slipfast

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by ummrys

Summary

"You're supposed to smoke over there." Someone said from behind Ilya.

Ilya almost dropped his cigarette. His English was shitty, but he had studied that sentence enough times over the years to understand it immediately. He didn't even think about his words much anymore, but it was impossible to avoid them.

He turned instinctively, and was face to face with Shane fucking Hollander.

Out of almost seven billion people, of course Ilya's soulmate had to be his fated rival. It was almost poetic. Still, Ilya had enough sense to realize just how bad this was.

or, Shane says Ilya's soulmate words. Ilya vows to never speak a word to him to keep him from finding out. They fall in love anyway.

Notes

fic title is from slipfast by role model. alternate titles include:
- that boy is CORRUPT (the original document title)
- etched in the surface
- ilya rozanov's guide on how to ruin everything
- various lyrics from del water gap's marigolds

See the end of the work for more notes

Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

i'm going to be kind of real with you guys, this fic is so far outside my comfort zone i'm not even sure i'm in the same country anymore. never before have i been compelled to write something this unhinged and this explicit. honestly, i rarely even write something this *long*. truly hollanov has made me into a different person and that person is a fucking FREAK

the idea for this fic came to me in a dream. it's kind of a mess, but it (very) loosely has the same plot as heated rivalry until a certain point. you'll know when it diverges pretty clearly. i use A LOT of the same dialogue and scene structures but the timeline is whatever i decide!!! everything happens a lot earlier because they're both a lot more impulsive

hopefully this is something. if not, i'll just die or whatever

See the end of the chapter for more notes

February 2004– Moscow

Ilya Rozanov was thirteen years old when he got his words.

He'd heard about soulmates his entire life. At some point in their life, everyone got their words. They were a record of the first thing your soulmate would say to you, written in their handwriting. Nothing about the system was predictable. Some people were born with their mark, others didn't get them until they were in their forties or later. The only constant was that they appeared before you met your soulmate.

Like every other child, Ilya had dreamed of his soulmate. He'd wondered who they would be and what they would be like. He'd wondered if his bond would be romantic or platonic. His mother had told him the stories with a smile, tucking him into bed and kissing him on the forehead. She'd told him tales of star-crossed lovers working out in the end and of people who would do anything for their soulmate. Her favorite had always been a Greek legend of how everyone was originally two beings in one body, and the split was how soulmates were created. Ilya could recite the entire myth backwards if asked.

"Your soulmate is your other half." She'd told him countless times, running a hand over the spot on his wrist where his words would appear. "When you find them, you'll feel complete."

Ilya had believed her. He would have believed anything that she told him. Even as his father pushed him away from idealism and towards hockey, he'd kept his dreams of having a soulmate. His father could wreck the majority of Ilya's dreams, but he couldn't ruin that image of finding that person who was right for him. Ilya wouldn't let him.

Then, his mother died and most of Ilya's dreams died with her. His thoughts about soulmates were replaced by hockey. Any time someone asked if he'd gotten his words, he joked that hockey *was* his soulmate. He was pretty sure that was the truth anyway. No person would live up to the adrenaline high he got from being on the ice.

Still, his words appeared. He couldn't pinpoint the exact moment it happened. His wrist was blank when he'd pulled his gloves on before practice. When he took them off hours later after being forced off the ice by the rink staff, there was a sentence etched onto his skin.

You're supposed to smoke over there.

Ilya ran his finger over them, trying to make sense of the unfamiliar symbols. He knew enough to know that it was probably English. The handwriting was neat. Even without comprehending a single word, he could tell that. Now, he knew two things about his soulmate that he hadn't before. They were not Russian– or at least, they would probably not be in Russia when they met for the first time– and they had nice handwriting.

The sun had set long ago. His teammates had left when practice ended. Ilya, like always, had stayed for as long as they would let him. He was still young, but everyone knew that he was destined for greatness. Barring the worst possible scenario, he was going to be drafted to a professional team in 2009. Soon, he'd be expected to make a choice between staying in Russia and going to North America to play in the NHL.

His father was waiting in the parking lot for him. When Ilya climbed into the car, he was frowning. "You're late."

"Sorry. They gave me more time than usual tonight."

"I do not want to wait." His father didn't even look at him as he pulled out of the parking spot. "You are going to walk from now on."

It was futile to argue. Bringing up the brutal cold or the three mile walk would just make him angrier. All Ilya could do is hope that he would forget about this tomorrow. "Yes, sir."

The rest of the car ride was silent. Ilya leaned away from his father and lifted his sleeve up to look down at his words again. If he stayed in Russia, he probably would never meet his soulmate. He could probably count the times he'd heard English in person on one hand. He could live his life without ever having to worry about hearing his words.

Ilya's chest filled with dread at the idea of that. Having a soulmate was troublesome, but the thought of never meeting them was horrific. In that moment, without even understanding the sentence on his wrist, Ilya knew that he had no other choice.

He was going to the NHL.

April 2004– Ottawa

Shane hated his words. It had been a depressing realization to come to. Having a soulmate was his dream. His parents were basically the blueprint. College sweethearts who had adorable words. Shane had built up his entire life around the idea of replicating that. Every day, for as long as he could remember, he'd checked his wrist for his words immediately after waking up. He'd come up with a thousand different options for what his words would say. In every single one, they'd been just as perfect as his theoretical soulmate.

It had all come crashing down two months ago when Shane had woken up and looked down at his wrist. He'd had about a minute of excitement before he managed to read the messy handwriting and process exactly what was forever inked onto his skin.

Fucks sake, Hollander.

The words themselves were bad enough, but the fact that his soulmate was calling him Hollander was absolutely terrifying. Only other hockey players called Shane by his last name. The implications of that… Shane couldn't think about it for more than a few seconds without panic rising in his chest.

His parents had been thrilled when they found out he got his words. They still were. Shane was pretty sure they would have been thrilled no matter what the words said. They were optimists. Decades of being happy with your own soulmate did that to you. They couldn't understand why Shane was apprehensive, and Shane couldn't make himself say his fears out loud. That would make them *real*.

So, he pushed everything down and kept moving. He convinced himself he didn't need his soulmate. He had hockey. Hockey was pretty much his entire life at this point anyway. He was the best, and everyone knew it. Nobody around him even compared. If everything went well, he'd be registering for the NHL draft in five years. When he made it, he wouldn't have time for another person until he retired. It would be fucked up of him to expect someone to play second fiddle to a sport.

His parents told him he was too young to be thinking like that. They never doubted him when he said he was going to be in the NHL, but they did think that he put too much pressure on himself. They didn't understand that the pressure was what kept him thriving. Soon, he would be on the junior national team. In 2009, he would be drafted and his life would truly begin. He'd finally have some real competition.

Still, even as he tried not to think about them, his words bothered him. They were impossible to avoid. Every time he moved his arm, he was reminded that someone with terrible handwriting who called him Hollander was his soulmate.

The worst part of the whole thing is that whenever Shane forgot to be terrified, he was actually hopeful. He had his words. He was going to meet his soulmate.

Eventually.

December 2008– Regina

Canada was underwhelming. It was not much different from Russia, in theory. There wasn't much to focus on outside of the cold and hockey. Both things Ilya was very familiar with.

He'd never been somewhere as far as North America before. Some of his teammates spoke about missing home or their parents. They couldn't wait to get back. Ilya was experiencing whatever the opposite of that was. The idea of going back to Russia– to his *father*– was suffocating. He would never go back if he could.

Team practices had just ended. Ilya was freshly showered, wrapped in his Team Russia parka, with a bottle of Coke in one pocket and a carton of cigarettes in the other. He was pressed against the brick wall of the practice rink. His hands shook from the cold as he lit up.

This was familiar. The bitter cold, the acrid smoke, the lingering adrenaline from practice. It was what made Ilya feel alive.

"You're supposed to smoke over there," someone said.

Ilya almost dropped his cigarette. His English was shitty, but he had studied that sentence enough times over the years to understand it immediately. He didn't even think about his words much anymore– hell, he kept them covered up with a plaster half the time– but it was impossible to avoid them.

He turned his head instinctively, and was face to face with Shane fucking Hollander.

Despite being the two most talked about prospects in the world, Ilya had never met Shane Hollander. He'd seen countless pictures, but they didn't do him justice. Shane Hollander was distractingly gorgeous. His skin was freckled and beautiful. Ilya was so taken by him that he almost forgot Shane had said his words.

Out of almost seven billion people, of course Ilya's soulmate had to be his fated rival. It was almost poetic. Still, Ilya had enough sense to realize just how *bad* this was. He couldn't…

Hollander was looking at him, clearly expecting an answer. Ilya couldn't give one. He knew that whatever he said next would change both of their lives and potentially ruin their careers. Realistically, they'd both have to ignore the bond until they retired. Ilya could live with that, but he wasn't willing to count on Hollander not to do something stupid.

"I wanted to meet you." Shane held his hand out, ignoring Ilya's awkward silence. "I'm Shane Hollander."

Ilya stubbed out his cigarette, turned on his heel, and walked away before he spoke and let both of them make a terrible mistake.

Shane blinked at the empty space in front of him. Rozanov had stood there just seconds ago. Shane had wanted to finally meet him, to size him up and figure out what kind of person he was. He supposed he got the answer to that question.

Later, in the car, Shane told his parents that he had tried to talk to Ilya Rozanov.

"What's he like?" His mom asked, turning in her seat to look back at Shane.

Shane shrugged. "Kind of a dick."

June 2009– Los Angeles

"Shane, could you move a little closer to Ilya, please?"

Ilya could feel Shane's hesitance as he stepped closer. Their arms brushed. It took everything in Ilya not to react.

He'd spent the last six months practically obsessed with Shane Hollander. (His soulmate. Not that he'd ever let anyone know that– especially not Hollander.) It was an entirely professional obsession, of course. They had a lot in common, actually. He was the only hockey player on the same level as Ilya. The more he'd learned about Hollander, the more dangerous he'd become. Ilya actually wanted him. That was the worst part. He'd convinced himself that he'd never get to have Hollander– that he could never even *speak* to him– only to turn around and keep fucking wanting him.

The look on Hollander's face when Ilya had beaten him at World Junior's was the same look he'd had when Ilya had been drafted number one. It made Ilya feel more alive than he'd felt in years.

They were drafted to rivaling teams. Because their fucking *souls* being intertwined wasn't enough, their careers had to be as well. He would never be able to escape Shane Hollander.

"Congratulations." Shane said, once the cameras had finally stopped, because of course he was *polite*. He held out his hand to Ilya.

Ilya knew that he couldn't say anything. He could never say anything to him. Especially not right now, in front of basically the entire NHL. He wouldn't overshadow their accomplishments by revealing that they were soulmates. So, he just patted Hollander on the shoulder.

Hollander flinched, like Ilya's hand burned him. He opened his mouth, but Ilya was getting dragged away from him before he could speak again. When he looked back, Hollander was gone. He didn't see him again for the rest of the night.

Shane couldn't fucking sleep. It had been a fucking day. He had finally been drafted into the NHL. He had gotten what he'd worked his entire life for. He had spent the last however many hours talking to person after person. He was fucking *exhausted*. But he couldn't sleep.

His mind wouldn't quiet down. He couldn't put his finger on exactly what was bothering him. After over an hour of tossing and turning, Shane rolled out of bed and put some sweats and his sneakers on. If he wasn't going to sleep, he figured he might as well be productive with his time.

The hotel gym was empty when Shane got down there. He stepped onto one of the two treadmills and gave his mind something to focus on besides his nameless anxiety.

He didn't notice that another person had entered the gym until Ilya Rozanov stepped onto the treadmill next to him. Rozanov gave him a quick nod– more acknowledgment than Shane had ever gotten from him– and started up his machine. Shane tried to ignore him. Rozanov probably just couldn't sleep. Or he always hit the gym this late. Or maybe he was having jet lag. Or maybe…

Rozanov increased the speed. He didn't look at Shane, but Shane was just petty and competitive enough to increase his machine to be just a little faster than Rozanov's. Within a minute, Rozanov increased his speed again, silently waiting for Shane to match it. Which he did. Obviously.

Shane glanced over and saw a slight smirk on Rozanov's face. Shane bit the inside of his cheek to keep his own smile in check.

They kept increasing the speed, testing the limits of their bodies and the machines. Shane's entire body was burning in protest, but he was determined to beat Rozanov. He *smoked*, for fucks sake. Shane could definitely beat him.

Only, he showed no signs of stopping.

Shane only lasted another minute before he was sure his legs were going to give out underneath him. He hit the emergency stop button, stumbling off the machine and collapsing on the floor. Rozanov ran for about ten more seconds before he bailed, breathing heavy and chuckling as he sat directly across from Shane. Their legs were both sprawled out in front of them. Rozanov's sneakers were almost touching Shane's ankle.

Rozanov ran a hand through his damp hair and squirted water into his mouth from the bottle. The move was a lot more interesting to Shane than it should have been. He quickly looked at the floor, hoping the flush from the exercise was enough to cover his blushing. Shane was suddenly very aware that he was incredibly thirsty and had not brought his own water.

Wordlessly, Rozanov held out his bottle. Shane shook his head, refusing to let Rozanov one-up him yet again. Or, at the very least, he wanted Rozanov to actually *speak* to him for once.

Instead of opening his mouth, Rozanov just tossed the bottle at Shane's head. Shane caught it right before it hit him in the face.

"Dude." Shane huffed. Still, he drank the water. Apparently, hydration mattered more to Shane than his pride.

When he'd had his fill, he held the bottle out for Rozanov to take. Their fingers touched as it changed hands.

For the first time in his life, Shane felt it. His stomach swooped, and he felt like he was about to vibrate out of his skin. His heartbeat quickened, practically pounding in his chest. He was almost 100% certain that Rozanov could hear it. Still, if even just a brush of their hands could make Shane feel like this…

"We're going to be seeing a lot of each other." Shane said quickly. Awkwardly. "Boston and Montreal play each other quite a bit."

Rozanov nodded. His eyes were focused on Shane's lips. For a moment, Shane was pretty sure that Rozanov was going to lean forward and kiss him. For a moment, Shane was pretty sure he would let him.

"Anyways. I'm– uh. Going to bed. See you around."

Shane didn't wait to see if Rozanov was going to respond. He scrambled to his feet and left the room as fast as he could without literally running. He waited until the door to his room was safely shut before he collapsed back to the floor and let himself freak the fuck out.

What the fuck.

Somehow, just by sharing his water and looking at Shane, Rozanov had gotten him half-hard. Shane wished that he understood his own body. Rozanov still hadn't said a word to him. He'd barely even touched him. Besides, he was a fucking *asshole*. What the fuck was wrong with Shane?

He couldn't explain his own thought process. But, he *could* get in the shower and get himself off, desperately trying to think about literally any girl. Anything but hazel eyes and dark stubble and muscular arms…

For the rest of his life, Shane would have to live with the fact that he had ended his NHL draft day getting himself off in the shower to the thought of Ilya Rozanov.

July 2010– Toronto

No matter how hard he tried, Ilya could not escape Shane Hollander. He was a constant topic of conversation around Ilya. If he wasn't seeing Hollander's face on his TV, people were talking about him. Every time Ilya saw his face or heard his name, he was back on the floor of that hotel gym. Every time he closed his eyes, he saw the blush on Hollander's freckled cheeks, and the way that he reacted to Ilya's presence.

Hollander was dangerous. Ilya knew that he had to keep his distance. He *wanted* to keep his distance. It was bad enough that Hollander occupied every part of his mind not already taken over by hockey, but he had to keep fucking *seeing him*. He'd thought that he'd be safe since they were signed to two different teams. A 300 mile buffer still wasn't enough. Of course they had to have the same sponsorship deal. Of course they had to film a commercial together.

He was already on the rink when Ilya got out of hair and makeup. He was gliding on the ice like he belonged there. Ilya was obviously an amazing skater– he was definitely better than Hollander– but he was messy. Hockey players often were. Hollander wasn't. He was graceful. There was no other way to describe it.

Ilya swallowed. This was going to be a long shoot.

Hollander did one more lap before skating over to the bench. Ilya wanted to go up and talk to him, but he knew that he couldn't. The makeup and the dramatic lighting made Hollander look so fucking pretty. Ilya heard people chirp Hollander during games by calling him "pretty boy" before, but it really was the truth. He was pretty sure that he could spend the rest of his life looking at Hollander, and he'd still leave Ilya breathless.

Finally, the director called them onto the ice. The photoshoot was long. It was a lot of standing and holding hockey sticks. Very boring. Most of the shots were solo, but the last one was of them bent over in front of each other, holding the faceoff position. Their faces were inches apart.

"Try not to laugh, fellas, I know it'll be challenging." The director said. Laughter was the last thing on Ilya's mind right now. He had to make a conscious effort to maintain eye contact. It was especially difficult, because Hollander's eyes kept flicking down to Ilya's lips. Which was interesting.

"A little more intensity in your eyes, if you could Shane."

Hollander blinked, like he'd forgotten he was in the middle of a photoshoot. He stared Ilya down, but he was only able to keep the intense expression for about a minute. Ilya was having some difficulty himself. A real faceoff was only a few seconds. Holding the position and the expressions was awkward.

Ilya was so uncomfortable that he couldn't keep himself from laughing. Hollander cracked almost immediately, chuckling along with him.

"Just a few more seconds, guys. Please."

"Sorry." Ilya said to the director. Hollander's eyes widened slightly as he spoke. For a moment, Ilya was worried that counted as talking to him, that he'd just said Hollander's words and his entire plan was about to come crashing down in the middle of this fucking photoshoot. But Hollander schooled his face back into the fake-serious expression. It was so ridiculous that Ilya couldn't keep himself from laughing again.

The director sighed. "We've probably got enough anyway. Let's take a break and then we'll do the film footage."

"That was your fault." Hollander said immediately. Ilya just bumped him with his shoulder and skated away.

The rink's communal shower was somehow worse than normal. It was dingy and small. The rows of showers facing each other on each wall were just a bit too close together. Shane undressed as quickly as possible and cut the shower on, stepping under the spray before it had warmed up. He was trying to get in and out as fast as possible to avoid Rozanov.

Of course, Rozanov walked in right after him and picked the showerhead directly across from him. Because he was an asshole.

Shane looked at the floor. He couldn't let his eyes linger on Rozanov's bear tattoo or his gold crucifix. He'd showered with hundreds of guys in his life, and he knew the etiquette. Looking was absolutely unthinkable.

But Shane was thinking it. He was really fucking thinking it. He glanced up, and stared helplessly at Rozanov's muscular back. His eyes trailed across his wide shoulders, over his waist, and down to his fucking perfect ass. Shane couldn't stop looking. He was bewitched. And aroused. Very *visibly* aroused. In the shower. With Ilya Rozanov.

Then, Rozanov was turning around and Shane only had enough time to look down at his half-hard dick with horror. Rozanov glanced at his crotch and raised an eyebrow.

"Fuck off." Shane said, helplessly. "It's nothing."

Rozanov didn't say anything. Of course he didn't say anything. He never spoke to Shane. He spoke *around* Shane, but never directly to him. Shane could only assume it was some superiority complex thing.

Shane should have just left the showers. This was fucking torture. But then, Rozanov was grinning at him in a way that was absolutely not helping Shane's little problem and Shane was transfixed. He couldn't move. All he could do was stare at Rozanov and wait for him to say something or leave or punch Shane in the face.

He didn't do any of that. He just stared back, clearly enjoying the effect he was having on Shane. His eyes were full of intensity, more heated than anything Shane had seen before. He was so busy being mortified that he didn't realize that Rozanov's dick was getting hard as well.

"What the fuck." Shane whispered, unable to tear his eyes away. This was fucking insane. Shane needed to *leave*. He was losing his mind very quickly. All the blood in his brain was draining right into his dick.

Rozanov let a hand trail down his stomach, and wrapped it around his cock. Shane gasped as he slowly stroked himself.

He didn't fucking get this guy. Here he was, jerking off in the shower in front of Shane but still refusing to say a word to him.

"Are you going to say something?" Shane asked.

For a moment, Rozanov's cool exterior crumbled. He looked sad and vulnerable. Shane thought maybe he'd finally gotten through to him.

Then, Rozanov was stepping forward and pressing his lips against Shane's.

Oh.

Shane's knees felt weak. For a moment, he was too shocked to do anything but stand there and let Rozanov kiss him.

He must have been still for too long, because Rozanov started to pull away. Shane's hands had been hanging limp at his side, so he grabbed the back of Rozanov's head, pulled him in again, and kissed him back.

Shane had never felt like this before. He knew this was a bad idea– they were in *public*– but his brain was broken. At that moment, all Shane could think about was the cool tile against his back and the feeling of Rozanov's lips against his.

It was a fucking amazing kiss. Shane was pretty sure if Rozanov hadn't crowded him against the shower wall, he would have collapsed. Everything was too much already. Shane was practically gasping into his mouth, and Rozanov took that as an invitation to slide his tongue into Shane's mouth.

The feeling of Rozanov's hardness against his own finally pulled Shane's head out of his dick. He pulled away, bracing his hands on Rozanov's shoulders to keep him from leaning in again.

"Oh my god." Shane was panting. "We can't do this here. We can't do this *at all*."

Rozanov tilted his head, like Shane's words confused him. His cheeks were pink, and his chest was heaving. He looked about as wrecked as Shane felt. He still hadn't said a word, but somehow, Shane knew what he meant.

"I'm in room 1410." All of Shane's impulse control was gone. He couldn't seem to remember exactly why they absolutely should not be doing this. All he could think about was the way

Rozanov smirked when he told him his hotel room number. Shane felt himself grow harder, if that was even possible.

Rozanov held up nine fingers and made a knocking gesture. Shane let out a shuddering breath. The fact that Rozanov managed to get him like this without a single word made Shane feel… something. He should have said no. Or at least had the dignity to make Rozanov say it out loud. But Shane fought to keep his voice even as he went against all the alarm bells ringing in his head and said, "I might open the door."

Then, he let go of Rozanov's shoulders and fled into the locker room.

This was bad. This was really, really fucking bad. Ilya was in way over his head. He'd let himself get carried away. He was supposed to stay away from Shane Hollander, not make out with him in the showers and agree to go to his hotel room.

There was literally no way that this was going to end well for Ilya. He should have just walked away when he realized Hollander was into him. *Fuck*. Hollander was *into him* and he didn't even know they were soulmates.

Any thoughts Ilya had about telling Hollander they were soulmates immediately went down the drain the moment he'd kissed him. Their relationship was already getting too fucking complicated. He could deal with mutual sexual attraction, but actually being together was a completely different story. There had never been an out gay NHL player before, much less two players on rivaling teams who were *soulmates*. Ilya couldn't even begin to imagine the ramifications it would have for their careers, especially since they hadn't even fucking *started yet*. Their lives would be over before they could really begin. Plus, they didn't even really like each other. Ilya wasn't willing to risk everything for *Hollander*. He was sure that if Hollander knew, he'd feel the same.

But, Hollander also kissed him back in the shower and gave Ilya his room number with no hesitation. He'd practically melted under Ilya's hands. If Ilya never spoke to him– if he never found out they were soulmates– he was pretty sure this could still work. It would be a one-night stand, and they'd both move on tomorrow and never think about it again.

At least, that was what Ilya told himself as he knocked on Hollander's hotel room door at 9:09. Tastefully late.

Hollander opened the door almost immediately. He was wearing a nice looking buttoned shirt and his cheeks were already pink. Ilya stepped into the room and let him shut the door, trying to keep his breathing even. He heard both the click of the deadlock and the flip of the latch before Hollander turned around.

"So, we should probably–"

Ilya didn't let him finish whatever it was he wanted to say. He grabbed Hollander by the shoulders and crashed their lips together.

It was just as electric the second time. Hollander practically went limp in his arms, kissing Ilya back frantically. Ilya backed him up against the wall and wedged a thigh in between Hollander's legs. The whimper Hollander let out made Ilya lose whatever shreds of self-control he had left. All he cared about was getting Hollander to make that sound again.

Hands brushed across Ilya's nipples. He groaned into Hollander's mouth and scrambled at the buttons of his shirt. It took a lot longer than Ilya wanted it to, but he figured Hollander wouldn't appreciate him tearing the shirt off his body. Impulsively, he grabbed Hollander's hand and pressed it against his crotch. His pupils visibly dilated as he gripped Ilya through his jeans. Then, that hand was unzipping Ilya's fly and working its way inside his jeans.

Ilya inhaled shakily as he watched Hollander's hand move under the fabric. He'd never been so turned on in his life.

He made quick work of his own shirt and cupped Hollander's face in his hand. Hollander looked at him with big eyes, his uncertainty as visible on his face as his arousal. Still, when Ilya brushed his thumb over Hollander's lips, he sucked it into his mouth. Ilya could pinpoint the exact moment Hollander realized exactly how much he liked the sensation. His eyes went impossibly wider, and he let out an almost imperceptible moan. Ilya couldn't suppress a shudder.

Then, his thumb was slipping out of Hollander's mouth as he sank to his knees.

Ilya had to bite into his fist to keep himself quiet. He'd always been a talker during sex. Hollander pulled his jeans down and pressed his tongue to the head, and Ilya was pretty sure he was going to fucking die. Death by head. What a way to go.

Hollander was a fucking natural. It was obviously his first time, but he was so eager and willing. Ilya watched him closely, trying to memorize the sight and the feeling. Hollander was clearly caught up in his own head, but whatever he was thinking about must have been good. He moaned around Ilya's cock, which made Ilya tangle his hand in Hollander's hair. Clearly, he was enjoying being on his knees, but Ilya was very quickly losing it.

He pulled Hollander off his cock, staving off his orgasm at the last possible second. Hollander looked panicked, like he'd done something wrong. "Sorry. I'm sorry. I've never…"

Ilya shook his head firmly. He hoped he'd get the message that he'd done everything right. Hollander rose up off his knees, looking at Ilya with curiosity.

"Were you thinking about this?"

What a fucking question. Of course he'd been thinking about it. He'd been thinking about it practically every day since that night in the gym over a year ago. He thought about it every time he was with a girl. He thought about it every time he picked up a hockey stick. His mind was dominated by thoughts of Shane Hollander. Ilya couldn't exactly *say* all of that, so he just nodded.

"Still not going to say anything?" Hollander asked. He didn't sound pissed off about it, more confused. Ilya nodded again, and then shoved his tongue down Hollander's throat.

They stumbled backwards onto the bed. Ilya's jeans were still pooled around his ankles. For a second, Hollander was on top of Ilya, kissing him passionately and pushing him into the mattress, but he quickly pulled away and stood back up. For a moment, he just looked down at Ilya like he couldn't believe this was happening. Ilya let Hollander stare while he pulled off his pants.

Hollander made eye contact with Ilya and waited, like he was waiting for direction. Ilya just gestured to his clothes and then patted the bed next to him. It didn't take long for Hollander to get the message and pull his clothes off. Ilya could barely breathe. He wondered how Hollander would have reacted if Ilya was coaching him through this. He wished he'd get to see it.

His nervous energy was palpable as he laid down on the bed next to Ilya. He was always so fucking tense, even around his teammates. Ilya made it his goal of the night to get him to relax for two seconds. He wrapped a hand around Hollander's dick and kissed him deeply. Hollander let out a soft, breathy moan, and then he was pushing Ilya flat on his back and taking his cock into his mouth.

Ilya couldn't keep himself from looking. He propped himself up on his elbow and watched Hollander figure out how to suck dick. *God*, he was good. He somehow figured out all of Ilya's sensitive spots, and Ilya was absolutely not going to last. Hollander pulled off, stroked him once, and then Ilya was coming.

Most of his release fell onto his stomach, but some hit Hollander in the face. His tongue darted out, tasting Ilya's cum, and *fuck*. Ten minutes ago, Ilya had thought seeing Hollander on his knees was the hottest thing ever. He was absolutely fucking wrong. He needed to see Hollander come right fucking now.

Ilya wiped the cum off his stomach, tossed the tissue on the floor, and kissed his way down Hollander's body. Quickly, he lost himself in the familiarity of sucking dick. He hadn't slept with Sasha in well over a year, but they'd been together enough times that Ilya knew what he was doing. Hollander was writhing underneath him, running his hands through Ilya's hair and across his face.

"Ah! Fuck! Rozanov!" Hollander's hands tightened in Ilya's hair and Ilya knew he was about to come. That hadn't taken long at all. "I'm going to–"

Instead of pulling off, Ilya sucked harder. Hollander made a beautiful noise and came into Ilya's mouth. He started mumbling nonsense and sorrys. Ilya let him babble, too fucked out to translate his slurred English.

"I can't believe we did that." Hollander breathed out, and then he started laughing. Ilya couldn't help but laugh with him. The whole situation was ridiculous. It had been the best sex of his life, and Ilya had had a *lot* of really good sex. It could also never happen again. Like ever.

He wanted a cigarette. Fuck the stupid hotel room no smoking policy and fuck the Boston Bears for making him quit.

"You're… not going to tell anyone about this, right?" Hollander asked, once he finally composed himself. "I get you're a dickhead and refuse to talk to me, but I know you talk to other people. I've seen you do it."

Ilya shook his head, and zipped his lips shut. He didn't think Hollander actually thought he'd tell people, but he clearly needed reassurance. Now that the main event was over, Hollander was clearly freaking the fuck out. Ilya wasn't too far behind him.

There was a mutual understanding that whatever this had been was a huge mistake. Ilya slowly started putting his clothes back on. He needed to get out of this room as fast as possible before he did something even more stupid like fall *back* into bed with Hollander or ask to stay. It was nothing more than a quick, no-strings-attached hookup.

Ilya's words felt itchy underneath the plaster. He resisted the urge to scratch at them as he headed towards the door.

Hollander pulled his briefs back on and followed Ilya. "I guess we'll see each other on the ice."

Ilya wanted to kiss him one last time because he probably would never get the chance to ever again. Instead, he grabbed the notepad on the nearby table and scribbled his number down.

He was out the door before Hollander could get another word out.

08/07/10 23:01

Unknown Number: Have you ever done that before?

Ilya: who is this

Unknown Number: Fuck off.

Unknown Number: Wait, actually save me as Shannon.

Ilya: no, you are jane

Ilya: and who am i?

Jane: Lily, obviously.

Ilya: obviously

Jane: Now answer my question.

Ilya: yes i have

Ilya: couple times with my coachs son in russia

Jane: Your coach's son?

Jane: Jesus. You don't do anything halfway, do you?

Ilya: i like trouble

Jane: I could tell.

Ilya: that i have experience or that i like trouble?

Jane: Both.

Ilya: it was your first time?

Jane: Yes.

Jane: With a man, I mean. I'm not a virgin.

Ilya: did you like it?

Jane: I'm not going to stroke your ego for you.

Ilya: because you want to stroke other things

Read 23:37

November 2010– Montreal

Two weeks after the Boston Montreal game, Shane felt restless. Nothing else had been able to live up to that adrenaline high. They'd won other games, but none made Shane feel even *close* to how he'd felt winning against Rozanov.

His mind was a constant loop of Ilya Rozanov. Rozanov smirking at him, and then losing their first face-off. Rozanov on the floor of the gym. Rozanov jerking off in the shower. Rozanov slamming Shane into the boards. Rozanov with his hands in Shane's hair and his dick in Shane's mouth. When he wasn't thinking about hockey, he was thinking about Rozanov. It was fucking infuriating.

It had been a one-night stand. Shane hadn't done a one-night stand before, but he was 99.9% sure that he absolutely was *not* supposed to be thinking about it this much. He needed to get laid, like *yesterday*.

Hayden Pike had invited him out for drinks tonight at ten. Shane hadn't hesitated to accept. He genuinely liked Hayden, and he knew how to have a good time. Hayden would be the right person to help Shane out of whatever Rozanov-induced psychotic episode he was having. He'd get Shane laid and then this whole thing would be over.

It was a good plan. Shane was totally committed to it, right up until his phone buzzed on the couch cushion next to him.

03/11/10 20:54

Lily: would you let me fuck you?

Shane blinked at his phone, and then rubbed a hand over his eyes to make sure he wasn't having a hallucination. Of all the things he'd been expecting to see, a text from Rozanov was absolutely not on the list. Especially not *this* text. His blood was torn between rushing to his cheeks and his cock. Christ.

Shane: Jesus, man.

Shane: A little warning next time.

Lily: what, are you busy?

Shane: I'm about to be.

Lily: but you are not right now

Lily: so answer my question

Fuck. Shane felt lightheaded. This guy was such a fucking asshole and he turned Shane on so fucking much. His hands shook as he typed out his response.

Shane: Why? Have you been thinking about it?

Lily: of course i've been thinking about it

Lily: you have seen yourself, yes?

Shane: So you want to fuck me? Is that what you're saying?

Lily: yes

Lily: i want to fuck you

Shane's dick was impossibly hard already. He was only able to resist the urge to shove a hand down his pants for about ten seconds.

Shane: Really?

Lily: really

Lily: would you like that?

Shane: Yes.

Lily: i would make it very good for you

Shane: Jesus fycking christ.

Lily: a typo? do i really have that much of an effect on you?

Lily: or is your hand perhaps busy doing something else?

It shouldn't have been hot. It should have been fucking embarrassing to get called out like that, but it just made Shane moan.

Shane: Actually go fuck yourself.

Lily: you and i both know that's not what you want from me

Shane: You really want to fuck me?

Lily: again

Lily: very much

Lily: would be so hot

At this point, all bets were off. Something about Rozanov made Shane throw caution to the wind. He'd never done something like this, but chasing his orgasm was more important than seeming cool right now.

Shane: How would you do it?

Lily: i would be gentle with you

Lily: the first time at least

Lily: stretch you out enough to take my cock

Lily: have you ever been fingered, hollander?

Shane gasped. He closed his eyes and imagined Rozanov's big fingers inside of him. It was almost enough to make Shane shoot off right there, barely having touched himself. This was absolutely not helping his Rozanov problem.

Shane: Only by myself. It's been a while.

Lily: i bet you would come apart so pretty on my fingers

Shane: Holy fuck.

Lily: are you touching yourself right now?

Shane: Yes.

Lily: you are a lot more responsive in person

Shane: Not exactly easy to type one-handed.

Lily: i don't know, i'm not having any problems

And then, he was sending a photo. In his nineteen years of life, Shane had never received (or sent) any nudes. He'd always thought that it was too dangerous. He didn't feel that way anymore. Rozanov's big hand was wrapped around his even bigger dick. Shane's throat went dry. All he could think about was how the weight of it had felt in his mouth and how he wanted it inside him more than anything.

He was coming almost immediately, moaning Rozanov's name to his empty apartment. It shouldn't have been an intense orgasm, but Shane's entire body was shaking.

Shane: Fuck you. You're so hot.

Lily: no photo for me?

Shane: No.

Lily: don't tell me you came already

Shane: Fuck you.

Lily: fucks sake, hollander

Shane froze. It was the first time those words had been said to him. *His* words. Shane knew it didn't count, but *fuck*, it was terrifying to hear them coming from Rozanov.

Imagine if *he* was Shane's soulmate. That would be a fucking disaster.

Lily: send picture

Lily: i still want to see

Shane ignored all the warning bells in his head and listened. He positioned the camera over his stained pants– fuck, he'd come in his *pants*– and snapped a photo.

There was a long gap between when Shane sent the photo and when Rozanov texted back. Shane didn't need to guess what he was doing with it.

Lily: jesus christ

Lily: you came in your pants

Shane: Don't let it go to your head.

Lily: too late

Lily: already has

Shane caught a glimpse of the time and swore. It was already 9:30. He was supposed to be leaving the house in fifteen minutes. Fuck. His outfit was ruined, and his legs were shaking a little as he got up off the couch. There was absolutely no way Shane could go out with Hayden like this. He grimaced and pulled up his last conversation with Hayden.

03/11/10 21:31

Shane: Hey, Hayden. I'm sorry to cancel on you so last minute, but I'm not going to be able to make it out tonight.

Shane: Trust me, you don't want the details.

Hayden Pike: Yikes

Hayden Pike: Take care of yourself, dude. Hydrate or whatever. We can go out next week.

Shane: Definitely. Have enough fun for both of us this time.

Hayden Pike: Oh, trust. I will

He really did not doubt him. Shane was prepared to get off the couch, take a very hot shower, and collapse into bed, but Rozanov had texted again.

Lily: next time we are in the same city with enough time

Lily: maybe i can get your hotel room number again? take you apart in real life this time?

Lily: do you think you'll come as fast for me?

Shane: I like you better when you don't talk to me.

Lily: aw hollander

Lily: we both know that isn't true.

The question of why the fuck Rozanov talked to everyone but him had been nagging at him for years. Shane figured there wasn't going to be a better chance to ask it.

Shane: No, but seriously. Why don't you talk to me?

Rozanov typed for a long time. Shane watched the three little dots appear and disappear until he couldn't bear it anymore. He was almost 100% sure that Rozanov was just going to ignore him, so Shane decided to at least get himself off the couch and out of his cum-stained pants. When he checked his phone after a quick shower, a message was waiting for him.

Lily: i am scared

Shane blinked. That was not what he'd been expecting.

Shane: Scared?

Lily: i am not a good talker

Lily: i do not have words to say to you

Lily: not ones that you'd want to hear

Shane: I wouldn't care if you spoke to me in Russian.

Lily: you like my voice, hollander?

This was the most vulnerable anyone had ever been with him, which was funny considering what they'd been doing less than an hour ago. It made Shane feel that unidentifiable feeling again.

Shane: I do.

Lily: i am sorry

Lily: you make my brain not function in any language

Shane: I'll take that as a compliment.

Lily: because you are so boring i fall asleep inside

Shane: And you're back.

Shane found himself smiling unconsciously at his phone. Smiling at *Rozanov*. Once he realised exactly what he was doing, he felt nauseous.

Everything about this was a giant, ridiculous mistake. He never should have let Rozanov kiss him in the shower. Shane certainly shouldn't have sucked him off and then added him to his contacts. He *definitely* shouldn't have let whatever just happened happen.

Today was supposed to be the day that he stopped letting Ilya Rozanov take over his mind, not the day that he started fantasising about what it would feel like to have Rozanov's hands inside of him. And yet, Shane was pretty sure that was all he'd be able to think about for the rest of his life. That picture would be burned into his memory.

This was really bad. Shane had dug himself into a really fucking deep hole. He was going to have to end this thing with Rozanov to get himself out of it.

January 2011– Nashville

Ilya stretched out on the massive hotel bed. He was a little more than buzzed after drinks with his All Star teammates. He'd probably gone a little too hard for a coworker dinner, but his

brother had tried to call him four times throughout the night. For a second, Ilya had been worried, and then he'd listened to the voicemail Andrei had left him. It was four minutes of rambling and culminated with him demanding more money. Ilya made it about four hours before he caved and wired it over. It was a new record, and he celebrated with more drinks.

His team had been nice. Ilya had secretly been hoping to play on the same team as Hollander, but the league had decided to split the teams into a North American team and a European team. It had been obvious as to why. The league was going to milk his rivalry with Hollander until the last possible opportunity. Which probably would be after they were both dead.

Hollander hadn't reached out yet, even though this was the first time since their… conversation in November that they were close enough together for long enough to meet up. Ilya wasn't sure why he was disappointed by that. This… thing with Hollander was still a bad idea. Of course it was still a bad idea. It might even be the worst idea possible. Ilya had this internal argument with himself every single time he thought about Shane Hollander, which was a lot. Like, a lot. He'd been so fucking easy. It took barely anything to get him onto his knees or to admit he wanted Ilya to fuck him. He came in his fucking *pants* at the dick pic Ilya had sent. It was an amazing dick pic, but still.

He shouldn't keep doing this, but Shane Hollander was fucking addictive. Now that Ilya had been given a taste, he wasn't sure how he'd ever lived without it.

It was kind of crazy that Hollander had this effect on Ilya. They'd met up once and had one *very* memorable texting conversation. Ilya had done more than that with dozens of women in the time since, and he hardly thought about them. He wasn't sure why Hollander was so hard to shake.

Even worse, Hollander was captivating on the ice. If Ilya wasn't thinking about fucking him, he was thinking about playing him in hockey. Ilya actually loved playing against him. He loved slamming him into the boards and taking the puck from him and beating him at face-offs. Every time they played, it had been a beautiful reminder of all the reasons Ilya *loved* playing hockey. Especially when the Bears won.

He wondered what Hollander was doing. He wondered if Hollander was out with his friends or holed up in his hotel room. He wondered if Hollander was thinking about him. He wondered why, out of so many people, it had to be him.

Ilya thought about texting him, but Hollander was a bit like a cat. If Ilya didn't want to spook him, he had to let Hollander come to him. They'd see each other tomorrow.

Hopefully.

The press conference wasn't unexpected, but it *was* unpleasant. Shane had been doing such a good job of avoiding Rozanov. He'd decided after their text conversation to take a play out of Rozanov's book and ignore him. It was actually pretty effective. If he kept himself out of Rozanov's reach, he wouldn't be able to pull Shane back in with his infuriatingly magnetic aura. It had been a good, safe plan to keep Shane out of danger.

Of course the league had to barrel over all this just to fan the flames of their rivalry. They'd given Shane the heads up about four hours in advance. When he'd asked why, they'd told him straight up that the press has been more interested in him and Rozanov than anything else this season.

That was how Shane found himself sitting at a raised table next to Ilya Rozanov in a room full of cameras. They were sitting so close their forearms were almost touching. Shane swore he could feel the heat of Rozanov's skin through his sleeve. He had to make a conscious effort to keep his gaze forward.

"Ilya," the first reporter began, "how does it feel to play on a team of all Europeans in your first All-Star Game?"

It took Rozanov a moment to reply. Shane wondered if his presence was actually affecting Rozanov's grasp on the English language, like he'd said back in November

"Good. Perfect." He smirked. Shane felt his mouth go dry. "Locker room makes more sense than usual."

The room laughed. Shane watched the way Rozanov was slowly rubbing the knuckle of his forefinger with his thumb. His hands were really nice. They made Shane remember a whole lot more from that November conversation.

Shane had a hard time focusing on the questions he was being asked with his mind swirling. He hoped that his answers were at least semi-coherent, and he hoped he wasn't visibly looking over at Rozanov too much.

His curls were popping out of the bottom of his baseball cap. His v-neck had to be at least a size too small. Shane could see the gold chain of the crucifix Rozanov had been wearing… the last time they saw each other.

Shane took a heavy drink of water, and sat back in his chair. That didn't help at all. Now he could see Rozanov *better*. He could see the way the muscles in his back shifted, straining against the thin material of his shirt. He was gesturing and laughing as he responded to a question Shane definitely hadn't heard get asked. Blood was rushing in his ears.

"Shane?"

"Sorry?" Shane forced out, blinking in confusion.

"Just a quick one from the *Toronto Star*: Would you like to play on an All-Star team *with* Ilya in the future?"

His instinct was to say no. He didn't want Ilya to be that close to him for that long. At least, not until he could get himself under control. That wasn't the PR friendly answer though, so Shane took a steadying breath, smiled, and lied through his teeth. "Of course. I mean, Ilya is a great player."

"Ilya, same question to you?"

"If Hollander doesn't mind me being starting center, then yes."

Laughs again. Shane didn't have to force his eye roll as he moved to rest his arms on the table. Rozanov moved as well, and the edges of their elbows were touching. Shane had to bite the inside of his cheek to keep himself from reacting. He felt kind of insane. The hair on his arm was standing up.

"Both Montreal and Boston have been out of the playoffs for three seasons now. Do you guys feel the pressure to restore your team's legacies, even this early in your careers?"

Shane rubbed the back of his neck with his arm and furrowed his brow. When he turned his head, Rozanov was already looking at him. His expression was kind of desperate. He was practically begging Shane to take this question for both of them. Once again, Shane remembered that Rozanov's English wasn't great and he supposedly made that worse. He'd probably only caught about half the words.

"I can't speak for Rozanov or the attitudes in Boston, but I know the fans in Montreal definitely love their team. They're expecting us to turn things around and get back in the playoffs. Maybe win some cups." Shane laughed, a little awkwardly. "I feel the same way. I love Montreal, and I love the fans. I guess what I'm trying to say is that I don't feel pressure that I'm not already putting on myself."

He hoped that was enough. Unfortunately, the reporter turned to Ilya, clearly waiting for a response. He cleared his throat and said, "Yes. What Hollander said."

Rozanov smiled at the room as they chuckled. Shane was suddenly struck by the fact that this was the first time they'd ever had a conversation. He'd never heard Rozanov talk this much before. He definitely hadn't been lying when he said he liked Rozanov's voice.

The next time Shane looked at him, Rozanov winked. Shane had to purse his lips to keep himself from laughing.

Under the table, he felt Rozanov's foot tap against his. It was barely anything, but it still made Shane's heart skip a beat.

Christ.

He was definitely going to end up in Rozanov's hotel room tonight, wasn't he?

The NHL All-Stars Skills Competition had been a fucking dream. It wasn't a big deal to most people, but not only was Shane here as a rookie, he'd set a league record *and* beaten Rozanov in the shot accuracy competition. Somehow, the result of that was standing at the hotel bar surrounded by people he barely knew trying to get him drunk, like they weren't going to play a game tomorrow.

Practically every All-Star was crammed into one room. It was loud and smelled like shit and Shane wanted to be literally anywhere else. Well, maybe not *anywhere*. There was definitely somewhere specific he wanted to be.

Rozanov was on the other side of the room, surrounded by a similarly sized group of people. He was clearly the life of the party, because everyone around him was laughing and smiling. He looked like he belonged there. Shane tried desperately to ignore him– to ignore the pull he felt towards him. But then, Rozanov smirked and Shane caved immediately.

29/01/11 22:36

Shane: Hey.

He didn't watch as Rozanov presumably got the text and responded. Shane was absolutely determined not to let Rozanov know just how desperate he was for this. He felt his phone buzz in his hand, but he let a Pittsburgh defenseman whine to him about how much he missed his wife for way too long. It had probably been at least twenty minutes before Shane finally opened it.

Lily: was wondering when i'd hear from you

Lily: took you long enough

Shane: I wasn't going to text you, but then I beat you and I figured you might need a consolation prize.

Lily: and that prize is…?

Shane: Actually, nevermind.

Shane huffed and put his phone away fully. He wasn't going to let Rozanov make him ask for it. He had to maintain at least *some* of his little dignity. It wasn't until it buzzed five consecutive times that he pulled it out again.

Lily: come on

Lily: i know how badly you want it

Lily: you were practically ready to get on your knees for me at that press conference

Lily: do not think i didn't notice

Lily: you are not subtle

"Dude, are you alright?" Someone asked, gesturing to Shane's face. "You got all red."

Shane held his drink up with a shrug, thanking his mother's ancestors for this built-in excuse. "Ah. Yeah. Asian flush. This is just how it is sometimes."

Shane: You're an asshole. I hope you know that.

Lily: you know you could have said that to my face

Shane: But it's so much more satisfying to get a response from you.

Lily: one day, maybe

Lily: now, was there something else you wanted?

Shane chanced a direct glance across the room. Ilya was casually chatting with some other Russian guy, like he wasn't practically torturing Shane in public. This motherfucker. Shane hated him. He wanted to fuck him more.

Shane: You know what I want.

Lily: yes

Lily: but i want you to say it

Shane: Fuck you.

Lily: ask me nicely, hollander

Shane: Can I have your hotel room, please?

Lily: so that i can fuck you the way you deserve?

Shane shivered, biting the inside of his lip. He was putting a lot of effort into acting normal, trying to at least somewhat contribute to the conversation happening around him. It was a miracle that he was able to get a coherent sentence out. It was also a miracle that his dick was only half-hard.

Shane: Maybe not this time.

Lily: really?

Shane: We shouldn't. Not here. It's too dangerous.

Shane: People could hear.

Lily: you can be quiet, can't you?

He absolutely could not be quiet. Shane swallowed harshly. It was an obvious bait attempt, and Shane let himself fall in the trap. When he looked up, Rozanov was watching him from across the room.

Shane: I can try.

Lily: 1221. come whenever you can get away

And then, Rozanov was laughing and patting the guy next to him on the back and heading towards the elevators.

Shane took a steadying breath, put his phone away, and focused on the people around him. He ignored his desperation and let some guy from Toronto pull him back to the bar. He needed to waste a little bit of time. It was bad enough that he was about to let Rozanov fuck him in a hotel full of their coworkers and the press, he couldn't make it that obvious.

The longer he lingered at the bar, the more desperate he got. He couldn't stop thinking about the fact that Rozanov was up in his hotel room waiting for Shane. Waiting to *fuck* him. The anticipation was practically killing him. After almost two hours, he was barely able to keep his breathing steady. He carefully excused himself from the group he'd found himself in, telling the people who complained that he wanted to make sure he was well rested for the game tomorrow.

Rozanov opened the door in a half-unbuttoned dress shirt and trousers. Shane pushed past him into the room and locked the door.

"Nobody saw me." He said instead of a greeting, mostly to remind himself. Rozanov just looked at him with that stupid fucking *smirk* on his face. It was the same one he directed at Shane during face-offs. It was the same one that made Shane feel weak in the knees and distracted him enough to make him *lose* face-offs.

Shane kissed him so he didn't have to keep looking at Rozanov's face. It was making him angry. Rozanov kissed him back passionately, immediately burying a hand in his hair.

Shane had kind of been hoping that their last encounter had been a fluke. If Rozanov was bad this time, Shane would be able to forget him a whole lot easier.

It wasn't bad though. Somehow, it was *better*. Shane's body was buzzing with anticipation as Rozanov's hands untucked his shirt from his pants and slid underneath. His hands were warm, and he used his grip on Shane's waist to manoeuvre him. Shane went willingly, blindly letting Rozanov move him until he felt the wall at his back. Apparently, that was Rozanov's MO. Three out of three times they'd… been together, Shane had found himself pinned against the wall. He was not complaining.

They both knew what was about to happen. Worse, they both knew that Shane *wanted* it. Some part of Shane was glad that Rozanov was maintaining the whole "I don't talk to Hollander" thing, because he wasn't sure he'd be able to handle it if Rozanov pointed out his desperation.

Shane felt Rozanov tip his head back, deepening the kiss. He moaned slightly when Shane opened his mouth and slid his tongue against Ilya's. It felt a bit like a win, especially since it made Ilya's hand tighten in his hair. Fuck.

Rozanov pulled back. Shane felt like a complete mess. They were both panting slightly.

Shane dropped to his knees, looking up at Rozanov. Rozanov looked down at him, cupping his face in one big hand. He leaned forward, getting his mouth on Rozanov's cock through the fabric layer. It wasn't exactly what Shane wanted, but he'd been overwhelmed by his need for this. He moved to unbutton Rozanov's pants, but the hand left his face and grabbed him by the wrists. When he looked up, ready to protest (ready to *beg*), Rozanov just shook his head.

And then, Shane was being pulled off the ground and thrown over Rozanov's shoulder like he weighed nothing.

"What the fuck? Put me down!" Shane practically yelled. He tried to twist, but Rozanov's strong arm kept him in place. "I can walk, asshole."

Rozanov just chuckled as he deposited Shane on the bed, standing over him and pulling his shirt off. With Rozanov looming over him like that, Shane felt small. It was a ridiculous thought. He was a 5'10" pro-hockey player built of solid muscle, but as big as he might be, Rozanov was undeniably bigger. The fact that he'd been able to manhandle Shane onto the bed that easily should have been infuriating, but instead Shane felt insanely turned on.

Shane's mouth was practically watering as Rozanov undid the last few buttons of his shirt and slid his pants down. He pulled a packet of lube and a condom out of his pocket before he discarded them. His eyes were immediately drawn to the outline of Rozanov's hard length in his briefs. Shane almost moaned at the sight, remembering how it had felt to have it in his mouth. Rozanov leaned down on the bed, planting a thigh in between Shane's that was just far enough away from his crotch that Shane couldn't rut into it. He captured Shane's mouth in a bruising kiss.

He let Rozanov take off his shirt and press kisses to his stomach. When he started to squirm, Rozanov just wrapped one big hand around Shane's thigh to hold him in place. How was he so *good at this*? Fuck. Shane was about two seconds away from losing it. He wasn't convinced he was going to make it to the main event at this rate.

Rozanov pressed a kiss to his bulge over the fabric. It made Shane shiver. Then, Rozanov was undoing his pants and sliding them down his legs with his briefs. Being naked in front of him should have felt uncomfortable, but it didn't. Maybe it would have been if his brain wasn't dominated by Rozanov's name.

Shane thought they were going to get right to it, but Rozanov leaned back over him and kissed him again. It was easy to lose himself in the feeling of Rozanov's mouth against his. He had absolutely no idea how long they were making out for. His coach could have walked in the room at that moment, and Shane probably wouldn't have noticed.

He's going to fucking kill me, Shane thought as Rozanov ground their erections against each other.

He's going to fuck *me*.

Like he could read Shane's mind, Rozanov finally pulled away and reached for the lube. Shane absolutely did *not* try to chase the kiss. And he *definitely* did not spread his legs. He would have denied it if Rozanov called him on it, but blessedly, he was still quiet.

Maybe Shane should have been put off by that, but it probably made this easier. He couldn't find it in himself to care anyway. Especially not when Rozanov crawled down the bed and ripped the lube packet open with his teeth. It was probably the hottest thing Shane had ever seen. He probably needed to see more things.

Rozanov was so confident in what he was doing, but so careful with Shane. It was like he knew what Shane wanted before he did. Most of their communication was non-verbal. They shouldn't have known each other well enough for that to work, but it *did*.

A wet finger started to circle Shane's rim. Shane let out a faint moan. He knew how this worked. He'd done a little… experimenting on himself. He had a dildo. Even if those sessions hadn't exactly been as fruitful as he would have liked them to be, he'd still done it before. The feeling wasn't abnormal, but the presence of another person definitely was.

Rozanov licked a stripe up Shane's cock as he slowly slid his finger in. Shane immediately tensed up, and then felt himself melt into the mattress as Rozanov's licking continued. He kept his breathing slow and even as Rozanov's finger went deeper and then…

Oh.

Shane gasped, his back arching unintentionally. "*Fuck*."

Rozanov smirked, and rubbed his finger over what had to be Shane's prostate again. He'd never been able to find it himself before, but Rozanov seemed to know exactly where it was and what to do with it. Shane couldn't keep himself from whimpering. He'd never felt like this before. It was exhilarating. He'd never really got why people went crazy for sex, but in this moment, he completely understood.

"Holy *shit*." Shane breathed out, covering his mouth with his hand. Rozanov reached up with his free hand and yanked his hand away. He didn't even pull away from Shane's cock.

Shane seriously was not going to last very long like this. He let out a pathetic whimper and squeezed his eyes shut. "Fuck… You have to… Slow…"

He couldn't get a sentence out, but Rozanov knew what he was saying. He pulled off Shane's cock, and gave him a quizzical look.

"You're good." Shane replied. He felt winded. "Very good. Too good. I need a second."

Rozanov used that second to stroke his own cock with his free hand, and then he reached for the condom. Shane was suddenly very aware of how massive he was. This was probably not

a good starting point, but Shane Hollander was not a fucking quitter. He'd been thinking about this for too long to tap out now.

Two fingers pressed against him. He was a lot more ready this time, letting Rozanov stretch him with little tensing. It burned a little, but it was a good burn. It reminded him of how his muscles felt after a long workout. He knew he'd be sore tomorrow, but he also knew it would be worth it.

Shane reached down and wrapped a hand around his cock. Rozanov made a noise that sounded almost like a growl, and then his fingers were sliding out. He was grabbing him by the hips and manhandling Shane onto his front before he could even make a noise of protest. Shane settled himself on hands and knees because was about 90% sure this was how sex between two men worked. He'd tried to watch gay porn to get a feel for the vibe, but he'd barely managed to make it forty seconds in before he was slamming his laptop shut out of embarrassment.

Rozanov was clearly happy with the position, because Shane could feel one hand on his hip and the blunt head of Rozanov's cock against his hole.

Fuck. This was really happening.

He pushed in slowly, and Shane tried to keep himself as relaxed as possible. That burning sensation was back, a little sharper than before, but Shane had been expecting that. The pressure was the most overwhelming feeling he'd ever experienced. He felt impossibly full.

Rozanov ran a soothing hand against the small of Shane's back when his hips were finally flush against Shane's ass. Shane's voice was strained as he said, "I'm okay."

Then, he pulled out slightly and pushed back in, somehow deeper.

"Fuck." Shane gasped. "Wow."

He thrust a few times, clearly getting used to the feeling of being inside Shane. Then, he adjusted his hips and on his next thrust, he hit Shane's prostate.

"*Yes*. Holy fuck. Keep fucking doing–" Shane's arms shook as Rozanov hit his prostate again and again with deadly accuracy.

Yeah. This was definitely why people had sex. Shane had never felt more keyed up in his life. He didn't feel pain or fear anymore, he just felt an overwhelming *need*. It felt so good that Shane genuinely couldn't keep himself quiet anymore. He had enough sense at that moment to bite down on his knuckles to muffle his moans.

Of course Ilya Rozanov was already a sex god at nineteen. If Shane wasn't on the receiving end of that experience, it would have pissed him off. It probably would in an hour, when Shane was safely back in his own room two floors down.

Distantly, as Shane pulled his hand out of his mouth to wrap it around his cock, he wished they'd had enough foresight to put down a towel. He was about twenty seconds away from ruining this bedding. He'd also definitely feel guilty about that later, but there was nothing he could do to stop it now.

Rozanov let out a faint moan– the first noise he'd let out since he'd flipped Shane onto his stomach– and then Shane was coming. *Hard*. He was pretty sure his vision whited out for a second.

His own orgasm did not distract him from the way Rozanov's hips stuttered to a stop as he came *inside of Shane's body*. Well, inside a condom inside of Shane. If he hadn't come less than a minute ago, he probably would have gotten hard again. His spent cock gave an interested twitch, but then Rozanov was pulling out and collapsing on top of him.

"I can't believe I just did that." Shane whispered, mostly to himself. The weight of Rozanov was surprisingly comfortable, so for just a couple of moments, Shane let himself bask in the afterglow without worrying. He was impulsive now. He could let himself relax for two seconds.

Eventually, Rozanov rolled off the bed and went to the bathroom to clean up. Shane stared up at the ceiling and let himself remember exactly why this was a bad idea.

He'd just had *sex* with *Ilya Rozanov* in a *hotel full of hockey players*. He had to play in the *All-Star game* tomorrow. Jesus fucking Christ.

It had been really good sex though. Shane was suddenly disappointed. He'd probably never get to experience this again. He couldn't let Rozanov keep fucking him, and the likelihood of him finding someone else safe to do this with was low.

Maybe he'd find a girl who was really into pegging. Or maybe he'd just have to live his life having mediocre sex, knowing in the back of his mind that this was an option.

Rozanov came out of the bathroom. Shane got up on unsteady legs and headed there himself, picking up his clothes on the way in. He could feel Rozanov ogling him the entire time. He wiped the cum off himself, got dressed again, made himself look at least semi-professional, and slipped without saying goodbye.

Blessedly, Shane didn't see anyone as he went back to his room. He was able to get himself into a scaldingly hot shower in peace. When he came out, wrapped in a towel, a text was waiting on his phone.

30/01/11 02:01

Lily: thanks, hollander

Lily: was fun

Shane rolled his eyes and ignored him because he was an asshole. Trust Rozanov to remind Shane that he actually *didn't* like him pretty much immediately. Shane had almost forgotten.

His itch had been scratched. Very thoroughly. Now he knew what it was like to fuck Ilya Rozanov. He could move on with his life and his season without constantly thinking about it.

Rozanov would be nothing more to him than some asshole he saw a couple times a year. He'd forget about this… encounter in a few months and that would be the end of it all.

He hoped. He really, really hoped.

June 2011– Las Vegas

Ilya lost Rookie of the Year to Shane Hollander.

The sting of it hadn't fully set in yet. It had been a close race. It probably had never been closer. He'd known that it was a toss up between the two of them, but some part of him had expected to win it. He always expected to win. He'd been number one all his life. He just wasn't used to losing, especially not to someone like Shane Hollander.

Christ. He needed to get out of this room, with the press watching him like a hawk for any negative reaction. He needed a fucking cigarette.

The rest of the ceremony lasted fucking ages. Ilya kept a carefully composed expression plastered on his face, trying desperately not to show the hurt. He didn't want to deal with the narratives the press would spin around him if he let anything slip. He'd just let them run headlines about how cool and collected he was, even in the face of defeat. They didn't deserve to know the truth.

He went willingly to the party, letting anyone who talked to him know how sportsmanlike he was. Every time someone apologized to him, it felt like a knife to the gut.

It wasn't even about the award anymore. It had stung to lose, but now every time someone reminded Ilya about that, he was forced to remember the flight back to Russia he'd be getting on in three days.

He didn't want to go back. He didn't want to face his family. His father was liberal with his disappointment when Ilya's team lost *pre-season* games (not that he watched them in the first

place). He really didn't want to imagine what he'd say when he found out Ilya lost this award. He really didn't want to imagine what he'd *do* when he finally had the chance.

Thankfully, Ilya was not the person most people in the room were itching to talk to. Twenty minutes in, he slipped out and headed for the elevators. He thought about going up to his room and sulking for the rest of the night, but he craved the familiarity of a cigarette. He had an unopened pack in his room for this exact scenario. What his team didn't know wouldn't hurt them.

There was a rooftop bar. Some girls he'd been chatting up in the lobby had told him. Maybe there would be a smoking section there. At the very least he could get a drink and brood by himself.

A very pretty and very drunk girl tried to flirt with Ilya in the elevator. On any other day, he probably would have indulged her flirting and followed her to the bar. He really wasn't in the mood for that tonight. He politely laughed at her drunken attempts at being funny and split off when she started for the bar.

There wasn't a designated smoking section, but Ilya honestly didn't care. This was Vegas. He could do what he wanted. That was, like, the entire point of the city. He stood off in an empty corner of the roof, stared out at the city skyline, and lit up his first cigarette of the night.

It felt nice to be alone, listening to the loud music coming from the bar and feeling the wind on his skin. He hadn't realised how oppressive the cameras felt until they were no longer pointed at him. He breathed out, watching the smoke drift up into the sky.

He was on his third when someone finally found him.

"It's not worth jumping over."

Ilya half-turned. Shane Hollander stood right behind him, his arms crossed. Of course it was Hollander. Ilya wasn't even surprised. He just took another drag, and waited.

"I didn't expect to find you here." Hollander lied. Ilya could see right through him. He wasn't sure how he felt about Hollander looking for him. "I just came up to get some air."

Ilya exhaled slowly. He wanted to say so much and nothing at all. Hollander moved to stand next to him. Their shoulders were touching.

"It could have gone to either one of us, you know that right?"

Ilya rolled his eyes. He didn't even have it in him to be angry that Hollander assumed he was butthurt about losing. Ilya had never given him any reason to think otherwise.

Hollander was looking at him intently, like he was trying to read Ilya's mind. His expression melted from righteous indignation to something almost… caring. Not that Ilya would be fooled into thinking Hollander cared about him. He chuckled at the thought of that, dropping the butt of his cigarette and stamping it out.

As they stood in silence, Ilya contemplated him later. He'd at least get some pleasure in telling Hollander that not everything is about him all the time. They weren't friends though. Hollander probably didn't even care.

"I should get back." Shane said, after several minutes of staring at the city. "My parents are probably still at the party."

Ilya stiffened. His parents. Of course Shane Hollander had his perfect parents here to celebrate with him.

"I guess… I guess I'll see you next season."

Shane stuck his hand out, and Ilya was overcome with the desire to just kiss him. He glanced around, making sure their half of the rooftop was still empty, and chanced it.

He pushed Hollander up against the wall and kissed him. It was an angry kiss. He was worried Hollander would freak out, but he kissed back just as harshly. Ilya knew this was a terrible idea, but he couldn't resist it. He couldn't go back to Russia– back to his *father*– without doing this one more time.

Hollander lasted about twenty seconds longer than Ilya had anticipated before he was breaking the kiss and shoving him away.

"Are you fucking *insane*?" Hollander hissed, looking more panicked than Ilya had ever seen him. "What the fuck is wrong with you?"

Ilya smirked at him. Shane glared back. "No. We can't. Go to bed, Rozanov."

Ilya's smile faded. Shane turned on his heel and walked away without looking back.

Even though he'd expected this, the rejection still fucking hurt. It was strange. Shane Hollander shouldn't have been able to cut him this deep. Ilya never really understood his emotions when Shane was involved.

Unconsciously, Ilya had started picking at the plaster over his words. He ripped it off and stared at his words, like looking at Hollander's handwriting on his skin would give him all the answers. Ilya blinked down at his wrist, and suddenly, everything came into focus.

He was in love with Shane Hollander.

It wasn't funny, but Ilya started laughing. The worst part was that after he'd had a few seconds to come to terms with this earth-shaking realisation, Ilya wasn't even shocked. Of course he'd fallen in love with Shane Hollander. He was just so… Shane Hollander. It was inevitable. Literally written into the stars and their skin. From the moment he'd said Ilya's words, there was only one way this was going to end.

Fuck. How could Ilya have let this happen? It was too fast. They barely even knew each other. He was better than this. He should have been able to outsmart his own emotions. Maybe he'd actually avoided Shane instead of *fucking him*, he could have pushed this back a decade or two. Maybe if he'd decided to just actually tell Shane that they're soulmates, Shane would cut him out of his life and Ilya wouldn't have to make the decision himself.

He could try and tell himself he was going to block Shane's number and move on with his life, but he knew that was impossible. Shane was just magnetic. Ilya was in his thrall now, and there was no going back.

He'd done this to himself. He'd fucked too close to the sun, and he was just going to have to live with the consequences.

September 2012– Montreal

Ilya's hands were shaking. The Bears had won the game in overtime, but Ilya couldn't care less about that right now. Shane Hollander was waiting for him in a hotel room six floors above his own, and Ilya was pretty sure he was going to throw up.

He was actually nervous. It was so fucking stupid. This wasn't the first time they'd hooked up. If you counted their sexting (which Ilya definitely did), it wasn't even the first time they'd hooked up since his rooftop realisation. But now, Ilya felt like he was hiding some big secret from him. Ilya wished he understood his own thought process behind that feeling. It was probably *less* big than the other secret he was keeping from Hollander.

Somehow, he'd managed to not talk to Shane at all. It had been almost four years at this point. Ilya was honestly impressed with his resolve. The answer he'd given Shane after their first endeavor into sexting– something they'd recreated many times at this point– had apparently been enough. He'd never asked him again.

Ilya knew that, eventually, Shane would find out that they're soulmates. He knew that the fallout of that would be massive and terrible. Shane would probably never speak to him again once he found out Ilya knew this entire time. Ilya would be able to handle that when the time came, but he wanted to have whatever Shane would give him until then.

08/09/12 23:05

Jane: Are you coming?

Of course Hollander was going to complain about Ilya being five minutes behind schedule. He was always so fucking eager.

Ilya: someone should teach you some patience

Jane: I can handle this by myself if you're going to be like this.

Ilya: lol

Jane: Fuck you mean 'lol'?

Ilya: lol is acronym for laugh out loud

Ilya: i am laughing at you

Jane: I know what it means, dipshit.

Jane: Just get up here before I change my mind.

He wouldn't change his mind, but Ilya hauled ass to the elevators anyway. His nerves hadn't quite faded, but he also knew that there was no way he *wasn't* going to Shane's room tonight. He might as well bite the bandaid, or whatever the phrase was.

Shane opened the door after one knock. He rolled his eyes when he saw Ilya standing there, smiling. Then, he grabbed Ilya by the shoulders and pulled him into the room.

"You are the worst." Shane muttered as he tugged Ilya's shirt off in between heated kisses. "I hate you."

It probably should have stung, but then Shane was dropping to his knees, and Ilya had a hard time believing him. Shane scowled as he pulled Ilya's pants down. His face was already flushed, and his freckles were standing out more than usual.

Ilya really tried not to think about Shane Hollander's freckles. It was a self-preservation mechanism, really. If he spent longer than a second looking at them, Ilya was pretty sure he'd never look away. He would happily spend the rest of his life memorizing the patterns on Shane's skin.

Fuck. He really was in love with him, wasn't he? This was disgusting.

Thankfully, Hollander wrapped his lips around Ilya's cock and blessedly, Ilya's ability to form coherent thoughts faded away. He was so fucking good at sucking cock. Ilya had fucked his way through half of Boston, but nobody gave head like Shane did. There was something desperate about it, like he was afraid Ilya would stop him. What a ridiculous thought.

Too soon, Shane was pulling back. When Ilya made a betrayed noise, he just looked up with an amused expression. "Did you think I was going to make you come? You're here to fuck me, Rozanov. Did you forget that?"

Holy fucking shit. Just when Ilya thought he could anticipate whatever Hollander was going to throw at him.

Ilya just nodded, his mouth slightly open. Shane pulled his shirt off, and tugged Ilya's pants down all the way. When he got up off his knees, Ilya couldn't resist the urge to pull Shane in and kiss him.

Shane was growing visibly desperate a lot faster than normal. He was panting into Ilya's mouth, letting out little moans every time Ilya brushed a hand across his skin. Yeah, Ilya needed to be inside him, like, *yesterday*.

When he pulled away, Shane fucking *whined*. What had gotten into him tonight? He was usually easy, but he'd never been this fucking desperate for Ilya.

"I'm already prepped." Shane admitted, his cheeks flushed, and well, Ilya had his answer. "You were taking a long time."

Bad excuse. Ilya had been barely seven minutes late. Shane had *planned this*. Ilya wanted to call him on it, but he wanted to fuck him more.

He turned Shane around and shoved him on the bed face-first. Shane went willingly. He practically shook his ass in Ilya's face while he put the condom on and grabbed the lube. He let out an absolutely *sinful* noise when Ilya grabbed him harshly by the hips and shoved two lubed fingers inside his hole.

Shane's face was buried in the comforter, but Ilya could hear every noise he made like a gunshot. He prepped Shane himself, ignoring his mumbled protests that he was ready. It was less out of concern for Shane, and more out of concern for his own dignity. He needed to give himself a second to calm down, because he was pretty sure he'd blow his load in about two seconds if he tried to enter Shane now.

Once he was sure he could last at least a couple of minutes, Ilya pulled his fingers out of Shane and wiped them on the carefully laid-out towel. Wow. He'd *really* planned this.

"Are you *ever* going to fuck me?" Shane complained as Ilya lined himself up.

Just to be a dick, Ilya pushed in almost completely in one thrust. Shane gasped, tensing around him. He relaxed almost immediately, and Ilya set a bruising pace.

Shane turned to mush under him pretty much immediately. He was saying a lot of words, but Ilya really didn't have the brainpower to translate. All of the blood his brain usually used for thinking was currently in his dick.

He lasted longer than Ilya had been expecting. Not that Ilya had been expecting him to last long at all. Still, the feeling of Shane coming on his cock was fucking *insane*, and he wasn't too far behind him.

"F–" Ilya gasped as he came, stopping whatever he was about to say at the last possible moment. Shane looked back at him, eyes wide and pupils dilated. His cheeks were flushed, and he made a disappointed noise when Ilya slid out.

Ilya quickly discarded the used condom in the bathroom trash can, and grabbed a towel for Hollander. He slipped his boxers back on and chucked the towel right at Shane's head.

"Thanks, dickhead." Hollander rolled his eyes, but used the towel to clean himself off. "You can get the fuck out now."

Ilya wasn't offended. He actually really wanted to get the fuck out. Aftercare was the part of sex he was the worst at. He wasn't enough of an asshole to leave his partners without it, but it always felt too intimate. If he stayed to help Hollander clean up, he'd probably do something he'd regret. He'd already gotten way too close for comfort tonight, he didn't need *more* of an incentive to talk.

Shane was quiet as Ilya put his clothes back on. They weren't exactly the type to say goodbye– not that Ilya could if he wanted to– so he started to head for the door as soon as he wouldn't get arrested for public indecency.

A hand on his wrist stopped him. When he turned back, Hollander leaned up and kissed him like he hadn't just told Ilya to get the fuck out two seconds ago.

For a moment, Ilya let himself pretend this was normal. He cupped Shane's face in his hands and smiled into the kiss. Then, when the feeling in his chest started to become too much to ignore, he pulled away.

Shane tried to chase the kiss. His eyes widened when he realised what he just did, and he took a step backward. It was so cute that Ilya was suddenly smiling. He couldn't make himself *stop*, even as he turned on his heel and left the room as fast as he possibly could.

Ilya was honestly kind of in shock as he walked back to his hotel room. He'd known he was in love with Hollander in theory, but actually experiencing his own emotions was mind-boggling. This wasn't something he was used to. He was Russian, for fucks sake. If his father found out he was *feeling things*, he'd probably beat the shit out of him.

Impulsivity was practically Ilya's defining characteristic. He'd been making terrible and dangerous decisions for his entire life. None were quite as terrible and dangerous as Shane Hollander.

It wasn't smart to sleep with someone you're keeping secrets from, especially not secrets *about* them, but nobody had ever accused Ilya of being intelligent. Maybe, if he was a better person, he'd pull the plug. He'd tell Shane everything and let him go.

Ilya wasn't that person though. He really wasn't. He barely even knew Shane, but he loved him too much to let him go now. There was no universe in which this ended well, but there was also no way Ilya could turn back now. This was going up in flames anyway. He might as well douse his entire life in kerosene in the meantime.

God. The Ilya who'd made the decision not to speak to Hollander would have been so disappointed in him.

January 2013– Montreal

01/01/13 00:02

Lily: happy new year

Shane blinked at his phone. He'd just gotten home from Comeau's party, and it was hard to think through the alcohol, but Shane was pretty sure that was a text from Ilya Rozanov. He blinked again, and it didn't go away.

He wasn't entirely sure if he was hallucinating or not. He didn't think he was at the midnight Happy New Year text level of friendship with Ilya. Don't get him wrong, Shane texted Ilya probably a concerning amount, but about 90% of their conversations were sex-related.

Still, it was nice to know Ilya was thinking about him at whatever crowded party he was at. It made Shane's heart feel a little bit funny.

01/01/13 01:34

Shane: Happy New Year!

Shane: Hope you are having fun.

Lily: i definitely am

Ilya sent a photo of himself in the thick of a crowd, a girl with curly blonde hair Shane had seen with him in paparazzi photos before hanging off his arm. He was smiling and they were both wearing a pair of stupid 2013 glasses. The design didn't even make sense. Why would they make numbers without enough places to put eyes into sunglasses? Shane was suddenly really pissed off. He didn't bother replying.

He wondered if that girl was Ilya's soulmate. She was pretty. Perfect. Exactly everything Ilya was expected to go for. Exactly the opposite of Shane.

Fuck. He didn't even know why he was thinking about this. It wasn't like he was with Ilya. Even the idea of that was laughable. He didn't even *like* Ilya. Besides, he'd been photographed with this girl a couple of times. He wouldn't have continued… whatever it was he and Shane were doing if he'd found his soulmate.

Shane was glad he'd gone home early. His words felt itchy and his skin felt two sizes too small for his body and his mind was spinning. He needed a shower. He needed to not think about Ilya Rozanov's stupid fucking New Years glasses.

He practically stormed into the bathroom, flicking the shower on. The water was too hot when Shane stepped under the spray. He didn't bother turning it down.

The alcohol was making his head feel heavy. He probably shouldn't have drank so much. They started a two week long road trip tomorrow. Or technically today. Thank god their first game wasn't until the 2nd. Shane was pretty sure he'd die if he had to play hockey tomorrow.

It was probably going to be an easy couple of games. The Voyageurs were at the top of their game this year. It was only Shane's second season, but there were serious talks about them making a run for the cup. They'd been on a winning streak since their last against Boston.

And then, he was thinking about Ilya and the way his hands had felt against Shane's skin. They hadn't seen each other in three months, but he'd basically gotten Shane addicted to his dick– withdrawal symptoms and everything. Ilya occupied a permanent corner in his mind. He was so intertwined in Shane's life that even if he wanted to stop thinking about him, he'd never be able to.

When Shane opened his eyes, he was hard. He didn't even waste time being pissed off about it. He was too drunk and too lonely to care. He seriously needed to get a girlfriend, but right now, he just wanted to get off. If he needed to think about Ilya to do that, then sue him.

He didn't bother easing himself into it. He just wrapped a hand around his cock and started stroking.

It wasn't enough. He was stroking himself in all the right places, but he couldn't quite get himself off that edge. Shane wasn't sure what was wrong. Normally, he had the *opposite* problem.

Maybe he needed to try a different approach. He thought about the way Ilya's fingers had felt inside of him more often than was probably acceptable.

He didn't have lube, so he spit on his fingers. It was disgusting and probably not lubricating enough, but he was genuinely too horny to care.

Doing this in the shower was precarious, but Shane made it work. He slid a finger inside himself with one hand and jerked himself off with the other. Hopefully he didn't fall, because he wouldn't be able to catch himself. Wouldn't that be an interesting 9-1-1 call?

Ilya is so much better at this, Shane begrudgingly thought as he tried to find his prostate. He could only just reach it. It was barely a brush of his finger, but combined with the stimulation on his dick, it was enough to make Shane come.

His orgasm was deeply unsatisfying. Instead of feeling sated, Shane couldn't stop thinking about how much better it would have felt if Rozanov was the one who got him there.

Shane was pissed off as he got out of the shower and dried himself off. What a fucking way to start the year.

He should have made his New Year's resolution to end this rivals-with-benefits thing he had going on with Rozanov. The deeper into it they got, the more the risk outweighed the reward. Well, maybe not in reality, but definitely in theory.

There was just no way this was going to end well. Maybe Shane should have just blocked Ilya's number and moved on before he got himself hurt.

Maybe Shane was too deep into this for him to care anymore.

November 2013– Boston

"Heading out?" Hayden asked. He was settled on one of the beds in their hotel room, watching some action movie.

"Yeah, just for a bit." Shane kept his face carefully neutral. He couldn't let anything too real show. He couldn't let Hayden know what was about to happen. He already felt guilt and shame and fucked-up anticipation about going to Ilya's apartment. If Hayden actually knew what Shane was going to do… Shane didn't want to think about his reaction. "Meeting a friend."

Hayden grinned immediately. Of course he did. "If you say so."

"Just a friend."

Hayden winked. Shane felt his face grow hot. "I won't wait up."

"It's not–" Shane closed his eyes and hoped he wasn't visibly blushing. "It's not that type of friend. I'll be back soon."

"That's disappointing. You seriously need to get laid."

"I'm fine." Shane pulled on his jacket and fled the room.

He shouldn't be doing this. The Voyageurs had only arrived in Boston that morning. Their game was tomorrow, which meant that after a short practice, the team had the evening free. Shane *should* have spent the night focusing on how to beat the Bears, but Ilya had asked him to come over. They'd argued for over an hour about how it was a terrible idea, and eventually Shane gave in. Because of course he did.

Logically, Shane knew how stupid it was, but logic and Ilya didn't exactly coexist in his mind.

Ilya lived a short cab ride away from the hotel, and Shane spent the entire drive practically vibrating in his seat. He was terrified of being seen, but he was also scared of being in Ilya's penthouse. This probably should have been the point where Shane ended things. It was getting too personal. Mostly, they stuck to texting and exchanging photos (which were immediately deleted). Their few in person trysts in the past had all been in hotel rooms. The fact that Ilya was inviting him into his *home* so easily made Shane feel a little lightheaded.

He pulled his baseball cap low over his face as he stood on the apartment steps, waiting for Ilya to buzz him up. It didn't take long, and Shane rode the elevator all the way to the top. He told himself that he would finally talk to Ilya tonight. He told himself that this was absolutely the last time anything would happen between them. He told himself that he actually meant it this time.

Ilya opened the door in low-hanging sweatpants and no shirt. Immediately, all thoughts of *talking* left Shane's mind.

"Hey." Shane stepped inside. He wasn't given much time to appreciate the interior design, because Ilya's mouth was on his before the door was fully closed.

Ilya kissed him deeply, grabbing Shane by the waist with one hand and cupping his face with the other. Shane melted into the kiss, wrapping his hands around Ilya's shoulders and pulling him impossibly closer. It was oddly the most gentle kiss they'd ever shared.

That didn't last for long, though. Quickly, Ilya had Shane backed up against the wall. Everything kind of blended together after that point. Somehow, they walked to the couch. Ilya pulled his sweatpants off and stripped Shane, throwing their clothes onto the living room floor. He pulled Shane into his lap, and then they were kissing and grinding and *fuck* Shane was already coming probably less than five minutes in.

Sometimes, he forgot how much he craved this during those months he didn't see Ilya. He'd never been able to get this feeling from other people, and trust him, he tried. He couldn't even get the same satisfaction from himself. The whole thing was infuriatingly hot. *Ilya* was infuriatingly hot. Shane had long since realized he was simply incapable of making good decisions around him. One crooked smirk, and Shane was fighting the desire to sink to his knees.

He didn't need to fight it now, though. Shane slid off Ilya's lap and dropped to his knees, feeling the impact of the rough hardwood. He'd probably have bruises for a few days. He honestly couldn't bring himself to care. It would be the only mark he'd have to remember this by.

Ilya's legs widened to accommodate Shane. He could see his own spend all over Ilya's dick and stomach. It was fucking hot. He slowly started kissing his way down Ilya's stomach and cleaning up his own cum, looking up at Ilya through his eyelashes. Ilya looked starstruck. Once Shane was mostly done, Ilya pulled him up and kissed him messily. He moaned at the taste of Shane on his own tongue.

The kiss ended quickly, and then Shane was back between Ilya's thighs again. Getting Ilya in his mouth was second nature now. The weight of him was familiar, and Shane reveled in it. Ilya had always teased Shane for being so responsive, but he always came apart under so beautifully Shane's tongue.

Ilya's hand tangled in Shane's hair as he sucked on Ilya's tip. He brought a hand up to play with Ilya's balls, and slowly started to deepthroat him. This wasn't something Shane had ever done before but (embarrassingly) he had practiced. It wasn't exactly comfortable, but the fucked-out look on Ilya's face when Shane pressed his nose against his pelvis made everything worth it.

"Fuck's sake, Hollander." Ilya breathed out, his hand tightening in Shane's hair.

Shane's entire body went cold. He pulled off Rozanov's cock, falling backwards. He caught himself with one hand at the last second. "What did you just say?"

"I–" Rozanov started, before his face went slack with terror. "Fuck."

Chapter End Notes

shane hollander crashout of the century incoming once i do the assignment i put off in order to finish this! i hope you are all ready because ilya is not

i do just want to add 2 things
1. i think shane would have done the same thing if ilya had spoken to him first. neither of them have any idea how to navigate being soulmates and also opponents. it's a complicated situation and i feel like 17 year old ilya deserves some grace for how he handled it please don't be mean to him in my comments
2. i also think that if shane had found out like any earlier his crashout would have been 100x worse than it's about to be. like i can't even imagine the way that 2009 shane hollander would have reacted if he found out ilya was his soulmate. or 2010 shane hollander. honestly if he found out any time before the point that he did it would have probably resulted in a murder charge

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

oh boy. the first chapter of this got more traction than i could have ever imagined... like i am still blown away by all the positivity i received. thank you all so much.

this got. ridiculously out of hand. like oh my god. i intended for this to be about the same length as the first chapter but it quickly because clear that. was not going to happen. so. sorry? should i even be apologizing for writing more?? idk this fic kinda broke my brain. i wrote almost 15k in three days

same as the first chapter, a lot of the same dialogue and scene structures are coming directly from the source material because this is something of a canon rewrite. all of the credit for that goes to rachel reid, but very little besides dialogue is directly ripped from the book

fun fact a paragraph of this was written on a camel. i'm probably the first person in history to ever write hollanov on a camel.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Shane was moving instantly, desperate to put as much distance as possible between him and Rozanov. It didn't feel like the air he was breathing was reaching his lungs. Blood was rushing in his ears. He wasn't sure how he was moving. He could barely even *think* through the panic flooding his veins.

His back hit the corner of the coffee table and Shane realised he was still naked and on the floor. On his *knees*. He'd never felt this vulnerable in his life. He had to get his clothes back on. He had to get the fuck out of there.

Somehow, he got to his feet and found his shirt. Rozanov hadn't moved. He was frozen in place, watching with a horrified expression as Shane stumbled away from him. Any remaining concern that Shane had misinterpreted the situation was gone. If hearing the words wasn't enough to confirm it, Rozanov's reaction certainly was.

Halfway to the door, Shane tripped over a pair of pants and went careening back to the floor. Distantly, he recognised them as his own, so struggled back to his feet and tugged them on. He didn't even care that he wasn't wearing underwear. His brain wasn't in control of his body

anymore. He felt nothing but anger and an intense need to escape. Whatever got him the fuck out of here.

"Wait." Rozanov said, snapping out of whatever stupor he'd been in. Shane didn't wait. "No. Hollander. Shane. *Shane*."

Shane involuntarily flinched when Rozanov said his name. He continued ignoring him, checking his pockets to make sure he wasn't forgetting anything important. He didn't want to have to come back. He didn't want to ever even *speak* to Rozanov again.

"Please, let me just–" Rozanov had practically thrown himself across the room. He reached out, wrapping his hand around Shane's wrist to stop him from leaving, and Shane saw fucking *red*.

"Do not *fucking* touch me."

The words came out meaner than Shane had intended them to. They were practically venomous. Shane had literally *never* spoken to another person like that.

Rozanov let go. His panicked expression crumbled into something sad and pitiful. It made Shane feel even angrier because, for a split second, Shane actually felt *bad* for him. Like he was somehow the one in the wrong here.

"Shane, *please*. Just let me explain." Rozanov's voice broke as he moved to stand in front of the door, as if he could stop Shane from leaving. He was still naked. Shane was so livid he couldn't even fucking look at him.

"I don't care what you have to say." Shane laughed. It sounded manic. Everything felt *wrong*. He needed to get the fuck out of this apartment immediately, or he was actually going to punch Rozanov's lights out. "You can't just fucking– I can't believe you think that I'll just–" He took a calming breath. It didn't do much. "Get the fuck out."

Rozanov blinked. "Is my apartment."

"I *know that*." Shane gritted his teeth. He felt dizzy. His heart was pounding in his chest so loudly he was sure that Rozanov could hear it. "I'm leaving, Rozanov. Let me go."

"We should *talk*." Rozanov insisted. It was so audacious that Shane laughed again.

Shane chose his words carefully, trying to figure out what would hurt Rozanov the most. He wanted to make Rozanov feel even a *fraction* of the pain and betrayal that Shane did. "You've done enough talking."

"Shane–" He took a step closer to Shane, his desperation clear.

"Whatever this thing between us was… it's fucking *done*." Shane shoved past Rozanov, and finally got a hand on the doorknob. "I never want to see your face again."

Rozanov flinched away, like he'd been shot. Shane left without another word.

He didn't really process the situation until he was in the back of a taxi. He knew he looked horrible. He hadn't exactly stopped to look in a mirror on his way out. His face and hair were definitely a mess and he was physically seething with anger. His driver had taken one look at him and wordlessly turned up the music.

Rage wasn't really an emotion that Shane was familiar with. He'd felt angry a lot in his life– he was a hockey player, for fuck's sake– but the white-hot rage that enveloped him was new. His mind was so clouded over with emotion that he'd almost forgotten why he was angry in the first place.

Almost. The actual moment was replaying in Shane's mind every time he closed his eyes.

He felt like a fucking idiot. It was so fucking *obvious* now that he knew. The only reason he didn't see it until it was literally right in front of his face was because he had thought it was

ridiculous. He didn't even like Rozanov before this and he *certainly* didn't like him now. It would have never even occurred to Shane to put Rozanov and soulmate in the same sentence before.

Besides, as much as he loathed to admit it, Shane was not exactly emotionally intelligent. He had a hard time putting the pieces together in his mind. Ilya Rozanov said his soulmate words. That didn't necessarily mean he was Shane's *soulmate*. Except it did. Not even Shane could deny that.

He was hyperventilating again. The more he thought about it, the more nauseated he felt. He was pretty sure he was going to throw up in the back of this car, until the taxi driver pulled to a stop in front of the hotel.

Shane wasn't sure how he got from the car to the hotel elevator to his room. He could feel his feet moving, but his mind wasn't aware of what was happening around him. His hands were shaking so hard that he could barely press the keycard against the lock.

"You're back early." Hayden commented when he heard the door open. He was reading Sports Illustrated in a hotel bathrobe. When he looked up from his magazine and saw the state of Shane, he dropped it in shock.

Shane couldn't even form words. He just collapsed on the floor near the door, still hyperventilating. His chest hurt. He felt kind of like he was about to die. Hayden was in front of him, shaking him by the shoulders. He was saying something, but Shane couldn't comprehend it. A hand was on his face. Something sharp hit his cheek. It felt like his head was underwater. He couldn't fucking *breathe*.

Then, Hayden was kissing him. It was incredibly chaste and only lasted a second– honestly, it was more of a peck than anything else– but it was so ridiculous that Shane's brain was suddenly snapped back into his body.

"Dude." Shane's voice sounded wrecked, even to himself. "What the fuck?"

Hayden looked shocked, like he couldn't believe that he'd done that. "I'm sorry! I freaked out!"

"What the *fuck*?"

"I don't fucking know!" Hayden held up his hands. "You weren't responding. I already slapped you. It was between that and calling an ambulance."

"Why the fuck was it between kissing me or calling an ambulance?"

"I saw it on TV once. I figured it was worth a shot."

Shane's jaw was on the floor. "*Why*?"

"Well, it *worked*!" Hayden said, defensively. "Sorry for caring about your wellbeing, I guess."

"You're such a fucking idiot."

Hayden chuckled, and then his face got suddenly very serious. "What just happened, Shane?"

"I don't–" Shane frowned. "It's nothing."

"Yeah, for some reason, I don't believe you."

Shane took a deep breath. It was the first one in a while that felt like it reached his lungs. He couldn't tell Hayden what had actually happened. But, he was also a terrible fucking liar. He

needed to find some sort of middle ground, or at least come up with a lie that would be believable. "I just… ran into Rozanov. That's all."

"*Rozanov* did this to you?" Hayden's tone was vicious. Shane immediately knew that was the wrong fucking thing to say.

"No, he didn't–"

"I'll *fucking kill him*."

"Hayden, calm down–"

"No, I mean it." He said, and Shane did not doubt him. "I'll wreck his shit tomorrow. I don't even care if I get suspended."

Shane appreciated Hayden's loyalty, but he also didn't want this to spiral out even farther out of his control. If Hayden fought Rozanov for Shane, Rozanov would definitely know that he'd affected Shane a lot more than he'd let on. "You seriously don't have to do that. He's not worth it."

"Shane. You can't be serious."

"He didn't hurt me or anything." Shane crossed his arms. Technically, it wasn't a lie. The only physical pain Shane felt at that moment was from where he'd backed up into the coffee table. "You don't have to defend my honor, or whatever. We happened to be at the same place, and he was just being an asshole. His words cut a little too close to home and I overreacted. Promise me you won't fight him."

"You're not telling me everything, are you?"

"I'm telling you what you need to know." Shane squeezed Hayden's shoulder. "You're a good friend, Hayden. I need you to trust me."

Hayden studied him for a second, before he sighed. "I'm not promising shit. He's an asshole."

"I'm not going to argue with that."

Shane's blood pressure was probably dangerously high as he prepared for the game. His heart rate certainly was. He could feel the rush of his blood inside his head. It was intense and terrifying and distracting.

Shane wasn't really an emotional person. At least not openly. He'd gotten really good at putting on a blank mask in front of other people, not letting them see how he truly felt. The fact that he couldn't keep that up through this vortex of anger and frustration and panic was scary.

"Shane." Hayden settled a hand on Shane's shoulder while he laced up his skates, pulling him out of his spiral. "Are you sure this is a good idea?"

It was a ridiculous question. Of course it was a bad idea, but Shane didn't have another option. He couldn't *not* play this game. That would be admitting that whatever happened last night with Rozanov affected him in any way. It obviously *had*, but Rozanov didn't need to know that.

"I'm fine, Hayden."

Hayden's face showed that he absolutely did not believe Shane, but when he opened his mouth to push further, he was cut off by Coach Theriault.

The pre-game rituals lulled Shane into a false sense of security. He lost himself in the familiarity of the routine, and for a second, he felt normal. Then, he caught a glimpse of Rozanov's number on the ice, and his anger was crashing back into him.

"Hollander, you're up against Rozanov for the faceoff." Theriault ordered.

Shane nodded wordlessly. He'd expected this. He *wanted* this. Shane was out for fucking blood. He was going to take immense pleasure in crushing the Bears.

When Shane met him at center ice, Rozanov looked nervous. *Good*. Shane smiled harshly.

"Hollander." Rozanov's voice was shaking almost imperceptibly as he bent down for the faceoff. "Long time no see."

Shane was going to fucking kill him. There was literally no way he was making it out of this game without a penalty. His usual method of taking the high road was so far in Shane's periphery that it didn't even occur to him to ignore Rozanov.

"Yeah, *long* time." Shane tapped his stick against the ice as he got into position. He'd spent the night lying awake, trying to come up with the best way to respond if Rozanov tried anything. He hoped he sounded mean and not lame when he said, "Hope you weren't too *blue* last night without me."

Shock rippled across Rozanov's face right as they dropped the puck. Shane won the face off and scored a goal within the first two minutes.

Then, he went a little off the rails. Shane Hollander had gained a reputation for playing a clean game of hockey even when his teammates faltered. That was not the Shane Hollander who Boston got. He played *dirty*. Never quite aggressive enough to warrant a penalty, but enough to piss the Bears off.

He also played badly. After winning the faceoff and scoring, his focus was completely shot. He couldn't concentrate on hockey through his anger. It wasn't a good look, and Shane would certainly be embarrassed about it in a few weeks, but it felt necessary.

Until Theriault was pulling him from the ice towards the end of the second period and yelling until his face turned purple. Shane endured it by tuning him out, right up until the end when he was pretty sure he heard the word benched.

"What?"

"I said you're *benched*, Hollander." Theriault shook his head and stuck a finger against Shane's chest. "I don't know what's going on with you, and unless it's an injury, I don't care. We leave our personal lives at the fucking door. Get your shit together. You'll be back on the ice when you remember how to play."

In the end, Montreal still won 4-2. Shane still felt absolutely horrible, but he didn't feel as bad as he could have. It left room for him to feel a little smug. Hockey was a team sport, but Shane couldn't help feeling like this win was personal. He'd come out on top, even if he'd been pulled from the game.

Shane didn't like the person Rozanov's… betrayal was turning him into. He didn't like feeling angry. He didn't like sitting in the locker room by himself, seething over everything and nothing. He didn't even *like* Rozanov. His overly-emotional response to this was freaking him out.

Everyone on the team gave Shane a wide berth in the locker room. Especially after he started haphazardly throwing his gear into his locker instead of meticulously stacking it like he usually did.

Well, everyone except for Hayden, who was looking at Shane like he was about to explode, and J.J., who never knew when to leave him alone. Hayden approached him slowly, like he was scared a sudden movement would spook him. "Are you alright or do I need to put you on suicide watch?"

"*Fuck off*."

"I've *never* seen you play like that." J.J. said, ignoring the way Hayden dug an elbow into his ribs. "What the fuck is wrong with you? Are you sick or something?"

He was about to be. He could feel bile rising in his throat.

"It was just an off day, right?" Hayden asked, probably just to give Shane an out.

"Sure." Shane started to undo the last of his padding, desperate to avoid eye contact with either of them. "An off day."

J.J. snorted. "Maybe I'd believe you if you weren't taking your clothes off so passive-aggressively. If you were a girl, I'd honestly be offended. What'd your shoulder pads do to you, man?"

"Leave me alone, J.J." Shane snapped, turning away. He heard Hayden whisper something about not poking the bear, but they walked away, so Shane called it a win.

He showered and got himself on the bus back to the hotel as quickly as possible. Though they might have left him alone in the locker room, the rest of the team did not share Shane's sense of urgency. It took probably an hour for all of them to meander their way on board. Shane sat in the back, trying to act like he wasn't completely overwhelmed by his emotions. His anger was calming down, but embarrassment and anxiety were quickly replacing it. He felt the same panic he'd felt last night bubbling in his chest, but the memory (and the potential threat) of Hayden kissing him kept it from overtaking him again.

Shane needed to get this suit off of his body. The feeling of the fabric against his skin was too much. He'd already tugged his tie loose, but it wasn't enough. He needed another shower. Maybe some room service. He needed to sit in the dark by himself and internalize the mistakes he'd made on the ice. He needed to not think about Ilya Rozanov for two fucking seconds.

There was no way he'd be achieving that last one tonight, but the others were doable. Especially since he knew Hayden would be going out to celebrate their win. The plane wasn't leaving Boston until mid-afternoon, but Hayden would have gone out if it was leaving at five in the morning. Shane would have the room to himself for the night, and he could sulk to his heart's content.

He tried not to think about what he *would* be doing if last night hadn't happened. He tried not to think about the raw and open emotional wound he had. He *really* tried not to think about how it had felt to have Rozanov's cock down his throat. But, of course, the more he tried to keep his mind away from thoughts of Ilya Rozanov, the more he seemed to think about him. His mind was constantly betraying him these days.

Yeah. There was definitely no way he wasn't thinking about Ilya tonight. He'd lasted about five minutes, which was honestly longer than he'd been expecting.

When they got back to the hotel, Shane was the first person off the bus. Hayden trailed behind him, talking at Shane but not really expecting a response. He casually mentioned that the team was going out to celebrate, and when Shane didn't respond, he didn't press further. That was sort of how their friendship worked. Hayden was significantly more social than Shane. Even though they were so different, they worked well together. Hayden soaked up the spotlight that came with being a professional athlete with ease, and Shane was more than content to exist in the background.

Hayden also, wisely, knew where Shane's lines were. He understood Shane's boundaries better than anyone, outside of maybe his parents. He never pushed, even when Shane could tell he wanted to, and he kept J.J. and their other teammates off his back.

Once Hayden had vacated the room, Shane took a long and *blisteringly* hot shower. He breathed in the steam, letting the heat of the water turn his skin pink. He scrubbed at the skin of his wrist, like he could wipe his words away. It didn't work. The sting helped clear his thoughts a little. Showers always helped Shane get himself in order. He was starting to feel almost normal again when he stepped out.

That lasted about as long as it took for Shane to pick up his phone. A text from Rozanov sat on his home screen, unblinking and ominous.

08/11/13 22:31

Lily: i'm sorry

Lily: i will be here when you are ready to talk

Lily: i do not care how long it takes

Shane's arm was moving before he could fully process what was on his screen. His phone hit the wall with a dull smack.

"Oh my god." Shane stared at the floor in horror. He couldn't believe he just did that. This wasn't him. All the evidence that he *had* was literally right there, but he couldn't *fathom* that he was the kind of person who threw his phone across the room in a fit of rage.

The wall was, thankfully, okay. Shane wasn't sure he'd be able to deal with his mortification if it wasn't. His phone… less so. The screen was practically shattered, but it still turned on.

Rozanov's texts still sat on his home screen. They still made him want to break his phone, but he was quickly realising that he needed to redirect his anger into something more meaningful. Stewing in his rage wasn't going to make everything better. There really wasn't anything that could make this better. He was just going to have to learn to live with it.

Living with it didn't mean he had to *accept* it though. He still wanted nothing to do with Rozanov. There were things he could do that were a hell of a lot less dramatic than chucking his phone across the room.

Shane steeled himself to do something he should have done a long time ago. He blocked Rozanov's number. Maybe now he could finally move on with his life.

February 2014– Sochi

Being back in Russia never failed to make Ilya feel like shit. *More* like shit than usual. His emotional baseline pretty much put the bar in hell, but somehow, he still managed to feel

worse from the moment he'd stepped off the plane. He had been on edge all week, faking smiles for the cameras and mingling with government officials who made Ilya's skin crawl. He bit his tongue and played the role they expected him to, even though it killed him a little.

His relationship with Russia was… complicated, to say the least. He loved his culture, but not his country. Being Russian was something that Ilya took pride in, but he couldn't be the person that Russia wanted him to be. That his *father* wanted him to be. He wasn't able to just blindly support the government. He was hardly able to look the ministers he was expected to meet in the eyes.

And, to make everything worse, Team Russia was out of the running for a medal already. It wasn't Ilya's fault– and he knew that– but it still made him feel like a failure. These international events were always difficult. Shoving a bunch of hockey players who had never played together onto a team and expecting them to excel was a gamble. This team was especially hopeless. Too many egos. Too much pressure to perform in their home country. Tempers were high, and scoring was low.

It was difficult to get out of bed. He had responsibilities and events to attend, but he still struggled. Everything felt heavy, and all he wanted to do was go home. But, his flight back to Boston wasn't for another few days. All he could do was stay curled up in his shitty cardboard bed in the Olympic Village.

At least, for once, he wasn't struggling over Shane Hollander.

He'd been hoping to run into Shane at least once. They'd played against each other twice since Shane found out, but Ilya hadn't gotten a chance to actually talk to him. That was probably on purpose. He knew that his number was blocked, and it wasn't like he could just show up to his apartment in Montreal and demand to talk. He didn't even know where Shane lived, and even if he did, Shane definitely wouldn't let him in. He clearly hated Ilya. Ilya didn't blame him.

The whole thing was fucked up. He knew the fallout was going to be brutal. He had been *expecting* this. The whole time, he knew this was the most likely outcome, but Ilya still let himself fall in love.

The whole thing hurt more than he'd ever thought that it could. He would never be able to forget the way Shane had looked at him right after he'd realised. The memory was burned into his brain. He replayed it every time he closed his eyes. It felt like there was a hole in Ilya's chest where his feelings for Shane had once sat. Shane had ripped himself out of Ilya's life pretty efficiently, but Ilya still felt the loss every time he breathed.

He wondered if Shane hurt in the same way. Did he feel the absence of Ilya in his life? Probably not.

Either way, Ilya didn't have time to dwell on it. His presence was requested (required) at some ostentatious party tonight, and his father had informed Ilya that he was expected at his hotel room beforehand. Ilya wished he was strong enough to refuse.

He wasn't. So, he knocked on his father's hotel room door exactly five minutes before six o'clock.

His father opened the door in his full dress police uniform. He was frowning, as always when Ilya was in his presence. His beard was greyer than Ilya remembered. He was in his late seventies now, well over fifty years older than Ilya.

He moved to the side. All the air was sucked out of Ilya's lungs as he stepped into the room. It felt a little like he was walking into a sentencing for a crime he knew he didn't commit.

Ilya removed his wool overcoat and set it on a hook near the door, and instantly, his father's eyes were raking over him. *Inspecting* him for anything out of place. Ilya's tuxedo was impeccable. He'd tied and retied his bowtie probably half a dozen times until it was perfect. He had even given himself the closest shave he'd had in years. Still, his father would find something. He *always* found something.

"You need a haircut." He finally decided. Ilya had let his hair grow out, but it was slicked back tonight. It had been foolish to assume his father wouldn't notice.

"Yes, sir."

His father's frown deepened as he crossed the room to the bar. He poured two tumblers of vodka and handed one to Ilya. Blessedly, his hands weren't shaking as he accepted the glass.

"The Minister wants to meet you tonight."

The Minister of Internal Affairs. His father's boss.

"I will be honoured." Ilya lied. He took a small sip of his drink, resisting the urge to throw it back and pour himself glass after glass.

"You *should* be honoured that he would want to meet you. Especially after last night. To lose to *Latvia*." He spit the last word like it was a slur. Ilya bit down on the inside of his cheek so hard he drew blood. "How could you have allowed that to happen? How are you not ashamed?"

"I am ashamed, Father."

"Not nearly enough. You have forgotten your discipline in the American league. You are sloppy." His father shook his head. "You had so much promise when you were young. What happened to you?"

The cool disappointment was worse than the explosive anger Ilya had been expecting. "I am a better player than I ever have been. The team just hasn't been working well together."

The wrong thing to say. His father's gaze went from cold to icy. Ilya could have sworn the temperature in the room dropped a few degrees.

"You are the captain, are you not? Who else is there to blame for this but you?"

Ilya didn't respond, even though he had a lot he could have said. Anything he said would just make it worse. He fixed his gaze on the floor and waited until his father changed the subject.

Grigori set his vodka on the table and grabbed Ilya harshly by the neck to needlessly adjust his tie. "Who tied this for you? Your mother? You know she doesn't know how to do this properly."

Ilya's breath caught in his throat. Fuck. He hated this part of talking to his father.

"No, Father. Mama is dead. Remember?"

Grigori froze. The confusion on his face was obvious. It took him longer than it had the last time to blink and reaffirm his grip on reality. Almost a full minute. "Yes, of course. I know that. I was thinking of your stepmother."

"And where is Polina tonight?" Ilya accepted his father's obvious lie. If he was determined to deny that he wasn't okay, Ilya would be forced to ignore it as well. He didn't like his father, but watching him deteriorate like this was difficult.

"Home." He released Ilya's bowtie and didn't offer a further explanation. Ilya really didn't care, so he didn't press further. He just finished his glass of vodka with a barely hidden grimace.

"We should leave."

Confusion marred his father's face again. His brow furrowed. "… Leave. Yes."

"To the gala." Ilya supplied. "For the Olympics. You are going to introduce me to the Minister."

And just like that, his father snapped back into himself. He looked at Ilya with anger in his eyes and snarled, "I know that."

As he watched his father collect his overcoat, Ilya honestly felt a little sorry for him. He couldn't help it. Watching his father drift in and out of himself over and over again was difficult. He wondered if things would be easier when his father was too far gone to remember even his own name. When he didn't have to suffer the embarrassment of being just aware enough to know that he's confused.

The gala was just as brutal as Ilya had been expecting. Three hours of mingling with Russian officials who Ilya could barely hide his disdain for. His father kept him on a tight leash, rarely leaving his side. Ilya couldn't tell if it was because he didn't trust Ilya or himself. Probably a mixture of both.

Ilya was thankful that meeting the Minister of Internal Affairs was the worst of it. If Russia had won gold… he didn't want to think about who he'd be forced to meet. To shake hands with. Maybe losing was a blessing in disguise.

When the event finally wrapped up and Ilya was alone, he still couldn't relax. He couldn't shake the feeling that he was being watched, even in the security of his empty room. He needed to clear his head. It wasn't that late. He could still do something.

Even if it was late, it wouldn't matter. You don't have any games left to play, Ilya thought bitterly. His typical method of fucking his head on straight was out of the question. He'd been slowly easing back into his playboy ways after spending a month licking his Hollander-induced wounds, but he couldn't turn up to a club without word somehow getting back to his father. Sochi wasn't his home city, but people in Russia knew his name.

Maybe he would go for a walk on the beach near the Olympic Village. Get some fresh air, feel the breeze against his skin, try to pretend like he wasn't drowning within himself for two seconds.

Yeah. That sounded like a good idea.

Sochi was… interesting, to say the least. Shane had been pretty anxious leading up to the Olympics. The pressure of competing for his country and the countless articles about security concerns had made Shane nervous. He'd never been to Russia before. He wasn't exactly sure that this over-the-top spectacle was the best representation of the country.

He couldn't help but think of Rozanov at every moment. This was *his* country. He couldn't relax knowing that. Knowing that, at any moment, he could run into Rozanov. He'd been working on moving past the hurt and betrayal, but it had barely been two months. He couldn't even fool himself into believing he was over it.

Some small, vindictive part of Shane had been happy when he saw that Team Russia had been knocked out of the running for a medal. An even smaller part of him felt bad. It couldn't have been easy to lose so early, especially competing in your home country.

Team Canada was doing great. They'd won last night, and after a quick practice in the morning, the team had been given the day off. Shane didn't have many friends competing outside of J.J., who was bouncing from event to event, and his parents had elected (after some fierce discussion) to stay behind, so Shane felt a little aimless. He'd eaten with a bunch of the Team Canada players, but after that, he had no idea what to do.

Somehow, he'd found himself wandering alone on a beach. Geographically, Shane knew that Russia had beaches, but it was kind of surreal to experience one. He really hadn't known what to expect from Russia before he'd stepped foot in Sochi.

"Shane Hollanderrrrr!"

Shane jumped at the sudden sound. He turned around and found Carter Vaughan and Scott Hunter approaching him. They were both smiling.

"What's up, guys?" Shane exchanged bro-hugs with both of them once they caught up to him. "Did you know there would be a beach here? This place is so weird."

Carter laughed and spun around. "There are fucking *palm trees*. I thought Russia was supposed to be, like, cold in winter."

"Congrats on your last win." Scott said. Shane didn't often find himself liking players on opposing teams, but Shane genuinely liked Scott Hunter. It was hard not to. Carter was nice and fun to be around, but Scott was, like, an angel. He'd literally never had a bad word to say about anybody, at least in public.

"Thanks. It was an easy win, but I'll take it."

"Ah, these early games are all easy." Carter waved a hand, and then turned to Scott. "Who are we playing next, Scotty? Fiji?"

Scott frowned at him. "Denmark. And I don't want you getting cocky about it."

"Sir, yes, sir."

Shane laughed a little at Carter's over-the-top salute. "How are you guys finding the accommodations?"

"Are you kidding?" Carter asked. "I'm sleeping on a *cot*–"

"It's a twin bed." Scott interrupted.

"Semantics." Carter waved his hand. Scott poorly suppressed a smile. "It might as well be a cot, especially since I'm wedged between two other beds. One has this fucking *oaf* snoring away."

"I don't snore."

"And the other has Sully– Eric Sullivan, he plays for Jersey– and I really don't even know him, but he's fucking *massive*. Even bigger than Scott."

"Yeah, I get you." He hadn't been loving the rooming arrangements either. "I'm with J.J. and Huff."

Scott's face lit up at the mention of his teammate, because he was the best. "I was wondering where he'd ended up. I've been meaning to check in."

"Huff doesn't take up much space, but J.J…" Carter laughed. "He's a giant."

"Yeah, I can't say that any of us are enjoying it. J.J. least of all."

"What are your plans for the rest of tonight?" Scott asked.

"I think I'm going to watch…" Movement behind Scott caught Shane's eye and he trailed off in the middle of his sentence. He couldn't remember what he was saying because Ilya Rozanov was standing there, just a couple meters from Shane. He was staring pensively out at the sea with his hands in his pockets. When he turned his head, his eyes met Shane's.

Seeing him was agonizing. It felt like someone punched a hole through Shane's chest. For a moment, they were both frozen, staring each other down. Then, Ilya started towards them *fast*.

Shane's hands started shaking. He couldn't do this. Not here. Not now. He wasn't… He was still too angry for this. He was still too confused. All the progress he'd thought he made in sorting out his emotions had gone out the fucking window the moment his eyes locked onto Rozanov's. If he joined this conversation, Shane wouldn't be able to keep it civil. He couldn't let Scott and Carter witness that. It would spread across the entire league like wildfire. Hockey players were massive gossips.

Shane took the coward's way out. He turned around in the middle of whatever Scott was saying and walked away.

"Hollander?" Carter called after him, but Shane ignored him. He was determined to put as much space between him and Rozanov as he could.

When Shane chanced a glance back, Rozanov was standing between Carter and Scott. Carter and Scott were exchanging confused glances, but Rozanov was watching Shane. Shane met his eyes again, and Ilya's face crumbled. It was the same look he'd had when Shane had told him that he never wanted to see him again.

In that moment, Shane was sure that he was going to follow. In that moment, Shane almost wanted him to. He was stunned at how willing he was to throw his pride aside if it meant never having to see that crushed look on Ilya's face again.

But then, Carter opened his mouth and the moment fell away. Rozanov turned to him and laughed. Shane kept walking.

The distance didn't do anything to ease the growing ache in his chest.

June 2014– Las Vegas

This was, potentially, Shane's worst fucking nightmare.

At the end of the season, the league had asked Shane to present at the NHL awards. That in and of itself would have been fine. Except, they wanted him to present the award for Best Sportsmanship. And they wanted him to do it with *Ilya Rozanov*.

Shane was standing backstage in his tuxedo alone, trying desperately not to freak out. Nobody had seen Rozanov. They were supposed to walk out on stage together in *three minutes*. Shane probably should have been thankful that he was MIA. It meant he didn't have to awkwardly dodge conversation with him.

"Where the hell is Rozanov?" A panicked director asked.

"I have no clue." Shane's shoulders tensed. "We don't exactly, uh, talk much."

It was the understatement of the century. In the months since the Olympics, a lot of Shane's anger had cooled off. It gave way to a mix of betrayal, sadness, horniness, confusion, and anxiety. A swirling vortex of emotions that Shane couldn't sort through even if he tried.

He remembered watching Ilya win the cup, sitting on the couch with all the Voyageurs who had stuck around Montreal after their third round elimination. He had been angry and sick with jealousy, but also strangely proud when he saw Ilya lift the cup over his head. There had been real tears streaming down his face. Shane knew it wasn't because of the overwhelming emotions that came with winning. Ilya had proved something to somebody.

Their last conversation had been that night in Boston. It was technically their only conversation. Shane didn't like thinking about it. He felt unreasonably anxious every time he did. Even now, he was struggling to keep his breathing even. Shane had been hoping that the complete radio silence between them would make it easier for Shane to get over this. Somehow, it had the opposite effect. Ilya had become a permanent fixture in the back of Shane's mind, haunting practically every thought that he had.

"Looking for me?"

He whipped around, ready to absolutely ream into Ilya for being so late. Whatever he was about to say died on his tongue the moment their eyes met. Rozanov was just a few feet away, looking so fucking good in his tux that Shane had to swallow. He looked like a fucking model. It was infuriatingly sexy.

Shane rolled his eyes, and turned away without responding. He hoped he came off as unbothered. Some part of him was curious to know how it would feel to give Rozanov a taste of his own medicine. Rozanov's eyes got a little sad as he studied Shane's side profile. He opened his mouth to say something, but was cut off by a director coming out of nowhere to shove them onto the stage.

They went to the podium and recited the banter they'd been given about the importance of having respect for your fellow players. Shane was thankful that the whole thing played into their rivalry. It got a lot of laughs. Probably because Shane was giving his part of the speech through clenched teeth.

He was all too aware of Rozanov at his side. He couldn't help but wonder what Rozanov would have done if the league had tried to make them do this before. Would he have let Shane find out twenty seconds before he was supposed to go on stage in front of literally *all* of their coworkers?

"Hey." Rozanov bumped his shoulder against Shane's. "Before we give out the award, can I get a selfie?"

Shane played up his confusion a little. It was all part of the script. "What?"

"Just a quick one. I mean, when will this ever happen again, right?"

"Fine." Shane rolled his eyes. "Hurry up."

Rozanov wrapped his arm around Shane's shoulder and pulled him tight against him. Everyone laughed at how tense Shane looked. Rozanov pulled his phone out and snapped a few photos. "Give me your number. I'll send it to you."

"No chance." Shane deadpanned.

Rozanov's arm stayed on Shane's shoulders for a fraction of a second too long. Shane was half-ready to force himself out of his grip, but he also knew that he'd miss the feeling of being so close to him. Even now, on stage in front of all of their coworkers, Shane's brain couldn't fucking figure out his own feelings.

When he finally pulled away, Rozanov let his fingers brush against the back of Shane's neck. Shane felt like he'd been electrocuted. Every hair on his body stood up, and he struggled to

keep his composure as they started to read off the names of the nominees.

Shane was off the stage as soon as he possibly could be. His breathing was heavy and uneven. He didn't stop walking until he found a small bathroom backstage. He locked himself inside and collapsed against the closest wall, chest heaving.

He couldn't believe that Rozanov still had that much of an effect on him. One touch and he was sending Shane careening off a cliff in his own mind. And, to make matters so much worse, he was getting hard. Of course he was. It was like his dick was fucking *conditioned* to react to even just the thought of Ilya. Even the negative ones. He'd been in this situation more times in the last couple months than he was comfortable admitting.

Someone tried the handle of the door. Shane's eyes widened in panic, and he yelled, "Occupied!"

"Hollander?" Rozanov tried the door again, a little harder. "Is you?"

Shane bristled. "I'm in here, asshole."

"Yes. I know. Can you… let me in?" Rozanov asked quietly. His usually confident tone had taken on something uncertain.

Shane straightened. His voice was far too shaky as he said, "What do you want?"

"I have much to say to you. Not exactly ideal place to say it, but…" He laughed anxiously. "You have made it difficult. Can I come in please?"

Shane pressed his forehead against the door and settled a hand on the knob. He wasn't going to open it. He *wasn't*. "No. Go away."

"You still do not want to talk?"

"No. I don't. You don't have anything to say that I'd want to hear." Shane threw the words that Rozanov used as an excuse for his silence all those months ago back in his face.

He heard a faint gasp on the other side of the door, and then… nothing. Shane lasted about twenty seconds before he caved and opened the door, but when he did, Ilya was gone.

Ilya left the party early. This should have been *his* night. He'd won the cup. He'd gotten the Conn Smythe. He should have been out *celebrating*. He fucking deserved it.

Instead, he was shut up in his hotel room staring at a picture of Shane fucking Hollander.

The guilt lived in Ilya's brain. It had burrowed its way deep inside of him, eating at him little by little. Nothing he did seemed to dislodge it. There was a constant reminder of his biggest mistake etched into his skin. Every time he saw his words, Shane's betrayed face flashed in his mind. No amount of hockey wins or sex could erase that from his memory.

He was going to apologize tonight. He *wanted* to apologize tonight. He would have gotten on his knees and begged if that would fix it. But, Shane had fled as soon as he possibly could. He hadn't looked back this time. He hadn't even opened the door.

The message could not have been clearer. He didn't want to hear anything Ilya had to say. Nothing had changed since the Olympics. Ilya was going to have to let him go. Holding on would only make things worse. Ilya wasn't going to shove his way back into Shane's life. It wasn't fair to either of them. Ilya had long since learned not to go where he wasn't wanted, and Shane didn't want him.

Ilya's dick hadn't gotten that message, though. He could feel himself getting hard in his briefs looking at Shane's annoyed face on his phone, even as he decided it was time to move on. It was ridiculous.

Fine. One time. He'd allow himself to get off to the thought of Shane Hollander one more time, and then he'd work on getting over him. That was the only healthy option anyway.

Ilya wrapped the hand not holding his phone around his dick, not bothering to start off gently. He was already hard and desperate. Getting this over with was his number one priority here. The quicker he got off, the quicker he could free himself from Hollander's hold on him.

It was an easy orgasm. At some point, he'd zoomed in on Shane's freckles. They filled his entire phone screen as he came.

Ilya cleaned up quickly. Once he was done, he selected all the photos. His finger hovered over the delete button. He had no reason to keep these pictures anymore. He was determined to start the process of getting over Shane, like, tomorrow. Keeping these would be counterproductive, but Ilya still couldn't bring himself to actually *do* it.

Fine. He would put it in a locked album. He told himself he'd never look at them again, because these days, lying to himself was the only way that Ilya made it through the day.

He wondered what would have happened if Shane was talking to him. What they would have done. Ilya had won big this season. He would have made Shane reward him somehow. Shane always listened to pretty. He would have done whatever Ilya asked, if he asked it right.

Ilya would never get that again. He'd have to live for the rest of his life with those few memories. Maybe one day, he'd be okay with that. Maybe one day, he'd forget.

September 2014– Montreal

Shane woke up to his phone ringing. It was weird. He was almost always awake before anyone who would be calling him. His alarm was set for six, but the clock in his room said it was only 2:30. Who the fuck was calling him at 2:30 in the morning?

Hayden, apparently. Shane squinted at his too-bright, still broken phone screen, trying to figure out exactly *why* Hayden would be calling him in the middle of the night, for long enough that the call ended. Hayden called him back immediately, and Shane was both curious and worried enough to pick up on the first ring.

"Hayden?" Shane's voice was scratchy. He needed some water. "Dude, do you know what time it is?"

"Jackie's pregnant."

Well, that was one way to wake Shane up. "Oh."

"She's *pregnant*, dude." Hayden's voice was shaking, and Shane could hear him hyperventilating. "Like. With a baby. *My* baby."

"What else would she be pregnant with?"

Hayden did not find that funny, if the sharp intake of breath on the other end of the phone was any indication. "Shane. We're not ready for this. *I'm* not ready for this. We're so young. I hardly even know–"

"Don't finish that sentence." Shane cut him off before he could dig himself too deep. "You're literally soulmates. You've been married for two years. Don't you want this?"

"Of course I want this, but I can't leave Jackie to take care of a kid all by herself for most of the year! What kind of father would that make me?" He paused and then said, in a horrified tone, "God, what if I get *traded*? What if I get traded to an American team? I couldn't leave Jackie alone with a baby in *another country*."

Hayden's panic was palpable and kind of infectious. Shane was suddenly starting to feel anxious, like this was *his* baby. It was ridiculous. He took a deep breath to get his head on

straight and cut Hayden's panicked spiral off. "You're not going to get traded, Hayden. You have a no-trade clause."

"Oh." Hayden swallowed loudly. "Right. Yeah. I do. Sorry, I'm not–"

"It's okay. You're stressed out. It's a major life change."

Hayden sighed. "I just don't want Jax to resent me."

"Jackie knew what she was signing up for when she married you." Shane reminded him. Honestly, Shane didn't really understand how anyone could be a WAG. It seemed like a horrible life, but he wasn't about to point that out right now. "She knows your job. She knows that you're going to be gone. She married you anyway."

"It's not just that. I want to *be there*, you know? I want to raise our kid."

"You will be there."

"Yeah, but I'll be gone half the time." Shane couldn't see Hayden, but he knew him well enough to know he probably had a hand tangled in his hair as he paced around. "I don't want to, like, traumatize my kid by not being there. What if they hate me?"

"Hayden–"

"I wouldn't even be able to blame them, you know? What kind of dad is gone for half of his kid's life?"

"Hayden."

"Oh *god*. What if she goes into labour while we're on a road trip? What if I miss the–"

"*Hayden*." Shane practically yelled, cutting off whatever tangential spiral he was about to go down. "You're freaking out right now."

"Fucking obviously."

"It's going to be *fine*." Shane insisted. "You two are, like, the blueprint. You have the story that everybody wants to have."

It wasn't even that much of a lie. Shane constantly wondered what his life would be like if his soulmate was literally anybody else. Would he be living like Jackie and Hayden? Married, with a kid on the way? That was what he'd always assumed his life would be. It's what *everyone* assumed his life would be.

With some amount of horror, Shane realised that he actually understood why Ilya had kept the fact that they were soulmates a secret, at least at the beginning. There wasn't exactly a manual for how to deal with finding out your soulmate is also your rival. Shane probably would have made the same decision in that moment, if Ilya had been the first one to speak. Hell, he probably would have stayed away from Ilya forever if he'd found out first.

There was absolutely no way seventeen year old Shane would have been able to handle that realisation normally. Twenty-three year old Shane certainly hadn't. Maybe if he'd found out in a different way, Shane would have been okay with it. Maybe if Ilya hadn't spent almost four years lying to his face about it while still sleeping with him.

That was the part that really confused him. If Ilya didn't want Shane to know they were soulmates, why did he kiss Shane in that shower? Why did he want to fuck Shane? Why *did* he fuck Shane? Was it some fucked-up power thing, like he was getting off on the idea of having something over Shane?

It probably wasn't that. Ilya was an asshole, but he didn't seem like *that* kind of an asshole. Besides, if the way their encounters had gone were any indication, Ilya was genuinely into him. The whole thing made Shane's head spin every time he thought about it for too long.

He wanted answers, but the only way to *get* answers would be to talk to Ilya. He wasn't ready for that. He wasn't sure he ever would be.

"Shane? You still there?"

Right. Shane was still on the phone. He was still on best friend duty. "Yeah, sorry. I was just… thinking."

"Sorry for calling so late." Hayden sounded a little sheepish and a whole lot calmer. "I was just totally freaking out, man."

"Don't apologise. I'm happy to–" Shane cut himself off with a yawn.

"I'll let you go back to sleep. Thanks for talking me down."

"I meant what I said. You're going to be a good father, Hayden."

"Thanks, Shane." He could hear Hayden's smile. "I'll see you in a few hours for practice."

"See you."

Shane hung up the phone and laid back down. He closed his eyes and quickly realised that there was absolutely no way he was going to fall back asleep. His mind was spinning so much he was pretty sure he'd get vertigo. He was thinking so much that he could barely think. After probably an hour of staring at the ceiling, Shane grabbed his phone again. He would mindlessly scroll on Instagram until he either fell back asleep or his alarm went off in a few hours.

Mostly, Shane saw game highlights. He scrolled from an impressive assist by Scott Hunter to a video of Dallas Kent taking a fist directly to his eye socket. Shane couldn't help but laugh a little. He'd played against Kent enough times to know that he probably deserved it. He scrolled again, and Ilya's face filled up his phone screen. It was a clip from a post-game interview with one of the bigger news outlets. He wasn't wearing a shirt.

The sound of Ilya's voice talking about hockey had almost lulled Shane back to sleep, but the interviewer quickly grabbed his attention. "Have you found your soulmate?"

Shane dropped his phone on his face. He was suddenly very nauseous.

"I have." Ilya paused for dramatic effect and smirked at the camera. Shane couldn't fucking *breathe*. He wrapped a hand tight around his wrist, like hiding his words would stop Rozanov. Surely he wasn't about to– "Is a silly question. My soulmate is hockey. Always has been, always will be."

Somehow, that response was worse. How the fuck was that *worse*?

Shane's brain was absolutely fucked up. Why was he mad that Ilya hadn't acknowledged his place as Shane's soulmate? *He* hadn't even acknowledged the bond. He'd been actively trying to get over it. Was it going *well*? No. But he was trying.

He shut his phone off. Ilya's voice still echoed in his mind. *My soulmate is hockey*. Fuck him. Seriously. What an asshole.

Shane couldn't stop thinking about him.

November 2014– Montreal

"Hollander. What the fuck are you doing right now?"

Shane frowned at his phone. Sometimes, he wished J.J. would just text him. His phone calls always lasted a maximum of two minutes. It was the definition of unnecessary, but it was J.J.. "Nothing, why?"

"Fuck that. Get your ass downtown. My buddy Francois is having a little party at his restaurant after-hours, and get this, the cast of the fucking *X-Squad* movie they're filming here is going to be there."

"All of them?"

"I don't fucking know! Enough of them! Get in your car *right now*. You know the restaurant, right? Djon-Djon?"

Shane's first instinct was to tell him no. If it had been literally anyone but J.J. inviting him out, he probably would have stayed in. But he knew from past experiences that saying no to J.J. meant enduring hourly calls for the rest of the night to let him know what he was missing.

It wasn't like Shane had anything better to do tonight anyway. He was going to be spending the night on the couch watching the end of a Bears game and pretending like he was thinking a normal amount about Ilya Rozanov. He could definitely use a distraction.

He put on one of his nicer outfits and drove himself to the restaurant. Most things were closed by this point, but Shane could see the lights on in the hip, Haitian-inspired restaurant on the corner. The sign said they were closed, but the door opened for Shane before he'd even reached it.

Inside, there was laughter and warmth and music. It was crowded, but in a way that still seemed intimate.

"Hollander! Fuck yeah! Get over here!"

J.J. wasn't hard to spot. He literally towered over everyone, even Shane. It was kind of laughable to think they played the same sport. J.J. was at least ten inches taller than Shane, and he weighed probably seventy pounds more. Even if he wasn't so physically imposing, J.J.'s personality would have filled the room. He was loud and he *loved* to talk. People hung onto his every word, no matter where he went. He was French and fashionable and loved food and wine. It was like he was custom built in a lab to live in Montreal.

Outside of J.J. and a few other teammates, Shane didn't know anyone else at the party. Well, he didn't *know* anyone, but he recognized a good chunk of the people in the room. Shane was pretty famous– extremely famous when compared to most hockey players– but he felt a little starstruck.

Normally, Shane would feel out of place at an event like this, but he was surprisingly comfortable. He made his way to the bar. The bartender was slim and gorgeous in a way that made Shane look twice.

"Can I get a beer?" Shane asked him in French. "Whatever's on tap is fine."

"*Shane Hollander* can have whatever he wants here." He said with a sexy smile. He poured Shane his beer and slid it over the counter.

"Thanks."

Shane tried to slide a ten across the bar, but the bartender held his hands up. "On the house."

"For you, then."

"It's an honour."

Shane smiled and held out his hand. "Shane. Please."

"Maxime." His skin was soft and warm against Shane's.

"Nice to meet you. Are you having a good night?"

"With this crowd? Are you kidding? *Rose Landry* is here, man."

"Are you serious?" Shane's head scanned the room, almost involuntarily. When he looked back at Maxime, he was grinning. Shane had wanted to catch a glimpse of the actress, but he was kind of enjoying looking at Maxime. He needed to put some distance between them before that became too obvious.

He spent the rest of the night at J.J.'s side, letting him drag Shane around the room and introduce him to people. He stood quietly in small circles of people, laughing at their jokes and telling none of his own. He carefully avoided the bar and eventually found an empty table in a corner. He was about to get up to leave when a very pretty woman with dark, glossy hair slid into the booth next to him. Shane recognized her immediately. Rose Landry.

"*Please* tell me you're hungry." She set a plate piled high with some delicious smelling fried food on the table. Shane was pretty sure they were cod fritters. "The chef just handed me this and there is literally no way that I could eat them all."

She smiled at him and popped one in her mouth. Her eyes went wide with surprise, and she raised a hand to cover her mouth. "Holy shit. These are *so good*. You have got to try some." She swallowed and held out her perfectly manicured hand. "I'm Rose, by the way."

"Shane." He smiled and took it. "It's nice to meet you. I'm kind of a big fan."

She leaned in a little bit. She smelled amazing, like cinnamon and vanilla. "I'm kind of a big fan of *you*, if you'd believe it."

"You like hockey?"

"I was born and raised in Michigan." She laughed. "Damn right I like hockey."

He blinked in surprise. "Oh! Well, thanks."

"You're welcome. Eat a fritter, Shane Hollander."

Shane lost track of time in the booth as they talked over the fritters. She was ridiculously easy to talk to. They bonded over the lakeside cottages they'd spent their summers at. Rose's brother had played hockey in college, before he became an engineer. Their parents had similar life stories. Soulmates who met in college and then went on to do government work.

"And what about your words?" She asked, once Shane was done recounting how his parents had met. It was very forward of her. You really didn't ask that question if you weren't actually interested in someone. Shane bit back a smile.

"I have them. Me and my soulmate…" Shane scrunched up his face, trying to find a simple way to put the fucked up mess of emotions he felt towards Ilya into words. "We aren't on good terms. At all. What about you?"

For a second, her light dimmed a little. She looked a little sad as she said, "I haven't gotten my words yet."

There was an awkward beat of silence. Shane wasn't sure if he should console her or not. He'd had his for so long that he'd forgotten what the etiquette was. He decided to just change the subject to something a little less heavy.

"So, have you ever been to Montreal before?"

"Once. I was shooting a role in this absolutely *horrible* FBI movie. I can't even remember what it's called anymore."

"*Under Dark*, I think."

"Oh my god. You saw that? *Shut up*."

Shane shrugged and grinned. "I fly a lot. I watch a lot of movies. They can't *all* be good."

"Thankfully, it was a small role. I was here for a week that time. And it was summer."

"It's a little different here in the winter."

"Michigan, remember." She leaned in a little. "Winter can't scare me."

Shane's chest felt light. The more he looked at her, the more he didn't want to look away. He felt his cheeks warm a bit as he asked, so smoothly he almost shocked himself, "Are you going to be in town for a while?"

Her smile let him know she knew what he was *really* asking.

At the end of the night, they exchanged contact information and made loose plans to go get dinner as soon as their schedules aligned. Shane left the restaurant feeling better than he had in months. He'd never had that kind of connection with a woman… ever. He really liked Rose. He wanted to get to know her. The idea of spending time with her was exhilarating. She was gorgeous, obviously, but mostly Shane just loved talking to her.

When he got in the car, he realised that he hadn't thought of Ilya since she asked him about his soulmate. He'd been talking with Rose for at least two hours after that. She was funny and kind and not *once* had Ilya Rozanov crossed his mind. That could only mean one thing.

Shane *liked* her. He like a girl.

Finally. He was starting to think it would never happen.

Three weeks later– Detroit

Ilya loved going out. He loved losing himself in the alcohol and the music and the press of bodies against his own. There was nothing better, except maybe sex. Often they went hand in hand.

The Bears had lost against Detroit, but Ilya hadn't let that stop him from going out. It just meant that he would have less overly drunk teammates to worry about. An unfortunate side effect of being captain meant that, even off the ice, his teammates were his responsibility. They'd cockblocked him by overindulging so many times it was getting a little annoying.

Not tonight though. Tonight, Ilya was flying solo.

Pretty quickly, Ilya had found himself in a dark corner, half-hard with a pretty girl's mouth on his. She had dark hair and freckles and she was so obviously into Ilya that he found it hard to resist. He was pretty sure her name was Jane. It was a little ironic, all things considered.

He'd let her take him back to her place. They didn't make it to the bedroom. Ilya lost himself in between her thighs on the couch, her hand tangled in his hair. She was sweet and eager, but she had some edge. Ilya made her come twice before she pushed him down and rode him.

It was *good* sex. Like, really good. If Ilya had a list, she'd probably make the top three. By the time he was coming inside the condom, Ilya was thoroughly satisfied by the outcome of the night.

"Fuck. That was– *fuck*." She was out of breath, her cheeks flushed in a way that made her freckles stand out. Ilya pointedly did *not* think of anyone else. He had no reason to, not when there was a beautiful woman in his lap.

"Agree." Ilya pushed his hair off his forehead. "Very good."

Gingerly, Ilya pulled out of her. He made quick work of the condom while she practically melted into the couch next to him, chest still heaving.

Once she finally seemed to catch her breath, Jane slid off the couch and plucked the used condom out of Ilya's hand. "Wait here. I need to pee."

He thought about asking her to stay and go for a second round, but he'd had enough sex to know that this part was a non-negotiable. Maybe she'd let him stick around long enough to get hard again. He'd been so keyed up on this road trip that it probably wouldn't take long.

Vegas was playing right now, Ilya thought distantly. She probably wouldn't be long, but Ilya *was* playing in Vegas in two weeks. Jane's remote was sitting on the coffee table. She had recognized him pretty quickly, so there was a high chance she would get hockey channels. Ilya reached down to grab her remote off the coffee table, but something else caught his eye.

There was a tabloid magazine Ilya vaguely recognized sitting there. Shane Hollander was splashed across the cover, holding hands and smiling with a movie actress Ilya immediately recognized. Rose Landry. The headline was something about them dating. It wasn't the only picture of them on the cover. Smaller circles were scattered on the bottom, documenting their other outings.

Ilya's head was spinning. He picked up the magazine. For a second, he'd thought it was an illusion, but the image didn't shift when Ilya picked it up. Shane's half-pleased, half-embarrassed smile was stagnant on the cover. Ilya could see his freckles. Rose Landry's grin was practically blinding.

He should have felt jealous of *Shane* here. She was gorgeous and fashionable and, above all, *cool*. Ilya didn't know much about her, but he had seen paparazzi pictures of her before. She always had this aura of confidence about her. She was nothing like Shane Hollander.

Ilya obviously didn't want him anymore. He spent more time in other people's beds than his own these days. Still, the thought of Shane with *Rose Landry* of all people was enough to

make Ilya feel ill.

And not metaphorically. He found himself retching into the sink, clutching the counter with white knuckles. He hadn't even realised his legs were taking him into the kitchen. Fuck. Maybe he was getting sick.

"Holy shit." Jane rubbed a hand up Ilya's back. "Are you okay?"

"Yes. Probably."

Ilya spat into the basin, trying to get the bitter taste out of his mouth. Thankfully, like many Americans, she had one of those garbage eater things. He didn't know what they were named. He'd never encountered one outside of the states. Ilya would never understand this fucking country.

"Do you want like… a ginger ale or something?"

An image of Shane clutching a can of ginger ale at a some event flashed into Ilya's mind. He wrinkled his nose. "No."

"Are you going to throw up again? Because I'd really rather you didn't–"

"I will leave. Sorry for…" He stepped away from the sink and gestured vaguely.

"Trust me. You do *not* have to apologise." Jane smirked at him. "You're welcome back anytime, vomit in my garbage disposal and all."

Garbage disposal. That's what it was called. Ilya gave her an easy smirk, and gathered his clothes. He was still a little shaky as he dressed. He *must* have been getting sick. That was the only explanation Ilya would accept. The other option didn't make any sense.

Before he headed out the door and back to the team's hotel, Ilya turned back. "Goodbye, Jane."

"Uhm." Her brow furrowed. "My name is Jenna."

December 2014– Montreal

Shane had a girlfriend. He had a *girlfriend* who was *Rose Landry*.

It still made him a little giddy thinking about it, like he was a teenager again. The fact that she wanted him, of all people, was a bit thrilling. What about Shane Hollander attracted someone so effortlessly cool?

His heart rate sped up a little bit when, an hour after his game against Boston had wrapped up, he picked up his phone and saw that she'd texted.

Rose: Congrats on the win!

Rose: Come out with us tonight! We'll be at Ultraviolet.

Shane hated nightclubs. He never allowed himself to get drunk anymore, and he really needed to be drunk in order to be comfortable on the dance floor. But his beautiful, movie star girlfriend wanted him to go out dancing with her. If he was going to endure the chirping from his teammates for dating her– he'd found about sixty roses in his locker the other day, which was a very expensive and stupid prank– he might as well enjoy himself.

Shane: I'll be there.

Shane: What time?

Ilya hated Montreal. It was a stupid city absolutely plastered with pictures of stupid Shane Hollander.

He was in an absolutely foul mood after their loss. His way of handling that was to sulk around his room and make bitchy comments at his roommate.

Carmichael endured it a whole lot longer than Ilya had been expecting him to. Still, he snapped after about a dozen undeserved insults. "*Dude*. Fuck you. What's your fucking problem tonight?"

"Nothing." Ilya sat himself on the end of his bed. "Fuck this. I just need to get fucking laid. Let's go out."

"Out where?"

Ilya swept his hand at the window. "I don't fucking care. We're in a city. Find a fucking club."

"Right on, man." Carmichael smiled. "Let me grab Victor and Cliff."

After four very successful NHL seasons, Shane had gained a reputation of being two things: one of the best hockey players in the league and absolutely *no fun*.

People chirped at him about it all the time. He thought it was kind of an unfair assessment. He was a ton of fucking fun, thank you very much. He could relax and enjoy a beer and be social. He had *friends*. He just really didn't like clubs. He didn't like crowds or loud noises or dancing.

At least tonight, he didn't have to worry about the overwhelming pressure to pick up women.

He'd found Rose and her friends in a private booth in the VIP area of the club. She practically threw herself at Shane when she saw him, and he kissed her happily. He recognized about two people in the group. Miles and Jiya were her favorite co-stars from the *X-Squad* movies, and Shane had met them before.

Miles made Shane a little nervous. He was one of the most attractive people Shane had ever seen in his life. He was sitting at the corner of the booth, looking effortlessly gorgeous in a long-sleeve black tight and slim-fitting pants. When Shane nodded at him awkwardly, he gave him a slow, sexy smile in return. Shane quickly looked away, wrapping his arms around Rose's waist.

"Good game tonight?" She put her hand on his face and leaned her head back a little so she could look him in the eyes. In her precariously high heels, she was only an inch shorter than he was.

"Yeah. Did you watch?"

"I wish." Her smile was apologetic. "I had just finished filming when I texted you. I checked the score on my phone the whole time, though. I'll catch the highlights on ESPN tomorrow."

Shane couldn't shake the feeling that everyone was staring at them as he let go of her and slid into the booth. His hand was on her knee. It probably felt natural to her, but Shane felt stiff.

He ordered a beer when the server came by, even though everyone else was drinking tequila. That was definitely *not* a decision Shane would be making tonight.

They sat and drank and talked. Well, everyone else talked. Shane probably said less than ten words. He was content to listen to the music and attempt to follow the conversation.

Occasionally, he stole a glance at Miles. It made him feel ridiculously guilty. He was here with *Rose Landry*. Why would he need to look at anyone else?

"Come dance with me!" Rose shot up out of her seat suddenly, pulling on Shane's hand.

"Oh. Uh…" Shane said, feeling a bit like someone had just shined a giant spotlight on him. "No, I–"

"*Come on*." Rose pulled him a little harder. "I never get to dance!"

Miles laughed. "That is a blatant lie."

"Well, I want to dance with *Shane*."

Shane was pretty sure that he heard Miles mutter, "That makes two of us."

After one more tug on his hand, Shane gave in. He stood up and allowed Rose to lead him to the dance floor.

He was the worst dressed person in the entire room. Going out with Rose's friends always made him feel like a slob. He'd put in effort tonight, digging out a dark purple polo shirt he'd worn once and pairing it with blue pants, but it was still about four levels below where it needed to be. He really needed to up his fashion game.

Rose wrapped her arms around his neck as they danced. Well, as *she* danced and Shane watched her. She was absolutely stunning. She moved in time to the music with carefree joy. Shane was absolutely mesmerized.

Most of the girls on the dance floor weren't his type. *They were Ilya's type though*, he thought bitterly. Or, at least, they were what Shane *assumed* was Ilya's type based on the pictures he'd seen. He tried to avoid looking at them. They made Shane feel… some type of way. As if he

had any right to be jealous. He knew his own face was probably plastered on just as many tabloids.

The song switched, and Rose let out a high-pitched noise. "I *love* this song!"

Shane smiled at her. He literally had no idea what song it was. He kept his hands on her waist, and she ran a hand down his chest.

He knew what was happening here. Or, at least, what was *supposed* to be happening. He should be… escalating things. Touching her. Kissing her. Making her *want* him.

So why wasn't he?

Ilya went straight for the dance floor, barking vague orders at Cliff to go get him a drink. It was late and the place was already packed and loud. Good. Exactly how Ilya liked it.

A quick scan of the place told him that there were plenty of good options. Plenty of gorgeous women who could take Ilya's mind off of Shane Hollander.

Wait. What?

Ilya's breath caught in his throat. Rose Landry was impossible to ignore. Even in the thick of the crowd, she stood out, but Ilya wasn't looking at her. No, his eyes were on Shane. Shane who had his hands on her hips and her arms wound around his neck.

Fuck this.

Ilya moved with purpose to the other side of the dance floor. It took less than a minute to find a girl who was happy to press her body against his. By the next song, she had her tongue in his mouth.

Miles joined them on the floor after a few songs, and Shane dropped his hands from Rose's waist almost involuntarily. Rose switched dance partners, leaving Shane to hover awkwardly in the crowd and watch them together.

Shane tried to keep his eyes on Rose, but every once and a while, Miles would look over her shoulder at him. There was something darker in his eyes. Like he could see right through Shane.

Rose flowed between the two of them, dancing and navigating her way through the crowd with ease. Now that Miles was here, Shane considered leaving after the next song. Either to go back to the booth or go home. He vaguely recognized this one, so he returned his hands to Rose's hips and tried to move with her.

He looked out at the sea of people for a second. His eyes landed on someone who looked *just* like Ryan Carmichael. Shane would have thought it was just a trick of the light if he didn't immediately see Victor St. Simon and Cliff Marlow next to him.

And Ilya Rozanov.

The entire world stopped. Shane couldn't look away. He couldn't even *move*. Rose was in front of him, and he should have been paying attention to her, but he was fucking transfixed by Ilya.

Ilya was on the other side of the dance floor in a practically translucent shirt. He was dancing with some girl. Well, dancing was an overstatement. She was practically grinding her ass against Ilya's crotch. It was honestly kind of disgusting to watch. Shane felt like a voyeur, but he still couldn't tear his eyes away. He felt a stab of jealousy and nausea as she leaned in and kissed him messily. Her hands were tangled in Ilya's hair as they made out, but Ilya's attention wasn't fully on her.

No, his eyes were open and he was staring directly at Shane.

Ilya pulled away from the kiss. He wasn't looking at the girl, even as she tilted his head to try and resume. She'd been a good kisser, but his eyes were locked on Shane Hollander.

Shane Hollander, who had been *watching*. He was still with Rose, but he was looking at *Ilya*. There was an intensity in his expression that reminded Ilya of that first night they'd been together after the CCM photoshoot. It was a mixture of horniness and anger, like he couldn't believe the emotions he was feeling. Some part of him felt a sick sense of satisfaction. Even though he had a beautiful movie star girlfriend, Ilya was still on Shane's mind.

He didn't look away, even as he leaned down to whisper in the girl's ear. "Should we take this somewhere else?"

Shane's eyes widened. Ilya smirked and raised an eyebrow at him. He got to watch as Shane's face went pink, visible even in the dark lighting.

"Sorry, babe." She patted his chest with one hand. "Not tonight. I'm here with my soulmate. He likes to watch me. It turns him on. So, thanks for the offer, but I'm leaving with him."

Okay. That got Ilya's attention. He was not in the mood to get his shit rocked tonight. Quickly, he let go of her and put some distance between them. "Soulmate?"

"Relax. He's not going to hit you. Like I said, he likes to watch. This was fun, though." She giggled, kissed him on the cheek, and then melted into the crowd.

When Ilya looked up, Shane was gone. So was Rose Landry.

He resisted the urge to throw his half-empty beer on the ground. He stalked out of the crowd, oddly furious *and* horny, and grabbed Victor by the arm.

"I'm leaving." He shouted into his ear.

"With that girl?" Victor dug a teasing elbow into Ilya's ribs. "Right on, man. See you on the plane."

Ilya didn't answer him.

Back at the hotel– after he jerked off in the shower in an attempt to take the edge off– Ilya sat alone on his bed, thinking about Shane Hollander.

Ilya wondered if Rose Landry was good for him. Shane had seemed happy with her tonight. He'd been on the dance floor in his boring clothes with his perfect girlfriend. Ilya had shown up alone.

He wondered if they were in love. Was it too soon for that? Ilya wouldn't be able to fault Rose Landry if they were. Shane wasn't a hard person to fall in love with. It was like the frog in the boiling water analogy Ilya had heard. You didn't even realise it was happening until it was too late to get out.

Most of all, he wondered if Shane still thought about him. Ilya would probably always be wondering that. He hoped Shane was able to remember the good things about Ilya. If there even were any good things *for* him to remember.

Jealousy was a weird emotion. Ilya had never really cared much about someone sleeping with someone else. God, why *did* Ilya care so much? He hadn't spoken to Shane since… that night. Shane certainly wanted absolutely nothing to do with Ilya. He probably hated him.

Except, maybe that wasn't true. Shane had been *watching* Ilya with that girl. He hadn't looked away when Ilya met his eyes.

Ilya scowled to the empty room. He'd really been making strides towards getting over Shane. Now, he was back to square one.

Another week later– Montreal

Shane really liked Rose Landry. She was easy to talk to, and she had this air about her that was just… captivating. Everything about her was warm and genuine, and she was so observant. She remembered almost every detail of every conversation she'd ever had, even recognising fans she'd only met once or twice before. He really enjoyed spending time with her.

The sex part… that was fine. They'd slept together a few times, and it was better than usual. Shane's nerves around the act had made it difficult for him to perform, but Rose had been patient and helpful even though it was clear she was surprised. He was pretty sure she wasn't used to nerves or performance issues in her partners. He was sure he'd get over it soon.

Tonight, Shane was alone with her in a private room at a nice wine bar in Old Montreal. They'd been alone a few times, but normally when they went out like this, she went with her friends and coworkers. To Shane, it had seemed like she had an endless stream of people who wanted to spend time with her.

"I thought it might be nice to talk." She'd explained when Shane asked. He thought she might be upset, but she wasn't. Because she was awesome. "You know, just the two of us."

"Yeah. You're right. It is nice."

They talked for a long time. Shane normally had a hard time holding conversations *not* about hockey, but he never felt that way with Rose. It was just… easy to talk and laugh with her.

"You're so cute." She said, after Shane had practically giggled at one of her jokes. "Have I ever told you that?"

Shane's face flushed a little. "No."

"Well, you are. *Very* cute." She gave him a lopsided smile. "Miles is extremely jealous."

"Of me?"

"No, silly. Of *me*."

It took a second for Shane to put the pieces of what she was saying together. "Oh. *Oh*."

"Wait, did you seriously not notice?" Her brow furrowed a little.

"Uhm. No. I didn't. I hadn't really thought about it, you know?" Shane lied. He knew his face was bright red.

"Well, he is. And he's, like, low-key in love with you."

"Oh."

"Are you… *surprised* that he's gay? I mean, he's an actor."

"No– I mean… No. I'm not. I just don't make it a habit of assuming, you know? I don't think most of the people I know would take it very well."

"Are there any gay hockey players?" She asked, leaning back in her chair.

"No." Shane said, probably too quickly. "Well, none that have said it publicly."

Why is she asking me about this, Shane thought. At some point, he'd unconsciously started rubbing his thumb over the plaster over his words. He stopped himself, putting his hands flat on the table.

"Interesting."

"What?"

Rose gave him a small smile. He wasn't exactly sure what it meant. "I'm sorry. This… I'm going about this all wrong."

"Going about what?" Shane spoke slowly. He suddenly felt like he was staring down the barrel of a shotgun.

Rose bit her lip. "Shane, I really like you. But… I just get the feeling that I'm not… doing it for you."

"*What*?" Shane said again, his voice shrill. "You are! You do! I like you a lot too!"

"You like talking to me, but do you like kissing me?"

"Sure."

She laughed. "Wow."

"I mean…" Oh god. Shane was fucking this up *big time*. "Yes. Of course I do."

"It's really okay. I just get the feeling that you'd rather be kissing, just for example… Miles?"

Shane didn't know what to say. He'd never faced this kind of situation before. Nobody had ever asked him point-blank before, at least not in a genuine way. He'd had people chirp him on the ice by asking him, but Rose wasn't trying to be an asshole. She was just trying to understand him.

He stared into his wine glass. He knew he'd taken too long to reply. He knew she would be able to see right through any excuse he was going to come up with.

"It's okay." She said again, softly. Reassuringly.

"I like you, I swear." Shane was quiet. "I wasn't trying to… I don't know, lead you on? I like being with you. I like talking to you. It's just the sex… I know it's a problem."

"A problem is something that you can solve. We're like… a square peg and a round hole." She scrunched her nose. "Ew. No. Gross. Please forget I said that."

Shane laughed. The buzz of the wine made him feel brave. "I get the message. Besides, I kind of… prefer to be the hole over the peg."

"Ha! See. We definitely aren't supposed to fit together. It was easy to keep trying for a while, but…" She pulled her sleeve up. On her wrist sat her words. The handwriting was in neat cursive. *So, are you here for the groom or the groom?*

"Oh my god, Rose!" Shane felt genuinely excited. They hadn't really talked about soulmates, outside of that first conversation where she told him she hadn't gotten her words yet. It had been the most subdued he'd ever seen her.

"I know." She smiled. "I can't believe it. I feel like I'm in a dream. You know the feeling?"

"Sure, yeah."

"Okay, now that all of that is out of the way…" Rose crossed her arms and fixed him with a mischievous look. "What the fuck is going on between you and Ilya Rozanov?"

Shane's mind blanked out. He stared at her for far too long, willing his brain to come up with a coherent denial. What he managed was, "Uh. What? Who? I mean– I don't know what you mean."

She laughed and shook her head. "Come on, Shane. I'm not *blind*. I saw the way you two were looking at each other when we went out the other day. You looked like you couldn't tell if you wanted to drag him back to your place or knock him unconscious."

"I wouldn't have– Not if we were–"

"I know. I didn't think that you actually *would*." Her grin was almost feral and her eyes were sparkling. Shane was a little scared of her. "I just think it's a little strange that you look at your rival like that. Everyone always says that you two hate each other."

"Hate is one word for it." Shane grumbled, resting his chin on his fist.

"And another?"

Rose leaned forward a little, and Shane studied her for a second. For whatever reason, he didn't feel like lying. Keeping this a secret had been weighing on him immensely. Absolutely *nobody* knew what had gone down between him and Ilya, but for the first time, Shane considered the ramifications of telling someone. He trusted her more than he trusted most people. She didn't know Ilya and she wasn't connected to the hockey world. Maybe it would be good to get an unbiased opinion on their… situation. Not even Shane's parents would be able to provide that. Plus, she was significantly more famous than he was. She definitely knew how to keep a secret.

So, Shane leaned forward as well. "You don't breathe a *word* of what I'm about to tell you to anybody."

"Wait." Her eyes widened. "There's actually something to tell me? I was just teasing, I swear."

"Rose. I'm serious."

She mimed zipping her lips shut and throwing away the key. Shane sighed. There was literally no way to ease her into this, so he just started with, "We used to hook up."

"*What*?" She yelped, causing the waitress to poke her head into their private room. Rose waved her off with a kind smile, and then turned immediately back to Shane with her jaw on the floor.

"Oh, trust me." Shane laughed at her shocked expression. "That's just the beginning."

And so, he told her everything. *Everything*. From day one up until the week before. She ordered them glass after glass of wine and listened, providing minimal commentary– mainly to call Ilya a lot of choice words that Shane didn't disagree with.

It was the first time he'd ever told the story. He'd thought it would make him feel better. Really, it just made him aware of his own poor decision making.

"Wow." Rose said, when he'd finally finished the story. "That was… a lot."

Shane winced. "I know. Sorry for dumping this all on you. I just… I haven't gotten to talk about it yet."

"You've just been sitting with *all* of that by yourself?" Rose frowned when he nodded. "Shane, that really sucks. I'm glad you trust me enough, but why didn't you talk to your parents or your friends about it?"

He let out a long breath and kind of deflated a little. "I don't know. I've thought about it, but everyone I know also knows him through hockey. You're the only person I know who's far removed enough not to have a preconceived opinion on him. I thought you might be able to offer some perspective."

"I have been told I offer some good advice." She drummed her fingernails on the table. "So, you hate him?"

"Yes? No? I honestly don't even know anymore."

Rose hummed. "Elaborate on that. Talk it out. Maybe you'll feel better."

"You're my girlfriend, not my therapist."

"*Ex*-girlfriend." She corrected with a grin. "And I've played a therapist on TV before. That's close enough."

Shane threaded his fingers together. "I don't think I hate him. That's kind of the worst part. I *should* hate him. I *did* hate him."

"But now?"

"Honestly, now I just fucking *miss* him." Shane rubbed a hand across his face. "Maybe it's because I have nobody else to miss like that. Or my brain is spiting me."

Rose was quiet for a few moments. Then, she finally said, "Or maybe you just miss him."

It was poignant enough to make Shane pause. He struggled with a way to deny that.

Finally, he settled on, "I don't think I knew him well enough to miss him. He's basically a stranger."

"I don't think that's true. You two were very… intimate with each other." Rose swirled the wine at the bottom of her glass. "I think if you didn't know him, you wouldn't be so hurt by what he did. A stranger lying to you doesn't matter."

"It really did hurt. I'm not even angry anymore. I'm just sad and hurt and confused all the time."

"Okay, I know I called him a washed out asshole like ten minutes ago, but have you considered… talking to him?"

Shane laughed in her face. "No. *No*. Absolutely not."

"Why?"

"I don't…" Shane trailed off. "I just don't think I'm ready for that. I can hardly look him in the eyes."

"You weren't having that problem the other night." Rose teased. Shane rolled his eyes

"And besides, I can't imagine he'd want to talk to me. I've been ignoring him for months. He's *let* me ignore him for months. I think that sends a message."

"Oh my god, you're such an idiot." Rose mumbled, rubbing a hand over her face. "I can't believe you're making me defend him after everything you just told me."

"I'm not *making* you do anything."

She reached over and put a hand over Shane's. "Yes, you kind of are. Shane. Honey. He's taking his cues from *you*. You don't want to talk to him, so he's not going to force it. For once in his stupid fucking manwhore life, he's being respectful."

The idea of Ilya being respectful probably should have been laughable, but… maybe Rose wasn't too far off. Shane found himself *wanting* to believe her. Shane rubbed a thumb over his words again and laughed breathlessly. "This was really not how I expected this night to go."

"You're telling *me*." Rose giggled. Her cheeks were flushed from the wine.

"I really am sorry." Shane squeezed her hand. "It had honestly never occurred to me that I didn't like women. I don't think I was… ready to accept it yet."

"What? That you're gay?"

"Yeah. And the whole Ilya thing didn't help."

"You're, like, a repression expert. It's not just a river in Egypt, or whatever they say." She giggled again. She was definitely drunk. Shane wasn't too far behind her. They'd had a *lot* of wine.

"I'm so sorry." Their waitress stuck her head into the room again. "We're closing in ten minutes. I have your bill with me now."

After some light shoving, Shane handed her his credit card and told her to pay for the whole thing. It was the least he could do after accidentally leading Rose on.

Rose was unsteady on her feet as they left the restaurant. Shane wrapped an arm around her waist to keep her from falling.

He knew they were going to be friends. Close friends, hopefully. He liked being in her company so much, and now, she knew more about him than anyone else on the planet.

When her cab pulled up, she pressed a kiss to Shane's cheek. "It'll work itself out."

"I know."

"Besides," She looked up at him with a grin as she lowered herself into the backseat, "maybe I'll meet my soulmate at your wedding."

Shane rolled his eyes. Wouldn't that be something?

The same night– Boston

The mood was ruined. No hope of recovery.

Svetlana was sitting at the end of Ilya's bed, studying her wrist. Her words had appeared five minutes ago. While she was actively riding Ilya.

He'd seen them first. Her hand was braced on his chest, splayed over his bear tattoo. One second, her wrist was blank. Ilya closed his eyes, caught up in the feeling of her around him, and when he opened them, there was a neatly written sentence inked into her skin.

Oh, someone's a comedian. It was like fate was laughing at him.

"Sveta." He gasped. "Your wrist."

Immediately, she'd pulled off of him. He couldn't even be mad, not when he got to see the pure, unadulterated joy on her face.

Svetlana was probably Ilya's closest friend. Potentially his only friend. They'd met during Ilya's second year on the Bears. She was a massive hockey fan– maybe even more so than he was– but she never treated Ilya with any sort of reverence. It probably helped that her father was a retired superstar.

And she spoke fluent Russian. She hadn't even entertained speaking English with Ilya after they'd met. He hadn't realised just how much he'd missed speaking the language to someone who would understand him until that day. They had fun together. A lot of fun. In many different positions.

Their relationship had always been no expectations. Ilya wasn't really a commitment kind of person, and Svetlana was really just looking for satisfaction while she waited for her soulmate. Which was why Ilya was in this situation in the first place.

"Fuck, Ilya. I'm sorry." She didn't really look sorry. She looked awe-struck, fingers brushing over her words. "I just–"

Ilya smiled at her. "I do not care. Bad time to get them, though."

"Really a shame. We were having such a good time."

"Yours are better than mine." Ilya held his wrist out for her to look at. "Mine's a buzzkill."

Svetlana laughed at him as she inspected his arm. It was the first time he'd ever let anyone look at his words. It had always seemed too intimate, but he'd literally just been inside her while she got hers. He figured that pushed them well past that line. "I cannot imagine Ilya Rozanov with a buzzkill for a soulmate."

"The words don't lie, Sveta." He shook his head and snatched his arm back. "Though, I also can't imagine anyone thinking you're a comedian."

"Fuck you. I'm hilarious."

"Put your clothes back on."

She slid off the bed and grabbed her bra. "I don't think anyone's ever said *that* to me before."

"Well, there's a first for everything."

Ilya wasn't as put off about not getting off as he normally would be. Seeing her so full of joy made it hard for him to feel anything but happy for her.

It was hard not to think of Shane. He wasn't sure where things stood between them. They still hadn't spoken. At the rate things were going, Ilya wasn't sure they ever would again. He couldn't believe he'd run into him in a fucking nightclub of all places. A *nightclub*! It was the least Shane Hollander place in the world.

And yet, he'd been there. Hands on Rose Landry's waist, but eyes on Ilya. Would he bring her with him to the All-Star game next month? Make Ilya watch them together again?

Fuck. The idea made him feel sick. There was seriously something wrong with him.

January 2015– Tampa Bay

The All-Star game was something Shane usually looked forward to. It would be his fifth year playing in it, and this time, he'd been chosen to captain. It should have been perfect. There was just one problem: Ilya Rozanov.

They were chosen to play on the same team, which meant the countdown on how long Shane could avoid Rozanov was quickly running out. Very, *very* quickly. It made Shane nervous. He was down to the wire now.

Except, he also kind of *didn't* want to avoid him like before. That also made Shane nervous.

After his conversation with Rose, Shane had felt a little bit askew. She had been so unflinchingly supportive of Shane, and yet her soft criticism had been stuck in his mind. Shane was forced to reckon with the fact that he was the one calling the shots now.

He wanted to talk to Ilya– to get a feel for how he really felt on his own terms– but he wasn't sure he wanted to *talk* quite yet. He also wasn't sure if he could get one without the other, but he knew he wanted to try. If Rozanov really *was* taking his cues from Shane, then he wouldn't push.

There was a team meeting in ten minutes. Shane could do this. He could have a totally normal conversation with Ilya and not freak out about it.

He looked at himself in the mirror and let out a long breath.

He could do this.

He definitely could not do this.

When he'd walked into the bar, Shane's eyes had immediately locked onto Ilya and he felt his heart rate speed up. He was sitting at the bar by himself in a shirt covered in palm trees, watching Shane. Shane could feel the weight of his gaze as he walked around, shaking hands and exchanging greetings with his teammates for the weekend.

He tried to relax, but he couldn't. Rozanov made no move to greet him, even as he stared. *Fuck*. Stupid Rose and her stupid correct assessment of the situation. He *was* being respectful. His shirt was so ugly. The fact that he still managed to look so good was perplexing.

Once he'd finished making the rounds, Shane straightened his posture and headed straight for Rozanov. Might as well rip the bandaid off now.

"Hey, teammate." He said, casually stepping right next to Rozanov.

Ilya's eyes widened with shock. It took him a second to respond. "Uh. Hello, *Captain*."

"So, this should be fun, right?" Shane reached out a hand to try and flag down the bartender. He ordered a beer and then turned to look at Ilya. He was staring at Shane like he'd never seen him before. "I've kind of always wondered what it would be like to play on the same team."

"You… did?"

"You haven't?"

"No. I have." Ilya blinked slowly. "You are talking to me."

Shane's lips quirked. "Nothing gets past you."

The bartender handed Shane his beer. Thankfully. He took a big swig, and couldn't help but notice the way Ilya's gaze lingered on his throat.

"Did you… bring anyone with you?" Ilya's voice was apprehensive. Like he was afraid of Shane's answer.

"Nope." Ilya's shoulders sagged in relief almost imperceptibly. Shane wasn't sure if he was just good at reading Ilya, or if he was just really fucking easy to read. "Nobody to bring, outside of my parents. And they've been to these things before, so they're not missing much."

"Ah."

Shane licked his lips and grinned. "Nice shirt."

"I thought I should be in the mood."

"Well, you can pull it off." Shane did not bother to be subtle about the way he looked down Ilya's body. He was having a lot more fun than he should be. "Looks good."

Ilya whispered something in Russian under his breath. He had barely blinked since Shane sat down, like he was afraid if he looked away, Shane would disappear.

"Jesus, look at this!" A pair of giant arms descended on Shane and Ilya, shoving their heads close together. Mike Brophy– a fucking massive defenseman from Jersey– laughed loudly. He gave J.J. a run for his money in terms of volume. "Fucking Hollander and Rozanov working together. This is what it's all about! Love it!"

Shane squirmed until he managed to pull his head out of Brophy's grip. He laughed a little awkwardly. "Should be fun."

"Don't listen to a word this fucker says." Brophy elbowed Ilya roughly. "Can't trust this asshole. Whatever he tells you, ignore it. He's probably just trying to get in your head."

Then, Brophy punched them both in the arms and disappeared just as quickly as he'd arrived.

"I think we can expect a lot of that this weekend." Shane turned, leaning back against the bad on his elbows.

"They should give us a chance to get to know each other." Ilya shifted a little closer to Shane. "We might even have something in common."

Shane smiled at the ground. This was… okay. So okay it was kind of jarring.

"You look *very* good." Ilya gave Shane a once over. Shane knew he wasn't lying. His outfit– obviously not chosen by himself– was fashionable by normal standards. Even Shane could admit that it made him look attractive. "Someone bring you shopping?"

"If I admit something to you, will you promise not to tell anyone? Or make fun of me?"

Ilya's eyes looked a little panicked, but he still said, "Sure."

"I… uh…" Shane pressed his lips together. "I hired a personal stylist."

Ilya didn't even bother hiding his delighted laughter. Shane rolled his eyes, but something fluttered in his chest. Yeah. He was definitely figuring out his feelings. Trust Shane's brain to *finally* work out everything after ten minutes talking to Ilya.

"Fuck off!"

"I shouldn't have told you."

"No, no." Ilya took a deep breath, clearly trying to compose himself. It didn't work, and he started laughing again. "Got tired of looking like shit?"

Shane had to fight his smile. "I didn't– I guess I just wanted to present myself better. Wear a little more than just athletic clothes, you know? I tried on my own, but it became clear that I needed some help."

"Does this have anything to do with Rose Landry?"

"Going out with her was the kick in the ass I needed, I think. Her friends always looked so good. I felt like a slob."

Ilya paused. Smiled a little. "Are you and her not…"

"Oh. No. Not anymore. It was just a short thing." Shane shook his head. "Besides, she's not really my type. We're not… compatible like that."

Ilya looked awestruck. His emotions were written so plainly on his face. For a second, Shane thought he might lean in and kiss him. Honestly, if they weren't in a bar full of NHL players, Shane would probably have leaned in first.

Oh boy. His impulse control was completely gone. It wasn't like before, when looking at Ilya made all of his emotional progress disappear. This was the same attraction he'd felt when they were eighteen in that shower.

He liked talking to Ilya. This was their first real conversation, like, ever, and Shane didn't want it to stop. But he did still have responsibilities as the captain.

"Anyway." Shane gestured to the room with his beer bottle and stepped away from the bar. "I should go say hi to everyone."

"Right."

He patted Ilya on the shoulder. "We'll talk later, okay?"

And then he walked away. When he looked back, Ilya was smiling into his hand.

Ilya had spent most of the All-Star weekend feeling like he was walking on fucking air. Shane had talked to him. *Shane* had *talked to him*. Willingly. And he wasn't dating Rose Landry.

Ilya had been ready to deal with both Shane's silence and his girlfriend. The fact that neither of those were a problem anymore had sent him reeling.

It was fun. Ilya had found himself in the pool at the hotel, entertaining about half a dozen children. He wasn't sure who they belonged to, but they had quickly roped Ilya into doing a swimming race with them. It was fun to pretend to be angry when he lost.

Shane was on a pool chair nearby. He'd settled down there after a run about twenty minutes ago. He was smiling at Ilya as he chased one of the older kids around the pool, yelling about how she'd cheated. The other kids were laughing.

"Last race!" Ilya announced, to the dismay of his gaggle of tiny people. "Winner takes it all! No other races count!"

"No way!" Someone shouted.

"Yes way! If I lose…" He pretended to think on it, like this hadn't been his plan from the start. "*If* I lose, I'll buy you all candy bars from the vending machine."

That was, apparently, enough to get the kids attention. They all scrambled to line up on one end of the pool.

"Hey! Hollander!" Ilya shouted. Shane didn't seem surprised that Ilya was yelling for his attention. He just nodded in acknowledgment. "You have to watch, okay? Make sure none of the little cheaters cheat."

Shane laughed a little. Ilya had been a little worried that their conversation the other day had been a one-off, but Shane seemed willing to indulge Ilya on this. "Okay."

"You guys know who that guy is?"

"Shane Hollander!" Most of them said at once.

"Really?" Ilya feigned shock. "You've heard of *him*?"

They all laughed. One of the braver kids said, "He's the best player in the league!"

"Okay, you're out of the race. Out of the pool. Out of Florida. Which one do you belong to?"

The kids laughed even more, but so did Shane. It made Ilya glow a little.

When the race finally began, Ilya took an early lead. And then, he pretended to be taken down in a dramatic shark attack. He was nothing if not committed to his bits.

One of the kids tugged Ilya's hand. "You gotta buy us candy now!"

"Aw, damn." Ilya turned to Shane as he moved his arm up to let a kid hang off his bicep. "Hey, Hollander. Can I borrow twenty dollars?"

Shane shook his head fondly. His eyes were fixed on Ilya's arm. "What, did Boston stop paying you or something?"

"I forgot my wallet."

"Of course you did."

Ilya shook the kid off of him and hoisted himself out of the water. He watched Shane watch him as he approached his chair. Then, because he couldn't stop himself from being an asshole sometimes, he shook the water off himself.

Shane practically shrieked as the water drenched him. "Ah! What the fu– Knock it off!"

Ilya did not knock it off. It might have been pushing his luck to do this so soon, but he reached down and wrapped his arms tight around Shane. Shane immediately went tense, but he quickly relaxed and started making half-hearted attempts to escape. Everyone was laughing.

When he finally let go, Shane shoved at him. His face was flushed. He was clearly trying to look annoyed, but it wasn't working. His shirt was wet and clinging to his chest. The white and blue fabric had gone translucent in some places.

"You ruined my shirt."

"Sorry." Ilya lied. He was definitely not sorry.

Shane licked his lips. Ilya turned away before he did something that he would regret.

"Hey! Brophy! I need twenty bucks! Hollander's a cheapskate."

Ilya had volunteered to move from center to right wing to play on the same line as Shane. They'd both been waiting for a long time for this, and playing with Ilya was everything that Shane had ever dreamed it could be.

Shane kind of felt bad for their left winger, because it was pretty much like he didn't exist. The only person on the ice who mattered was Ilya. They had barely even practiced together, and yet they still played like they were reading each other's minds. Shane felt unstoppable. He'd never clicked like this with another player before.

Ilya took a pass off one of their defensemen and went flying down the ice. Shane was right there with him. He crossed the blue line and fired it over to Shane, who knocked it back. Ilya returned it at the last second, and Shane shot it clearly into the top corner of the net.

He was so caught up in the adrenaline of the game– caught up in the way that Ilya had felt on the ice next to him– that he actually *got it*. For the first time, he really understood why his soulmate was Ilya Rozanov.

"I guess it makes sense." Shane said, before he could stop himself. "The whole… you know."

The look Ilya gave him would be burned into Shane's memory. He stopped in his tracks to stare at Shane in awe. Then, he rushed forward and pressed a kiss to Shane's cheek.

It was a risky move, but it made Shane's heart swell all the same. Shane shoved him away. Mostly to keep up the appearance that Ilya was just being a dick, but a tiny part of Shane wasn't sure he would have been able to keep things professional for much longer.

"Nice goal." Ilya said, when they were back to the bench.

Shane bumped their shoulders together. "Nice assist."

Shane looked out at the beach. There were countless parties happening tonight, but Shane had declined all of his invitations. He needed a moment to himself, to figure out exactly where he should go from here.

He'd kept a carefully calculated distance between him and Ilya. Not because he wanted to, but because he didn't trust himself not to give too much away. Everything had *clicked* this weekend. It was terrifying to have it all make sense so quickly. He'd spent so long avoiding his feelings. Even though he'd been making a real effort to understand them now, some part of him had been hoping that he would realise that he *didn't* want Rozanov.

Obviously, he did. That was undeniable now. He wasn't sure why he'd even tried. They were kind of inevitable, in a way. Shane was pretty sure they would have ended up together, soulmates or not.

He understood why Ilya hadn't told him at first, but he still wasn't quite over the lying. He still didn't understand why Ilya had done that to him. They could have successfully avoided each other for at least a few years. It didn't have to be this complicated.

Except, the more Shane thought about it, the more he realised that it would never *not* be complicated. Nothing about them could ever be simple. Shane would *never* have been able to accept that he cared about Ilya Rozanov without experiencing a whole lot of emotional pain beforehand.

Someone settled on the beach next to Shane. He didn't have to look to know who it was.

"Found you."

Shane turned to Ilya. He was backlit. It looked a little like his hair was glowing. "You were looking for me?"

"Of course." Ilya planted his hands on the sand and stretched his legs out. "You are a very hard person to track down sometimes."

"You always seem to manage it."

Ilya smiled wryly. "I am very hard to get rid of."

Don't I know it, Shane thought.

"I'm glad that you found me." Shane admitted, digging his toes into the cool sand.

Ilya blinked. "You are?"

"You don't have to sound so surprised."

"I am though." The vowels were thick in Ilya's mouth. Shane wasn't sure how he'd gone so long without hearing Ilya's voice. It was, unfortunately, extremely attractive. Now that Shane was *letting* his brain think these thoughts, it seemed to be going fucking wild. "Surprised."

They sat in silence. Shane studied Ilya's side profile. He was looking out at the ocean, his expression carefully neutral.

Shane had so much that he wanted to say, but he didn't know how to say it. They were physically close, and yet Shane still felt like he'd never been farther from Ilya. He'd made so much emotional progress in the last year, but he'd done it completely alone. He had no idea how Ilya felt. The space between them had become physically embedded in the ways that they interacted with each other. Shane wanted to bridge that gap, but he didn't even know how to start. He wasn't even sure that he was ready to let Ilya in like that.

They had to talk about it. That much he knew. Not talking about it got them here in the first place. Shane knew that he had to be the one to bring it up. He'd switched up his behavior towards Ilya so fast he was pretty sure he'd given them both whiplash. Shane sighed. "I think that we should… talk. Somewhere private."

"*Talk*. Okay." Ilya's hands shifted closer to Shane's. Their thumbs were touching. Shane resisted the urge to link them together. "You want to talk? I can talk. I am in room twelve seventeen."

"Okay."

Ilya pulled his hand away and stood up. He looked down at Shane with an unreadable expression. "See you soon."

Shane watched him walk away. He collapsed backwards onto the sand, looking up at the dark sky to try and calm himself down. It was a clear night, but Shane could only see a few stars. The light pollution was terrible. It made him think about his cottage. How clear the skies were there. Shane was not great at spotting constellations– usually he let an app on his phone tell him what he was looking at– but he'd always found himself stargazing when things got to be too much.

He gave himself twenty minutes of staring at the sky before he stood up. He brushed the sand out of his hair and walked into the hotel.

Ilya's room was not hard to find. Shane rode in the elevator with Troy Barrett for a few floors. It might have made Shane uncomfortable if not for the fact that they were both pointedly ignoring each other. Troy was looking everywhere but Shane's face. Shane was watching the floor numbers slowly tick up. They got off on the same floor, and Troy all but ran down the hallway. Weird guy.

Shane's nerves were relatively calm until he was standing in front of Ilya's door. He lifted his hand to knock and found himself unable to move. Some part of him still wanted to run away.

The door opened immediately. Shane slipped inside and sat on the edge of the bed. His hands were shaking.

Ilya sat next to him. Their thighs were touching. Shane could feel the heat of his skin through the fabric of their pants. The room was quiet except for their breathing. Shane stared at the floor.

After a few minutes, Ilya sighed. "You are here for me to explain? To talk about it?"

"No! *No*." Shane said, probably too quickly. Ilya's shoulders tightened, and Shane winced. "Well. Maybe. Kind of. Not yet?"

"That is not an answer."

"You have to give me some grace here." Shane was struggling to think coherently through his anxiety. This was a bad idea. A few minutes in private with Ilya and Shane was already unravelling. "It hasn't exactly been easy."

Ilya let out a frustrated noise and turned away. "I have let you come to me. You hate me? Fine. I understand. I did that to myself. I made bad call, and hurt you. But then, you start conversation. *You* come to *me* and you say that you understand and you ask to talk. Now, you say you do not want to. You confuse me here."

"I *never* hated you." Shane insisted, zeroing in on that one offhanded comment. "I tried really hard, but you're, like, fucking impossible to hate."

"You can't just–" Ilya started, then he mumbled some fast Russian. Shane ignored the way his dick twitched at the sound of Ilya speaking his native language. It was really *not the time*.

"I can't just *what*, Rozanov?"

"You have mixed signals. I do not do mixed signals. You have to give me *something*. I am not the mind reader."

Shane knew that he wasn't exactly being clear with his actions. He didn't know how to make Ilya understand him. He barely even understood himself these days. "I'm not… trying to confuse you. I'm just confused."

"Why are you here, Shane?" Ilya's voice was quiet and broken. It was so strange to see someone so larger than life broken down to their core.

"I just–" Shane sighed and ran a hand through his hair. "I don't even care anymore. I mean, I *do* but also… I just wanted to see you. *Talk* to you. I miss you. It's fucked up. I barely even knew you before we didn't speak for a year, but I miss you. So much that it scares me sometimes."

Ilya didn't respond for a moment. His breathing was uneven. Shane watched his shoulders shake. "I want to know you. I have always wanted to know you."

And *fuck*, if that punched a hole right through Shane's chest. This was harder than he thought it would be. Ilya was saying everything that Shane wanted to hear. All Shane wanted to do was get on his knees and make Ilya forget about everything, but that wasn't right. Shane was barely ready for this half-baked conversation. Diving headfirst back into sleeping together before they worked through their issues was a *terrible* idea.

"I want that." Shane whispered. He moved to sit behind Ilya. "I want *you*, but I don't know how to have you."

Logistically, Shane couldn't see how this could work out. He'd looked at it from every possible angle, and yet none of them made sense. They played on opposing teams. Their cities were three hundred miles apart and they barely had any free time. Even if they happened to end up on the same team, this had never been done before. No one had ever been openly queer while playing in the NHL. Shane was somewhat comfortable with his sexuality, but he wasn't brave enough to be a trailblazer. Just the thought of that being on his shoulders was enough to make Shane feel sick. He couldn't do it.

All Shane had ever wanted was to be with his soulmate. Deep down, even when he was fucking furious with Ilya, he'd still wanted that. He'd thought that accepting that he wanted Ilya would be the toughest part. He was so fucking wrong. Knowing that it was just out of reach for both of them was fucking devastating. Shane knew that neither of them would be able to make do with the occasional silent hookups whenever they happened to be in the same city anymore. Even though they hadn't been speaking, this… thing between them felt

more real. More intense. Shane couldn't explain it, but he somehow knew that Ilya felt the same.

"Ilya…" Shane's voice cracked.

Ilya turned to face him again, sliding off the bed to kneel on the floor. His smile was sad. "I know."

"I want that too, but–"

"We cannot. Is why I didn't tell you." Ilya interrupted him. His voice was more steady, but his face said everything he didn't.

"I know. I get it. It's not your fault." Shane's chest hurt. Ilya's shoulders sagged a little at Shane's admission that he understood. Shane wanted nothing more than to throw caution to the wind and throw himself into Ilya's arms, but he just wasn't that person. He wasn't strong enough. "It's just the situation. If we weren't–"

"Yes. For what it is worth, I am sorry. About everything."

Shane squeezed his eyes shut. He wasn't going to cry. Not here. Not now. "I know."

"If things were different…" Ilya reached his hand out and wrapped it around Shane's wrist. His words pulsed under the plaster. "I would not hesitate. Not for a second."

A tear slid down Shane's cheek against his will. Gently, Ilya wiped it away with his thumb. Shane leaned into the touch unconsciously. He hadn't even realised he did it until Ilya cupped his face in one large hand. "God. Why is this so hard?"

"I wish I had the answers."

"Where do we go from here?" Shane asked. He blinked away more tears. "How do we… What do we do?"

Ilya's thumb brushed across Shane's cheekbone. "We do nothing. There is a dead end here."

"I know."

"One day…" Ilya trailed off. Shane knew what he was going to say. One day, in the distant future, they could reevaluate.

"I should go." Shane squeezed his eyes shut and tried to memorize the way Ilya's hand felt on his face. "I just– Before I go, can I ask one thing?"

Ilya nodded. "Anything."

"If you knew this whole time, why did you fuck me in the first place?"

"You are… impossible to resist. And impossible to avoid." Ilya moved his hand to the back of Shane's neck. Their foreheads were practically pressed together. "Bad combination. Only a matter of time before I made stupid mistake."

Shane let out a choked laugh. "It really was stupid."

"So stupid."

"I wasn't even really mad that you didn't tell me." Shane admitted quietly. "I figured out pretty quickly that I would have made the same call. I just… you *lied* to me. That was what got me."

Ilya's fingers tightened against Shane's skin. "I put myself in a hole. Very deep. Not easy to get out of. I knew you would be upset no matter what. I could not bring myself to eat the bullet and just tell you."

"Bite the bullet." Shane corrected absentmindedly.

"Ah. Same thing."

Shane couldn't help himself. He closed the small gap between their lips. Softly. Just for a second. It wasn't nearly enough, but it would have to be. For now.

"Goodbye." He whispered. Ilya's hand slipped out of his hair, and Shane walked away. He had to do it now. Otherwise, he would stay in that hotel room forever.

The hallway was empty. Thankfully. Nobody needed to see Shane leaving Ilya Rozanov's room looking like he'd just lost everything.

Shane walked slowly. He felt a little numb. He pressed a thumb against his lips and swallowed a sob.

Why was he doing this to himself? Ilya was *right there*. They were so fucking close. He finally understood how he felt after months and months of agony, and now he was just supposed to walk away from it? Why? Because he was *scared*? Fuck that. Ilya was his *soulmate* and Shane loved him.

Clarity hit Shane so hard it felt like he was being smacked in the face. Shane was in love with him. How had he not seen it until now? In the face of that, all of the reasons to stay apart that he'd thought of seemed extremely stupid. Suddenly, he knew what he had to do. It went against everything he'd *just* forced himself to accept. It was stupid and impulsive and there was no way that Ilya would say yes, but if he didn't do it, he knew that he'd regret it for the rest of his life.

Shane turned around.

Ilya laid on his bed, feeling a bit like his heart had been ripped out of his chest.

The conversation had been less painful than it could have been. Ilya had not expected Shane to so easily understand the decisions that Ilya made. If he was being honest, he hadn't expected *anything* that Shane had said.

Knowing that Shane Hollander wanted him was a heady feeling. Ilya had done many drugs before, but none of those highs had ever matched the way he'd felt when Shane said that he *wanted* Ilya.

And then, reality had set in. It was the right call, but that didn't make it feel any less painful. Being together didn't make sense, not when both had so much to lose. Ilya had no doubt that they would find their way back to each other in the future.

He could still feel the ghost of their kiss on his lips. The phantom heat of Hollander's skin against his fingers.

Someone knocked on the door. Ilya ignored it. He didn't care who was at the door. Chances are, it was someone who wanted to drag him out to a club and use him as a wingman.

They knocked again. Louder. Ilya ignored it again.

It wasn't until they pounded on his door so hard Ilya was afraid it would break off the hinges that he rolled out of bed and opened it.

"What do you– Hollander?" Ilya said, a little stupidly. He stepped to the side to let Shane back into the room. Shane pushed past him. He looked a little bit insane, if Ilya was being honest. Was he about to murder Ilya? Was this how Ilya met his end? Death by Shane Hollander? "What are you doing here?"

Shane whirled around to face him. "Shut the fuck up and let me talk."

Ilya shut the fuck up. He watched as Shane paced around the room, running a hand through his hair and clearly working up the nerve to say whatever it was he was about to say. Finally, he stopped and looked Ilya dead in the eyes.

"Come to my cottage during the off season."

Of all of the things that Ilya was expecting him to say, that might have been at the fucking bottom. For a second, he just blinked at Shane as he tried to comprehend exactly what he was being asked. "What?"

"I know we just had that whole conversation about why this is a terrible idea. I *know* it's a terrible idea. I really do. But then, I walked away and it felt like I left a piece of myself behind." Shane laughed. It came out kind of manic. Ilya had absolutely no idea what had happened in the minute and a half that Shane had been gone. "I don't expect you to say yes. I just… I would think about it forever if I didn't turn around."

Ilya blinked. "What happened to… everything we just said?"

"It's still important but… I don't know. I think we could have just a few weeks together. I just want a little more time."

Ilya felt his stomach clench. He should turn him down right now. It was too good to be true. He knew that it would be fucking agony to spend that long with Shane, knowing that it wasn't forever. Knowing that they would have to go back to their separate lives and pretend like it never happened.

"It would just be the two of us. Completely alone for however long you want to stay."

Ilya would stay forever if Shane would let him. He should just say no, but he felt a little like his heart would shatter if he did. The way that Shane was looking at him certainly wasn't helping.

So, for probably the first time in his life, Ilya took the coward's way out.

"Maybe."

Shane blinked. He looked genuinely surprised. "Maybe?"

"I do not know. I will need to go to Russia. So. Maybe."

"Okay." Shane's smile was contagious. "Okay. I'm going to… Text me. You still have my number?"

Ilya swallowed. "Yes."

"Right. Uh. Bye again."

And then, Shane was gone. Ilya blinked at the space where he'd just stood, trying to comprehend what the fuck just happened.

Two weeks later– Montreal

"Hey, did you hear about Rozanov?"

Shane stopped tying his skates and went tense. Comeau and J.J. were sitting on the bench across from him, chatting idly in French. He *hadn't* heard about Rozanov. He hadn't even heard *from* Rozanov since the All-Star game. He'd been unblocked in Shane's phone since then, but he hadn't heard anything. He wasn't handling it as well as he wanted to be.

"What about him?" Shane asked, also in French.

"He wasn't on his team's plane to Nashville." Comeau turned his phone screen around, showing an article about Ilya being missing. "They put out a statement that he was taking the next couple games off for personal reasons."

J.J. looked unconcerned. "He wasn't injured last night, was he? I think we would have noticed watching?"

"No, I don't think so." Shane quickly replayed the last few minutes of the game he'd watched in his mind. Ilya had seemed fine. He hadn't taken any particularly aggressive hits. "You're right. We would have noticed."

"Maybe he's sick."

Comeau shrugged. "I'm sure we'll find out. ESPN isn't saying anything except for what the team said."

"Right." Shane said quietly, running through every possible scenario in head. Most of them were alarming. He knew that Ilya was probably okay, but it didn't hurt to check.

Shane: Are you okay?

The text went unanswered for hours. Shane checked his phone every chance he got, but Ilya never even read it. When the game was finally over, he found a private corner of a hallway and scanned every single news outlet, hoping one would have dropped even a *hint* as to why

Rozanov was MIA. There was absolutely nothing. Every article was the same regurgitation of the team's statement.

Something was *wrong*. Shane could barely cough in public without it being reported on. This silence meant that the journalists knew the reason, and were *choosing* not to publicize it. That meant absolutely nothing good.

Shane called him. He didn't know if he would answer, but Shane wanted there to be at least a missed call notification on his phone.

"Hollander?"

"*Ilya*." Shane breathed. "Are you okay?"

Ilya let out a humorless laugh. "I do not know."

"Where are you?"

"Home."

Shane's brow furrowed. "In Boston? Are you sick?"

"No. *Home*. In Moscow."

Oh. Shane hadn't been expecting that.

"*Moscow*? Did something happen?"

"Yes. My father." Ilya's voice was tight. "Dead."

"Oh my god. I'm so sorry."

"It was not a surprise."

"That doesn't make it any better." Shane didn't know what to say.

Ilya sniffed sharply. "I will be back in a few days. A week, maybe."

"Ilya–"

"I should go."

"Okay. Just–" Shane sighed. "Please call me. Or text me. I'm here for you, okay? I want to help."

Ilya was quiet for so long that Shane had to check to see if the call was still connected. His voice was raw when he finally said, "You did. Thank you."

And then, the call dropped. Shane let out a long breath and let the back of his head hit the wall.

Three days later– Moscow

Ilya had not felt less like himself in a long time. His grief was complicated and deep, but it was all overshadowed by his usefulness. At some point, he had become a walking credit card to his family. So long as he was willing to pay for things, he was allowed to stay and mourn.

He did not want to be in Russia. The second he'd touched down, he felt an oppressive weight on his chest. Every time he breathed, he was reminded that he was intrinsically wrong. It had been easy to forget that in Boston.

If the country that claimed to be proud of him knew who Ilya really was, they would hate him. He was all too familiar with the laws of his country and the attitudes of his people. Things had only gotten worse in recent years. His very existence was seen as a contradiction of Russian values. Of his own culture.

Even though he'd been aware of his sexuality since he was a teenager, Ilya still hadn't come to terms with that. He probably never would. There was a difference between sneaking around with men and being publicly out. Ilya was famous. Too famous for this to be something that could fly under the radar. Russia would no longer be a safe place for him to go. He would be losing any chance to compete for Russia in the Olympics. He would become a laughing stock in the Russian press. He would never get to visit his mother's grave again.

Maybe things would be better in the future, but Ilya would have to give up this piece of himself to live the life he'd always wanted. Would he be willing to give all of that up for Shane? Probably. Eventually. But not now. He wasn't ready to let go of it all yet. Shane deserved better than Ilya could give him when he was still holding on.

He couldn't go to the cottage with Shane. It would break his heart to say no, but he didn't see another choice. There were a million reasons why they couldn't be together. They'd acknowledged that already. This was just another addition to the pile. Ilya couldn't have Shane in his hands just to give him up in two weeks.

Ilya: are you alone?

Shane responded within the minute. Thankfully. Ilya was sitting in a park. It was fucking *cold*.

Jane: Yes.

Ilya: can i call you?

Jane: Yes.

Ilya's hands shook as he pressed the call button.

Shane picked up immediately. "How are you doing?"

"I do not know." Ilya admitted. "Bad, I guess."

"How's your family treating you?"

Ilya barked out a laugh. "Like I do not belong here."

"That's ridiculous." Shane said, as if he could not comprehend that Ilya's family wouldn't want him. It was a stark reminder of how different their lives were. The guilt that had been hiding in the back of Ilya's mind since their conversation in Tampa suddenly made itself known again.

"Shane. I– I want to come to the cottage. But I cannot." Ilya admitted, not bothering with a segue. If he didn't say it now, he probably never would. He ignored the way that Shane's breath hitched on the other end of the phone. "It's too much."

"What?"

"Shane…" Ilya hesitated. He was alone in the park, but he still chose his words incredibly carefully. "I'm not– I cannot be… what we are. Not publicly. I would not be able to come back."

"To your family?"

"To *Russia*." The words tasted like ash in his mouth. It was the truth though.

"What would happen to you?" Shane asked, his tone horrified.

"I do not want to know." Ilya admitted. "My family… they are not like yours. My father is– *was* a cop. My brother is a cop. I do not have…" He grappled for the word he was looking for, but came up with nothing. "Fuck. My English brain… it is not working."

Shane was quiet for a long time. Finally, he sighed. "I understand."

"I am sorry that you have to." Ilya meant it.

"Are you okay? I mean–" Shane laughed a little awkwardly. "Obviously you aren't okay. I don't even know what I'm saying anymore. I just… How are you handling this?"

Ilya's heart stuttered in his chest. Nobody had asked Ilya how he was grappling with the death of his father. Most people had just sent obligatory condolences.

"I am… I wanted him to… be changed?" He let out a frustrated noise as his brain desperately tried to put together a sentence. "Sorry. I make little sense. English is hard. Lots to say and no words to say them."

"I'm sorry. I wish that I spoke Russian."

Ilya smiled a little at the thought. "You would learn perfectly in two weeks. No accent."

"I don't think so." Shane was laughing. "The difference in alphabet alone is enough to throw me off. Where are you right now?"

"I'm at a park. Going for a walk. I needed to get out."

Shane was quiet for a few seconds, before a whole lot of words came rushing out of his mouth. "Tell me everything. Do it in Russian. I won't understand, but maybe it will help? Like, you can process your emotions in a way that makes sense to you? Maybe it's stupid."

Jesus fucking Christ. Ilya was dumbstruck at the idea. It was such a Shane Hollander thing to do. He didn't want anything from Ilya. He was just so… *Shane*. There weren't words in any language to describe how Ilya felt about him.

"Okay."

Speaking Russian always felt a little like coming home. No amount of complicated feelings towards the country could change his love of the language. It was his mother tongue. The syllables flowed out of his mouth with ease, and he didn't have to hesitate and make sure he was talking coherently. He just instinctively *knew*.

It was surprisingly intimate. Ilya felt like he was giving over a piece of himself. Shane was silent on the other end as Ilya ranted. He talked about everything that had been eating at him since his father died. He vented about his family struggles, but for the first time in his life, Ilya opened up about how he felt about his relationship with his father. How he wished it could have been different. That he had– stupidly– always hoped that he'd tell Ilya he was proud, even once.

He also talked about how much it hurt to have Shane so close, but so fucking *far*. How he had absolutely no idea what to do with all the love he carried for Shane inside of him. There was nowhere for him to put it. He'd never even said the words out loud before this moment. He was here for Ilya as a *friend*, and Ilya couldn't help but want more.

When he was finally done spilling his guts, he let out a little embarrassed laugh and switched back to English. "I'm done."

"Feel better?"

"Yes, actually."

"Maybe you could teach me some Russian someday." Shane's tone of voice had taken on something familiar. Something that Ilya hadn't heard since before. He briefly remembered a text conversation from years ago where Shane had said that he liked Ilya's voice. Maybe him speaking Russian had had a different effect than he'd intended.

He couldn't suppress his smirk as he said, "Only useful phrases. встань на колени."

"What does that mean?" Shane sounded a little breathless.

"Get on your knees."

"Oh." For a second, Ilya was worried he'd taken it too far. That he'd misinterpreted. But then, Shane let out a tiny noise. Not quite a moan, but not *not* a moan. "And what other useful phrases would you teach me?"

Ilya laughed lowly. "I can think of many, Hollander."

"I wish you were here right now." Shane said, as if it was something they said all the time. As if it wasn't still baffling that he wanted to be in the same room as Ilya.

Ilya's grip on his phone was tight as he whispered back. "Me too."

April 2015– Montreal

It was a good day. One of Ilya's favourite kinds of days.

Nobody had bothered him on the plane to Montreal. The team dinner had gone well. Ilya had tried a new kind of pasta, and he was a big fan. He had thought he'd tried all the kinds of pasta by now. It was always nice to find a new one.

And he was on the ice playing Montreal tonight. His favorite team to play.

Ilya really, truly loved playing against Hollander. Now that they were good again, he could enjoy the games without the guilt eating away at him the entire time. Shane was a reminder of all the reasons that Ilya loved this game.

They were in the corner, battling for the puck. Ilya couldn't keep a smile off his face, even as Shane won and skated away. It didn't take long for Ilya to catch up and poke the puck out of his grasp from behind.

He had possession for all of three seconds before Shane was slamming him into the boards and taking it back. His challenging grin made Ilya think a lot of thoughts that were not appropriate to have in the middle of a hockey game. Ilya grinned back and launched after him. He was struggling to close the gap, and then…

Cliff came careening in out of nowhere. He crushed Shane against the boards. It happened so fast that Ilya didn't know it was happening until it was over and Shane was crumpling to the ice.

No. Ilya's breathing stopped as he watched Shane lying there, motionless. He didn't know what to do. Instinctively, he skated to Shane's side. He cut through the crowd of Voyageurs and shoved Hayden Pike out of his way so aggressively he was surprised he didn't get shoved back.

He knew people were watching as he fell to his knees next to Shane. He knew he was kind of acting ridiculous, considering this was his *rival*. But, in that moment, everything else fell away. All Ilya could focus on was Shane.

Ilya wondered if this was the same moment of clarity that Shane had in that hotel hallway, when he'd turned around and invited Ilya to his cottage. Sitting there, every possible reason

they had for not being together seemed foolish. He couldn't fucking care less about Russia or the NHL right now.

The medics had arrived. Ilya was pushed away, but he couldn't move. He had never been more afraid in his life.

Then, Shane moved, ever so slightly. Barely more than a flutter of his eyes as he came back into consciousness.

"Shane?" The medic closest to Shane's head asked as his eyes finally opened fully. He looked dazed. Confused. In pain. "Don't move. We're going to take you off the ice."

Shane made a confused noise. Ilya couldn't keep himself away any longer. "Hollander."

"Ilya?" Shane slurred, blinking slowly at the ceiling.

Ilya couldn't keep the bone-deep panic out of his voice as he asked, "Is he alright?"

"'M okay." Shane mumbled. Ilya's breathing quickened. He was practically hyperventilating at this point.

"We're going to get you on the spinal board, Shane. Keep your head still please." The medic looked up at Ilya with concern and confusion, as if she wasn't sure exactly why he was reacting like this. "You're going to have to stand back, Ilya."

Spinal board. Only worst case scenarios required the spinal board. He skated just far enough to give them room to move Shane.

"We're not alone." Shane's eyes flicked to Ilya as the medics transferred him. He was still slurring his words. "Ilya. They can see us."

"Is he okay?" Ilya asked again. Pleaded. No one answered him.

"Tell him." Shane's voice was distressed now. He tried to move, but the straps held him in place. "Tell him I'm fine."

Ilya watched in horror as they carried Shane off the ice. He had thought that the moment Shane had found out about their bond was the worst moment of his life. He was so, *so* wrong. That didn't even compare to this.

He allowed himself five more seconds of panic before he shoved the terror to the back of his mind and snapped back into himself. He could freak out again later, once this was all over. Right now, he had to lock in and play the rest of this game like nothing happened. Like half of his fucking *soul* wasn't just carted off teh ice on a spinal board.

"Roz?" St. Simon put a hesitant hand on his shoulder. "You good?"

Ilya nodded. He didn't have another choice.

"What happened?" Shane gritted out. He genuinely wasn't sure what had gone down. All he remembered was grinning at Ilya as they fought for the puck and then… he was on a spinal board being carried out of the rink. Every part of his body hurt.

"You took a blow to the head. You went into the boards." *Fuck*. "There's an ambulance waiting."

Shane struggled to keep his breathing even. His eyes were stinging. What if he wasn't okay? What if he never walked again? He was *scared*.

"My parents–" Shane managed to say. If Shane was scared, they were all probably terrified. "Can you tell them–"

One of the paramedics nodded. "We'll make sure that they know where we're taking you."

Shane closed his eyes. The lights around him were too bright. Everything felt too heavy.

"Shane, we need you to stay awake. Can you do that?"

"Mhm." Shane felt cool air on his feet as someone took his skates off.

"Can you move your toes?"

Fuck. He really hoped so.

He couldn't really think through the pain, but one of the paramedics said, "Good."

Thank god. Thank god. Thank god.

Shane thought about his parents and Ilya. God, *Ilya*. He would have seen Shane go down. He must have been so scared. Shane wished that he could text him. Tell him that he's okay and that his feet still moved.

This had never happened to Shane before. Somehow, in all of his years of playing, he'd never been knocked unconscious. He'd only had *one* injury classified as serious, and that was before he'd been drafted.

Shane was pretty sure the game was almost over. Montreal had the lead going into the third period. He'd scored twice, Ilya had scored once. Shane's favorite kind of game.

The playoffs were probably a wash now, Shane thought bitterly. There was only *one week* left of the regular season. This was supposed to be Montreal's year. Shane kissed the idea of winning the cup this season goodbye. It would have to be next season. It *would* be next season.

"Shane, we need you to keep your eyes open, okay?"

"Sorry."

Ilya had to wait until the morning before he was able to go to the hospital. By the time he was done with his press obligations, visiting hours had closed. It had fucking killed him.

It had also led him to make some… questionable choices. He knew that absolutely ripping into Marlow in the locker room had probably given too much away. It was better than his first instinct of fighting his *own teammate*. Cliff hadn't meant to do it and felt bad– that much was obvious– but Ilya couldn't even look at him without feeling rage bubbling up inside of him.

He barely slept. He spent the entire night refreshing sports websites for any news on Shane's condition. He turned up to the hospital promptly at 8 AM. He had to get on the team plane in two hours. The woman at the desk had handed over Shane's room number immediately. She was far too interested, even commending Ilya for his display of sportsmanship.

The door was cracked. Ilya pushed it open gently. Shane was, blessedly, alone. He was elevated into a sitting position by the hospital bed. His left arm was in a sling.

"Ilya!" Shane's face lit up so bright that, for a second, Ilya was worried that there was a second person named Ilya coming in behind him. He still wasn't used to the idea of Shane being happy to see him.

Ilya hovered awkwardly in the door. "Hi. I just– I needed to– Are you–?"

"I'm okay. Well, as okay as someone with a concussion and a fractured collarbone can be." Shane smiled, a little shyly. Ilya's breathing got a little easier. "And I'm out of the playoffs. But, you know…"

"Could have been worse." *I thought it was*.

"Yeah."

"Marlow… he feels bad." Ilya drifted a little closer. "He is very… angry at himself. We had some words after the game."

Shane snorted. "Please tell me you didn't yell at your teammate over me."

"I will not tell you then."

"It's all part of the game, right?" Shane gave him a lazy grin. He must have been on some *good* drugs. "I know he's not that kind of player. It happens to everyone eventually. He probably doesn't want to meet my mom in a dark alley, though. He might be twice her size, but she's out for blood."

Ilya chuckled. "I will warn him."

He wanted to reach out and feel Shane's pulse under his skin. To know he was really okay. It must have shown in his eyes, because Shane held the hand not in a sling out.

"Come here? Please?" He asked, voice soft.

Ilya nudged the door closed. He ignored Shane's outstretched hand in favor of cupping his face in one hand. Shane pressed a barely-there kiss to the inside of Ilya's palm.

"You scared me." Ilya admitted.

"I know."

"You will be okay?"

"Yeah, I'll be okay." Shane gazed up at Ilya. "I wanted to tell you last night. I wish I could have texted you or something. I was–"

"It's okay. I'm here now." Ilya moved his hand into Shane's hair. Shane's eyes fluttered closed.

"I was going to ask if you wanted to come over last night."

Ilya wasn't surprised. "I would have said yes."

"I'm mostly mad that Marlow fucked *that* up, to be honest." Shane sounded so earnest that Ilya laughed a little. "When will we get the chance again?"

Ilya wanted to stay forever. He wanted to help him with his recovery and make a place for himself in Shane's life. But, he couldn't. He couldn't even stay more than another twenty minutes.

They would have summer. That much Ilya knew. It would probably wreck all of their plans to stay apart, but Ilya still found himself not caring. After last night, he would have taken a match to his life and burned it all down if it meant he would get to be with Shane.

"I do not know… I will be busy until summer. Winning the Stanley Cup."

Shane tangled their fingers together. "Until summer?"

"Well, I might be busy." Ilya faked a contemplative look, and watched hope enter Shane's eyes. "I got this invitation to go to some cottage. I was thinking about saying yes."

"Wait. Really?"

"Yes." Ilya squeezed Shane's fingers. "We have wasted so much time because I am an idiot. And we lost last night. Lots to make up for, no?"

"You really were such an idiot." Shane laughed wetly and Ilya beamed down at him. It was the first time that he thought things might be okay between them.

And then, the door handle was turning and the moment was over. Shane released Ilya's hand, and Ilya took a step away from his bedside. The nurse who just walked in was smiling teasingly. "Uh oh. You're not trying to smother him with a pillow, are you, Mr Rozanov?"

"No." Ilya managed a small smile in return. "I was… just leaving, actually."

Shane held out his hand for Ilya to shake. He'd turned on business mode so quickly even under the influence of pain meds that Ilya got whiplash. "Thank you for coming. I appreciate it."

"Get well soon, Hollander." He let his hand linger in the handshake for just a second too long, and then he was leaving.

Walking out of that room hurt, but the fact that they would be together in just a few months was a salve on the aching wound. In the meantime, Ilya would have to focus on winning the Stanley Cup.

July 2015– Ontario

Ilya wasn't quite sure how he'd ended up here. Both literally and emotionally. He was standing in the driveway of Shane Hollander's summer cottage. Shane was grabbing Ilya's suitcase for him out of the trunk of his boring, ugly car.

If someone had told Ilya six months ago about this, he would have laughed in their face. It was a little ridiculous. Ilya would have been nowhere near ready to believe that this was something he could have. Some part of him still didn't think he deserved it.

"I can carry my own bag." Ilya said as Shane hauled the suitcase up the small staircase. Shane ignored him and headed straight into the house. Ilya trailed after him.

It was a gorgeous house, but Ilya wasn't concerned with the architecture. He only had eyes for Shane.

Shane, whose face looked brighter than Ilya had ever seen, was standing in the middle of the room. "Make yourself at home."

Because he was in Shane Hollander's *home*.

"I could give you a tour, if you'd like." Shane was looking out the windows, gesturing at the lake. "Or, if you're hungry, I stocked up on groceries. We shouldn't, uhm, need to leave often."

Shane turned to look at Ilya with bright eyes and a small smile. Somehow, despite everything, Shane was happy to see him. Ilya would be chasing the high of that realisation for the rest of his life. He felt like he was going to die if he didn't get his hands on Shane in the next few seconds.

Ilya closed the distance between them in slow, deliberate steps. He gave Shane plenty of time to step away. He didn't. Instead, he tilted his head up to meet Ilya's eyes. For a second, they just looked at each other. Even after all this time, Ilya was stunned by Shane's beauty. Ilya brushed the back of his fingers against Shane's freckles, just because he could. Shane licked his lips and Ilya couldn't take it anymore. He leaned down and kissed him.

The moment Shane's mouth opened under him, everything made sense again. He knew right then that there was no going back. Things would never be the same. All those years of denial and avoidance suddenly seemed worth it because all of it led here. To this moment.

Ilya grabbed at Shane's shirt, pulling him closer. Shane moaned into his mouth and plunged his hands in Ilya's hair. He walked Ilya backwards, until he felt the solid weight of a couch behind him. Shane pulled away from the kiss just long enough to shove Ilya down and climb onto his lap.

It reminded Ilya a little of Boston. The last time they'd kissed like this. Ilya wasn't sure how he'd managed to live without this for so long. He'd somehow forgotten how different it was with Shane. None of the dozens of women that Ilya had hooked up made him feel even a fraction of how good he felt right now.

Shane was hard, grinding a little into Ilya's crotch. The movement almost seemed unconscious. Fuck. Ilya was *not* going to last long. He hadn't had sex in months. Not since the All-Star game. It was the longest he'd ever gone without it since he was sixteen.

"I'm not–" Shane pulled back, panting a little. "I'm not going to last long. It's been a while."

"Yes. Same. But we have two weeks, right?"

"Same?"

"Not since January." Ilya said, tugging at the hem of Shane's shirt. He lifted his arms with ease, and Ilya pulled it off and threw it somewhere on the floor. They'd find it again later. "Can we please get back to–"

Instead of kissing him again, Shane brushed a lock of Ilya's hair behind his ear. "Really?"

"Did not feel right." Ilya admitted.

Shane's eyes widened, and then he was sliding off Ilya's lap onto his knees. He tugged Ilya's shorts down and took him in his mouth and *fuck*.

Ilya lost himself in the pleasure. In all the times Ilya had dreamed this, it was never this good. He had forgotten just how eagerly Shane gave head. How much he clearly loved it. He was letting out little moans against Ilya's cock. When Ilya tried to thrust his hips shallowly, Shane held him down with one forearm. Ilya was suddenly overwhelmed with how much he fucking *loved* him. It was like a dam inside of Ilya's mind had broken. All of the thoughts he'd spent the last six years holding back were washing over him now, and he just couldn't hold it in anymore.

"I love you." Ilya blurted out, before his brain could catch up to his lips. He clapped a hand over his mouth, but it was too late. The words were already out there.

Shane pulled off of him, looking a little bewildered. "Did you seriously–" He gaped at Ilya for a second, before he started laughing. "Oh my god. Again?"

"I am sorry. I did not mean to– It just came out." Ilya was horrified. He'd been here for less than an hour, and he'd already fucked it up.

Except, maybe he hadn't. Shane didn't look mad. He looked fond and amused. "I love you too, idiot. Please stop telling me important things while I'm sucking your dick."

"I am so sorry. I–" Ilya's brain caught up again. He finally processed what Shane had said and cut himself off "You love me?"

"Yes. More than anything. We can talk about it later." Shane looked up at Ilya through his eyelashes and wrapped his hand firmly around Ilya's cock. "I was kind of in the middle of something."

Ilya lasted about twenty more seconds. He came in Shane's mouth with a shout, and Shane swallowed it all with a faint moan. As soon as Ilya's brain was back in his body, he pulled Shane up off the floor and into his lap. Shane practically melted into him, tucking his head into the crook of Ilya's neck and holding him close. Ilya held the back of his head and breathed in Shane's presence. He smelled like citrus and sea salt.

"I love you." Shane sighed into Ilya's skin. "We aren't going to be able to go back to the way it was before, are we?"

Ilya tightened his hand in Shane's hair. "No. What are we going to do?"

"I don't know." Shane kissed his way up the column of Ilya's neck. "We have two weeks to figure it out."

Ilya took Shane's hand off his neck and turned his arm. Gently, he peeled the plaster off his wrist and revealed his words. Seeing his own handwriting on Shane's skin made him shiver. "It's so beautiful."

He brushed a thumb across them and then, before Ilya could even process what was happening, Shane was coming apart in his lap.

Holy fuck. It was the hottest thing that Ilya had ever seen in his life. Shane had gone completely red, and was panting. When Ilya looked down, there was a wet patch on his shorts.

"You are…" Ilya didn't even have the words to describe how he felt about Shane in that moment. "I love you."

Shane's eyes were wide. "What the fuck just happened?"

"You came, Hollander."

"I *noticed* that. I didn't–" Shane cut himself off. He grabbed Ilya's wrist and peeled his plaster off. He was not as gentle, but Ilya couldn't care less because then, he was running his finger across Ilya's words for the first time. It was… There was nothing like it. He completely understood why Shane had come immediately.

"Wow." Ilya smirked. "That is good to know about."

"I can't believe we let this happen." Shane whispered into Ilya's chest later that night. They were naked in bed together. Cuddling. Ilya was playing with the hair at the nape of Shane's neck. "We had a plan."

Ilya's chest rumbled. "I am pretty sure you threw that plan out immediately."

"We still *had* it."

"I do not care about the plan. We make a new one." Ilya tangled their fingers together. "Relax, Hollander. You and I will figure this out, да? Together."

There were so many problems that seemed impossible to solve. Were they really going to keep this a secret until they retired? If Shane looked at Ilya with even a fraction of the love in his eyes that Ilya directed at him, they would be found out almost instantly. But, the more Shane thought about it, the less he cared.

"I feel like I'm dreaming." Shane admitted softly, looking up at Ilya.

"No." Ilya lifted their joined hands and brushed his lips against Shane's soulmark and smirked when Shane shivered. "You were never this clear in my dreams."

Chapter End Notes

i did my best guys i hope you enjoyed it <3 if you think i made a subtle reference to something, i probably did. i listened to a lot of music while i was writing this. here's a link to the playlist i made !!!

sorry to scott hunter for writing him out!!!! his timeline still happens as normal, so he comes out in 2017 and then hollanov follows. also sorry to shane for taking his cups away. he wins next year i swear. he also still has more than ilya but just not right now.

i also ended up writing yuna and david out mostly. i was contemplating write a (shorter) sequel fic about people finding out about their relationship so keep an eye out for that. it probably won't come soon because tbh i already know what my next hollanov fic is going to be.

stay tuned and follow me on twitter for potential snippets!

End Notes

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