

Concussion Protocol

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Concussion Protocol

by [cjr2](#)

Summary

Instead of Shane, it is Ilya who suffers a concussion during the Boston-Montreal game in April 2017. Dazed and agitated, Ilya briefly starts speaking and responding only in Russian and the medics can't calm him down. Luckily, Shane started studying Russian after Ilya spoke to him in Russian on the phone from Moscow. For no particular reason. Certainly not because he's fallen in love with Ilya Rozanov.

In Montreal with lingering concussion symptoms, Ilya is advised not to fly home for a few days, and the hospital won't release him without assurances that he has someone to stay with him until his symptoms improve. Luckily, Shane conveniently has a condo in Montreal no one knows about and a few days before he has to travel again.

But Ilya's symptoms don't resolve after a few days. Which is okay; Shane can handle it. He can take care of Ilya, study Russian, lead his team into the playoffs, and keep Ilya's continued presence in Montreal a secret. He can do everything, no problem. He *is* Shane Hollander after all.

or

A whump fanfiction that is secretly a fix-it.

Notes

I originally tried to use transliterated Russian like the books do, but I hate transliterating Russian, so I decided I'm writing it in Cyrillic. Which I know is also kind of weird in the middle of English sentences and with English quotation marks but that's the decision I went with. 🙄

I'm not a medical doctor, so there will probably be medical inaccuracies. Also probably NHL inaccuracies. Also probably Russian inaccuracies, but thankfully they will mostly come from Shane, who speaks bad baby Russian the same way I do. So somehow it loops back around to being character-accurate! 🙌

I was deciding between writing longer chapters and writing shorter chapters that I post more often, and I chose the second one because I'm just too impatient to wait to post. Hopefully frequent updates are coming!

- Translation into Русский available: [Протокол лечения при сотрясении головного мозга](#) by [carassment](#)

Chapter 1

“У меня есть кошка,” a neutral male voice said into Shane’s headphones. He repeated the words in his head, mouthing along, even though he knew it would be better to train his tongue to speak the words if he actually said them aloud. And even though he didn’t have a cat. And even though all he could think was that the voice *wasn’t* Ilya Rozanov’s.

Shane knew he was totally fucked. But it wasn’t because he was obsessed with Ilya, and it definitely wasn’t because he was *in love* with Ilya. It wasn’t because from the moment Ilya had spilled out all those raw, unfiltered words Shane couldn’t understand, that Shane had been desperate to allow Ilya to open up in a way he couldn’t in English. It wasn’t because he was dying to know what was inside Ilya Rozanov’s soul.

“У меня нет кошки,” the voice said. Shane sighed, but mouthed the words along again. He could use this one, at least. He didn’t have a cat. But when the fuck would he need to tell Ilya he didn’t have a cat? Ilya knew he didn’t have a cat.

Shane pulled his headphones out of his ears, annoyed. What was the point of any of this? This was stupid. It was a stupid thing he’d done, cramming Russian vocabulary into whatever free moments existed between practices and games and team meetings. He’d had some stupid idea in his head that he’d surprise Ilya when they met after the game, except there were understandably no Russian courses he’d found that had front-loaded phrases Ilya had joked about teaching him, like *get on your knees*. Not that he wanted to say that to Ilya nearly as much as he wanted Ilya to say it to him, and this time not teasingly.

But instead, all Shane knew was fruits and pets, and the word *hello* was nearly impossible to say, and that wasn’t even mentioning the rest of the conversation. It didn’t matter that it had only been a few weeks. Shane had always been an overachiever, and somehow he’d thought he’d be able to do this. French had seemed easier than this, but maybe he’d just forgotten how hard it had been in the beginning. Russian seemed fucking impossible. And this audio course definitely wasn’t going to teach Shane how to say *fuck me in the ass* before the game started.

Shane stood, rolling his shoulders, trying to shake off the frustration that clung to him. He tossed his headphones in his locker, shaking his head to himself.

Ilya looked normal. Hell, Ilya looked fucking exceptional. He definitely looked better than he had during that Skype session from Moscow, during which he’d still looked amazing, because he was Ilya Rozanov. But now he looked better rested, and like a weight had been lifted off his shoulders. Maybe that weight was knowing his father was gone and he had no obligation to return to Russia. Maybe it was whatever deep, emotional baggage he’d unpacked to Shane while Shane had listened on, uncomprehending.

He couldn’t wait to get Ilya back to the condo, and the desire was fiercer than it had ever been before. Maybe he hadn’t progressed to Russian dirty talk yet, but he wanted to give Ilya

whatever he needed, whether it was to take Shane hard and rough or kiss him gently as they fucked face-to-face. Shane would even suck Ilya's dick all night long if that was what Ilya asked him to do, and he'd do it gladly. As long as he could see that Ilya was okay, and that whatever Shane was doing was helping.

But those were not the type of thoughts that were conducive to winning a hockey game, and whatever else he felt for Ilya, he still wanted to beat him on the ice, still wanted to prove he was better, faster, sharper. Still wanted to win, because that was what they did. That was who they were.

Ilya met Shane's eyes across the rink and raised an eyebrow, that insufferable smirk playing at his lips, like he knew exactly what Shane was thinking. Like he could see straight through him. Heat crept up Shane's neck and into his face, and he jerked his gaze away, hyperaware of the cameras that followed their every move. Not that they would ever jump to the correct conclusion, but still, Shane wouldn't risk it.

The game started fast. Ilya scored in the first minute, which pissed Shane off and fired him up, and Ilya's face was flushed despite the fact that he'd barely had to exert himself at all. And he was smiling, carefree and smug as always, and there was nothing of the despondent exhaustion that had been in his voice when they'd spoken the first few times after Ilya had arrived in Moscow following his father's death. And a tiny part of Shane celebrated Ilya's goal, even if it had been scored against Shane's team, because seeing that smile, seeing Ilya back to his usual self, was worth more than a thousand goals. Because Shane lo—

No. He didn't, because he couldn't, and now wasn't the time. Now was the time to beat Ilya on the ice.

The worst thing about playing against Ilya was how fast he was. The best thing about playing against Ilya was how fast he was. It was exhilarating when Ilya snuck up behind him when he thought he had a clear path to the goal and stole the puck right off his blade. Frustrating, too, but Shane was more than used to being frustrated by Ilya Rozanov.

Shane pivoted hard, digging his edges into the ice as he chased Ilya down. He caught him in the corner, used his body to pin Ilya against the boards. They battled there, sticks tangling, shoulders grinding, both of them fighting for control of the puck. Shane could feel Ilya's breath, hear the grunt of effort as they shoved against each other.

Shane won the battle and skated away as fast as he could, knowing Ilya would pursue. Cliff Marlow was blocking Shane's path to the goal, so he looked for someone to pass to—

Ilya plucked the puck from Shane's blade for a second time, and really, that was just rude, and Shane should not have been fighting the urge to smile. Playing against Ilya was just so *fun* in a way that playing against no one else was. Ilya was so fast, and surprisingly graceful for his size. Shane pursued, but Ilya was too quick for him to catch up, racing down the ice, unimpeded to the goal, and Jesus Christ, he was going to score *again*—

Comeau appeared out of nowhere, a blur of motion from Ilya's blind side. The hit sent Ilya's body careening into the boards. There was an awful *thump-crunch* as Ilya collided with the

boards headfirst.

The whole world seemed to freeze, suspended in the moment before Ilya fell. And then Ilya's body crumpled, went completely limp. He slid down to the ice like a broken doll. He didn't move, didn't even twitch.

Shane's first instinct was to skate to Ilya, to fall to his knees by Ilya's side and make sure he was all right. His second instinct was to punch Comeau in the face. He did neither. Instead, he stood there, dumbfounded, as the officials surrounded Ilya, immediately waving for the medics. Shane's brain was moving sluggishly, and Ilya still wasn't moving, and even through his numb shock, Shane knew that that wasn't good at all. A loss of consciousness was never good, and Ilya was very clearly unconscious.

The silence in the arena was deafening. Shane could hear his own heartbeat pounding in his ears, could hear the scrape of skates as other players backed away to give the medics room. Someone touched his shoulder, but Shane couldn't acknowledge it. Couldn't look away from Ilya's motionless form.

The medics were already surrounding Ilya by the time he came to. Shane hadn't moved at all, his blades frozen to his spot. He was pretty sure Hayden was beside him, saying something with him, but he couldn't hear it. It was as if they were underwater, everything slow and muffled. The medics had brought out the spinal board, were carefully positioning it, when suddenly Ilya jerked against their hands. He was saying something, words tumbling out low and slurred, too quiet for Shane to make out. But Ilya's voice was enough to break the spell. Shane pushed forward on his skates, stopping just outside the ring of medics crowding around Ilya's body.

"Ilya, please remain still," one of the medics was saying, but Ilya did the opposite, struggling against their hold, as if he didn't understand they were trying to help him. He was still mumbling, and Shane realized it was all in Russian, and frustratingly, he still didn't understand. He heard *что* and *где* and *great*, at least he knew all his question words, which were very much *not* helpful right now. Ilya's eyes fluttered open and closed, unfocused and glassy, and he looked terrified and confused and he was still mumbling in Russian. Shane got the question words again and maybe *не понимаю* and *I don't understand* certainly *had* been at the top of the list of things he'd learned in Russian so far.

And fuck. Ilya was clearly confused and in distress and was going to hurt himself worse. He had movement in his extremities, but that might change very fucking quickly if he kept squirming and the medics couldn't get him on the spinal board. Then he'd be concussed *and* paralyzed, and Shane couldn't let that happen. Before he recognized what he was doing, he'd pushed one of the medics aside and fallen to his knees beside Ilya as he'd wanted to do from the very beginning. He put a hand on Ilya's shoulder.

"Всё хорошо," Shane told him gently, and everything was very much *not* fine, but it was among one of the few phrases Shane knew, and his heart was hammering in panic, and he probably would have said the same thing in English if he'd thought Ilya would respond to it. He'd also have said *stop fucking moving*, but that hadn't been in any of his Russian lessons yet.

But it worked. Ilya stopped struggling and gave another long, slow blink, his eyes not quite focusing. Was Shane imagining things, or was one of his pupils blown?

“Shane?” Ilya mumbled dazedly. He said что and then a word Shane didn’t know, but Shane figured he might be asking what the fuck had happened, considering how disoriented he seemed. Shane had no fucking idea how to explain any of it in Russian.

“You hit your head,” Shane told him, in English. He squeezed Ilya’s shoulder, hoping that would ground him. “Just...calm down. They need to get you on the spinal board.”

These words had the opposite effect. Ilya made a whimpering noise and turned his head, which was exactly what Shane *hadn’t* wanted, and Shane wanted to cry in frustration and fear and absolute panic.

“У тебя болит голова,” Shane said in a rush, and that was definitely wrong, like he was almost entirely certain he’d just told Ilya that he had a headache, which was probably true enough at that moment but definitely didn’t communicate much of use about what had happened. But maybe just hearing Shane try, just hearing some borderline-relevant Russian words helped, because Ilya went still again, his breathing evening out just enough that the medics could finally maneuver him onto the spinal board.

Shane just kept saying всё хорошо even though he was pretty much thinking it was a lie. Shane watched them wheel Ilya away on a stretcher, feeling hollowed out and exhausted, even though nothing had happened to him. His legs felt weak beneath him, his hands were shaking, and he realized dimly that he was still kneeling on the ice, that everyone was staring at him.

Hayden was beside Shane when he stood again on shaky legs. “God,” Hayden breathed, sounding nearly as overwhelmed as Shane felt. “That was fucking scary. To see Rozanov like that, of all people.”

Hayden didn’t know how true his words rang. Ilya, who had always been so in control, so self-assured and cavalier. It was strange to see him so terrified, so disoriented. And Hayden only knew Ilya as a player, as a persona that Ilya had projected, didn’t know half of what Shane knew. Shane had to fight back the tears that threatened to escape from his eyes.

J.J. skated up to them.

“Since when do you speak Russian?” he asked, and Shane couldn’t look away from the spot on the ice where Ilya had been lying, unconscious and then panicking and confused. And why the fuck didn’t they have someone on staff here who spoke Russian better than Shane did? With all the fucking Russian players in the NHL, they couldn’t have a Russian-speaking medic or official or *someone*? Shane wanted to scream.

“I don’t,” Shane said, truthfully, hazily, despondently. His mediocre Russian had been close to useless. “Just a few words. Nothing special.”

Chapter 2

Shane was enough of a disaster for the rest of the game that Theriault eventually took him out entirely. Maybe everyone would assume he was too traumatized seeing such a bad injury so close up. Maybe they would assume that Ilya fucked him in the ass basically every time they were in the same city and he was desperately, terrifyingly in love with him. At that moment, Shane almost didn't care. He was almost ready to confess everything if it could get him out of the building and into whatever hospital room Ilya currently occupied.

Instead, he spent the rest of the game watching his teammates beat the clearly shellshocked Boston Bears, who maybe cared about Ilya more than Shane had realized or were maybe just terrified to see someone they played and practiced with every day injured so badly. The opposing coach took Cliff Marlow out after he literally tripped over his own foot and faceplanted on the ice. Shane felt like he had done the same thing, emotionally. He couldn't focus on anything, couldn't care about the game in front of him at all.

His head was filled with thoughts of Ilya. What he might have done differently to calm Ilya down sooner. What he would do if Ilya had sustained a spinal cord injury because he hadn't acted quickly enough or studied Russian hard enough. *Had* Ilya's pupil been dilated, or had that been Shane's imagination? Was Ilya in surgery right now? Was he conscious? Was he still speaking in and responding only to Russian? Did the hospital have an interpreter who could help him if the entirety of the English language had been knocked out of his brain by the force of Comeau's hit?

Hockey seemed like an absolute waste of time when anything could be happening to Ilya while Shane watched the two teams skate up and down the ice for a meaningless fucking game.

Shane was the first into the dressing room, the first into the showers, the first changed into his street clothes. He was pretty sure Theriault wanted to chew him out for losing his composure the way he had, so he avoided his coach like the plague. He couldn't remember if he'd committed to any post-game interviews, but if anyone asked him what it had been like to watch his rival collapse motionless onto the ice, he would scream. If he so much as looked at Comeau, Shane was sure he would punch him, and Shane never punched anyone.

The evening was crisp, and cool, and Shane could not catch his breath. He barely remembered where he parked his car, or even if he'd driven his car. Or maybe even if he had a car. He moved through the parking lot like he was sleepwalking, his feet carrying him forward on autopilot in the general direction of where he thought he'd parked. All through the game, he'd counted down the minutes until he could leave, until he could get to the hospital and see for himself that Ilya was okay. But now that he was free to go, dread settled heavy in his stomach. What if Ilya *wasn't* okay? What if Shane got there and found out it was worse than he'd imagined? If they'd even let him see Ilya.

"Shane!"

The voice cut through his fog, and Shane turned, bewildered by the sound of his own name. His mother stood beside his car, which solved that mystery at least, and she was waving at him. Shane changed direction, his body moving toward her even as his mind was stuck somewhere else—back on the ice with Ilya, at the hospital with Ilya, anywhere but in this parking lot.

“Hi, mom,” he said flatly. When he was close enough, she threw her arms around him.

“How are you doing?” she asked him, not letting go for a long time. It was strangely comforting, his mother’s arms around him, like he was a child again and she could assure him that there were no monsters under the bed, that he was safe, that Ilya Rozanov would be okay, and it would be true. But she didn’t know anything about Ilya, or about Shane and Ilya. “That must have been scary, seeing Rozanov get injured like that. I’m sure it was probably hard to avoid thinking about how easily that might have been you.”

Shane pulled back, staring at his mom in disbelief. She really thought—?

But of course she did, he realized. She had no reason to think that Ilya Rozanov was anything but his rival, his mirror in so many ways. Drafted the same year, started the same year, playing the same position in the same division. The rebel to Shane’s rule-follower, flashy where Shane was boring, gregarious where Shane was reserved. Of course she thought the reason Shane was freaking out was because he saw himself in Ilya. Of course she thought he was that self-absorbed.

“It was scary,” he agreed. That was true, at least. Shane had been terrified, *was* terrified, even though he knew Ilya would be at the hospital getting the best possible care. It wasn’t like he hadn’t seen players get their bell rung before, but this was one of the worst he’d seen. And this was *Ilya*. His mom gave him a sympathetic look.

“We could stay over in Montreal tonight,” she offered gently. “If you need us.”

Jesus, that was the last thing Shane needed right now, his parents hovering while he freaked out and couldn’t tell them why. He knew his mother meant well. She was trying to help, to be there for him the way she always had been. But having her close would only make it harder to keep himself together, harder to hide the real reason he was falling apart. At least the offer was enough to shock him out of whatever stupor he’d been in.

“I’m okay,” Shane assured his mother, even though he wasn’t. He was better than Ilya at least. “I think I’ll, ah...go to the hospital to see Rozanov, and then just go to bed.”

His mother’s expression softened, pride and concern mingling in her eyes. “That’s a wonderful gesture from you, Shane,” she said, squeezing his arm. Shane felt like a fraud. There was nothing wonderful about any of this; he was going to the hospital because the alternative was losing his mind, not because he was some paragon of sportsmanship. “But he might not be up for seeing visitors yet.”

Shane knew as much. He might be sleeping or in surgery or something worse. But if he was awake and even a little aware, he’d want to see Shane. Shane was sure of it. Not that he could tell his mother that.

“I’ll just go check,” Shane said. “If he’s not up for visitors, that’s fine.”

Yuna placed her hand on Shane’s cheek. “I sometimes wonder how I raised such a conscientious, wonderful son,” she said with a warm, loving smile. “It must have been your father’s doing.”

Shane snorted out a laugh, then nearly started crying. God, he had to get away from his mother and her gentle affection before he lost it and she started asking why. And she started realizing that he wasn’t rushing to the hospital to see Ilya Rozanov because he was conscientious but because he was horribly, desperately selfish.

“You had something to do with it, too,” he assured her. His voice came out rougher than he intended, and he had to look away before she could read too much in his expression. “I’ll talk to you later, okay?”

Thankfully, his mother took that as the dismissal he’d meant it to be. “I’ll call you tomorrow to check on you,” she told him, like Shane was the one who needed checking on. Like he had been the one who had been unconscious and dazed and forgotten his second language. “I love you.”

“I love you, too, mom,” Shane said, and then turned away to get in his car before she could see his tears.

Shane hadn’t expected it to be so easy to get back to see Ilya. But he was well-known enough in Montreal that the woman behind the desk recognized him, which could be a problem. A player trying to display good sportsmanship by checking on the opposing captain probably would have waited until morning, not rushed to the hospital directly after the game. His appearance here was probably suspicious, and his whole face probably screamed that he was panicking internally after watching someone he lo—

He cut the thought off. He would worry about all of that a different day, once he saw that Ilya was okay. Ilya must be okay if they were letting him have visitors.

When Shane got to Ilya’s room, he was awake, his bed in a half-sitting position. His left arm was in a cast below the elbow. He looked exhausted, his curls pressed flat on one side and sticking up wildly on the other. But his hazel eyes looked ridiculously big and green and bright, and neither one of his pupils were blown huge the way Shane had clearly only imagined. It was the most beautiful sight Shane had ever seen.

“Shane,” Ilya greeted. His voice was groggy, sluggish, but at least he recognized Shane. Not that Shane had worried about that, not really. He’d recognized Shane on the ice already; the only thing he’d somehow forgotten was English. And Shane’s Russian was deeply not up to this task.

“Do you understand English again?” Shane asked tentatively, hopefully. A look of confusion passed across Ilya’s face, like he was having a difficult time parsing Shane’s meaning, and Shane felt his heart crumple in his chest. Initial confusion was one thing, but if it hadn’t

resolved after several hours...Shane wasn't a doctor, didn't know what that meant, but he knew it wasn't good.

"Did I...dream?" Ilya answered at last, slowly and thickly, like he was translating word-for-word in his head. Relief flooded through Shane so suddenly he felt dizzy. Ilya was speaking English, even if it was labored and uncertain. "Or...you spoke in Russian?"

Shane moved to Ilya's bedside, gripping the bed rail to keep his hands from shaking. He blinked hard, willing the sting in his eyes to go away. The last thing Ilya needed was to see Shane falling apart. He tried for a smile but wasn't sure he managed it.

"It wasn't a dream," Shane assured Ilya quietly.

He'd thought Ilya would be happy. He'd seemed happy, when they'd been on the phone, when Shane had expressed an interest in learning Russian. Except the look that crossed Ilya's face now was one of absolute panic. Shane's stomach dropped.

"You...always you speak Russian?" Ilya asked, and the words were jumbled and clumsy and not quite in the right order, but it was more than enough. Better than Shane could do in Russian, and he didn't even have the excuse of a head injury.

Shane rubbed self-consciously at the back of his neck as he lowered himself in the chair by Ilya's bed so Ilya didn't have to crane his neck up. "No. I, uh...after we talked while you were in Moscow, I thought it wasn't fair that you always had to talk to me in your second language," he explained. "So I started studying, a little."

Ilya's crooked little smile replaced the panic that had been on his face. There was something soft and strange in his expression, and Shane wasn't sure he'd ever seen it on Ilya's face before. Maybe it was the concussion. But it made Shane's heart go soft, too.

"Your accent," Ilya began, smacking his mouth like he couldn't quite get enough moisture in it, "it is very bad."

Shane laughed, except he also started crying. "I know," he said wetly, wiping frantically at his eyes. "Your English is so much better than my Russian, I'm sorry."

Ilya made a soft noise. "Is okay," he said blearily, his eyes drifting closed for a long second. "You speak French, too."

Except Shane would happily trade every word of French he knew in an even exchange for Russian. He didn't care if he never understood what his Quebecois teammates were saying to each other again.

"What did the doctors say?" Shane asked instead of dwelling on that.

"Oh, concussion," Ilya said hazily, which Shane had expected. The words came slowly, like he was pulling them from somewhere deep and murky, and each one of Ilya's blinks seemed to last longer than the previous one. "One of the bad ones. And this." Ilya waved his casted arm in an uncoordinated arc. "Broken some...wrist bones. Cannot remember which."

Shane's throat was thick. He hated seeing Ilya like this, hurt and disoriented, but at least it seemed like they'd given him some good drugs, because it didn't seem like he was in pain, just exhausted and fuzzy around the edges.

"Are you flying back with your team tomorrow?" Shane asked. He hoped the answer was no. He hoped Ilya would still be in Montreal tomorrow, where Shane could see him and know he was okay. For a relative value of okay, anyway.

Ilya's blink was slow and drowsy. "I think...no. Doctor said...something. I forgot."

Shane's heart ached, and he also felt fond. Shane wanted to climb into the bed beside him, wanted to wrap himself around Ilya and protect him from everything. The intensity of the feeling shocked him. He'd never felt anything like this before.

There was a soft knock and then a nurse appeared in the doorway, her expression sympathetic but firm. "I'm sorry, Mr. Hollander, but visiting hours are over," she told him apologetically. Shane suspected that visiting hours had already been over when Shane arrived, but they'd let him in anyway because he was Shane Hollander and Ilya was Ilya Rozanov, and exceptions got made for people like them, at least in Canada. "Mr. Rozanov needs his rest."

Shane stood up reluctantly, not wanting to take his eyes from Ilya for even a second. But Ilya was definitely flagging, and fighting to stay awake for Shane's sake. His eyelids kept drooping, and each time he forced them open again it took more effort.

"I'll come back in the morning," Shane promised. He didn't even care that all of the staff recognized him. He didn't care what they'd say if Shane Hollander showed up outside Ilya's hospital room the moment he was allowed and simply refused to leave. He couldn't be anywhere else, couldn't even imagine it.

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

You might be able to tell, but I was a little bit inspired by TV show Marleau here. Everyone in the show being super suspicious of what Shane and Ilya are up to adds an extra layer of fun, hahaha.

Ilya was more alert when Shane returned the next morning. When Shane pushed open the door, Ilya's face transformed, a slow, gentle smile spreading across his features, his eyes warming in a way that made Shane's heart stutter.

"You came back," Ilya said, his voice barely above a whisper, carrying a note of wonder that made Shane ache. Like Shane showing up was something precious and unexpected, something Ilya hadn't quite let himself hope for. And Shane couldn't even be offended by the surprise, because Ilya had every reason to doubt.

Shane walked around the side of Ilya's bed to sit in the same chair he'd vacated the previous night. "I told you I would, didn't I?"

"Mm," Ilya acknowledged, leaning back against his pillows and closing his eyes, though he was still smiling.

"How are you feeling?" Shane asked, leaning forward, trying to read Ilya's face for signs of pain or discomfort.

"Okay. A little..." Ilya paused, sweeping his hand in little circles next to his temple.

"Dizzy?" Shane provided, and Ilya made a low sound of agreement in his throat. Shane wasn't sure whether it was an English word Ilya hadn't known before the concussion or whether it was one he'd forgotten, but he was already much more lucid than he had been the previous night, which was reassuring.

Shane's phone vibrated insistently against his thigh. He pulled it out just far enough to see his mother's name on the screen, then shoved it back into his pocket without answering. He'd deal with her later. Instead, he snuck a glance toward the door and when he didn't see anyone, Shane reached over and grasped Ilya's hand. He felt almost physically incapable of doing anything else, like if he didn't touch Ilya, he might die. Ilya's smile went impossibly softer, almost shy, and his fingers curled around Shane's with surprising strength.

"How long do they want to keep you here?" Shane asked. Ilya's brow furrowed, his eyes losing focus as he worked through the question. Shane mentally kicked himself, wishing he'd

used simpler, clearer words. Ilya was clearly still struggling to process English, and making him work too hard couldn't be good for his brain.

"Doctor said...forty...sorry, numbers are hard right now," Ilya apologized. "Two or three days? Said they could...let me leave if I have somewhere to go and someone to watch me."

A crazy thought crossed Shane's mind, so crazy he barely believed he was considering it. "Do you want to get out of here?" he asked before he could second-guess the impulse.

Ilya rolled his eyes, then winced. "No, Hollander, I love hospital," he said sarcastically. "Maybe I will stay forever."

Well, at least Ilya's sarcasm was intact. That had to be a good sign. Shane's pulse was racing, his thoughts spinning faster than he could catch them. The idea forming in his mind was reckless, maybe insane, but the longer he sat here holding Ilya's hand, the more right it felt. He knew he should probably think this through. Should probably consider all the ways this could go wrong, all the risks involved. But for once in his carefully-controlled life, Shane didn't want to be cautious. He wanted to take the leap before fear could talk him out of it.

"We have two more home games. I don't have to travel again for four days. You can come to the condo. I can stay with you," Shane blurted out, the words tumbling over each other in his haste to get them out before he lost his nerve. His heart hammered so hard he could feel it in his throat. Ilya stared at him skeptically, and Shane backtracked. "I mean, if you want to."

Beneath the skepticism, Ilya's expression unreadable. His eyes searched Shane's face like he was trying to solve a puzzle, and Shane realized maybe he'd thrown too much at Ilya too fast, too many words for Ilya's concussed brain to process.

"I...want to," answered Ilya at last. Relief crashed through Shane like a wave, so powerful his knees felt weak even though he was sitting down. But somehow, despite how completely insane this plan was, Shane felt steady. Centered. Like this was exactly what he was supposed to do.

Shane took a deep breath. It was just logistics from this point on. Ilya couldn't fly until his symptoms resolved, and he couldn't play with his broken wrist even after that. Ilya's season was over, which meant he didn't *have* to go back to Boston at all. And he'd already said he wasn't going back to Russia.

Shane imagined an impossible scenario, Ilya in Montreal with him for the rest of the season, the Voyageurs winning the Stanley Cup, and then Ilya coming with him to the cottage where they could spend the whole summer. Just the two of them, no scrutiny, no obligations pulling them apart after an hour or two. They could have breakfast together every morning, could fall asleep tangled together every night. Shane could learn more Russian, could listen to Ilya talk for hours in whatever language felt right. The vision was so vivid, so perfect, it made Shane's chest ache with longing.

Shane didn't even know if Ilya wanted that. But Shane suddenly wanted it more than he'd ever wanted anything. He'd never wanted Ilya to get injured, but he desperately wanted more time, and this was their chance.

Shane's phone buzzed again in his pocket and he pulled it out to glance at it again. He put it away.

"Maybe answer, Mr. Popular," Ilya teased. Shane shook his head. He was not quite ready to face the intensity of Yuna Hollander. But it was nice to be teased by Ilya again.

"I'm going to find a doctor," Shane said instead of acknowledging Ilya's words. "See if we can get you out of here."

Ilya dozed a little after Shane left his hospital room. It was annoyingly difficult to stay awake for very long. His eyelids felt weighted, his thoughts kept slipping away mid-formation, and every time he tried to hold onto consciousness it felt like trying to grip water. Sleep kept pulling him under whether he wanted it to or not.

He had no idea how much time had passed when his phone's buzzing dragged him back to awareness. A nurse had given it back to him hours ago, except she'd told him not to look at screens. Stupid of her. Ilya grabbed it from the side table and squinted at the caller ID.

Cliff Marlow. Ilya had three missed calls from him.

With a grunt of effort, Ilya swiped to answer.

"I am in hospital, idiot," he said as a greeting. Secretly he was a little happy that Marlow was concerned, but he wasn't going to tell anyone that.

"Doc says they're letting you out," Marlow said. "Everyone was really relieved."

Ilya pulled his phone away from his ear to look at the time. That made his head swim a little so he stopped. They must all still be on the plane ride home. The hospital had permission to share his medical status with his team doctor, obviously, but still, Shane worked fast. But Ilya shouldn't have expected anything but extreme efficiency from Shane Hollander. It should have been annoying, that finicky intensity, that insistence on doing everything in a very particular way. Sometimes it *was* annoying. But it also made something in Ilya's chest go warm and tight, made him want things he had no business wanting.

"Mm. Yes," Ilya agreed, though he hadn't seen Shane to confirm. Maybe Shane had come back when Ilya had been dozing and Ilya had missed him. "Soon, maybe."

"Going home with your Montreal chick?" Marlow teased. "Maybe she'll put on a little nurse outfit for you. Give you a sponge bath."

Ilya laughed, which also somehow hurt his head. He imagined Shane in a nurse outfit, which was incredibly ridiculous.

"Fuck off, Marlow."

Marlow's laugh echoed in Ilya's ear. "You sound better," Marlow told him. Ilya figured he must. He didn't remember very much about the hit or what had come after, except he'd been

told he was mumbling in Russian. He remembered Shane's voice speaking Russian so very clearly, somehow, but everything else was a blur. "We're going to miss you out there."

You are, Ilya thought to himself, though he could not say it to his teammates. It would be a dick move to tell them they'd probably lose in the first round of the playoffs without him, even if it was true. He was petty enough that a small piece of him did hope that they would fail without him. But he wasn't quite enough of an asshole to say it out loud and kill whatever morale they had left.

"Just don't rush it trying to come back," Marlow said into Ilya's silence, his tone unexpectedly sincere. Not that there was any point in rushing. Even if the Bears somehow clawed their way to the finals—which they wouldn't—Ilya's wrist wouldn't heal in time. "Let your girl pamper you. Fluff your pillows, suck your dick, you know."

Ilya snickered. He wondered what Shane would think of being referred to as Ilya's 'girl.' But despite himself, he *did* imagine it. Sleeping intertwined with Shane, waking up to see his face first thing in the morning, eating breakfast with him. It sounded nice, domestic, and very, very stupid. This was exactly when Ilya should be pulling away, should be protecting himself, should be ending whatever this was between them before it destroyed him completely. Instead, he was going home with Shane—not Shane's real home, but close enough.

He should say no. He should insist on staying in the hospital and then going back to Boston, should put distance between them before he got any more attached. But Ilya couldn't make himself do it, couldn't give up the possibility of having Shane to himself for days instead of hours. And all Ilya needed to do to live in that fantasy world where such a thing was possible was to have his brain smashed against a wall.

"Yes, asshole, I will have my dick sucked every day while you still must play hockey. Lucky me."

In reality, Ilya didn't feel much like having his dick sucked at the moment, which was rare. He hadn't thought there was any circumstance in which he wouldn't want Shane to suck his dick, except his head was swimming and he felt a little nauseated. Which the doctor had told him was normal, but he didn't love it.

He had had a concussion before, he was pretty sure, when he'd been a teenager, but it hadn't been like this. They hadn't taken it quite so seriously so many years ago, and Russia might not take it seriously even now. Ilya had hit his head, felt a little dizzy for a few minutes, and gone right back into the game. He hadn't felt dizzy half a day later or so exhausted he could barely keep his eyes open.

Marlow laughed. "Never change, Roz," he said fondly. "Get some rest. We'll beat Buffalo in your honor."

Shane's phone buzzed *again* in his pocket, and Shane was finally frustrated enough to pick it up. He'd spent half the morning trying to convince the staff that yes, he, Shane Hollander was going to sit with Ilya Rozanov for the next day to keep an eye on his concussion symptoms, but please be discreet with this information.

The doctor knew he had a game the next day, and Shane had heavily implied that he had someone else who could stay with Ilya when he went in for his morning skate and then for the game. At first, he'd thought it was safe enough to leave Ilya alone for a few hours at a time, but he was beginning to wonder if he might want to find a way to skip the game. Call it a family emergency, which it was. In a way.

Ilya had fuzzily confirmed that he'd be going home with Shane when the doctor had accompanied him to Ilya's room, but he'd been so groggy that Shane wondered if he'd even fully woken up to answer. It was only then that the doctor had agreed to tell him any detailed information about Ilya's condition, which was good, because Shane was starting to get pretty freaked out by how confused and out of it Ilya still seemed. But the doctor assured him that it was a good sign that Ilya seemed generally aware of where he was and who he was with, and it was a good sign that his second-language aphasia was decreasing with time. The doctor seemed to think everything was a good sign, but Shane was fucking scared, and he didn't have enough mental energy to talk to his mother on top of it all.

But she clearly wasn't giving up, and he knew she wouldn't until he answered. So, begrudgingly, he did.

"What?" he snapped into the phone. He didn't think he'd ever answered a phone call like that before, and certainly not from his mother.

"Shane! Thank goodness. You weren't answering."

Shane took a deep breath. Because he had been not answering for a reason, and he couldn't tell her what that reason was. He couldn't tell her he'd been too busy arranging to smuggle Ilya Rozanov out of a hospital and into his secret condo to take her calls.

"Sorry, mom. I'm just busy," he said with every scrap of patience he could muster. Because it would be better if he didn't encourage her to ask more questions. The less he said, the less he'd have to lie. Or worse, the less chance he'd slip up and tell her something true.

"I told you I'd call you this morning," she reminded him. Shane sighed, staring at the sterile white wall of the hospital hallway. He felt sixteen years old again, his mother demanding to always know his whereabouts—which had usually been fine, because Shane had rarely been going anywhere. Now he wanted to get back to Ilya and get him away from here, but everything was taking too long, and this was making it take longer. "Did you get to see Rozanov at the hospital?"

Shane jumped, looking behind him on instinct, as if his mother might be standing there, watching him. And then he remembered he'd told his mom he was going to try to see Ilya the previous night. There was no point in lying about that.

"Yeah," he admitted.

"And how is he doing?"

Well, Shane supposed he could tell the truth about that, too. "Still kind of out of it," Shane said. He wondered if his mother could hear how worried he was. "Fractured wrist. He's out

for the rest of the season.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” his mother said delicately. She sounded sincere. Yuna Hollander would cheer against opposing teams with the best of them, would celebrate every Voyageurs goal even when it came at another player’s expense, but she would never celebrate an injury. “I hope he’ll be okay.”

“Me too,” Shane said, also sincerely. This was the most honest conversation he’d ever had with his mother about Ilya Rozanov.

“Shane, are you okay? Why don’t we go over there and meet you for dinner tonight?” his mother suggested. Fuck. He couldn’t have that.

“Mom, you just drove here and back yesterday, and you’re doing it again tomorrow,” Shane pointed out. He had to convince his mom to drop this. He was not leaving Ilya’s side after all he’d already had to do to convince the hospital to release him. He wasn’t even fully convinced he was going to be able to leave Ilya in order play the game tomorrow. He certainly wasn’t going to leave Ilya’s side to have dinner with his parents.

“We could spend the night,” she offered. “Or you could come to us, but I know you have a game tomorrow.”

Shane loved his mother, but for once, he wished that she didn’t love him quite so much. Or that he wasn’t so transparent that she could immediately tell that something was bothering him.

“I have too much going on here, Mom,” Shane said, not lying. “You’ll see me at the game tomorrow okay? I have to go.”

Shane hung up before his mother could make any other helpful offers.

Chapter 4

It turned out that Ilya's head didn't like it when he walked. Or when he stood up. Or when he became vertical or moved in any way. By the time he and Shane made it to Shane's condo, Ilya's head was spinning and it was difficult to even stay upright. Embarrassingly, Shane helped him to the couch. More embarrassingly, Ilya was not sure he would have made it to the couch without him.

Shane actually fluffed the stupid throw pillow behind Ilya's head, which he should have found annoying, and instead he found very, very endearing. He should have known that Shane would be the type to fuss. It was so perfectly Shane, wound tight as a spring, always overthinking, always catastrophizing about what could go wrong. That same anxious energy was now focused entirely on Ilya, showing itself in tucked blankets and adjusted pillows. But it was...nice. No one had fussed over Ilya for a very long time. Probably not since his mother had died.

"Do you think you can eat something?" Shane asked once Ilya was settled to his satisfaction, with several pillows behind his back and a blanket thrown over him as he lay across the couch. Shane had stared at him intently as he'd picked at the meal they'd served him at the hospital before they'd finally released him, but he hadn't been able to eat much of it. It was clear Shane was disappointed by that.

"Maybe," Ilya said. It was the best he could manage.

"Tuna melt?" Shane suggested nervously. Ilya's whole body seemed to protest the suggestion. He shook his head, pressing his lips together at the sour taste of bile in his mouth.

"No," he said when he was sure he wouldn't vomit. "Too much tuna, too much..." he trailed off, his brain slipping over the words. What was on a tuna melt? "Too much *melt*."

Shane gave Ilya a smile that was half helpless affection and half worry, and Ilya's heart almost broke. *Cheese*, his mind provided instead of deciding what he thought about that. How the fuck had he forgotten the word *cheese*?

"Maybe just plain toast?" Shane tried.

Ilya nodded slowly. He knew he should at least try to eat.

"Mm, yes. Okay," he acknowledged. Shane walked away, and Ilya took several long, slow breaths through his nose. He was not going to vomit all over Shane Hollander's secret sex condo. He would not take the chance that Shane would suddenly realize how much trouble he was and change his mind about this.

After a minute of slow breathing, Ilya's nausea subsided enough that he could focus on something besides breathing. And he thought about tuna melts. About how that was probably one of the only foods that Shane had known Ilya liked. That before all this happened, Shane had intended to bring Ilya back here and get vigorously fucked by him, and he'd stocked his

usually empty sex condo with the ingredients for tuna melts because he knew Ilya liked them. Just like Ilya had, not too long ago, stocked his own refrigerator with Shane's preferred brand of ginger ale.

Ilya felt stupidly warm inside at the thought. He closed his eyes, burying his face in Shane's ridiculous throw pillow. He wished it smelled like Shane, wished this was the place Shane actually spent his time when they were apart. But it was something.

Shane returned after a minute with two pieces of plain toast and a can of ginger ale. Ilya slowly sat up so he could at least try to eat them.

"I know you don't like ginger ale," Shane said apologetically. "But I thought it might help?"

Ah, yes, ginger was meant to help with nausea, Ilya realized. Did ginger ale even contain real ginger? He wasn't sure. But he appreciated the thought.

"Thank you."

Shane watched as Ilya consumed one and a half pieces of toast and seemed satisfied by Ilya's effort. Shane cleaned everything up immediately, as soon as he'd confirmed that Ilya was finished, because of course he did. It was cute, how very *Shane* he could be.

"Did you want to lie down in bed?" Shane asked nervously once he'd returned. Shane was a bundle of nerves, and it was making Ilya's head hurt. He was almost entirely certain it was not the concussion.

"Let's watch a movie," Ilya suggested instead. He strongly suspected that he would not stay awake for more than twenty minutes of a movie, but it was still the middle of the afternoon. "What boring movies do you watch? Sports documentaries?"

Shane looked offended, then said, "I *do* watch sport documentaries." Ilya fought back a smile.

"Yes? Well, put one on."

Shane considered for a second, then shook his head. "Maybe something more soothing," he suggested. "Like a nature documentary."

Ilya didn't understand how watching a lion kill an antelope might be more soothing than sports, except then he realized that sports often led to players being horribly injured. Ilya barely remembered what had happened on the ice that day, but Shane remembered.

"Whatever. Just put on whatever."

"Okay, but..." Shane hesitated, wringing his hands slightly. "You're not supposed to look at screens. With the concussion. So you have to promise you'll just listen, okay?"

Ilya sighed, more fond than frustrated. "Your boring documentary will put me to sleep anyway."

Shane nodded, then made a face. “I just...need to make a call first,” he said, in the weirdest, most suspicious way possible. Normally, Ilya would not have bothered him about it. Shane’s personal life was his own. But something evasive and guilty in his tone set off alarm bells in Ilya’s foggy brain.

“What call?” he pressed.

Shane shifted back and forth from foot to foot. Ilya watched him visibly consider lying.

“I, uh...I think I’m going to tell them I can’t play tomorrow. Family emergency.”

Ilya shared at Shane, dumbfounded. Of all the things he’d thought he might hear from Shane’s lips, missing a hockey game for Ilya’s sake had not been among them. It didn’t matter that Montreal had already clinched a spot in the playoffs. Seeding was still up for grabs, and Shane Hollander didn’t miss hockey games.

“And what will your family say?” Ilya challenged. “When you miss hockey game for ‘family emergency’ they do not know about?”

Shane’s face did a lot of complicated things. “I can’t just leave you here alone for hours,” Shane insisted. “I’m supposed to watch you.”

Something bright and almost painful unfurled in Ilya’s chest. Shane would miss a game. For him. Maybe Shane didn’t love him, but he felt *something*. Maybe it was only worry, but people did not worry like this, did not sacrifice like this, for someone they felt nothing for. Did they?

“Is only a few hours,” Ilya excused. “I will mostly be sleeping, I think. Don’t call.”

Shane expression looked impossibly pained. Ilya was hopelessly lost for this man. He took a sip of his disgusting ginger ale. Maybe it helped.

“Will be fine,” Ilya assured him. “I am so much better already, yes? I understand English again. Mostly.”

Based on his facial expression, Shane did not seem to like Ilya’s joke. Ilya sighed. “Come here. Turn on your awful nature documentary so I can sleep.”

Shane hesitated, then moved to the couch. He went to sit by Ilya’s feet, but Ilya shifted, ignoring the way that moving made his head swim, until he rested his head in Shane’s lap. Shane couldn’t deny him this, he was almost sure. Ilya was injured.

When Ilya laid his head in Shane’s lap, Shane tensed for a moment before relaxing, before starting to run his fingers through Ilya’s curls. It was nice and comforting and soothing. His hair was probably disgusting, messy and unwashed after half a hockey game and a night in the hospital. Shane probably hated it, since he was so fussy about things. But he didn’t stop.

Shane hadn’t even put anything on the TV by the time Ilya fell asleep.

Ilya should not have been surprised by the fact that Shane actually watched a nature documentary. Ilya dozed, and every time he woke up, there were whales or penguins or zebras on the screen, even though Ilya could only focus on the screen for a minute before his vision started to blur. He woke up a few times when Shane got up, but Shane always came back, and the soothing feeling of Shane's hand in his hair rarely stopped for long.

Eventually, Ilya was awake enough that he did what Shane had originally commanded, just listened to the voiceover tell him about jellyfish or something. There were a lot of words he didn't understand, and he was not sure if it was because his brain was broken or because there were lots of science words. He thought it was probably the second one. It was strange, how much English he could learn and still encounter entire categories of words that remained foreign. There were probably thousands of English words he would never know, concepts he would always understand better in Russian, no matter how long he lived his life mostly in English. Apparently, his bruised little brain agreed.

"Hey," Shane whispered after Ilya had been lying there awake for a few minutes. "Are you awake?"

Ilya grunted in response. The last three times he'd woken up, he'd thought about how badly he needed a shower, but he was warm and comfortable and Shane's hands were in his hair. Getting up felt like a lot of work. But he knew Shane would appreciate it if he showered, too.

"I need shower," Ilya admitted. "I smell like hospital, and sweaty hockey gear."

Ilya turned onto his back and looked up at Shane's face. The corners of Shane's mouth curved in a smile that seemed involuntary, like he couldn't help himself. "You do," Shane admitted wryly. "But if you're getting in the shower, I'm coming with you."

"Can't wait anymore to fuck?" Ilya teased. Ilya hoped the answer was no, but they'd never been alone together for so long without fucking, and they'd been deprived of their chance the previous night already. Ilya was also upset about that, but he wasn't sure his dick would work. He'd never even been drunk enough that that had been a problem, so he wasn't sure how to handle it. He could probably suck Shane's dick if Shane did most of the work. Maybe not in the shower, though.

"No!" Shane said defensively. "I—Jesus, Ilya, I don't trust your balance right now." Ilya stared at Shane for a few seconds, frustrated that he couldn't quite make sense of Shane's words. A guilty look passed over Shane's face, and Ilya hated it. "I don't want you to fall," Shane amended. Ah. That, Ilya understood.

"Am fine," Ilya insisted, and with some effort, he levered himself into a sitting position. He stood, and the world tilted. Shane caught him when he swayed, and when Ilya's vision cleared, Shane was staring at him with an expression that was caught somewhere between smug and scared. Ilya didn't like that second part.

"Hexopoшo," Shane argued, looking very pleased with himself. Ilya's heart immediately became mush. It was so charming that Shane knew so few Russian words and somehow found a way to use them to great effect despite that.

“Хорошо,” Ilya agreed softly, because no, apparently he was *not* fine. Ilya was stubborn but he was not stupid. He loved hearing Shane speak Russian, loved being able to speak Russian back, even if it was only baby Russian he thought Shane might be able to understand. He didn’t want to do anything that might discourage Shane from speaking Russian to him even more.

“Come on,” Shane urged gently, his fingers wrapping securely around Ilya’s bicep, his grip firm and ready to catch him if he was going to fall. Because Ilya was physically larger, he sometimes forgot how strong Shane was.

“Пойдем.” Shane stared at him for a minute, confused. It wasn’t something he knew yet, which Ilya had suspected, since Shane so was good about strategically deploying the Russian he did know. Ilya searched his brain for the best English. “Is something like, ‘let’s go.’”

Shane looked at Ilya like he’d given him some great gift rather than taught him one expression in Russian.

“Пойдем,” Shane repeated, and it wasn’t quite right how he pronounced it, but Ilya didn’t even care. The way Shane’s mouth shaped the unfamiliar sounds, careful and determined—it was perfect in its own way.

Ilya let Shane lead him to the bathroom, Shane’s hand never leaving Ilya’s arm. He felt comfortingly secure and safe in Shane’s grip. When was the last time he’d felt something like that? Maybe not since childhood, before he’d understood what the world was really like.

When they reached the bathroom, Shane flicked on the light. It blazed to life and Ilya immediately winced. The lights hadn’t bothered him so much before, but the harsh light and the white tile immediately pierced straight into Ilya’s skull.

“God, sorry!” Shane whisper-shouted. He hit a dimmer switch until the light was a soft amber color. Ilya blinked a few times until the little spots disappeared from his vision.

“I forget you have sexy bathroom mood lighting.”

“I know you’re making fun of me, but I’m glad I have it right now,” Shane said, completely earnest. Then he made a face. “Shit, we need a plastic bag.” Ilya stared at Shane for a few seconds, confused, and Shane clearly saw it. “For your cast.”

Ilya looked down at his left wrist. He’d somehow forgotten about it, which was weird. It didn’t even hurt that badly, although it had been a while since he’d last taken a painkiller. He didn’t remember how long. Or he just wasn’t sure how long he’d dozed on the sofa while Shane had learned about zebras. Except Shane probably already knew about zebras. He probably hadn’t learned anything, but he’d watched it so Ilya could sleep.

“Shit,” Shane said again, like this was a small disaster. “Here, sit for a minute.”

Ilya allowed himself to be maneuvered onto the closed toilet seat, and Shane practically fled the bathroom, moving with the kind of frantic energy that suggested the missing plastic bag was a genuine crisis. Ilya couldn’t suppress the fond smile that spread across his face. He

suspected that telling Shane to calm down would have the opposite effect, and it was almost soothing to see Shane being so very himself. Comfortable, at least, in his own space, even if it was just his secret gay panic fuck condo.

If Ilya hadn't already been certain of how stupidly in love with Shane Hollander he was, he was certain now. Watching Shane be his easily-agitated, high-strung self wouldn't make Ilya's heart flutter like this otherwise. Ilya closed his eyes and listened to Shane slamming open cabinets and drawers, searching for a plastic bag, thinking how absolutely fucked he was. He didn't know how he'd ever give this up now that he knew what it was like.

Chapter 5

Ilya was loose under Shane's touch, languid and boneless and more relaxed than Shane had ever seen him. Shane had to reach up to lather the shampoo in Ilya's hair, but Ilya melted into the touch with something like bliss, eyes falling closed, head tilting into Shane's hands the way a cat might finally surrender to being petted and discover it had been missing out all along.

Shane wished that they could have had this without Ilya being injured. He hadn't realized how much he had craved this, Ilya soft and pliable beneath his hands, and now he ached with the knowledge that he'd only gained the right to it through Ilya's pain.

Shane gently coaxed Ilya to tilt his head back without using words, letting his hands do the talking. He didn't know the words in Russian, and he didn't want to ruin this strange oasis of calm contentment by forcing Ilya to think too hard about English. And like always, they communicated better with their bodies than their words, Ilya tipping his head back, letting Shane use the handheld shower head to rinse the shampoo out of Ilya's hair without getting it in his eyes.

Ilya released a low rumble of contentment at the pulse of the shower water against his scalp. Shane pressed a small kiss against the back of Ilya's neck before he thought better of it. But Ilya didn't object, leaned into him instead, and Shane's heart may as well have melted into a puddle of goo and slid down the drain.

Shane had to force himself not to linger, though he wanted to remain in the moment forever if he could. But he really *was* worried about Ilya's balance, and he didn't think the steam and heat from the shower would make Ilya *less* lightheaded. It was strange, soaping Ilya's body down without intent, stranger still to be in a shower with Ilya Rozanov without Ilya's cock hard and straining with interest. That more than anything told Shane how awful Ilya must feel.

Shane switched off the water and carefully guided Ilya out onto the bathmat, steadying him with both hands. He was surprised when Ilya let him, when he barely protested Shane toweling him dry or carefully squeezing moisture out of his curls. The slow blink was coming back, and even Shane was starting to feel sleepy after the warmth of the shower, and after the day they'd had. Shane paused, gathering his courage before attempting the Russian phrase he'd been practicing in his head.

"Ты хочешь спать?" he asked, carefully enunciating every syllable. He was pretty sure he'd asked correctly, and Ilya's tired smile was bright and pleased.

"Да," Ilya murmured, voice soft and rough-edged. "Хочу спать." He nudged his forehead briefly against Shane's shoulder, as if to underline the answer, and let himself be steered without resistance.

Ilya sank onto the edge of the bed where Shane guided him, and Shane paused, chewing his lip before crossing to the dresser. He pulled open a drawer and retrieved a pair of black boxer

briefs, carrying them back to where Ilya sat. He handed them over, and Ilya started to put them on sleepily before he stopped mid-movement, staring at the garment. It had definitely been too much to hope that Ilya wouldn't question this.

"These are not your underwear," Ilya remarked, perplexed. Shane rubbed the back of his neck, feeling a flush rise to his cheeks.

"Um, no," he admitted. "I bought them a while ago, in case...I mean, we make a mess sometimes and I thought—"

There was laughter in Ilya's eyes, and Shane didn't even mind that it was at his expense. "You are freak, Shane," Ilya said, sounding very happy about it as he pulled the underwear the rest of the way on, only a little sluggishly. "You have pants and shirts in there for me too? Socks?"

Shane's face was burning. "If you're not careful, I'll throw them away," Shane threatened, even though he wouldn't. "Next time, I'll make you go back to your hotel in come-stained jeans."

Ilya laughed uproariously, sounding so much like his usual self that Shane was almost able to forget. Ilya's eyes were twinkling with mirth, his expression relaxed and happy. "I—" Ilya started, then stopped himself with a slow shake of his head. "You are funny," he said instead, and Shane had the feeling that Ilya had been about to say something very different before he'd stopped himself. Ilya blinked a few times, then yawned.

"You should sleep," Shane told Ilya gently. The doctor had told him that it would not be strange if Ilya was very tired for the first few days, that his brain needed sleep to heal.

"Mm," Ilya grunted in possible agreement. He looked up at Shane from where he sat at the edge of the bed. "Ты тоже хочешь спать?"

Shane took a beat. Тоже. He knew that one. *Also*. Ilya had been doing this all day, Shane realized, keeping his Russian deliberately simple, using basic sentence structures and common words. It was the opposite of how Shane spoke English around Ilya, his thoughts always spilling out in tangled, anxious streams. Ilya was being so careful, mirroring Shane's own phrases back to him, staying within the boundaries of Shane's limited vocabulary. It was incredibly thoughtful, but it entirely defeated the purpose of allowing Ilya to relax and not think too much, if he had to constantly worry about saying something too complicated for Shane to understand.

"Да," he agreed, because he was fucking exhausted, even though he hadn't really done anything all day except sit on the couch and pet Ilya's hair. But he hadn't slept well the previous night, and he'd spent the morning trying to convince doctors he wanted to help Ilya and not kill him while simultaneously dodging his mother's phone calls. Apparently that had all been more taxing than he'd realized. "I'll go make up the couch for me."

Ilya stared at him for a very long time, uncomprehending. "Ты идиот?" he asked at last, and Shane hadn't actually learned that word, but it was easy enough for him to understand that идиот was *idiot*. Cognates sure were swell. "Why sleep on couch? Bed is here."

“You’re supposed to rest,” Shane explained, feeling...well, like an idiot. “I don’t want to—”

“You are supposed to watch,” Ilya reminded him. “How will you watch from out there?”

It was very clear that that was not a serious question and that Ilya was making fun of him. He probably deserved it, except he’d been overthinking it for hours, the fact that he and Ilya had slept together so many times but they had never *slept* together. One of them had always been rushing off. But right now, neither of them had anywhere to be, no team hotel to get back to. Shane held up his hands in surrender.

“Okay, you win, I am an idiot,” Shane agreed. He hadn’t wanted to sleep on the couch, anyway. “Just let me brush my teeth and put on my pajamas.”

“You have pajamas!” Ilya exclaimed, sounding delighted. “I bet they are matching! With buttons.”

They were matching, with buttons, but Shane didn’t want to give Ilya the satisfaction. “Fuck off,” Shane said, and went to get his pajamas. He only put on the pants, because Ilya wasn’t going to see his buttons if he was going to make fun of him for it. Also because maybe he wanted to feel Ilya’s skin against his.

When Shane returned to the bedroom after brushing his teeth, Ilya was under the covers, turned on his side facing one edge of the bed. Shane paused in the doorway, wondering if Ilya had already drifted off, but then Ilya turned and looked over his shoulder at Shane. He was definitely at least halfway surrendered to sleep, his eyes half-lidded, and he reached his hand back vaguely and said something in Russian that Shane definitely didn’t understand, but he could guess. If Shane had had any hesitation at all, it melted away at the sight of Ilya’s soft, sleepy expression.

Shane sat on the edge of the bed, sliding under the covers opposite Ilya. He half-expected Ilya to roll over to face him, but Ilya remained where he was, his back to Shane. It was stupid that Shane thought Ilya would want to cuddle, he realized after a second. They’d cuddled on the couch, sure, but some people didn’t like to cuddle when they slept. Hayden complained to Shane all the time that it was hard to fall asleep with Jackie draped half on top of him. Maybe Ilya really *had* just wanted Shane close enough to monitor his concussion.

Except then Ilya reached back, grasping blindly for Shane, until Shane shifted forward, tentatively wrapping an arm around Ilya’s solid frame. Ilya caught his hand and pulled Shane tighter against him, Shane pressing his forehead against the center of Ilya’s back. Shane pressed his lips softly against Ilya’s skin, barely a kiss at all. Ilya released a soft sound that was mostly breath but definitely wasn’t an objection, so Shane scooted closer, until his front was pressed flush against Ilya’s back.

It was probably because Ilya was taller and broader than he was that Shane had always expected that if they slept in the same bed, Ilya would be the big spoon. Not that he’d ever imagined it. But if he had, that was what he would have imagined, Ilya’s arms wrapped around him from behind.

But this was good, too.

Shane kept a critical eye on Ilya where he sat up in bed, back propped up against the pillows, begrudgingly drinking the smoothie Shane had made him. He'd eaten most of his toast and a little bit of egg, which was definitely an improvement on the previous day, and he was drinking the smoothie even though he had liberally bitched about how disgusting smoothies were.

Morning skate was in an hour, and Shane would be gone for maybe three hours total if he hurried. Ilya would be fine for three hours. Probably. Hopefully. It didn't help that the condo was further from the rink than his actual apartment was, which meant extra minutes in which Ilya would be alone.

Ilya set the cup with half a smoothie still remaining on the beside table, glaring at it as if it had personally offended him.

"Disgusting," he remarked, wrinkling his nose. Shane would have run out to get him something much more disgusting like a McDonald's breakfast sandwich if he'd thought Ilya would actually eat it, but Ilya had gone a little green around the edges when Shane had offered, so this had been their compromise.

"Is it any better?" Shane probed hopefully. Ilya met his eyes.

"Your smoothie? No. I told you, is just as disgusting as first taste."

Shane rolled his eyes, even though Ilya's whining secretly pleased him. "Your head," he said patiently.

Ilya's expression turned thoughtful, which definitely wasn't a good sign. Anything but an immediate yes was a bad sign.

"Is not worse, I think," he said at last. Shane supposed he should feel happy that at least Ilya hadn't tried to lie about how awful he felt.

"I should stay," Shane insisted. Ilya sighed.

"Go," he insisted. "I will rest. Not look at screens. Maybe even drink your gross smoothie."

Shane hesitated, but that was quite a lot of sincere promises from Ilya Rozanov.

"I'll have my phone," Shane finally said, already running through contingency plans in his head. "Call me if anything feels different. Worse headache, more nausea, dizziness, anything. I don't care if I'm in the middle of drills, I'll come right back."

Ilya's expression softened, something fond crossing his features. "I know you will," he said quietly. He even sounded like he believed it. "Go play hockey, Shane. I will be here when you get back."

Shane nodded, still reluctant, but he grabbed his bag from where he'd left it by the door. He paused in the bedroom doorway, looking back at Ilya propped up against the pillows, looking rumpled and tired but also somehow content.

“Finish the smoothie,” Shane ordered.

“Het,” Ilya replied immediately, but there was a smile playing at the corner of his mouth.

Shane pointed at him sternly. “Yes.”

“Maybe,” Ilya conceded, and Shane supposed that was the best he was going to get.

Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

Are we screaming after episode 5? I am screaming.

Ilya finished the gross smoothie. It had been a struggle, but he knew he needed the calories, even considering how little he'd moved around the past few days. He didn't call Shane, because he was fine for the two and a half hours that Shane was gone. He hadn't lied; he didn't feel worse, but he wasn't sure he felt better, either. Even getting up to go to the bathroom made everything spin unpleasantly, and that made him feel like throwing up, though he managed not to. Experiencing the smoothie once had been bad enough.

When Shane returned, frantic and disheveled and still a little sweaty like he hadn't showered, Ilya managed to coax him back into bed for an hour. Ilya had discovered the very specific pleasure that was lying totally entwined with Shane Hollander, and now he was addicted to it. It was almost better than sex. Almost. At some point, Ilya's dick would remember how good sex was and start to take an interest again. Not yet, though.

Shane was a bundle of nerves when he had to leave again before the game. He force-fed Ilya some more toast, brought him unneeded ginger ale, and nearly even checked Ilya's pupils like he'd watched too many doctor shows. Really, Ilya thought that he was a saint for dealing with all Shane's fussing.

He drank the ginger ale after Shane left, then dozed on the couch some more. He turned on the hockey game in the evening and in deference to the doctor's orders and his promises to Shane, he turned himself away from the screen, no matter how much he wanted to watch Shane. He slept through half the game, anyway, frustrated and wondering when he'd finally be able to stay awake for more than an hour at a time.

Shane didn't score any goals, at least not while Ilya had been awake. Ilya felt a little bad about that. He was sure that Shane was worrying about him, entirely unnecessarily, because Shane worried about a lot of things unnecessarily.

The sound of the door opening and closing woke him some time later, and the sound of Shane deliberately trying to be quiet and failing.

"No, Mom, I'm not avoiding you," Shane was saying softly into his phone, dropping his bag and toeing off his shoes at the door. "I told you, I have plans. Yes, with the guys, who else?"

Ilya nearly snorted. He was a guy, but he didn't think that was what Shane had meant.

“Yes, Mom, everything is fine,” Shane insisted. He paused, clearly listening to whatever his mother was saying to him. “No, I’m not acting weird, *you’re* acting weird.”

This family drama was very interesting, Ilya thought. The type of family drama where everyone just loved each other too much, so much that they could be overbearing about it. Ilya wondered what that must be like.

“Listen, they’re all waiting for me. I can’t tell them I was late because I needed to check in with my mom.” Another pause, and then Shane sighed. “Yes, Mom. I love you too, Mom. Bye.”

Shane took another step in the room and stopped short. “Oh, you’re awake,” he said, surprised. He walked up to where Ilya lay on the couch, coming to sit on the cushion in front of Ilya’s chest. He put the back of his hand against Ilya’s forehead, which was very stupid. Ilya had never had a fever. “You heard all that, huh?”

“Mm,” Ilya acknowledged softly. Shane seemed to take that as an invitation to say more.

“She’s treating me like I’m twelve years old again,” Shane complained. “And a troublemaker, which I never was.”

Ilya privately thought that Shane had made a lot of trouble in Ilya’s life. And yet he wouldn’t change it.

“You should be happy,” Ilya said softly. “That your mother cares so much.”

Guilt rapidly crashed across Shane’s features. “Sorry,” he apologized, his voice barely above a whisper. He carded his fingers through Ilya’s hair, which did a lot to quell any negative emotions Ilya might have felt.

“Is okay,” Ilya assured him. “But you are lucky.”

The moment stretched. “I know,” Shane said after a long pause. “I know I am.”

Shane’s awoke out of a deep, soothing sleep, Ilya’s arm wrapped around him, to the sound of his phone buzzing incessantly on the nightstand. Ilya shifted behind him, and he was even more annoyed that the call had woken Ilya up, too. Shane’s hand slapped along his nightstand until he found the offending device, picking it up. His mother’s name again, Jesus.

“Mom, it’s seven in the morning,” Shane said, sliding out of Ilya’s grip. He hoped Ilya would go back to sleep if he left the room, so he quickly exited the bedroom and closed the door behind him. Before he did, he caught a glimpse of Ilya making an annoyed snuffling sound and pulling Shane’s pillow to him. It was cute.

“Where are you?” came his mother’s voice across the line, sharp and accusatory. And yes, worried. Ilya was right that Shane was lucky, but at that moment, he didn’t really feel like it.

“I’m at home.”

Silence hovered thick across the line. “I know you’re not,” Yuna said evenly. “Because I’m at your apartment right now, and you’re not here. In fact, it looks like you haven’t been here in days.”

Shit. Shane’s parents had a spare key to his apartment in case something happened while he was out of town. But how did she know he hadn’t been there? Unopened mail, probably. Shane hadn’t gone home to check it. Shit.

“Am I not allowed to have a life outside my apartment?” he demanded, as harsh as he’d ever been with his mom. That stopped her.

“Shane, if you’ve been acting strange because you have a girlfriend—”

Shane scrubbed his hand over his face. “Jesus Christ, Mom,” Shane groaned.

“—or even if you’re just...playing the field a little—”

“Oh my *God*, do not say ‘playing the field’—”

“—that’s a perfectly natural thing to do, especially after a recent breakup—”

“Mom, I have to go,” Shane said desperately, his face burning even though she couldn’t see him. “I’m fine, everything is fine, I just—I need to go. I’ll call you later, okay? I promise. Bye.”

He hung up before she could respond, then immediately silenced his phone and set it face-down on the kitchen counter like it had personally betrayed him. He stood there for a moment, hands braced against the counter, taking deep breaths and trying to will away the mortification.

When he finally returned to the bedroom, Ilya was awake, propped up on his uninjured arm and watching the door with concerned eyes.

“Бцѐ хорошо?” Ilya asked, his voice still rough with sleep. Ilya’s foggy default to Russian made Shane feel impossibly fond and somehow blessed.

Shane climbed back into bed, suddenly exhausted again despite having just woken up. “My mother is at my apartment. She knows I haven’t been there.”

Ilya’s eyebrows rose. “She has key?”

“For *emergencies*,” Shane confirmed, burying his face in his hands. “She thinks—God, she basically accused me of sleeping around. Like I’m out there hooking up with random people.”

Ilya snorted. “You are, sort of.”

If Ilya hadn’t been injured, Shane would have grabbed a pillow and hit him with it. Instead, he asked, “How do you feel?”

Ilya seemed to turn the question over in his mind. “My wrist hurts,” he admitted. He flexed his fingers slightly, then stopped with a wince. The cast prevented most movement, but apparently even the attempt was painful. “I think I need drugs.”

Alarm shot through Shane. Ilya never complained, not about anything real. For Ilya to admit that he was in pain, it must have been pretty bad. It was the first time he’d heard Ilya complain about his wrist since he’d been injured. But at least it wasn’t his head.

“Stay here. I’ll get your pills.”

Shane returned to the bedroom with a glass of water and one of Ilya’s painkillers, which Ilya grimaced but swallowed. Shane had already started to get the impression that Ilya wasn’t a fan of taking medication, because he mostly hadn’t been. Shane wasn’t about to force him, but maybe he’d ask a little more often if Ilya needed it.

“What’s ‘wrist’ in Russian?” Shane asked, hoping to distract Ilya from the pain until the pill could kick in.

“Запястье,” Ilya answered immediately.

“Jesus Christ.”

Ilya huffed out a soft laugh. “You are doing good job. Russian is hard.”

“English is hard,” Shane countered. Ilya smiled, wan and tinged with pain.

“I started learning earlier,” he said reassuringly. “I have head start.”

It was so silly, so ridiculous, that Ilya Rozanov could be this soft, this gentle and encouraging. If Shane were to tell anyone about this, they would call him crazy. Not that he would tell anyone, not in a million years.

“You should eat something,” Shane said instead of acknowledging Ilya’s words. “With your pill.”

“Ugh, more toast?” Ilya complained. “You will poison me with toast. I will *become* toast!”

Shane smiled. “Ilya, I will literally make or bring you anything you ask for. If you think you can eat it.”

Ilya grimaced, then buried his face in his pillow. “More toast,” he groaned, voice muffled by fabric. “Maybe with something on top this time.”

Shane traced his fingers along the bare skin above Ilya’s spine, his hand tracking there like a magnet. Like he physically couldn’t do anything but touch Ilya Rozanov.

“Butter? Or should we be daring and try jam?” Shane teased, his tone deliberately light. Ilya exhaled heavily into the pillow, his shoulders rising and falling.

“Bring both,” he suggested finally, “and I will try.”

Chapter 7

The jam turned out not to be a good idea. Shane cursed himself for having suggested it as he rubbed Ilya's back where he leaned over the toilet, expelling what tiny amount he'd eaten. Shane was pretty sure it was mostly bile, which could not be pleasant at all. The retching went on and on, Ilya's body heaving even when there was nothing left to bring up. Finally, mercifully, it stopped. Ilya slumped sideways, pressing the side of his face against the cabinet, still turned away from Shane as if he didn't want to be seen. But Shane could hear him sucking in long, careful breaths.

"I'm sorry," Ilya apologized, sounding absolutely devastated. Shane continued to rub soothing paths up and down his back.

"It's okay," Shane assured him quietly, because what kind of asshole would be angry at someone for being sick? Shane wasn't angry, not at all. But worry churned in his gut, sharp and insistent. This was getting worse, not better. He needed to say something. "Ilya, I think we should take you back to the hospital. You're getting worse."

Ilya moved his head from side to side against the cabinet, a weak shake of what Shane presumed was refusal. "Was the pill, I think," Ilya excused. "Better to eat first, take pill second. My mistake."

Shit. Shane should have thought of that, but all he'd been able to think of was that Ilya had been in enough pain that he'd been willing to admit it aloud, and he'd wanted to take that pain away as quickly as possible. And Shane was possessed of the dubious gift of never getting sick from taking pills, even if he didn't eat anything at all. He forgot that not everyone was like that. Shane was going to apologize for not thinking, except then Ilya was speaking again, still not looking at Shane.

"I do not like pills," he said, and Shane had noticed that already. "My mother took pills."

Shane continued rubbing Ilya's back, glad that Ilya wasn't looking at him, couldn't see the way his face crumpled at Ilya's admission. Shane had no concept of this, of how awful and painful a family could be, and the more he heard about Ilya's, the sadder it made him. He knew Ilya's mother was dead, and his brain painted a horrible picture of what it must have been like for Ilya. He searched his brain for what to say, and he spent so long searching that Ilya continued talking before he had found an appropriate response.

"She took a whole bottle of pills. So having pills around feels...dangerous."

Shane's hand stilled without any conscious signal from his brain. He felt hot, and cold, and hot again as he realized what Ilya was saying. His mind lingered on the word *dangerous*. Maybe that hadn't been what Ilya had really meant, though. Maybe the word had come to him in Russian and he'd searched his brain and come up with an imperfect English equivalent for what he'd truly wanted to say. And yet.

“Ilya...do you ever think about...?” Shane couldn’t finish the question, couldn’t force the words past the sudden tightness in his throat. His heart was pounding so hard he could hear it in his ears.

“No,” Ilya said quickly, and then, “Yes. Maybe. Sometimes. I don’t know.”

Well, fuck, that was literally every answer possible, which told Shane nothing except that now he was completely terrified. All these years he’d been seeing Ilya in snatches, falling for his devil-may-care attitude without knowing that at any moment, Ilya might have been gone, and he’d never have seen him again. And he’d never even have had a hint. It would have blindsided him.

“I’ll...keep them,” Shane promised wetly, which was a stupid promise that didn’t really solve anything. But he wanted to lock Ilya’s pills in a safe with a long combination that Ilya could never possibly guess. Shane began gently stroking Ilya’s bare back again, trying to force himself not to freak out. “Do you...want to try another pill?”

Ilya seemed to think about it for a very long time. “No,” he said at last. “Bed again, I think.”

Shane helped Ilya to stand, hovered close behind Ilya as he rinsed his mouth out at the sink. He wasn’t sure if mouthwash was bad for tooth enamel after throwing up, but he figured there was no point in worrying about it, owing to the fact that most of Ilya’s teeth were fake. Ilya seemed steady enough as he returned to bed, at least. Shane brought him a can of ginger ale, and Ilya didn’t even complain about it before sipping it.

Shane was going to have to get more groceries soon. He’d planned to be here with Ilya for a night, and even considering Ilya’s nonexistent appetite, he was running out of stuff. But going grocery shopping meant leaving Ilya again, and Shane didn’t want to do that, especially after the conversation they’d just had. He knew it didn’t make sense, that him knowing about the circumstances of Ilya’s mother’s death or Ilya’s own uncertain feelings hadn’t changed anything. It had all been true before he’d known. But knowing it was illogical didn’t make the feeling go away.

Maybe Shane could get some groceries delivered.

Ilya lay in bed for a while, but he didn’t sleep. His wrist still hurt, and he didn’t tell Shane, but his head was starting to hurt again, too. That was very possibly just the throwing up, the aftereffects of his body trying to expel what it had barely contained. It still wasn’t that bad, though. Not bad enough to go back to the hospital like Shane had suggested. Ilya didn’t want to be in the hospital. He wanted to be in Shane’s bed, with Shane’s arms around him, and maybe that made him weak and stupid, but he had a head injury, and he could blame almost anything on the head injury.

Except he’d felt all of this before the head injury, too. He didn’t have a good excuse to cover that.

But even with the dull throb pulsing through his wrist and temples in time with his heartbeat, there was something oddly comforting about listening to Shane move around the condo.

Shane couldn't seem to sit still; Ilya heard him check the bedroom doorway every few minutes, heard his footsteps pacing between the kitchen and living room, the soft sounds of cabinet doors opening and closing. At some point, Ilya realized that Shane had ordered groceries for delivery, and the image of Shane unpacking groceries was so heartwarming domestic that Ilya almost got up to help. He didn't, because the last thing he wanted was to ruin the first full day they'd ever had together even more by throwing up on Shane. Although he was probably safe from that. He was pretty sure he was out of things to throw up.

Ilya heard the sound of the blender and sighed. Another smoothie, but he would at least try to drink it because Shane made it for him. And because Shane was right, infuriatingly; Ilya did need to get something in his stomach, even if it tasted like punishment. Ilya sat up a little in bed so he was prepared when Shane returned with the offending smoothie, and Ilya reached out for it without making Shane try to convince him. The smile on Shane's face was worth it.

Ilya took a sip. Disgusting. Shane had definitely snuck protein powder into it. He couldn't believe Shane actually drank this shit by *choice*.

"Distract me," Ilya commanded imperiously, "from your gross protein smoothie."

Shane looked around the bedroom, as if hoping for some inspiration, but the condo was very, very bare. It was starting to look a little more lived-in now, but not much, since Shane tended to walk around behind Ilya, cleaning and straightening everything he had mused.

"I'm not going to take a chance with the screen," Shane said seriously. "So not the TV."

Ilya only avoided rolling his eyes because he knew it would make his head spin. Shane talked about screens like looking at them for one minute would cause Ilya's body to combust into flames. He could be so rigid in the way he interpreted things, Ilya had noticed.

"So what can we listen to?" Ilya prodded. "Do you like music?"

Shane bristled. "Of course I like music," he said defensively. Oh, this was far too fun. Ilya was starting to feel better already. He could swear his headache was receding by the second.

"What kind of music?"

Shane looked flustered. "I don't know!" he exclaimed. "Normal music."

"Normal music," Ilya repeated dryly. Shane's face twisted, caught between embarrassment and irritation, like he knew how ridiculous that sounded but couldn't take it back now. "Do you listen to *normal music* on the plane? When you work out?"

Shane frowned, stubborn and annoyed. "I listen to podcasts sometimes," he admitted finally.

"Podcasts!" Ilya exclaimed, taking a sip of his smoothie. It didn't taste so gross suddenly. "Of course, podcasts. Hockey podcasts, I bet."

"Sometimes," Shane admitted begrudgingly. Shane was probably the most boring person Ilya had ever met, honestly—podcasts and nature documentaries and matching pajamas with buttons. And somehow, impossibly, Ilya was completely gone for him. Ilya watched as

Shane's expression turned shy. "I've, uh...been listening to audio lessons in Russian recently."

Shane was trying to destroy him, Ilya was pretty sure. He was trying to make Ilya's heart explode.

"Yes, that," Ilya insisted. "Let's listen to that."

Shane looked skeptical. "You won't be bored? Or annoyed? They're really basic."

God, Shane was so cute sometimes. "I'll help you with your terrible accent," he offered, flashing what he hoped was a winning smile.

Despite the day starting with an unwelcome call from his mother and an unfortunate vomiting incident, the rest of the morning ended up being unexpectedly pleasant. They spent it sprawled in bed, listening to Shane's elementary Russian audio lessons. Ilya never got bored, alternatively laughing at Shane's attempts, though never cruelly, and gently correcting him. Once or twice, Ilya got annoyed at the lesson itself ("Only old men speak like that!"), and several times, Ilya paused it, trying to demonstrate what Shane should be doing with his tongue in order to produce the correct sound in Russian.

There had been much more interesting occasions in the past when Ilya had tried to demonstrate to Shane how to do something with his tongue, but Shane hadn't minded this, either, seeing Ilya more animated, more awake, less obviously exhausted and in pain.

But by the time they had been at it for more than an hour, Shane's brain was starting to become mush, and he was physically struggling to force his mouth to shape the still-unfamiliar Russian sounds. Maybe Ilya sensed it, or maybe he *had* actually started to get bored, because he reached over Shane's body and paused the audio playing from Shane's phone. Then he leaned down and kissed Shane.

It had been a long time since they'd kissed, *actually* kissed, and it was so unexpected that Shane actually froze in surprise. Ilya didn't seem to mind, slid his fingers along the smooth line of Shane's jaw, the several days growth of his own stubble brushing roughly against Shane's skin. His tongue pressed against the seam of Shane's lips until they parted for him, and Shane sighed, his body relaxing into the mattress beneath him. It felt like relief. It felt like coming home.

Ilya shifted his body so that he was on top of Shane, grinding his hips down against Shane's. Ilya wasn't fully hard yet—Shane was very intimately familiar with what *that* felt like grinding against him—but there was definitely interest there, which must have meant that Ilya was starting to feel better. And yet.

Shane broke the kiss, running gentle hands down Ilya's bare shoulders. Ilya was still in only the boxer briefs he'd slept in, though Shane had put on a shirt and sweats. Ilya mouthed little kisses down the side of Shane's neck.

“I don’t know if this is a good idea,” Shane cautioned, though he couldn’t help but tilt his head to the side to give Ilya better access. It was something irrepressible, deeper than instinct, baring his throat to Ilya Rozanov’s mouth.

“Is very good idea,” Ilya breathed against Shane’s ear, grinding down against Shane again as if to punctuate his point. Shane’s body was stirring to meet Ilya’s desire. “Doctor said return to physical activity when I feel good enough.”

Shane groaned as Ilya’s big hand wrapped around him through his sweats and his briefs, burning hot even through two layers of fabric. “I think they meant...like, walking,” Shane tried, even as his hips jerked involuntarily against Ilya’s palm.

“This is more fun than walking,” Ilya pointed out, “and I will feel much happier afterward.”

It was difficult to argue with that, but just in case, Shane rolled them so that he was on top of Ilya, and Ilya let him, though he did raise an eyebrow. But Shane wouldn’t put it past Ilya to get too ambitious with their first post-concussion sex, and taking over seemed the best way to ensure that he didn’t. Shane tugged at the hem of Ilya’s boxer briefs, and Ilya lifted his hips, letting Shane remove them. Then Ilya reached up and slid his uninjured hand down the back of Shane’s sweats and briefs, massaging his ass. He thrust his hips up, grinding his bare dick into Shane’s clothed one.

Well, fuck. Ilya was impatient, and suddenly Shane felt very impatient, too. He’d been waiting to touch Ilya like this, had been anticipating it, and then that horrible moment on the ice had derailed everything. Even dazed, injured, sick, Ilya was beautiful, but Shane hadn’t felt this desire for him, not until Ilya had instigated. But now, it rushed upon Shane like a flood.

He pulled his sweatpants and briefs down until finally they were flesh against flesh, Ilya’s length hard and hot against Shane’s own. Shane wrapped his hand around both of them as best as he could, giving them a firm stroke. Ilya sighed in something like relief, head relaxing against the pillow, eyes fluttering shut, this time in relaxation rather than fatigue. Shane thrust into the circle of his own hand, his dick sliding against Ilya’s, but it was too dry, too much friction of the unpleasant variety.

“Fuck,” Shane cursed, then moved off Ilya’s body enough to fetch the lube. Only Ilya could make him want this shit. He stripped off his clothes, Ilya watching him through hooded eyes, then poured lube into his palm. He climbed back atop Ilya and wrapped his hand around both of them again.

“Oh *fuck*,” Ilya groaned, and Shane was fucking gone. He would do anything, no matter how wet and messy, if Ilya would just groan like that for him again. He poured more lube, and obscene amount of lube onto Ilya’s abs. Ilya’s cast bumped Shane’s hip as he seemed to forget his injury for a moment and try to grip Shane’s hips to encourage him. But Shane didn’t need encouragement.

He settled his hips flush against Ilya’s, until both their dicks were pinned between their bodies, everything suddenly and immediately slick with lube. Ilya groaned again, catching

Shane's hip with his good hand, resting the casted one more gently on the other side, again urging Shane to thrust against him.

Shane did. Their dicks were trapped between their stomachs, pressed hard together, and everything was hot and slick and felt fucking amazing. He pressed his forehead against Ilya's as he worked up a rhythm, and for once, Ilya was still and wonderfully pliant beneath Shane, allowing Shane to do all the work, allowing Shane's movements to slide their lube-slick cocks against each other, first slow, then faster. Ilya caught Shane's lips, dragged them to his own like they were magnetic, like there was an inexorable force pulling them together.

Shane shifted, changing the angle so he could get more leverage to thrust, and Ilya's good hand tightened on Shane's hip. "Yes, like that," Ilya moaned, and Shane couldn't do anything but give in to exactly what Ilya wanted, because he wanted it too. Shane could feel the heat building within him, but he wanted to make sure Ilya went over the edge first. He sped up the pace of his thrusts, grinding his length against Ilya's, until he started to recognize the little sounds from spilling from Ilya's lips, the ones that Shane knew meant he was about to come.

Shane caught Ilya's lips again, and Ilya groaned, squirming against Shane as he spilled slick heat between them. Shane wasn't far behind, lost in the wet friction and the sound of Ilya's moan muffled against Shane's own lips.

Breathing hard, Shane collapsed beside Ilya on the bed. Ilya, who looked rosy and flushed and so fucking satisfied, except Shane was suddenly very aware of how absolutely covered in lube and come they were. "Jesus Christ," he said, still a little breathless. Ilya cracked open one eye, then gave a devilish grin.

"You knew you would hate this, after," Ilya remarked, gesturing between them. Ilya, of course, looked perfectly content and relaxed covered in their combined mess. "And still you did it. Maybe I should watch *you* for brain damage."

Shane laughed.

Chapter 8

While sex with Ilya was incredible—earth-shattering, really—watching him devour a plate of eggs without hesitation or that telltale grimace of nausea might actually top it. It was probably creepy, the rapt fascination with which he was watching the scene, but Shane didn't care at all. Shane finished drinking his morning protein smoothie as he watched, and Ilya looked up at him, pointing his fork in Shane's direction.

"Never again will I drink your gross smoothie," Ilya declared, and Shane couldn't possibly be gladder if Ilya's pronouncement turned out to be true, if Ilya's appetite was back and he was starting to feel better. Of course, that meant that Ilya would be okay to fly back to Boston soon, but Ilya hadn't brought that up. Shane wasn't going to bring it up, either.

It also meant that Shane felt much better about leaving Ilya alone in the condo, and the Voyageurs had an afternoon game, so he had to get going fairly soon. It unfortunately also meant that the team would be heading to Detroit sooner than Shane would like. Somehow, the days had flown by. Would Ilya feel weird staying in the condo for a few days until Shane got back? He hoped not, hoped Ilya would stay, would be here when Shane returned, to welcome him home like he was...something. A boyfriend, a partner. God, Shane was an idiot.

When Ilya had finished his eggs and toast, he sat back in his chair, sipping at his glass of water, which he had already stated was absolutely better than both smoothies and ginger ale. It was just water, though; Shane didn't think water needed a lobbyist, but they were avoiding caffeine so it was what Shane had. He was still charmed and honestly happy that Ilya was needling him more. It felt...normal, comfortable. Except then Shane noticed the way Ilya was rubbing absently at the base of his skull.

"У тебя болит голова?" Shane prodded gently. Who knew he'd get so much use out of asking whether someone had a headache? He hadn't thought he would, when he'd learned the phrase. Ilya waved his uninjured hand dismissively.

"Немного." All the limited Russian Shane had learned seemed to fall out of his brain for a second. Много he remembered meant *a lot*. So add не and it was probably...*a little*, it was definitely *a little*. And it was probably normal for Ilya's head to hurt a little even four days after being smashed into the boards. Which Shane still hadn't killed Comeau for, though he'd have liked to.

"Worse than before?"

Ilya shook his head. "Нормально." That one was easy to remember since it sounded so much like *normal*, but Shane wasn't quite convinced, and apparently that showed on Shane's face, because Ilya shook his head with a fond expression. "Всё хорошо," he drawled in a very exaggerated way, knowing it was a phrase Shane already recognized. Shane sighed.

"Okay, I'm going," Shane declared. He grabbed his bag from beside the door, slinging it over his shoulder. "Before you can think of even more ways of telling me you are fine in Russian."

Ilya grinned as if that was a challenge. “Я в порядке, доктор.”

Well, now Ilya was just teasing him. “Fuck you,” Shane replied, smiling as he made his way to the door. He paused with his hand on the doorknob, glancing back one more time at Ilya still sitting at the table, looking more like himself than he had in days. “I’ll see you later.”

Ilya was still calling Russian phrases after him when he closed the door.

Ilya’s neck actually hurt more than his head, but he felt well enough that he decided to chance actually watching some of the game, subjecting himself to Shane’s dreaded screens. He laid on the couch, only opening his eyes when he heard the name *Hollander*, which allowed him to fully experience only the best parts of the game without chancing his brain exploding.

Ilya stayed awake for the entire first period, and he felt very proud of himself for that. It was maybe a little pathetic, to be proud of something so small, but Ilya was anyway. When he’d first gotten back from the hospital, he’d barely been able to keep his eyes open for more than an hour at a time, had spent most of his days drifting in and out of sleep on Shane’s couch or in his bed. Every day since then, he’d felt a little stronger, a little more like himself. Today, he’d managed breakfast without nausea and a full period of hockey. Progress.

Although when Shane came home, maybe Ilya would complain, just a little. Not enough to worry Shane, but maybe enough that Shane wouldn’t start suggesting it was time for Ilya to buy his plane ticket back to Boston. Maybe enough that Shane would still stroke his hair and drop tiny little kisses on the back of his neck.

Ilya sighed, staring at the ceiling during intermission. He was an asshole. Because Shane would worry, even if Ilya only complained a little, and Shane already worried too much. But Ilya didn’t know how else to convince Shane they could keep having this, at least for a while.

But maybe he didn’t need to. Shane had mentioned his stupid cottage, hadn’t he, when Ilya had said he wouldn’t return to Russia in the summer? Maybe they could just...continue on, even after Ilya felt better. Maybe Ilya could sprawl himself out and muss up Shane’s fuck condo enough that it felt lived in, felt like home, and watch Shane win in the playoffs. And then maybe they could go to Shane’s ridiculous cottage and he could watch Shane do yoga on the dock like the little weirdo he was.

When the second period started, Ilya shifted to face the TV again, but kept his eyes firmly closed. Shane would be annoyed if he found out Ilya had been watching with his eyes open the whole time. Ilya could practically hear the lecture. So Ilya listened instead, waiting for the announcer to say Shane’s name. The announcer was very excited all of a sudden, and Ilya opened his eyes to see Shane racing down the ice, somehow graceful even in all his gear. Probably the yoga.

The crowd roared as Shane scored his first goal of the night. It was a good goal, right in the corner, perfectly placed and difficult to block. Ilya was a little jealous and a little proud as he watched Shane celebrate. He tried not to look at that asshole Comeau. He didn’t remember the hit very well, but he was still very annoyed about it. If it hadn’t been for him, Ilya could

be out there, too, playing his own game. Maybe the Bears and the Voyageurs would even meet in the playoffs, which would be maybe better than this, because they might even have seven games against each other, and they could have more opportunities to fuck without the fear of Ilya vomiting on Shane. Also, Ilya would still have both hands.

Pain shot through Ilya's skull, sharp and sudden. Ilya squeezed his eyes closed against it, cursing. Well, fuck. Maybe Shane was right. Maybe staring at a screen for five minutes *would* make his brain explode. But if he kept his eyes closed for a few minutes, it would probably go away.

Except it didn't. If anything, it got worse every second, maybe the worst his head had ever hurt in his entire life. Worse than whatever snatches he remembered of lying on the ice, listening to Shane's frantic voice speak to him in Russian. When he opened his eyes, the whole world rolled, so he forced them closed again.

This was so fucking unfair. He had been feeling *better*. He had just wanted to watch Shane play hockey, then maybe surprise Shane with a blowjob when he got home, if Shane could unwind himself enough from worrying that Ilya was some fragile little thing and actually enjoy himself. And now, he was pretty sure he was going to throw up. Maybe he'd feel better if he did.

Ilya sucked in a long, slow breath. He was not going to throw up on the floor of Shane Hollander's sex condo. He was increasingly certain that he *was* going to throw up, though, so he steeled himself and forced himself to his feet, gripping the back of the couch to keep himself upright. He managed.

Unfortunately, it was then that Ilya realized that he needed to open his eyes in order to get to the bathroom. In his own home, he might have been able to navigate without his sight, but not here. And his head was already spinning, the room tilting at odd angles even with his eyes shut. When Ilya opened them, a wave of nausea crashed over him. The pain intensified instantly, a vicious throb behind his eyes. The light felt like knives. Everything swayed and blurred, the room refusing to stay still. Ilya forced himself to breathe through clenched teeth.

He would make it. He would not throw up on Shane's floor. He told himself that as he took his first step toward the bathroom.

Shane felt fucking incredible, riding high in a way he hadn't since watching Ilya collapse on the ice. The last game had been rough; he could admit that. His mind had never quite been on hockey, had instead been at the condo with Ilya, worrying about what might be happening to him. But today had been different. Seeing Ilya demolish that plate of eggs, watching color return to his face, hearing him tease and complain...it had freed something in Shane's chest. He'd been able to play like himself again.

He wondered if Ilya had watched. Or, well, listened, hopefully, and not watched. Shane could describe to him what it had looked like, what it had felt like when he'd scored that perfect fucking goal, when everything on the ice had started to feel right again.

Shane unlocked the front door of the condo. The TV was on still, and Ilya apparently hadn't changed the channel after the game, because there were some talking heads behind a desk who were recapping basketball, which he didn't think Ilya actually watched or cared about. When would he even find the time? So it made sense that Ilya wasn't seated on the couch listening to it.

"Ilya?" Shane called out, setting his gear bag down. The condo wasn't big enough for Ilya to not hear him, but Ilya didn't respond. Maybe he'd gone to bed. Ilya didn't seem as exhausted as he had been, but he still needed rest. But why hadn't he turned off the TV, then? "Ilya?"

Shane flicked on the bedroom light, but the bed was empty, still neatly made the way Shane had left it that morning. And then Shane heard a groan from the bathroom, and his blood went cold. He moved without thinking, crossing the space in three strides.

He pushed the bathroom door the rest of the way open. The lights were off, and it took Shane's eyes too long to adjust to find Ilya half-crumpled against the toilet seat, retching.

Shane's heart ached for Ilya. He'd seemed so much better that morning. Shane went to Ilya's side, rubbing his back. Crouching down on the bathroom floor in his suit was uncomfortable as hell, but Shane wasn't going to change. And who cared if Ilya threw up on his suit? Shane certainly fucking didn't.

Ilya's head lifted slightly, the movement sluggish and uncoordinated. Shane's hand stilled on his back, every muscle in his body tensing. "Shane?" he asked, sounding bleary and exhausted, his voice raw.

"I'm here," he assured Ilya gently. Shane kept his voice as steady and reassuring as he could manage, even as his heart hammered against his ribs.

"What?" Ilya said, confused. "Where...?"

Now Shane was starting to get very concerned. "Ilya, is this the first time you threw up today?" he pressed. Ilya lifted his head, his eyes barely open, his expression fuzzy.

"I...don't..." Ilya said, and then followed with something in Russian so slurred that Shane had no chance of understanding. Shane's concern was quickly turning to panic.

"Ilya, look at me," Shane commanded, his voice sharper now, more urgent. When Ilya's eyes finally cracked open, Shane's stomach dropped. Even in the dim light from the hallway, he could see it, the way Ilya's left pupil was blown so wide that it swallowed nearly all the hazel, while the right remained normal. "Shit, I'm going to call an ambulance, okay?"

Ilya blinked blearily. "Mmkay," he slurred, then turned enough to rest his head on Shane's shoulder while Shane frantically fumbled for his phone in his pocket. "Хочу спать..."

Shane didn't know if it was a myth that he should keep Ilya awake right now, but he had this desperate fear that if he let Ilya close his eyes, he might never open them again. The weight of Ilya against him felt wrong—too heavy, too limp, like Ilya was barely there.

“Hey, stay awake for me, okay?” Shane breathed, dialing 911.

“Mmm,” Ilya murmured without conviction, his body going heavier against Shane’s side.

Shane pressed the phone to his ear, his free arm wrapping more firmly around Ilya to keep him upright. The operator answered and Shane rattled off the address, explained about the concussion, the vomiting, the pupils. His voice sounded distant to his own ears, clinical almost, like he was talking about someone else and not Ilya slumped against him. The operator asked questions, and Shane answered on autopilot while watching Ilya’s chest rise and fall, counting each breath like it might be the last.

When the operator told him the ambulance was on its way, to stay on the line, Shane set the phone on the counter next to them, on speaker. He couldn’t hold it anymore, needed both his hands free in case Ilya needed him.

“Ilya, hey,” Shane said, jostling him slightly. Ilya made a soft noise of protest. “Stay with me. Talk to me. Tell me about—I don’t know, tell me about Boston or hockey, or I don’t care. In Russian, even, it doesn’t matter if I understand.”

Ilya didn’t respond, just turned his face more into Shane’s neck, his breath warm and shallow against Shane’s skin. Shane’s throat tightened.

“This is my fault,” Shane heard himself say, his voice cracking. “I shouldn’t have left you. I shouldn’t have—fuck, I knew you were still hurt and I left you alone to play a stupid fucking game.” His eyes were burning. “I’m so sorry. I’m so fucking sorry.”

Ilya made a small sound, might have been trying to disagree, but couldn’t quite form the words.

Shane pulled him closer, one hand coming up to cradle the back of Ilya’s head. He didn’t care that the 911 operator was still on the line, didn’t care that this call was being recorded, didn’t care about anything except the terrifying reality that Ilya could be fucking dying in his arms and Shane couldn’t fix it. It turned out there was something that terrified Shane more than being outed.

“You can’t die,” Shane choked out. The tears were coming now, hot and fast. “Ilya, please. I love you. Do you hear me? I love you and you can’t—you can’t fucking leave. Not like this. Not when I just—” His breath hitched. “Please stay. Please.”

But Ilya’s weight against him was growing heavier with each second, his breathing getting shallower, and Shane was completely powerless to stop it.

Chapter 9

They let Shane ride with Ilya in the ambulance, but Ilya was still and pale and unresponsive the whole ride to the hospital. Shane kept his eyes on Ilya's face, searching for any sign of awareness, any flicker of those hazel eyes, but there was nothing. Just the awful stillness, the sickly pallor of his skin under the harsh ambulance lights. By the time they arrived, Shane felt like a ghost watching Ilya get wheeled away on a gurney, like maybe this would be the last time he saw Ilya alive. As soon as Ilya was gone, Shane burst into tears, right there in the middle of the hospital lobby.

Everyone was looking at him, but he couldn't stop. None of it seemed to matter, not when Ilya might be dying. Even if he was Shane Hollander, star Voyageurs center, standing in the hospital lobby sobbing in his postgame suit. He didn't know what the fuck to do, how he was going to sit around and wait for news without going crazy, if they even told him anything. They were at the same hospital Ilya had been in before, so maybe the hospital staff he'd convinced the first time would be willing to tell him about Ilya's condition.

Or maybe they'd blame him for leaving Ilya alone and letting this happen, even though Ilya had seemed fine, like he was getting better. Even though Ilya had insisted, over and over again, that he was fine. Shane should have known better than to listen. Ilya had had half a dozen small injuries over the years that he'd never told Shane about, that Shane had found out about in passing from someone else, or sometimes months or years later, when Ilya forgot he hadn't told Shane about it at the time. Of course Ilya Rozanov would downplay things. Of course he'd be strong and stoic and so fucking *Russian* about it, and Shane should know better.

Shane felt numb and lost and suddenly all he could think about was how much he wanted his mom. He'd brushed her off half a dozen times since Ilya's injury, and she had finally listened, because she'd thought he was off playing the field after breaking up with Rose, finally taking his turn being the irresponsible kid he'd never been. He hadn't told her that he was taking care of the man he loved, and doing an awful job about it, because he'd been a fucking coward, and Ilya was suffering for it.

Shane's hands shook as he pulled out his phone, scrolling through his contacts with blurred vision until he found her name. He pressed call before he could talk himself out of it. She picked up on the second ring.

"Shane?" she answered, sounding surprised. Of course she did. She probably thought he'd be getting ready to leave for their road game in Detroit, too busy to have any interest in calling her. But fuck their road game, and fuck Detroit.

"Mom?" he replied, his voice tight and watery, and just saying the word made Shane start sobbing so hard that he nearly couldn't breathe, and he definitely couldn't speak.

"Shane?" she repeated, sounding truly alarmed now. Good, someone else should be. Someone besides Shane should understand how catastrophically wrong this was, should feel

the same terror clawing at their chest while Ilya lay somewhere in this hospital, unconscious and maybe dying. “What’s wrong?”

Shane sucked in a hitching breath. He didn’t know how to start, couldn’t make his throat work. Everything was fucking wrong.

“David, pull over,” Shane heard his mother say, her voice slightly distant as she turned away from the phone. Right, they would be driving back from the game now, probably halfway back to Ottawa. “Shane, tell me where you are, and we’ll come get you.”

That was somehow easier to answer. “At the hospital,” he said through the thickness in his throat. He hadn’t quite thought about how that might make his mother panic.

“Are you okay? I didn’t see anything—at the game, did you get hurt?”

God, Shane *wished*. He wished it was him who had gotten hurt, that Ilya could be curled contentedly in bed, sleeping peacefully instead of where he actually was.

“No, I’m fine. I...it’s not me, it’s...” Somehow, Shane couldn’t make himself say it, not over the phone. Like any of this would make any more sense in person. “Can you please just come here?”

“We are turning around right now,” she assured him. Shane could hear his father’s voice in the background, low and concerned, asking questions Shane couldn’t make out. “We’ll be there as soon as we can, okay?”

“Thanks, Mom. I’ll see you soon,” Shane said, then hung up. That would probably worry her, too, but the conversation had exhausted him, and he just...couldn’t, anymore. He rubbed his hand over his face, trying to wipe away the tears, but that just made more tears fall.

“Mr. Hollander?”

Shane's jaw clenched. Of course. Someone had recognized him. The last fucking thing he needed right now was a fan coming to talk to him. He wasn’t sure he would be able to avoid biting their head off. Reluctantly, he turned.

But it was not a fan; it was a nurse, one he recognized from the first time he’d visited Ilya in this same hospital. She gave him a sympathetic smile. “We have a private room where you can wait,” she offered gently, like she was talking to a skittish animal. Shane blinked at her, the words not quite processing. His brain felt sluggish, like it was moving through water. A private room. He wondered if that only got offered to celebrities or if they made the offer to any crazy man crying in a full suit in the lobby.

“My...my parents are on their way,” Shane said, stupidly.

“We can send them to join you when they arrive,” she assured him quietly. “Come on. Let me show you where it is.”

A doctor arrived before Shane's parents did, and thankfully was willing to update him. He'd been so afraid they wouldn't, that they'd cite privacy laws and leave him here in the dark, not knowing if Ilya was alive or dead.

"The scans show that Ilya has developed a bleed in his brain," the doctor said, his voice steady and clinical. Shane's stomach dropped, even though he'd known it had to be something like this, something catastrophic. "We need to take him into surgery to drain the blood and relieve the pressure. He's being prepped now."

Surgery. Brain surgery. Shane's legs felt weak, and he sank back onto the sofa behind him. He couldn't figure out how this had happened. Ilya had been getting better. He'd been eating, joking around, looking more like himself every day.

And then the memory hit him: Ilya beneath him, breathless and beautiful, their bodies slick with lube as they came together. Shane had been worried then, too, had wondered if it was too soon, if the exertion might be too much for Ilya's healing brain. But Ilya had insisted he was fine, and Shane had given in because he'd wanted it too, because he'd been weak and selfish and—

Fuck. Had he done this?

"What..." Shane's voice came out hoarse, and he had to clear his throat. "What might have caused the bleed?"

"Brain bleeds after head injuries can happen for a variety of reasons. Sometimes they develop slowly over time, sometimes—"

Fuck, Shane couldn't just dance around this, as much as he wanted to. As terrified as he was to admit what he and Ilya were to each other, he had no choice.

"No, I mean..." Shane's hands were fisting in his lap now, his nails digging into his palms. This was humiliating. This was terrifying. But if he'd hurt Ilya, if he'd made this worse, he needed to know. "We had sex. Yesterday. He was feeling better, and we—I should have stopped him, I should have made him rest more, but I didn't, and..." Shane's voice cracked. "Did I cause this?"

Shane waited for the judgment, for the disgust, but the doctor didn't flinch, didn't react at all.

"It's very unlikely that has anything to do with his current condition," he said matter-of-factly, like the question hadn't been anything out of the ordinary. Like he hadn't admitted to something momentous, something that could ruin them both. "It's perfectly safe to return slowly to physical activity after a concussion as long as the patient is feeling well enough. Unfortunately, brain bleeds sometimes happen after head injuries. Sometimes days later, sometimes even weeks."

The relief that Shane had waited for never came. Because even if he hadn't caused the bleed, he'd still left Ilya alone. He'd gone to play a stupid fucking game while Ilya collapsed on the bathroom floor, disoriented and in pain, and Shane hadn't been there. If he'd refused to go to the game, if he'd stayed home like some part of him had wanted to, he would have noticed as

soon as Ilya started getting worse. He could have gotten him to the hospital sooner, given him a better chance.

If Ilya didn't recover from this, it might still be all Shane's fault.

By the time his parents arrived half an hour later, Shane was still sitting on the sofa in the little private waiting room, staring at his hands like they belonged to someone else. They were still shaking. He couldn't make them stop. Yuna Hollander rushed in in an absolute hurricane of noise and movement, and Shane found himself swept up into an embrace without even realizing it.

"Shane, honey," she said, holding him tightly. A moment later, his father's arms wrapped around both of them. Maybe it would have been normal to start crying again, except Shane didn't feel very normal anymore. He felt almost outside his body, like his insides had been scraped out with a spoon. A long minute later, his mother pulled back. "What happened? They told us you came in here with Ilya Rozanov?"

Shane blinked. He wondered if everyone knew now, if some person in the lobby had recognized them and snapped a photo, and now it was all over the internet, fueling rampant speculation. Or maybe the hospital had kindly whisked him off into this little private room quickly enough, before anyone had put the pieces together. Shane didn't even care anymore. It felt strange that he ever had. Shane ran a hand over his face, exhausted.

"Yeah," he agreed. He knew he should say something more. He'd called them, insisted they come, and now he had no words for them.

"I don't understand," his mother told him, her voice gentle. "Why were you with him? I thought you hated him."

Shane sniffed, his heart heavy in his chest. "I actually kind of love him," Shane admitted dully. Part of him couldn't believe he'd said the words aloud, but he was just too exhausted, too scared to lie. He felt the tears start to gather behind his eyes again, even though he'd thought he'd run out.

Neither of his parents said anything at first, though he saw them exchange a look, the kind of wordless communication that came easily after so many years together. He wondered if he and Ilya would ever have a chance to have that or if he'd ruined any chance they had at...something more. Shane wasn't even sure what was possible.

"Okay," his mom said at last, tone carefully neutral. God, Ilya did that to him, too, when he was afraid anything else he might say would make Shane freak out. But maybe he'd never do it again. "How is he doing?"

Shane sniffed, then wiped at his eyes. "I don't know," he admitted wetly. "They...he's in surgery. A brain bleed, the doctor said. He might not...be the same, after. He might not even —"

Shane couldn't speak the words aloud. He hated that he even had to think them. His parents looked at each other again, and then his mother spoke gently.

"Shane, about the game in Detroit—"

Fury flared in Shane's chest. "I'm not fucking *going* to Detroit!" he exclaimed. He knew he was being too loud, but he couldn't seem to modulate his voice at all. "Who gives a fuck about hockey? How can you even—"

"Shane," she interrupted gently. "I wasn't going to say that. I was going to say that I should call, tell them you won't be able to make it."

Shane knew he should feel bad about yelling, but he wasn't managing to feel very much at all. "I can't have my mom calling me out of work," he said numbly. "This isn't high school."

His mother's gaze locked with his, steady and unwavering. "It's a family emergency," she said. "It makes perfect sense I would be the one to call."

Shane almost started crying again. He knew that she wasn't calling Ilya family, not really. She was covering for Shane, protecting him the way she'd always tried to. But the words still did something to him, the way his parents just...weren't asking questions at all, were accepting everything without hesitation. It was because his mom could tell he was three seconds from an absolute meltdown, but it still meant something.

"*I'll* call," his father offered as he and his mother stared at each other wordlessly. "And then I'll stop by your apartment and pick up a change of clothes for you."

The words didn't make sense to Shane at first, and he looked down at himself. It was only then that he remembered he was still in his postgame suit. He'd discarded the jacket and tie in a rumpled heap on the sofa already, and his shirt and pants were an absolute wrinkled mess. Shane had somehow forgotten how uncomfortable he'd been sitting here waiting in it. It would be nice to have some sweats or something, he realized. And then.

"Uh...actually," Shane started, wincing, "could you go to my condo? I have some clothes there, and there's some stuff for Ilya too. If he, uh...needs it." Shane pulled the key out of his pocket. "I can text you the address."

Another look exchanged. Shane watched them, waiting for the questions he knew had to be coming. The condo he'd never mentioned. The fact that he apparently had Ilya's things there. "And how long have you had this condo?" his mother asked neutrally after a long pause. Shane released a rough laugh.

"Years," he admitted.

His father's eyebrows rose slightly, but he didn't comment. Just held out his hand for the key. Shane dropped it into his palm, watching his parents' faces for any sign of judgment, any hint of disappointment.

“Okay,” his mother said simply. She pulled Shane into another hug, this one gentler, longer.
“We’ll take care of it. You just focus on being here when he wakes up.”

Chapter 10

Sitting in the isolated little room was a blessing and a curse. Shane appreciated the privacy, the lack of prying eyes wondering what the hell Shane Hollander was doing at the hospital being an absolute wreck. But there was something strangely isolating about seeing no one else around him, no one else who was waiting for the same news he was, waiting to know whether their friend or lover or family member had survived surgery. The hospital must have been filled with people like that, but Shane was all alone.

He had his parents, at least. They still hadn't asked any questions, maybe sensing how close he might be to snapping into a million pieces if they did. He appreciated it, but it meant that there wasn't a lot of talking, even after his father returned with clothes for him and Ilya. He didn't even know if Ilya would need them, if they'd let Ilya change out of his hospital gown into something more comfortable. Shane didn't even know if it would *be* more comfortable, but at least he'd have clothes if Ilya asked. If Ilya *could* ask.

Eventually, begrudgingly, Shane checked his phone, just for the distraction. There was a message from Hayden asking if he was okay, so the team must have been told he wasn't traveling with them to Detroit. Shane didn't answer. He didn't know what to say, and he didn't want to lie. In his email was some kind of weird paperwork from the team that he didn't have enough brain space to look at just then.

And then Shane checked the internet. He searched his name, then Ilya's, but nothing new came up. It hadn't hit the news yet that Shane would miss the Detroit game, and the last stories about Ilya were all about his initial injury. But there were no salacious gossip blogs talking about Ilya being rushed to the hospital, no grainy phone photos of Shane sobbing in his suit in the hospital waiting room, no tip from a secret source within the hospital that Shane had brought Ilya in.

But it had only been a few hours. Maybe someone had the story and was waiting for an agreed payout or something.

Shane wasn't sure it mattered anyway, but he was surprised. Pleasantly surprised, actually. And come to think of it, Ilya hadn't mentioned receiving anything from his team asking why the fuck he'd gone home with Shane Hollander in the first place. The hospital probably included that information on their paperwork, didn't they? But Ilya hadn't really been able to check his phone, so maybe he'd had a thousand angry emails from his team asking him what the fuck was happening.

Or maybe the hospital was keeping their secret, for whatever reason. Maybe one of them was gay, or had a gay sibling or something, and was staunchly against forcibly outing someone. Or maybe this was the calm before the fucking storm, before their careers were thrown into a tornado and swirled around and around until they were a mangled mess.

If Ilya ever played hockey again. If *Shane* ever wanted to fucking play hockey again. He might not. He'd never thought that anything would kill his love for hockey, but if this sport

killed Ilya, Shane might be done.

The door opened, and Shane shot to his feet as the doctor returned. His mother's hand found his, squeezing tight.

"The surgery was a success," the doctor said, and Shane felt his heart lurch with relief. "No complications. Ilya is in the post-anesthesia care unit now, and he should be waking up soon."

Shane opened his mouth, but nothing came out. His throat had closed up completely, his mind spinning too fast to form words. His mother's grip on his hand tightened, and she spoke when Shane couldn't.

"Will he recover fully? Will there be any...lasting damage?"

The doctor's expression remained professionally neutral. "We won't know for certain if there are any cognitive deficits until after he's fully conscious and we can do a proper assessment," he said. "However, we were able to perform a less invasive burr hole procedure to drain the blood rather than a full craniotomy. Recovery from this type of surgery tends to be quicker and easier, so his chances of a positive outcome are good."

"But?" Shane's mother prompted gently when the doctor paused.

"But some patients do experience lingering issues even after the pressure on the brain is relieved," the doctor admitted. "Memory problems, difficulty with concentration, headaches, fatigue. Similar to what he may have experienced after the initial head injury. It's too early to say what, if any, effects Ilya might experience. The brain is remarkably resilient, but it's also unpredictable."

Shane's mother asked more questions. Shane heard the words but couldn't quite focus on them, his mind still whirring with the doctor's initial pronouncements. Positive outcome. Lingering issues. Too early to say. Shane didn't know what he would do if Ilya never fully recovered, hated the thought of Ilya suffering. But he knew he wasn't fucking going anywhere, no matter what happened.

"Someone will come let you know once he's awake, and able to receive visitors," the doctor said finally, offering Shane a small, encouraging smile before he left.

The moment the door closed, Shane's parents were pulling him into another embrace, both of them talking at once. His mother was saying something about how this was good news, how Ilya was going to be okay. His father was agreeing, saying something about the surgery being successful, about no complications being the best they could have hoped for.

Shane nodded. Or he thought he nodded. He wasn't entirely sure. His body felt like it belonged to someone else again, that same disconnected feeling washing over him. His brain refused to process anything beyond the most basic comprehension. Ilya was alive. Ilya was going to wake up. That was all Shane could hold onto.

Time blurred together after that. His parents kept talking to him, kept trying to draw him into conversation, but Shane could barely manage more than one-word responses. He sat. He stood. He sat again. Someone pressed a bottle of water into his hand and he drank it without really noticing. The clock on the wall ticked forward but the minutes felt both endless and impossibly fast.

Then a knock at the door cut through the fog, and Shane's head jerked up so fast his neck cracked. The nurse from before, the one who'd brought him to this room, let herself in, offering an apologetic smile.

"Mr. Hollander? I'm sorry to interrupt, but we were hoping you could come with me." She hesitated, glancing between Shane and his parents. "Ilya is coming out of the anesthesia, but he's a little disoriented. He's speaking Russian, and we've called for an interpreter, but we didn't realize we'd need one, so it will be a little while before someone can arrive."

Of course, these people recognized them, knew who they were. They'd probably seen Ilya on TV a hundred times, watched him do interviews with that cocky grin, confidently flirting with reporters in English like it was his first language. Hell, by the time Shane had shown up at the hospital after the initial concussion, Ilya had already been speaking English again, coherent enough to give Shane shit. But now, Ilya was disoriented and confused and fucking alone. Again.

Shane's numbness shattered. He was back on his feet before he'd consciously decided to move. "Yes. Please. Take me to him."

His mom came with him, but Shane barely registered her presence. The only thing he was thinking about was Ilya, getting to him as quickly as possible. The nurse led them through a maze of hallways, then to a large room with at least a dozen beds separated only by curtains. Many of the curtains were open, beds filled with patients, some sitting up and talking to relatives or nurses while others were sleeping and still. The nurse led him to an area with curtains drawn and led him inside.

Two nurses were at Ilya's bedside, each gripping one of his arms as he tried weakly to pull away from them, his head turning back and forth on the pillow. A stark white bandage covered one side of his head.

"Что...случилось?" Ilya mumbled, his voice rough and slurred. Shane had learned that just the day before. Ilya was asking what had happened. "Шейн...где Шейн...?"

Shane recognized his own name, the particular flavor of it on Ilya's tongue when he spoke Russian, just a little bit different than when he said it in English. Shane rushed to Ilya's side. There were only curtains separating Ilya from the patients on either side of him, but Shane didn't care.

"Ilya?" he prodded gently. "Я здесь."

Ilya stopped moving. His eyes flickered open, both of them beautiful and hazel and mostly clear. He blinked slowly. "Shane?"

Shane's heart felt incredibly soft. As long as Ilya remembered him, everything would be fine. Shane could deal with anything but losing that.

“Здравствуй,” Shane greeted, voice barely more than a whisper. He cursed that fucking word, how stupidly hard it was to wrap his tongue around a simple greeting. But a crooked smile appeared on Ilya's face.

“Здравствуй,” he echoed, just as quietly. His eyes fluttered closed again, and his uninjured hand fumbled forward blindly at the sheet. Shane understood what he wanted and grasped Ilya's hand, twining their fingers together carefully around the IV in his hand. Ilya only relaxed once they were touching.

“Всё хорошо?” Shane asked. He'd gotten a great deal of use out of this phrase, asking Ilya if everything was all right. He wished he knew something better, something that sounded...less stupid, when Ilya had had brain surgery and everything obviously wasn't fine. But at least it was *something*, a connection between them that didn't require Ilya to struggle through English when his brain was still fighting through the fog of anesthesia. Shane's limited Russian felt like a lifeline right now.

Ilya's eyes opened again. He swallowed around a dry smacking of his mouth. “Я...хочу пить,” he said at last, slowly, and even in Ilya's mouth, the Russian words sounded clumsy and odd, but Shane understood them. He looked up, seeing the pitcher of water beside the bed. But Ilya currently had one of Shane's hands hostage, and Shane wasn't going to be the one to let go.

“Can he have some water?” Shane asked the room at large. “He's thirsty.”

A nurse provided him a cup of water with a straw. Still holding Ilya's hand, Shane used the other to bring the straw to Ilya's lips. “Медленно,” he cautioned, and Ilya gave him an absolutely unamused look beneath his lashes. Shane could only guess at what sarcastic thought might be crossing his mind. Maybe that it was impossible to drink quickly through a bendy straw anyway, and probably that Shane was an idiot. Shane smiled as he imagined Ilya saying it.

After a few sips, Ilya's head fell back against the pillow, and Shane handed the cup back to the nurse. In English, he tentatively asked, “How do you feel?”

Ilya drew in a deep breath, and Shane couldn't tell from that if he was processing Shane's words at all. But then, he said, “Better, I think. Not...not like throwing up.” Ilya paused. “Did I throw up on your floor?”

Shane laughed wetly. “No,” he told Ilya. “You didn't throw up on my floor.”

Ilya's tired smile was very satisfied. “Good,” he said. “I tried very hard...to not do that.”

Shane shook his head, barely able to believe how surreal the conversation felt. “Ilya, I don't give a shit about the floor.”

“Mm,” Ilya murmured, hazy and slow. “You don't like mess. I am mess right now.”

Jesus Christ. Shane looked around, and a nurse was still there, checking Ilya's monitors, and Shane's mom was still standing a few steps away, watching. Shane decided he didn't give a shit. He lifted Ilya's hand and carefully placed a kiss on his palm.

"I'm a fucking mess right now, too," Shane said truthfully. "We can be a mess together."

Ilya's smile widened, his expression a little fuzzy. "Like yesterday?" he asked, and Shane was confused until he remembered all the fucking lube and come. "Was yesterday? Or did I sleep long?"

"It was yesterday," Shane assured Ilya, though Shane wasn't entirely sure how late it was, either. Maybe it was already after midnight. Ilya nodded sluggishly, seemingly processing that.

"Yes," he murmured, his eyes drifting closed again, but his smile still in place. "Let's be mess together."

Shane had never heard more beautiful words than that.

Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

Merry Christmas Eve! Do people read fanfiction on Christmas Eve and Christmas? Should I post tomorrow? Or like...do you have *families*?! Maybe you're hiding in the bathroom with your phone, desperately avoiding your families??

Shane left the hospital reluctantly later that night, but he didn't go home. He went to the condo instead and gave his parents the key to the unit downstairs. The unit he had always told himself he would rent out but never did. At least he'd found a purpose for it, now, to allow his parents to have a separate space where they would not all drive each other crazy. Also where he would not be faced with any questions about Ilya, because he somehow wasn't quite ready for those. It must be obvious to them, anyway, what he and Ilya were. He didn't want to explain the whens and whys of it, not yet anyway.

Shane slept fitfully, anxious and unsettled, and maybe also stupidly used to sleeping entwined with Ilya after just a few days. Somehow it felt better to have Ilya in the hospital, though, as much as Shane wanted to be near him. In the hospital, there were doctors and nurses right there if something went wrong. If Ilya's condition changed, if he started bleeding again, someone would know what to do. Shane had already proven he couldn't keep Ilya safe on his own. He'd left him alone and Ilya had ended up on the bathroom floor, confused and terrified. At least in the hospital, there were people who actually knew what they were doing.

After some discussion, his parents let him go to the hospital alone the next morning, mumbling something about buying groceries and clothes, since all their clothes were two hours away in Ottawa, and a four-hour round trip seemed like a lot for some shirts. Shane didn't know if he was relieved or not that they were staying. He was probably relieved. It was hard to figure out what he was feeling about anything in this moment, except that he was desperately glad that Ilya was alive and mostly whole, although he couldn't be sure about much. Ilya had said his nausea was better, but the doctor had told them that he'd given Ilya an antiemetic, so that didn't prove anything. He said he wasn't in pain, but they'd given him some heavy-duty pain meds. Shane was glad for both, glad that Ilya wasn't feeling awful, but he didn't know where they'd be when Ilya was able to go home. And it seemed insane that the doctors were already talking about discharge in a few days. The man had just had holes drilled into his skull.

Ilya had been moved to his own room and was eating his breakfast when Shane arrived, and he looked more well-rested than Shane felt. Shane at least felt good about that.

“Доброе утро,” he greeted carefully in Russian, and Ilya grinned around his mouthful of food.

“Доброе утро,” Ilya said back, and it didn’t sound quite the same as when Shane said it. Ilya didn’t correct him, though. Shane came around to the chair by Ilya’s bed, and Ilya made a strange face. “You are not in Detroit?”

Shane stared at him in absolute fucking shock. “Ilya, I’m not fucking going to Detroit,” Shane said, unable to believe that Ilya had even brought it up. “What the fuck.”

Ilya blinked innocently. “You should. I am in hospital for days they said.”

“You just had *brain surgery*,” Shane reminded him. Honestly, maybe he’d forgotten. On account of having had brain surgery. “Ilya, I might never leave your side again after this.”

Ilya seemed to consider this. “Sounds nice, but annoying,” Ilya said placidly. “You are Shane Hollander. You should play hockey.”

Shane could only stare, completely dumbfounded and more than a little offended. He couldn’t tell if Ilya was needling him on purpose or not. “The game doesn’t even *matter*,” he protested. “We’re in the playoffs already. Fuck off.”

Ilya picked up a cup of what looked like orange juice and drank some. “You will play in playoffs, yes?” he prodded, smacking his lips. Ilya seemed annoyingly determined to make sure Shane kept playing hockey games.

“I don’t know, Jesus,” Shane said. Maybe he should be happy that Ilya seemed...weirdly normal, after everything, better even than he’d been in those first days after the concussion. Except Ilya was making it very difficult. “Maybe rest your brain and stop worrying about the Voyageurs’ season. You hate us, remember?”

Ilya nodded sagely. “Voyageurs, yes. You, no.”

Shane wasn’t sure if he loved Ilya in that moment or wanted to kill him. The two sentiments didn’t feel mutually exclusive. Shane didn’t really want to argue about this.

“How do you feel?”

Ilya waved his hand as if to indicate *so-so*. “Not bad,” he said. “Drugs are good.”

“I’m glad,” Shane said, the words coming out stilted. He suddenly felt incredibly awkward, and he didn’t know what to say. “You really freaked me out.”

Ilya’s expression turned sympathetic. “I know,” Ilya said, suddenly serious again. He put down his fork and pushed his tray table to the side, abandoning his breakfast. Ilya looked down at his lap nervously. “I heard what you said.”

Shane didn’t know what Ilya meant at first. “When?”

“In bathroom. After you called the ambulance.”

Shane’s blood ran cold as he remembered what he had said. How he’d begged Ilya not to leave him, how he’d told him he loved him. He hadn’t expected to say the words aloud. He’d

barely let himself think them before that. And the last thing he needed to do was put that kind of pressure on Ilya right now. Maybe that was why Ilya was desperately trying to get him to go to Detroit, though it was definitely too late for that anyway. Maybe Ilya was trying to find a polite way to create distance between them.

“You don’t need to say anything back,” Shane said in a rush. “I don’t expect—”

“But I do,” Ilya interrupted firmly. There was no hesitation in his voice, no uncertainty in his eyes when they met Shane’s. “Love you. So much I cannot breathe sometimes.”

The words were so unexpected, so sincere, so terrifyingly romantic, that Shane didn’t know what to do with them. And then, embarrassingly, he burst into tears.

“Oh,” Ilya breathed, his face crumpling. That only made Shane cry more, because the last thing he wanted was to make Ilya sad. Ilya reached for Shane as if to grasp him by both shoulders, one arm casted and one encumbered by an IV. “Come here.”

Somehow, in a hospital bed after brain surgery, Ilya almost managed to bodily haul Shane into bed with him. “You’ll dislodge your IV!” Shane protested through his tears. He felt ridiculous, completely unmoored, crying like a child while Ilya, who’d just had his skull drilled open, tried to comfort *him*.

“Those words are too complicated,” Ilya declared, and tugged on Shane again. And Shane went, unable to help himself, and a little afraid if he didn’t, Ilya *would* rip his IV right out of his hand trying to convince Shane. Ilya shifted until there was nearly enough room for him in the bed beside Ilya. Half on top of Ilya, if he was being honest. Hospital beds were not made to be shared by two men their size. Ilya kissed the top of Shane’s head.

“Anyway, I said it first,” Ilya remarked once Shane’s tears had tapered off into tiny sniffles. It took Shane’s brain a moment to catch up, to make sense of the words. Then annoyance sparked through him.

“You just said it right now!” Shane protested into Ilya’s chest. “You said you *heard* me say it. Before.”

Ilya’s lips continued to rest against Shane’s hair, not quite a kiss. “I said it before that,” Ilya insisted. Shane’s tears had stopped.

“What, into an empty room?” Shane demanded. He pulled back just enough to glare at Ilya, though the effect was probably ruined by his red-rimmed eyes and splotchy face. “That doesn’t count.”

“No, I said to you.” Ilya paused. “Was in Russian, though. So you did not understand.”

They had been speaking Russian quite a lot recently, so Shane tried to figure out when Ilya might have said the words. But Ilya had been so careful with his Russian since Shane had started speaking it to him, and Shane had understood most everything Ilya had said to him. He couldn’t figure out when Ilya might have snuck in that kind of confession.

And then he did. On the phone, from Moscow, when Shane had told him to speak in Russian. Ilya had said so much, had been speaking for minutes on end, and Shane hadn't understood a word he'd said. That phone call had been less than a month ago, though it felt like a lifetime.

"Wait, *then*?" Shane demanded into Ilya's chest.

"Mm, yes. And you loved me then, too," Ilya said, all gentle confidence. "I know. You studied Russian for me."

Shane's heart did a soft flip. "Yes," he admitted, tracing his finger along the line of Ilya's pec through his hospital gown. "I did."

Shane somehow fell asleep like that. It felt impossible that he could be comfortable crunched up against the bedrail, half on top of Ilya, but somehow he had managed. Ilya wasn't going to wake him up or move him as long as he could help it. Ilya didn't even have to get up to piss because they still hadn't removed the catheter, so he pretty much could be Shane's pillow for as long as Shane wanted. Maybe until they came in to make Ilya walk another slow lap around the hospital ward.

Ilya wasn't tired. He'd slept strangely well, even considering the neuro checks throughout the night. It should have been more disruptive, but somehow Ilya had fallen back asleep easily each time. It was strange, after the days of being completely exhausted. Apparently it was better if his brain wasn't leaking blood into his skull.

His head didn't even hurt, not really; it was only a dull ache, more pressure than pain, and the nurse had told him it was probably from the drain, which they came to empty every few hours of weirdly watery red goo that was probably blood and Ilya didn't know what else. Ilya hoped Shane hadn't noticed where all Ilya's tubes led, because maybe he'd never want to have sex again if he had to look at bags of Ilya's piss and brain leakage.

At the sound of the door opening, Ilya's eyes snapped up, his whole body going tense before he could stop it, though he wasn't sure why. A nurse had already come in, looked slightly bemused to see two professional hockey players crammed into a tiny bed, and let them be. Maybe it was more normal than he thought, cuddling in a hospital bed. Maybe she saw it every day. Probably not between Ilya Rozanov and Shane Hollander, but well. Ilya tried not to worry about that. Shane hadn't said anything, and there were no reporters clamoring to get into Ilya's hospital room, so maybe it was okay. Or maybe this was a reporter now.

It wasn't. The door opened to reveal Yuna Hollander.

Ilya knew Shane's parents' names. Yuna and David Hollander. He'd googled them a very long time ago, years probably. He'd seen them in passing over the years, barely even quite met them. Yuna had been there the previous night, when Ilya had still been groggy from anesthesia and had barely been able to focus on anything that wasn't Shane.

But she'd been there, had seen them, so she must know...something. Ilya didn't know what Shane had told her, and he didn't know what he was supposed to say to the mother of his...lover? Boyfriend? Partner? He didn't know what Shane was, exactly, but Ilya had never

had to meet parents before. Svetlana's father, obviously, but that was different. Since his right arm was wrapped around Shane, what he did was lift his casted one enough to place his finger to his lips in the universal gesture for quiet, his eyes pleading with her not to wake Shane. Yuna stilled in the doorway, then closed the door behind her very slowly and very quietly.

"He did not sleep well last night, I think," Ilya said tentatively when Yuna turned to look at him again. She looked at her son curled against Ilya, and her expression was gentle and loving. Ilya understood.

"Probably not," she agreed. Her voice was soft, barely above a whisper, carefully modulated so as not to disturb Shane. "He was very worried about you."

Ilya released a slow breath. Well, she had not yelled at him for corrupting her perfect son, so that was good. Maybe she would wait until he was out of the hospital for the yelling. Instead, she walked to the table by the window and put a bag down there before coming around the opposite side of the bed, pulling up a chair. She left the other chair empty, like it was *Shane's* chair even though he wasn't sitting in it. Ilya liked that maybe too much.

"How are you feeling?" she asked awkwardly. Ilya figured he would get tired of people asking about how he was feeling, but it was still novel enough that anyone cared to ask. Most of his life, people had only cared how he was playing, not how he was doing. Whether he could score goals, not whether he was happy or hurting or exhausted.

"Better, actually," Ilya admitted, and it was true. He felt more like himself than he had in days. "Is strange, I had brain surgery. But doctor says it was simple surgery, really."

Yuna didn't say anything to that, just stared at Ilya, as if trying to puzzle something out. Maybe she was wondering how her son might want to fuck this bandaged monster in the bed with tubes coming out of all sorts of parts of him.

"Am sorry he is not in Detroit," Ilya said when the silence stretched on too long. A tiny smile touched the corner of Yuna's lips, and she looked just like her son in that moment.

"Yes, he was very adamant he wasn't going to Detroit," she said. Ilya didn't know what *adamant* meant, but he could guess. He looked down at Shane again, a comforting weight against him, and traced his fingers along the hairs at the back of Shane's neck. Shane released a soft, contented noise but didn't wake. "I didn't ever guess you might be gay. There were so many news stories about you and women."

Well, they were doing *this*, Ilya realized. Maybe she had asked him how he was feeling only to help her decide whether he was too fragile for it. He didn't know what to say, didn't know what to tell her. He didn't know what Shane had told her already, if she was blazing with anger because she thought he'd been cheating on her son. He didn't know how to explain those early years, when they'd both thought this thing between them had been nothing but dangerous fun. He didn't know if mothers wanted to hear that their sons had been casually fucking around, even if it had never actually been casual, even if there had always been something deeper running underneath that neither of them had been brave enough to name.

“I am bisexual,” Ilya said, because that was safe enough. He could talk about himself. He wasn’t going to tell Yuna anything about Shane that Shane wouldn’t tell her himself.

Yuna nodded slowly, apparently taking that in. “And is Shane gay?”

So Shane had told her nothing, literally nothing. It was typical of him, even if his mother knew they were fucking, not to tell her anything. Ilya almost laughed at how absurd it was.

“I think he should tell you these things himself.”

Yuna looked pleased by his answer, not that Ilya cared about that. Ilya wasn’t going to out Shane, not even to his own mother, even if his refusal upset her. That decision belonged to Shane.

“But you could be with a woman,” she said at last, her tone very careful and deliberate. “It would be easier.”

Ilya sighed. He’d thought about this so many times over the years, and she wasn’t wrong. He could marry Svetlana, and he could take her anywhere, to any event or restaurant or bar, and there would be pictures, but the press would only talk about how glamorous they looked, and what a beautiful couple. It *would* be easier.

Except he didn’t love her, not like that, and how could he explain that? How could he explain that no one else had ever made him feel how Shane made him feel? How could he explain that it made his heart swell whenever Shane said something to him, even if it was boring or neurotic or annoying? That he wanted to be with Shane all the time, wanted to always be touching him? How could he explain that when they were apart, all he wanted to do was talk to Shane, text him, how every time there was some story about a game that was a surprising upset or a player being injured, the first thing that came to Ilya’s mind was that he wanted to know what Shane thought about what had happened?

Ilya pressed a kiss to the top of Shane’s sleeping head. “No,” Ilya said, not able to meet Yuna’s eyes. His throat felt tight, the words coming out rougher than he’d intended. “I could not be with anyone but Shane. Is impossible.”

Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

For Christmas, Santa got me...a weather-related internet outage! 😡 I had to tether my computer to my phone to get this update out. Please send your complaints to Santa, as I don't know when I'll properly have internet again. RIP me.

Shane woke up slightly crushed against a very warm breathing pillow. Everything felt fuzzy and distant, his mind still clinging to sleep. He was comfortable, warm, and there was a steady heartbeat beneath his ear. His eyes drifted half open, and then he groaned, not wanting to be awake. Just five more minutes curled up with Ilya, and he'd be ready to get up and face the world. Just five more minutes.

Except there was scratchy fabric against Shane's cheek, and Ilya had been sleeping shirtless, nothing but warm skin between them. Confused, Shane opened his eyes, and then he remembered. He tried to sit up.

"Shit, I feel asleep, I'm sorry," Shane hissed. "I'm probably crushing you."

A warm, strong hand grasped him by the back of his head, gently pushing him back down to where he'd been lying against Ilya's chest.

"Not crushing me." Ilya's voice rumbled against Shane's body as he spoke. "Like a nice, warm blanket."

Shane drew in a long, shaky breath and let himself settle back down, his body gradually loosening. This was real. Ilya was here, alive and warm beneath him. His heart was beating steadily, his chest rising and falling in an even rhythm. He'd made it through surgery. He was okay.

Something was digging into his ass, presumably the bed rail. If he'd been sleeping there long enough, his ass might have a permanent indent from it. Also, his hip ached and his leg had gone slightly numb. He didn't care. He'd stay there forever if that was what Ilya wanted.

Then Shane's stomach rumbled loudly, breaking the peaceful quiet. Ilya laughed, the sound vibrating through his chest. "Your mother brought food," he said, still chuckling. Shane went completely still.

"My mother was here?" Shane shot up in bed, and this time, Ilya didn't stop him. He didn't know why that still freaked him out. It wasn't like his mother didn't know...something. But knowing and seeing him curled up on top of Ilya Rozanov were two different things. "Did you talk?"

“Mm,” Ilya grunted affirmatively. He looked fine save his cast and the bandage on his head, which had been there already. He didn’t look freaked out or traumatized by whatever Shane’s mother had said, anyway. “She asked if you were gay.”

Jesus. “What did you say?” Shane asked carefully.

“I said I am bisexual. I did not tell her about you. That is your business.”

It was oddly sweet, the way Ilya was trying to protect him. Not that Shane needed protecting, not from his mother anyway. But the sentiment was nice. Shane smiled at him. And then his stomach growled again, even louder this time, and Ilya’s eyes cut meaningfully to the paper bag on the table by the window.

Getting out of the bed was significantly more challenging than getting in had been, though Shane didn’t actually remember the getting in part very clearly. He was pretty sure Ilya had done most of the work then, somehow maneuvering Shane into position despite the cast and the IV. Now, Ilya just watched with obvious amusement as Shane tried to extract himself from the narrow space without falling on his ass or accidentally yanking on any of Ilya’s various tubes. Because he was an asshole. Also, Shane loved him.

The memory of it came flooding back, of Ilya saying the words—saying them without hesitation or doubt, like it was the simplest, most obvious truth in the world. And then he’d made it a joke, a competition, because he’d known it would get Shane annoyed enough to stop crying. Because despite all their years of trying to pretend it was nothing, trying not to get too close, he knew Shane.

Shane’s chest felt too full, too tight, like his heart was trying to expand beyond the confines of his ribs. Only Ilya Rozanov could make being an asshole loop all the way back around to being sweet.

Shane found the bag his mother had left, and inside was a chicken sandwich and a container of plantain chips. Ilya reached over to drag his tray table closer to Shane, which was when Shane realized that Ilya’s breakfast was also gone. Which meant that someone besides Shane’s mother had come in and seen them curled together in bed. Probably multiple someones. But Shane’s phone wasn’t blowing up yet, so maybe it was fine.

“Do you want some?” Shane asked, pulling the food out of the bag and setting it on the tray table. He unwrapped the sandwich halfway, the smell of grilled chicken and herbs making his stomach growl again, before a small spark of panic rushed through him. “Wait, can you have non-hospital food?”

Ilya looked at him like he was an idiot. “No, hospital food is magic, filled with special healing drugs,” he drawled. “Food from outside hospital will kill me in one second.”

Shane rolled his eyes, but Ilya had already been eating what looked like pretty normal food in the morning, so it probably *was* safe. Ilya just needed to say it in the most dickish way possible and yes, Shane loved the fuck out of him.

“Fine. Did you want some?”

Ilya considered. “Give me one of your weird little dried banana slices,” he commanded, holding his hand out. His expression was imperious, like a prince demanding tribute, which would have been more effective if he wasn’t wearing a hospital gown with his hair sticking up at odd angles around the bandage.

“They’re plantain chips!”

“What the fuck is plantain?”

Shane opened his mouth, then closed it, not exactly sure how to describe them. “They’re like...smaller bananas, but not as sweet,” he explained at last. Ilya raised an eyebrow.

“So weird little dried banana slices,” Ilya said again, wiggling his fingers. “Give.”

Shane handed him one and watched as Ilya put it in his mouth and chewed thoughtfully. His expression didn’t quite give away what he thought of it.

“Well?” Shane prodded. Ilya shrugged.

“Is okay. French fry would be better. Why do you eat this disgusting stuff?”

Shane wondered if the rest of his life might be this, Ilya whining and making fun of him for the food he ate, making faces and telling him how gross it was. It was amazing to imagine, when less than twenty-four hours before, he’d been terrified he’d never hear Ilya’s voice again, never see him roll his eyes or smirk or tease Shane about being boring. And now here he was, alive and annoying and perfect. It felt like a miracle. Being annoyed by Ilya Rozanov felt like something Shane could do forever.

Oddly, it sounded kind of like heaven.

Ilya’s balance was still his biggest problem. The first day, Shane thought it might just be the lingering effects of the anesthesia or the pain meds they were giving him, the way Ilya seemed to list to one side or stumble when they made him get up and walk around. The second day, they removed his drain and switched him to less potent oral painkillers, but he didn’t seem any better.

By the third day, the doctors had started using phrases like vestibular rehabilitation therapy and oculomotor rehab, which Shane didn’t fully understand, but it didn’t seem to matter because when they started talking about discharge, the early instructions were the same as they’d been after the concussion. Rest, no caffeine, no screens, no alcohol, no flying, and some added instructions about changing his dressing. All that complicated stuff would come after, Shane understood, if the vertigo and vision issues didn’t resolve on their own.

They’d gotten lucky, all things considered. That was what Shane kept telling himself. Shane had been terrified at points that Ilya might die, that he might be confused and disoriented forever, that he might be constantly nauseated or in horrible pain, but all he was was a little unsteady when he walked, with some blurry vision and whatever *visual artifacts* were. Shane could live with that, with helping Ilya and letting him rest and whatever Ilya needed.

Of course, if it didn't resolve, if all those weird rehabilitations didn't work for him, that meant that Ilya couldn't play hockey ever again. Shane couldn't tell how much that bothered Ilya, or how much Ilya might be afraid of that outcome. They hadn't talked about hockey since Ilya had tried to urge him to go to Detroit, not that his presence had mattered. Montreal had won, just as they had won every game since they'd beaten the Bears the day Ilya had been injured. The Bears had lost every game, even the one against Buffalo. Shane wasn't sure Ilya knew about it, that Shane's team had won the division and Ilya's team had only snuck in to the playoffs as a wild card. He wasn't sure if Ilya cared.

Ilya was discharged four days after his surgery. It was also the day when Shane started to get increasingly concerned messages from the Voyageurs asking if he'd be able to return to practice. They were supposed to fly to New York for the first playoff game in two days.

"Tell them you will go to practice," Ilya said from where he was lounging on the couch after Shane's phone buzzed for the hundredth time. He looked relaxed, almost normal, if you didn't notice his hair or the careful way he moved his head to avoid triggering the vertigo. Shane had used clippers to trim Ilya's hair short at Ilya's request, once he'd seen the shaved patch of his head when they'd changed his dressing. A short, light brown fuzz covered his scalp, except for the place that was still mostly bare of hair but decorated with surgical staples instead, though they were currently covered by a new stark-white dressing.

"I'm not leaving you again," Shane insisted, "not after last time."

Ilya sighed. "Your mother will stay with me," he insisted patiently. Shane's father had had to drive back to Ottawa for work, but his mother was still staying in the downstairs unit Shane was now quite happy he'd never rented out. "She already said."

Shane didn't know how he felt about leaving Ilya alone with his mother, except that he felt much better about it than leaving Ilya completely alone. It was weird that they all seemed to get along, even though Shane had always hoped they would, when he'd secretly imagined introducing Ilya to his parents.

"Here, give me your phone," Ilya said, reaching his hand out as if he expected Shane to actually do that. "I will write response for you."

Shane rolled his eyes. "No screens, remember?"

"*Limited* screens," Ilya corrected primly. Shane shook his head and put his phone on the end table furthest from Ilya, with his own body between Ilya and the phone. Not that he thought Ilya would lunge for it or something, but still.

"You're obsessed with me playing hockey," Shane said, coming to sit next to Ilya on the couch. Ilya pursed his lips thoughtfully.

"My season is over, but yours does not need to be," he said at last. Shane couldn't help but think that Ilya's *career* might be over, but he didn't say it out loud. It was probably too soon to be having those kinds of thoughts, and it was definitely too early to say them out loud to

Ilya. Trying to distract himself, Shane reached over and rubbed the fuzz covering Ilya's head, and Ilya made a contented little noise.

"I miss your curls," Shane said, feeling stupid as soon as he'd voiced it. What kind of asshole told their sick partner that they preferred how they had been before? But Ilya didn't seem offended, thankfully, because he only shrugged. Maybe the language barrier had somehow protected them for once.

"Is just hair," Ilya said lightly. "Will grow back."

Well, now Shane felt like he had to distract from his distraction, which took him right back to...responding to his team, which he needed to do either way. He needed to tell them yes or no, and it wasn't like he didn't trust his mom to stay with Ilya. Hell, she'd probably be more vigilant than Shane, noticing every small change in Ilya's condition with that maternal sixth sense she had. But she didn't know Ilya like Shane did, didn't know all his little tells, although Shane hadn't known them well enough, either, the last time.

And Shane couldn't literally refuse to leave Ilya's side for the rest of his life.

"Okay," Shane agreed at last, picking up his phone. "I'll tell them I'm okay to practice. Does that make you happy?"

Ilya tilted his head very carefully. "It makes me very happy when you listen to me," he said. Shane rolled his eyes again, although annoyingly, he was smiling. Ilya waited patiently without speaking while Shane typed out a response on his phone, though after a minute, he did shift himself until he was lying down on the sofa, tucking his feet beneath Shane's thighs. Shane looked up once he'd finished.

"Are you feeling okay?" he asked, looking Ilya over again for any change, anything that might indicate he was uncomfortable or in pain. Ilya gave him an indulgent look.

"They scanned my brain *today*, Shane," he pointed out. "Бцѐ xopomo. You can relax."

Shane felt like maybe he'd never relax ever again after what happened, but when Ilya reached out for him, he went. It took a minute of maneuvering before Shane was lying half on top of Ilya on the couch, and then Ilya pulled him down for a kiss, slow and sweeter than it usually was between them. Ilya's fingers pressed into the pressure points at the base of Shane's neck, holding him there and kissing him until Shane felt himself begin to uncoil. At last, Ilya pulled away.

"Do you know what is good for relaxing?" Ilya asked wickedly. His eyes had that familiar glint in them, mischievous and heated, the one that usually preceded something that would make Shane's brain short-circuit. "Orgasms."

Shane groaned. "Oh my God, Ilya, you can't be serious. You were just released from the hospital."

Ilya nodded sagely. "Released, yes, because I am okay."

Ilya did *seem* okay, and maybe that was just because he hadn't had to get up from the couch since they'd gotten him home. But he'd seemed okay before, too, and now Shane couldn't stop seeing that dazed look in Ilya's eyes and remembering what it had been like to feel him going limp and unconscious against Shane's shoulder. Shane felt his breathing hitch at just the memory of it.

"No," Shane said, too sharply. Ilya raised an eyebrow. Shane could see him processing the reaction, the hardness in Shane's voice, the way Shane had practically recoiled.

"No?" he echoed, maybe surprised by the vehemence of Shane's response. His expression shifted, became softer, more careful. Like he was trying to figure out what had just happened, what Shane was really saying. "Okay," he said at last.

Ilya didn't push any further, but it was hard to tell from Ilya's tone whether he was disappointed.

Chapter 13

Going back to the rink felt weird. Shane felt like he'd lived an entire other *life* in the few days he'd been gone, and it seemed strange to see everyone acting normal, like absolutely nothing had changed. They clapped him on the back and told him they hoped everything was okay, most of them even sincerely, and it was insane that none of them knew that Shane's entire world had almost fallen apart. That they didn't know how close Shane had come to maybe never stepping foot in this facility again. It had been hard enough the first few times he'd come back for home games, not to just go still and stare blankly at the spot where Ilya had been injured. Now, it felt almost impossible.

Hayden was the only one who had more for Shane than vague platitudes. He gently pulled Shane to the far corner of the dressing room, where they would be less likely to be overheard, and looked at Shane with concerned eyes.

"Hey, is everything okay?" Hayden's voice was low, meant only for Shane. His hand hovered near Shane's shoulder, like he wanted to offer comfort but wasn't sure if it would be welcome. "I texted, but I didn't want to bother you too much."

Hayden *had* texted, and Shane hadn't responded. Maybe he should feel bad about that, but the idea of having to lie to Hayden had been too much for him. It was almost too much for him now. He could say something vague, generic, but after how close he'd come to losing Ilya, Shane didn't feel much like lying anymore. It wasn't like he needed to tell the whole truth. And he wasn't telling the whole world, just Hayden.

"My...partner was in the hospital," Shane admitted at last. Even saying the words aloud made his chest tight again. "It was...pretty bad."

Shane saw the exact moment Hayden clocked his incredibly deliberate use of the word *partner*. Shane stiffened, wondering if he'd misjudged Hayden, if it turned out he was going to be an asshole. His pulse kicked up, and he braced himself for the shift in Hayden's expression, for awkwardness or worse.

But all Hayden said was, "Is...your partner better now?" His tone was very careful, neutral, and Shane could almost hear it in his voice, how he'd hesitated before specifying a pronoun. God, he didn't deserve Hayden.

"Getting there," Shane said, wiping a tear that threatened to fall from his eyes. He decided to take pity on Hayden and his awkward fumbling by confirming what he'd already implied. "My mom is staying with him."

Hayden sagged in something like relief, a little bit of tension leaving his body. "So, uh...how long have you had a partner?" he prodded.

Well, that was a difficult question to answer. Shane wasn't sure whether it was a week or a month or years, so he gave the answer that felt most honest.

“Seven years.”

Hayden’s eyes widened. “Seven?” he echoed, half whisper, half shout, but not loud enough for their teammates to hear. “Seven fucking *years*? And I’ve been trying to set you up with women!”

Shane felt lighter all of a sudden, that this was the most immediate concern in Hayden’s mind. “I know you meant well.”

Confusion passed across Hayden’s face all of a sudden. “Wait, what about Rose Landry?” His voice pitched up slightly, more bewildered than accusatory. He gestured vaguely with one hand, like he was trying to piece together a puzzle that suddenly had too many missing pieces.

Shane shook his head, laughing wryly. “I think I was trying to prove something to myself.”

Hayden’s expression turned thoughtful. “And did you?”

Shane chuckled, thinking of what a disaster it had been. He’d gotten a friend out of it, at least. A good friend. And far too much very awkward, unpleasant sex.

“Kind of proved the opposite, actually,” he said with a wince. Hayden seemed to understand the implication, because he winced too.

“Yikes,” Hayden said sympathetically. He looked over his shoulder at their teammates, who were still not paying any attention to their conversation. “So when do I get to meet him?”

Shane barely avoided laughing. He imagined saying, *You’ve already met him*. He imagined telling Hayden that it was Ilya Rozanov. He’d have to do it at some point, he realized, because now that Hayden knew there was *someone*, he wasn’t going to be dissuaded for long.

“Maybe when he’s feeling better,” Shane dismissed gently. Hayden clapped a hand on Shane’s shoulder.

“I’m looking forward to it,” he said brightly, and this time Shane *did* laugh. *You really aren’t*, he wanted to say, but he felt brighter, too. The sound of Shane’s laughter was enough to get their teammates’ attention, though.

“Hey, Hollander!” J.J. called, waving them over. Shane and Hayden exchanged a look, shrugged, and went over. “Did you read the news while you were out? Apparently Rozanov ended up back in the hospital.”

Shane frowned. He hadn’t seen the articles, but he wasn’t surprised it was news. The hospital would have had permission to disclose Ilya’s condition to his team, and NHL rules required injury disclosure. Apparently it hadn’t been any more than that, though, or Shane was sure they’d be having a very different conversation.

“I heard,” Shane said noncommittally, because if he said anything more, he might fucking lose it. His jaw clenched so tight his teeth ached, and he had to remind himself to breathe, to

keep his expression neutral.

Comeau laughed. “I guess I made his brain spring a leak,” he said, looking far too pleased with himself.

Shane punched him.

Shane held the ice pack to his knuckles, sighing. The cold stung against his split skin, but it was nothing compared to the heat still burning in his chest. His hand throbbed in time with his heartbeat.

He’d already been chewed out by Theriault, who had told him that although the team had empathy for whatever difficult situation he had with his family, punching a teammate would not be tolerated. He’d told Shane that if he wanted to fight someone, he should save it for the other team.

But Shane did not want to fight anyone. He wanted to fucking *kill* Comeau specifically, and he felt pretty fucking satisfied. He’d never punched anyone before, and he’d probably hurt himself worse than he’d hurt Comeau, but still.

His first practice back hadn’t gone great, hadn’t really gone anywhere past the dressing room, and his team was potentially thinking he’d lost his mind, but Shane sort of didn’t care. Maybe they wouldn’t want him to play in the playoffs, and maybe that would be better. Then he wouldn’t have to fly to New York and leave Ilya so far away.

At some point, Hayden found him where he was sitting, though Shane wasn’t sure what was going on, whether they were all practicing still and Hayden had somehow found a way to step away. His friend sat down next to him, shifting awkwardly in his seat.

“So, I’m going to say something crazy,” Hayden prefaced after they had sat in silence for a minute. Shane sighed, staring at his ice pack. He knew what Hayden was going to say already. After what he’d just told Hayden, after how he’d reacted with Comeau, it must have been obvious enough. And Shane was just exhausted, and his hand hurt.

“Yes,” Shane said simply. Hayden made a face.

“What do you mean, ‘yes’?” he demanded. He shifted to face Shane more fully.

“I know what you’re going to say,” Shane told him tiredly. “And the answer is yes.”

Several emotions crossed Hayden’s face, and Shane briefly wondered if he’d been wrong in thinking that Hayden had come to the right conclusion. Maybe Hayden had been about to ask something completely different, suggest Shane needed therapy or a vacation or anger management classes. Maybe Hayden thought he was on drugs. But then Hayden spoke.

“Jesus, *Rozanov*?” Hayden demanded, his voice coming out strangled, pitched higher than normal. “How? More importantly, *why*?”

Shane still, somehow, had not had that conversation even with his mother, and she'd been with them every day. Maybe Ilya had told her some details. Maybe he was telling her some details now, while the two of them sat at his condo together.

"He's not as bad as you think he is," Shane told him, not quite ready to get into the hows with Hayden either.

"So he's *not* an asshole."

Shane fought back the smile that threatened to escape. "I mean, he *is* an asshole, but—"

"My God," Hayden muttered, shaking his head slowly. He let out a long breath. "But I mean...he's *okay*, right? I went back and read that news article, and it said like...*emergency surgery* and *complications*..."

Shane found himself smiling helplessly. Hayden really was a good friend, to be asking about Ilya's condition rather than harping on how little sense they made together.

"It freaked me the fuck out," Shane admitted. "I thought he was going to die."

Hayden's expression softened at that, some of the skepticism fading. He opened his mouth like he wanted to say something, then closed it again. Shane could practically see him weighing his words.

"Look," Hayden said finally, carefully. "I'm not going to pretend I get it. But obviously this has been hell for you so...I'm not going to be a dick about it." Another pause. "Even if I have questions. So many questions."

Shane snorted. "I'm not sure if I know how to answer, really," he admitted. "But I love him."

Hayden smiled gently. "Yes, that was pretty clear when you punched Comeau in the face over his honor." He paused again. "Oh, but punching your own teammate? Yuna is going to kill you. Even if he fucking deserved it."

Shane groaned, because he hadn't even thought about that. But Hayden was probably right.

Ilya sat at the kitchen island watching Yuna Hollander make pasta. If someone had told him a month ago that he would be here, he'd have thought they were crazy. He'd have thought there was no way that paranoid, uptight Shane Hollander, the man who had bought this entire building so no one would ever see them together, would ever tell anyone about them. Maybe some part of him was almost thankful for the hit.

Except he wasn't, because this was hell in its own way, almost worse than those first days after the concussion. Because now he felt fine. The doctor had explained that the brain tissue itself had no pain receptors, so maybe that made sense. He was only taking drugstore pain meds, and that was enough to make him feel normal. Unless he stood up or moved his head the wrong way, and then he felt like the world had tilted at a weird angle and he couldn't quite tell which way was up.

It didn't hurt. It was less frustrating when it hurt, when he wanted to throw up, because that made sense. This didn't. Ilya wanted to get up and help Yuna cook. It seemed only polite to do something, rather than simply sit there watching her do all the work. Except Ilya didn't trust that he might not topple over and spill boiling water over himself—or worse, both of them—and then he'd end up in hospital again with horrible burns on top of everything.

Plus, he'd gotten himself onto one of the high barstools Shane had at the kitchen island, and it was only afterward that he realized that he wasn't sure if he could get down, not by himself. Maybe he'd stay here on this stool until Shane got home from practice and he could pathetically ask for Shane to retrieve him like he was a kitten caught up a tree, some dumb creature that had climbed stupidly too high before looking down and realizing they were stuck.

This whole situation was shit. He fucking hated it. And here he was, ruining Shane's family's life at the same time. Yuna and her husband were in different cities because of him, and Yuna probably had a job of her own, one she was missing to be here, cooking Ilya pasta while Ilya sat and watched and did nothing.

"You're very quiet over there," Yuna said without turning around. "Are you feeling all right?"

This had been a dance with them all morning since Shane had left for practice, neither of them quite certain how to act around the other. They moved around each other carefully, politely, like strangers forced to share an elevator. But she checked in with him almost more often than Shane did, which shouldn't be surprising. Maybe it was genetic.

"Yes," Ilya said automatically, then reconsidered. "Mostly. Just...thinking."

"About?"

Ilya hesitated. Yuna added pasta to the boiling water, gave it a stir, then turned to face him properly, leaning against the counter with her arms crossed. Her expression was open, patient. Waiting.

"I am sorry," Ilya said finally. "That you have to be here. That you will miss Montreal's home playoff games because of me. I know you go to most home games. In person."

Yuna's face softened, her eyes crinkling around the edges the same way Shane's did. "Did Shane tell you that?" It seemed to surprise her and maybe please her.

Ilya nodded. Maybe Shane didn't tell his parents how much he appreciated them often enough. He should. That was one secret of Shane's that Ilya didn't worry about sharing.

"Yes," Ilya confirmed. "He is very happy that you go watch him play."

Yuna beamed at the words, which is what Ilya had been hoping for. "It's okay," she told him kindly. "We can watch it on TV. Or I can watch and you—"

“Can listen, yes,” Ilya finished for her. She was almost as annoying about it as Shane. But Ilya didn’t mind. “And you will tell me how wonderful Shane looks.”

Her eyes were filled with a mother’s pride. Ilya was certain she would absolutely gush about how wonderful her son was, given the chance. Ilya’s own mother might have done that, too, when she’d been alive. But she’d been gone long enough that Ilya was starting to wonder whether some things had really happened or if he’d just hoped for them so hard that they seemed real.

Before she could say anything else, there was the sound of a key in the lock. They both turned to the door, slightly startled, not expecting anyone. When the door opened, it shouldn’t have been surprising to see Shane standing there, except—

“Shane!” Yuna exclaimed. “What are you doing here? We didn’t expect you for at least an hour.”

Shane’s hand went to the back of his neck, rubbing at it in that way that almost screamed that he had been caught doing something he shouldn’t. A pink flush painted the skin beneath his freckles. He looked very guilty. Sometimes, Ilya didn’t know how Shane had ever kept any secret in his entire life. Everything he thought was reflected on his face.

“What happened to your hand?” Yuna exclaimed before Shane could answer, and Ilya’s gaze dropped automatically, following hers. Shane was trying to hide his hand in the sleeve of his hoodie. He wasn’t doing a very good job, though, and Ilya could see the bruises on his knuckles. He raised an eyebrow. Shane sighed, dropped his gear bag, and came to the kitchen island to stand beside where Ilya sat.

“So,” he said to Ilya instead of answering his mother’s question. “Hayden knows about us.”

Ilya wasn’t quite sure how to process that. Hayden Pike was Shane’s best friend on the Voyageurs, but Ilya barely knew him. Shane had always been the more paranoid one, the one who insisted on secrecy, who bought an entire building just to keep their hookups hidden. But Ilya had something to lose here, too. A lot to lose, really, especially if he couldn’t play hockey anymore. But he did not think about that.

“You punched Pike?” Ilya asked, incredulous. Because it was very clear that Shane had punched *someone*, as unlikely as that seemed, and Shane got very upset whenever he imagined anyone finding out. Even his mother or his best friend. Maybe that would have been enough.

“What?” Shane asked, looking shocked and a little offended. “No, I punched Comeau. He said...well, I won’t repeat what he said.”

Ilya exchanged a look with Yuna. She’d gone oddly silent, letting Ilya do the talking. That was probably a bad idea. He tried to communicate that to her with his eyes, but maybe his eyes spoke Russian, too, and she didn’t understand. It didn’t matter, because then Shane was talking again.

“Jesus, Ilya, what are you doing on this stool?” Shane demanded, a thin edge of panic in his voice. “What if you fall and hit your head again?”

Oh, right. The high stool Ilya had stranded himself on. Ilya wasn’t angry, because Shane was right, and also because he recognized that this was what Shane did when he worried. His voice went tight and clipped, and he got the tiniest bit mean. And that was very charming.

“Yes, I am idiot,” Ilya agreed easily, holding his arm out to Shane. “Please help me down and take me to bed.”

Shane looked at Ilya suspiciously. “Why are you agreeing with me so easily?” Shane asked slowly, gaze passing over Ilya’s body like he thought he might find answers there. Under other circumstances, Ilya would be trying to get Shane into bed for sex, but Shane had been very weird about sex the day before, and Ilya suspected he’d be weirder now, with his mom in the next room. But if he got Shane into bed, he might both find himself cuddled up with Shane *and* learn what Comeau had said to make Shane punch him. That sounded pretty good to Ilya.

“Because I love you, and you are right,” Ilya said. Shane’s expression melted into something soft and gentle. Ilya loved saying the words now, loved that he could. Loved what it did to Shane when he said them.

“Come here,” Shane said, barely above a whisper, and he wrapped his arms around Ilya and helped him from the high stool to the floor. The world tilted, but Shane caught Ilya before he had any chance of falling.

Chapter 14

Ilya looked at his phone screen just long enough to confirm who was calling. That didn't make his vision blur or spots appear in his vision, thankfully. A soft smile found its way to his face as he answered.

“Добрый вечер,” he greeted Shane in Russian. “How was your flight?”

“Fine,” Shane said quickly, too quickly. Probably his team was being assholes because he'd punched Comeau, and Shane didn't want to bother him about it. “How are you? How was the hospital?”

Ilya thought about pushing Shane for details, but when Shane was single-minded like this, it was better to just indulge him, probably. Ilya could tell better if he could see Shane's face, but that meant screens. So they'd agreed to phone calls only, no texting, no Skype.

“No more staples in my head,” Ilya told him, running his hand over his shortened hair without thinking. It felt strange, bristly and unfamiliar under his palm. He hadn't had his hair so short in a long time. He wasn't sure if it would grow back where the incisions were, so he'd have to grow his hair pretty long to really hide them. “And they sent me to therapist for weird drills.”

Drills maybe was not the right word in English, but Ilya knew it because of hockey, and it was probably close enough.

“What kind of drills?” Shane asked suspiciously, like he was afraid the hospital had sent him skating the full length of the ice. Ilya probably should not have said *drills*.

“Like...look at letter on card and turn my head. Focus on pen. Very weird. They want me to do at home a few times a day.” There were some others, some standing and walking ones, but Ilya had only done those at the hospital with the therapist watching and ready to catch him if he toppled over. He would probably wait until Shane got back to try them at home. Yuna Hollander was a very diligent caregiver, but Ilya was not confident she could catch him if he collapsed. “I will show you when you get back. You will laugh.”

Shane didn't sound like he had any instinct to laugh. “Do you feel any better?” he asked instead, sounding very concerned. Ilya briefly thought about lying.

“Opposite, maybe,” he admitted. “I think this is like...worse before it is better? What is the expression in English?”

Shane was not distracted by Ilya's English question, unfortunately. “Where are you now?” he demanded, immediately snappish and irritable the way that Ilya understood meant he was worried.

“I am in bed, sweetheart,” Ilya soothed. He didn't think about the pet name until it had already left his lips. He didn't know if Shane would hate it or think it was weird. But when

Shane spoke again, his voice was softer, calmer.

“Is my mom with you?” he asked.

“She is in other room. I will yell for her if something happens,” Ilya assured Shane. “But is not bad symptoms. Just same as before. Vertigo.” Ilya had learned the word *vertigo* in English thanks to this. He wished he’d never had to learn it. “And what about you? Are you alone?”

There was a pause. “Hayden is with me,” Shane said after a moment. Well, that meant that Ilya had no chance of calming Shane down with phone sex. He didn’t know if that would calm Shane now, anyway.

“Tell Pike I say hello.”

Shane very diligently repeated, “Hayden, Ilya says ‘hi’.” In the background, Ilya heard, “What the fuck?” He stifled a laugh, and then Shane was talking to him again. “He seems very confused,” Shane reported to Ilya.

“Good,” Ilya said, feeling very pleased with himself. If it was this easy to rile Pike up, Ilya could get infinite entertainment out of this. When he could actually stand up without the world spinning, he was going to have so much fun.

Ilya hung up the phone, frowning down at it. The conversation with his agent had been...weird. Or maybe not weird. Maybe Ilya should have expected exactly what had been said, and maybe he was glad that it had all gone through his agent so he could hear it in Russian. He was sure that if he’d gotten a call directly from the Bears’ front office, it would have been filled with the weird, indirect euphemisms his agent had described to him, and his brain definitely wasn’t up to parsing those in English. He’d barely been able to manage in Russian.

He took a long, deep breath and then stood up from the bed, stabilizing himself with a hand on the headboard until the world righted itself just enough. It never did, not completely, not after standing up, but if he waited a minute, it was usually enough that he could walk and mostly in a straight line. It did feel like the world was tilted at an oblique angle, but he’d figured out how to still function with it. Mostly.

Still, he grasped the doorway just in case as he crossed the threshold, and he found Yuna Hollander in the kitchen again. She had been doing an ungodly amount of cooking. This time, Ilya hoped that it wasn’t just for his sake, since Shane’s father would be driving down in the afternoon so they could all watch the Voyageurs’ first playoff game on TV together. Ilya hoped he could convince Yuna that he was okay enough for her spend the night in the downstairs unit with her husband instead of on the couch listening for every creak and rustle in case Ilya collapsed in the middle of the night. Because Shane’s parents had spent enough time in separate beds because of Ilya.

Also, because Ilya kind of wanted to jerk off. It had been *days*. And he wasn’t going to attempt it covertly in the shower because he wasn’t an idiot.

Yuna looked up and smiled when she saw him, so Ilya made his way over to the kitchen island. He leaned against it, bracing his weight on his forearms. No way was he climbing onto that stool again. Otherwise he might have to wait all afternoon for David Hollander to arrive, and Ilya could manage standing, for a while. If he was leaning on the counter, anyway.

“A friend in Russia?” Yuna asked lightly. She must have heard him speaking Russian through the bedroom door. Ilya didn’t get the impression that she was trying to pry, just that she wanted to make conversation. Ilya barked out a laugh.

“Friend in Russia? Oh, no. I have no friends in Russia.” The sympathetic look Yuna gave him made him wish he’d thought more before saying that. She looked at him like he was some tragic figure who’d been exiled from his homeland with no one left who cared about him. Which...well. It wasn’t entirely inaccurate, but he didn’t need Shane’s mother feeling sorry for him. “Was my agent,” he explained quickly.

“Oh?” Yuna prompted gently, and Ilya found himself pressing his lips together, fighting the urge to spill everything. Why was it that that single word made him want to tell her everything? Was it a secret mother power? Had Ilya’s mother had that power? He didn’t remember, which was frustrating. He hated how much the memories of her had faded. The big things were still there, the important moments, but the small things? The way she’d asked questions, the tone of her voice when she was curious versus when she was concerned? Those were gone.

“The Bears say...hm, they are wondering if I am interested in being traded.”

Yuna Hollander frowned. “Why? Your contract is fully guaranteed regardless of injury.”

Oh, right, Ilya remembered. Yuna Hollander knew hockey. Maybe she *was* the right person to talk to about this.

“Yes, is true. Bears do not want...” what was the English word he was searching for? “...uncertainty, I think. They want Ilya Rozanov, star center, not Ilya Rozanov on long-term injured reserve. They think maybe some other team likes risk more and would take my contract.”

They hadn’t said it, exactly, but even filtered through his agent, Ilya knew what it meant. The Bears were done with him. They wanted him off their books, out of their locker room, away from their salary cap. They wanted to wash their hands of him and all the press about whether or not he’d ever come back and play like he had before.

“It’s still only April. Isn’t it a little premature to start talking about long-term injured reserve?” she asked, and there was an edge to her voice now, something sharp beneath the pleasant tone. Ilya did not think the sharpness was meant for him.

Ilya did not know the word *premature*, but he knew the word *mature*, so maybe he understood enough. “They did not like my last medical report, I think.”

Yuna let out a long, frustrated sigh, but Ilya felt like maybe she wasn't frustrated with him. When she looked at Ilya again, she was smiling. "Why don't we go for a walk?" she asked out of nowhere. Ilya felt a strange jolt of panic, and he wasn't quite sure what the source was. "Just around the block, and only if you feel up to it," Yuna added quickly. "But the doctors did say to slowly increase physical activity."

And Ilya was an athlete, she didn't say, but Ilya heard an implication of that anyway. Maybe that was just his own voice inside his head telling him that, telling him that he shouldn't be so afraid of a walk around the block. Such a simple thing. Children did it. Elderly people did it. And here he was, professional athlete, world-class hockey player, terrified of putting one foot in front of the other on a sidewalk.

"Is middle of afternoon," he said, grasping for an excuse. Someone might see him, might recognize him, might take a photo and post it online. Yuna gave him another sympathetic look.

"And it is known that you're still in Montreal, so if any fans recognize you, even with your short hair, it wouldn't be surprising," she pointed out quite rationally. Ilya rubbed a hand over his shorn hair almost automatically when she mentioned it. "They'd have to recognize Shane Hollander's mother as well and jump to some pretty extreme conclusions. Something more than that Shane would consider it good sportsmanship to have his family check on a fellow competitor when he's medically stranded in his city."

That was very rational, very reasonable. Ilya didn't know why Shane hadn't inherited *that*.

"Is just...Shane is very paranoid about this," Ilya said with a wince.

"I had gotten that impression," Yuna said, motioning to the room around them. Ilya huffed out a laugh.

"Yes, okay," he agreed. "Let's walk."

Yuna helped Ilya fasten his coat like he was a child, but Ilya didn't really mind it. It was nice, even. Ilya didn't even mention the random clothing that had started appearing in the condo starting when he'd been in the hospital, and mysteriously all in Ilya's size. It was a very precise, very neurotic, very *Shane* way of expressing love. He'd had extra clothes for Ilya already, after all, even before all this had happened.

They rode the elevator down, and Ilya was sure-footed enough as they made their way outside. As long as he didn't make any sudden movements of his head, probably. Yuna handed him a pair of sunglasses when he winced at the brightness of the sun. The condo had a lot of windows, but somehow outside, it was much brighter.

"Good thinking," Ilya mentioned. It would also make it less likely any fans would recognize him. He'd never had hair this short and a beard at the same time since he'd come to America, and he hadn't shaved his face in more than a week. It might be enough of a disguise.

Yuna looped her arm through his as they slowly made their way around the block, and it was nice to be outside, even if Ilya had to dedicate most of his focus to the actual mechanics of

walking. But breathing the outside air, hearing the birds, and maybe even hearing the traffic made him feel a little more...settled, maybe. He hadn't realized how much he'd needed this, needed to feel the sun on his face and the wind in his hair and the concrete solid beneath his feet.

"Do you want to stay in Boston?" Yuna asked Ilya after they'd turned the first corner, Yuna carefully guiding him so he didn't have to turn his head too much. She asked it like their previous conversation had never ended. Ilya took a moment to consider it.

"Boston is good city, I guess," he said finally, the words coming slow. "Good team. And it is good to be in the same division as Shane. So we know we play each other three or four times every season."

Not that that would mean much, if Ilya *was* placed on long-term injured reserve. He wouldn't travel with his team. But maybe he wouldn't even need to be in Boston if so.

Yuna looked at him carefully, like she was just starting to understand their relationship, the way they'd seen each other only in snatches over so many years, telling themselves it was nothing until it became something and then *everything*.

"Hm," Yuna murmured, thoughtful and noncommittal. Ilya waited for her to say more, to offer advice or wisdom or even just an opinion, but she said nothing. They just kept walking, Ilya's arm entwined with hers, the spring afternoon warm and bright around them.

Chapter 15

New York won the first game. Ilya watched the game on the sofa at the condo with both of Shane's parents, and it was nice and it was weird, too, all of them cheering Shane on together. Ilya felt like maybe he should be cheering against the Voyageurs on principle, but it was easier to cheer for them than to cheer for Scott Hunter and the Admirals. Either one of them would probably beat Ilya's team, anyway, if they made it through the first round.

And the Bears might not be Ilya's team for much longer, anyway. He wondered if his teammates knew that. Marlow hadn't mentioned anything when they'd last talked on the phone, but maybe he wouldn't have, even if he knew. Or maybe the Bears knew it made them look like assholes to try to dump Ilya off somewhere else and they didn't want to distract their team from the playoffs.

Comeau had a black eye, which was very satisfying.

When Ilya talked to Shane after the game, Shane didn't seem all that disappointed by the loss, like maybe he wanted Montreal to lose more quickly so that he didn't have to travel again. Ilya tried to convince Shane that he was fine, because the last thing Ilya wanted was to be the reason that Shane lost hockey games.

Ilya missed most of the second game because he started to feel so dizzy, even sitting, that he couldn't pay attention to what was happening, and he had to go to the bedroom to lie down. He picked up enough of the noise from the TV in the living room to figure out that the Voyageurs had won, though he couldn't have said by how many goals or who had scored them. It all just washed over him like white noise.

At some point, he must have fallen asleep, because when he opened his eyes again, the room was darker and he could hear Yuna's voice just outside the bedroom door, low and reassuring.

"No, he was completely lucid, just not feeling well," she was saying. "I'm watching him, I promise. I told you that the doctors said that some days might be worse than others..."

Ilya looked at the time, but it was way too early for Shane to be home yet, and if he had been home, Ilya had no doubt that he'd be in the bedroom already, fussing over Ilya. Ilya smiled fondly into his pillow.

"Yuna!" he called, and she was in the bedroom in seconds, phone still held to her ear. "Tell Shane I will call him."

Yuna turned her attention to the phone. "Did you hear that? Yes, okay, I'm hanging up now."

Yuna gave Ilya a look. Ilya smiled at her and picked up his phone. He went to call Shane like he'd promised, but the phone buzzed with Shane's call first. Yuna shook her head, smiling, and pulled the bedroom door mostly closed behind her.

“I am okay,” Ilya said instead of a greeting.

“My mom said—”

“Yes,” Ilya affirmed before Shane could tell him what Yuna had said. “I felt bad, I went to bed. I slept, and now I feel a little better. Breathe, please.”

Ilya heard Shane pull in a shuddering breath, which was good. “Where are you?” Ilya asked after he was satisfied that Shane had calmed down as much as Shane *could* calm down.

“On the plane.”

That was surprising, or maybe it wasn't. A month ago, he would have been surprised Shane would take a chance at even his half of the conversation being overheard by his teammates, even if he wasn't saying anything suspicious. He always worried that the most innocent thing could be taken out of context and suddenly everyone would know who he was talking to and what he felt. That he had ignored his own impulse to be afraid meant something.

It also meant that Ilya had limited options for conversation here. There was one that was very easy, and not suspicious.

“Tell me about the game,” Ilya said. “I missed most of it. You won?”

Even over the phone line, Ilya swore he could hear Shane relax. “Barely,” Shane admitted. “Man, the Admirals had so many shots on goal, I swear...”

It didn't matter that Ilya had missed it, because Shane was painting it for him now, giving him every detail. And Ilya lay back in bed and listened to Shane narrate the game for him, relaxing into the pillows at the rolling sound of Shane's voice.

A few minutes after Ilya finally hung up with Shane, having heard a play-by-play of the entire game, Yuna Hollander was standing in the bedroom door, leaning against the doorframe. It felt strange, like he had been caught staying up late when he wasn't supposed to, except that there was a tiny smile playing at the corner of Yuna's lips.

“You're so good with him,” Yuna said, and it took a minute for Ilya to understand what she meant. Except he realized that Shane had probably been freaking out on the phone to her for minutes, at least, before Ilya had been woken by her voice talking back to Shane on the phone. Shane probably hadn't taken no for an answer when she'd asked Yuna to check on him.

Ilya sat up in bed, propping himself up against the pillows. “Oh, that? Is nothing,” Ilya dismissed. “Shane is very simple, in some ways. If he is in panic spiral, you need make him think of something else. Some ways are very easy. Talk about hockey, that is easy. Or say something surprising or something to make him angry. He will forget to panic and be surprised or angry instead. He knows what I am doing but still it works always.”

Yuna shook her head, laughing softly to herself. “David and I never figured it out that precisely. It means more than you think it does, that you know him so well.”

Ilya felt pleased by the praise. “I do not know him so well,” Ilya admitted. “We wasted much time. For many years, we did not talk about our lives. We only...” Ilya trailed off, abruptly remembering that he was speaking to Shane’s mother. She made a face.

“Yes, I think I know what you did.”

Ilya looked at the ceiling. God, he did not know how to talk to mothers, and this was proof. He internally kicked himself.

“You should, ah...maybe you should spend night in downstairs condo, with your husband,” Ilya suggested. “I am okay. And Shane will be back middle of the night, yes?”

It was only when Ilya saw the flush on her cheeks that he realized that he’d made it sound as if he wanted her out of the condo so he could fuck her son. Which...he did want to fuck Shane, very much, but that had not been what he’d meant. He’d meant that he’d wanted her to sleep in a real bed with her husband and that it would not be so many hours before Shane was back and hovering over him again. But he could not take the words back. He would only make it seem worse.

“You’ll be okay?” she prodded, not acknowledging Ilya’s implied fucking of her son.

“For a few hours, of course. Sleep with your husband.”

The look on Yuna’s face made it very clear that what he’d meant to say was not what he’d said.

“Yes, thank you,” Yuna said, and then she fled the room. Ilya fell back against the pillows, groaning. Fucking stupid English language.

Ilya woke a few hours later to Shane crawling into bed, or more accurately, to Shane elbowing him in the side, after which Ilya hit him with his cast. On accident, mostly. He had been half asleep.

“Ouch!” Shane hissed, sucking in a sharp breath through his teeth. Even in the darkness, Ilya could make out Shane’s grimace, the way he was rubbing at his shoulder where the cast had connected.

“Ouch?” Ilya echoed groggily. “You pushed me with elbow first. Why are your bones so sharp?”

“My bones are just as sharp as—” Shane started to protest, but then Ilya kissed him. It was a very convenient and effective way of shutting Shane up, and Ilya didn’t really want to argue about whose bones were sharper now that he was starting to wake up a little more and realize that he had Shane physically back in bed with him. Shane let out a grunt of surprise, but it

was only seconds before he melted into Ilya's kiss, and Ilya forgot about the elbow to his ribs.

Ilya slid his one good hand down Shane's body to grab Shane's ass, pulling their bodies closer together, but then Shane was doing the opposite and pushing them apart. Which was not like Shane at all. Shane was usually just as desperate for this as Ilya was—maybe more desperate, like he'd been starving for it, and Ilya was the only thing that could satisfy him. But this was the second time now that Shane had pushed him away, the second time Shane had put distance between them when Ilya reached for him. At the feel of Shane's hand on his chest, Ilya pulled away.

"What?" he asked. Shane squirmed against him, but in a nervous way and not a sexy way.

"You weren't feeling well," Shane reminded him, as if Ilya wasn't aware of what his own body felt like. As if Ilya hadn't been the one lying in the dark, dizzy and exhausted, while Shane was off playing hockey.

"I feel good now," Ilya told him. "I slept a lot. Are you too tired?"

There was a long pause. "No..." Shane said finally, his voice hesitant. Ilya almost turned on a light so he could see Shane's face better, but the sudden brightness had too much of a chance of sending annoying spots through Ilya's vision, so he didn't. He ran his hand down Shane's side instead, feeling how tense he was.

"Then what?"

Another long pause. "I just think maybe we should wait," Shane said, not sounding like Shane at all. Shane might not love sex as much as Ilya did, but he definitely loved sex with Ilya as much as Ilya loved sex with Shane. "Until you're feeling good for more than a few hours."

Ilya felt frustration rising in his chest, an angry, animal thing. "And what if I never feel good for more than a few hours?" he demanded. Stupidly, tears were prickling at the back of his eyes. He pulled away from Shane, putting some distance between them. "What if I am like this forever? Do we never fuck again?"

"We haven't gotten to 'forever' yet, so I think it's too early to—"

"What about people who are...sick forever but not dying. What is the word in English? Invalid?"

"Disabled," Shane corrected him, his voice strange, like he didn't like saying the word. Like maybe there was something wrong with it. That made Ilya even angrier.

"Yes, disabled," he repeated furiously. "Do disabled people never fuck? Are they not allowed happiness and orgasms?"

"No, of course they are," Shane said. In the darkness, his eyes looked bottomless and black. "I'm just...Jesus, Ilya, I'm terrified of hurting you."

“I would tell you,” Ilya insisted. “If something feels bad.”

The silence lingered for a long time. “Okay,” Shane said slowly, and he moved so he was closer to Ilya again, tentatively wrapping an arm around Ilya’s back. Suddenly, Ilya didn’t want that, not at all.

“No, now I feel I am forcing you,” Ilya snapped. He knew he shouldn’t, but that did not stop him. “This is terrible.”

“You’re not—”

“No, no, go to sleep,” Ilya commanded harshly. “I do not want sex anymore. Maybe later, when you are in the mood.”

“I didn’t mean—” Shane started again, but Ilya wasn’t in the mood to listen. Maybe that made him an asshole, but at the moment he didn’t care. He pulled out of Shane’s hold and laid down, turning so his back was to Shane.

“I don’t want to talk more now,” Ilya said. “Go to sleep.”

For a few minutes, Shane didn’t move, and Ilya didn’t either. Ilya wasn’t sure he could sleep again, after he’d napped for half the evening, and after the conversation they’d just had.

Then, very slowly, Ilya felt the bed shifting, heard the sound of the comforter being adjusted. Shane’s arm wrapped around him from behind, very slowly, giving Ilya time to object. Not that Ilya could pull away. He was already at the edge of the mattress. But he didn’t try, just let Shane wrap an arm around him and place a gentle kiss to the back of his neck.

“I’m sorry,” Shane breathed into Ilya’s skin. Ilya didn’t respond, but he took a few slow deep breaths, until some of the tension left his body. He sniffed back the tightness in his throat and leaned into Shane’s arms.

Chapter 16

Shane was shit at practice. He knew he was, from the way half his teammates were glaring at him afterward, which he probably deserved this time. Ever since he'd punched Comeau, everyone had been walking on eggshells around him, like they weren't sure which version of Shane Hollander they were dealing with, the uptight one who never caused problems, or this new one who apparently solved them with his fists. And this performance today wasn't helping convince anyone he had his head on straight. As for Comeau himself...well. They weren't even occupying the same corner of the dressing room if they could help it.

Shane should be happy, considering he'd had half a night wrapped around Ilya after days apart. But everything had been awkward and strange before he'd left that afternoon for practice, so much so that he'd almost been grateful for an excuse to leave. Except then he'd played like shit anyway, so it wasn't like he'd been any good to his team either.

Hayden caught up with him on his way out of the rink, pulling Shane into the far corner of a hallway where they had almost no chance of being overheard.

"Hey, is everything okay?" Hayden asked, which is disheartening, not that Shane hadn't thought his lack of focus was obvious. "Something bad didn't happen with..." Hayden hesitated, and even though there was no one around, continued, "you know who?"

"Voldemort?" Shane snickered, and Hayden gave him an unamused look.

"Ha-ha, very funny," Hayden replied in a tone that very clearly said that it was not. "But if you're joking around, I guess that means he's fine?"

Shane sighed, considering what to say. He'd never had anyone to talk to about Ilya before the way all the other players talked about their wives and their girlfriends, and realizing it was even a possibility was...strange. But nice, too.

"Just pretty pissed at me, I think," Shane admitted. "I'm kind of an asshole."

Hayden snorted. "Pretty sure *he's* the asshole. Still."

Shane felt something ease in his chest at that, the way Hayden's loyalty to him was absolute, unwavering, even now that he knew about Ilya. Hayden still disliked Ilya just as much as he always had, maybe even more now that he knew what Ilya meant to Shane. It was ridiculous, it was petty...it was kind of amusing, actually.

"No, this time, it was definitely me."

Hayden looked at Shane for a long moment, as if debating whether he wanted to ask. Eventually, he said, "What did you do?"

Shane considered answering then thought better of it. "You probably don't want to know."

Hayden looked offended. “Is it gay sex stuff?” he asked in a low whisper. “What, you think I can’t handle hearing about gay sex stuff? I can handle it.”

Shane nearly fell over laughing. God, Hayden looked so earnest, so determined to prove he was a good ally or a good friend or whatever. Like Shane had just challenged his masculinity by suggesting he couldn’t handle a conversation about two men fucking.

“Kind of,” he admitted through his laughter. “Not really. It’s just...” Shane sobered, thinking about the previous night and how upset Ilya had been. “He’s still not doing amazing, and I feel...weird about having sex, like I’ll fucking...break him or something.”

Hayden hesitated, winced, then said. “Shouldn’t he be the one who knows best if he feels well enough?” Shane could hear in his voice how annoyed he was with himself, taking Ilya’s side. “I mean...sex feels good, unless you guys are doing it wrong. So if everything else feels bad, maybe it’s nice to have something that just feels good.”

Hearing it put that way made Shane feel even more annoyed with himself. Shane had been so busy trying to protect Ilya that he’d completely steamrolled over what Ilya actually wanted and how he actually felt.

“And thus, I am an asshole,” Shane concluded. He hesitated, feeling his face burn even at the thought of saying what was on his mind. “It’s just that...before he had that brain bleed, we had sex. And the doctor says I didn’t *cause* it, but I just keep remembering finding him, and waiting for the ambulance...”

The words died in Shane’s throat. He didn’t want to think about it, but the memory was right there anyway, vivid and terrible—Ilya collapsed on the bathroom floor, one pupil blown wide and dark, his words thick and slurred and wrong. The way his body had gone limp and heavy against Shane’s shoulder, unconscious, maybe dying, and Shane hadn’t known what to do except hold him and wait and beg him not to leave.

Hayden clapped a hand on Shane’s shoulder, pulling his attention away from the memory.

“I hope you don’t take this the wrong way, man, but...I think maybe you need therapy?” Hayden said it like a question, wincing a little like he was afraid of Shane’s reaction. “What happened to you was fucking traumatizing, not to mention hiding this shit for seven fucking years? You *have* to have a therapist already, right? Like you’ve *also* been hiding for seven years that you’ve been seeing a therapist, right?”

Shane released a rough laugh. “No secret therapist,” he admitted. “I don’t even know how I would, especially now. The playoffs, and then we’re going...well, I mean, I *hope* we’re going to my cottage after...”

It was only because Shane had looked up where the closest hospital was to his cottage that he was even considering it. But at the cottage, Shane had a full gym and so much space for Ilya to walk in the fresh, clean air without any curious eyes on him. Not that he was going fully Victorian and believing that fresh mountain air would cure all Ilya’s problems, but...maybe it would. It felt like a perfect place for Ilya to relax and recover, if Ilya would agree to go.

“Shane,” Hayden said, staring at Shane like he was being purposely dense. “It’s 2017. There *must* be a therapist who can see you over Skype.”

Shane fought not to blush as he thought of the other things he’d done over Skype.

“Yeah,” he agreed, hoping all that didn’t show on his face. “Probably.”

The living room was empty when Shane returned to the condo, which was strange. Shane turned his head to check in the corners as if his mother or father would be somehow hiding there, but of course they weren’t. Frowning, Shane made his way to the bedroom and pushed open the door.

He found Ilya lying in bed alone, not that he really expected he’d find his parents crammed into the bedroom with Ilya. He was idly playing with some fidget toy Shane didn’t know where he’d acquired, and it struck Shane then how boring it must be for Ilya, cooped up and unable to read or watch anything. Except he hadn’t complained about it. He hadn’t whined about being stuck inside, hadn’t demanded entertainment, hadn’t snapped at Shane or his parents for hovering. He’d only gotten angry at Shane once, which said a lot.

“Hey,” Shane greeted tentatively, lingering in the doorway. “Where are my parents?”

“They are in the condo downstairs.”

Shane fought the urge to be annoyed about that. It was an entirely separate unit, not like they’d be able to hear Ilya if something happened and he called for help. They might as well be in a hotel down the street. But Shane didn’t think Ilya would be too pleased if Shane brought that up. Shane took a few slow steps into the room, stopping beside the bed.

“Can we talk?” Shane asked, wincing at how serious his voice sounded. Ilya sighed.

“Yes, okay,” Ilya agreed, scooting up so that he was sitting against the pillows. Shane came to sit beside him, on what had become his side of the bed when he was with Ilya. He’d unconsciously drifted to the same side of the bed at the hotel in New York, somehow, though Ilya hadn’t been beside him.

“I’m an asshole,” Shane said without hesitation.

“No, I am the asshole,” Ilya argued. “Doctor said sex is okay, by the way, but starting slow, you know. I asked. I should have said that to you.”

Shane laughed, helplessly burying his face in his hands. “Of *course* you asked.”

When Shane lifted his head, Ilya was staring at him, his expression helpless and sad. “Is not just about orgasms, is about...” Ilya pursed his lips in frustration. “Sorry, I don’t have words in English. Is about being close, but different than just holding each other in bed. Which I like very much! But it is different.”

Shane’s heart skipped in his chest. He couldn’t believe he was finding out, over and over again, how romantic Ilya could be. He was helplessly, desperately in love. He shifted closer

on the bed and gathered Ilya into his arms, relief flooding through him when Ilya came willingly, settling against Shane's chest. Shane pressed a kiss to Ilya's head, soft and lingering.

"I know what you mean," he assured Ilya. "I'm sorry I was being so weird. I just...I was really scared when I found you that day, and..." Shane released a ragged laugh, unable to make himself say more.

"You will not break me," Ilya assured him, running his uninjured hand idly up and down Shane's arm. "Your dick is not so powerful."

It was clear that Ilya was trying to make Shane laugh, which hadn't quite worked, but it did loosen something in Shane's chest.

"Hayden thinks I should see a therapist."

"Hm," Ilya said thoughtfully. "Is good idea, I think. In Russia, it is very uncommon. To see therapist. If my mother, maybe..."

Ilya trailed off, but Shane didn't need to hear anything else to know what Ilya must be thinking. He tightened his arms around Ilya's body.

"I think maybe you should see one, too," Shane remarked gently. He remembered the conversation they'd had about her death, how much Ilya's uncertain answer had scared him. He waited to see if Ilya would bristle at the suggestion.

"Yes," Ilya agreed quietly. "I think maybe you are right."

The balance exercises they gave Ilya to do at home were scary. Shane's mother had told him that Ilya had refused to do them when Shane had been gone, and Shane could understand why. Ilya had lost weight in the last couple of weeks, noticeably so, but even considering that, he was a large man, and watching him sway felt...fucking scary, honestly.

Ilya walked short distances pretty much fine, could stand well enough if he was holding onto something. But just standing still with his feet together looked like a challenge, even from the outside, and Shane hated it. He wished he could fix it. When they tried with Ilya's eyes closed, Ilya's body listed to the side in less than twenty seconds and Shane had had to help catch him.

Ilya had to go lie down for quite a long time after that, but he rallied enough to come sit at the table and eat dinner with Shane's parents, which despite everything, Shane loved. It was so wild, so surreal, that Shane hadn't ever managed to truly imagine it. It felt oddly too normal for something Shane had never thought *could* be normal.

Ilya went to lie back down at Yuna's insistence while Shane helped his mother with the dishes, then said good night to them at the door to head to the unit downstairs. Shane turned off the lights in the living room and went to join Ilya in the bedroom. He found Ilya on the

bed looking at his phone, and Ilya put the phone down and shrugged at the sight of Shane's glare.

"Was just a minute," he excused. "And I feel okay."

"Yeah?" Shane prodded. Ilya did seem okay—better than he had been earlier, anyway.

"I could feel better than okay," Ilya said, waggling his eyebrows suggestively. Shane couldn't help his snort. "Do you know what would make me feel better than okay?"

"I can guess," Shane said, stepping toward the bed and fighting down the urge to worry. If Ilya said he felt fine, at some point, he had to trust that that was the truth. Hayden had been right about that, and it meant a lot that his friend had taken Ilya's side in the argument. "But maybe you should tell me."

"A blowjob," Ilya said, resting his body against the pillows and folding his hands behind his head in the most imperious gesture Shane could imagine. "And I think it would make you feel better, too."

"Giving *you* a blowjob will make *me* feel better?" Shane asked skeptically, unable to help the smile that was curling its way onto his lips. If Ilya was giving him a test, he was also trying to make it very easy for Shane to pass by keeping it light, teasing.

"Yes, I think so," Ilya said confidently, without hesitation, and...well, Ilya wasn't wrong. Shane loved sucking Ilya's dick, maybe more than was strictly healthy. It might even be true that he liked sucking Ilya's dick more than he enjoyed the reverse, although both options held their appeal.

Shane fought against his hesitation. He wanted to, he really did. He wanted to be the thing that brought happiness into Ilya's life, not the thing that brought him more fucking stress.

Sucking in a long breath, Shane lowered his knees onto the bed, shimmying himself far enough forward that he could reach the waistband of Ilya's sweats. Ilya pulled off his shirt, then lifted his hips and let Shane pull his sweats off, and he wasn't exactly hard yet, but his dick was slightly in the proceedings already. If there was one thing about Ilya Rozanov that was healthy, it was his libido.

But this was rare enough in their interactions to be novel; most of the time when they had met over the years, things had been fast and hard. The first few times, they'd been young and basically turned on by pretty much anything, and since then, they'd always had limited time, and so they'd usually been on each other in seconds, devouring each other, kissing and sucking and grinding to the point that when Shane had gotten Ilya's cock out, he'd already been hard and weeping and ready to go.

Shane's sexual experience was mostly just Ilya; he didn't know how most men liked to have their dick sucked, but Shane knew what he liked, and he knew what Ilya liked. They hadn't had to experiment much, because when they'd found what they liked, it was easy enough to stick to it. And when they had pushed things, it had usually been Ilya—Ilya with that Skype call, Ilya in that room in Vegas. But now, Shane wanted to experiment. They had time.

Shane leaned down between Ilya's legs and took his still mostly soft cock delicately in hand, without any intent. Slowly, softly, he leaned forward and slid his tongue past his lips, sliding beneath Ilya's foreskin to find the still hidden head of his cock. Ilya let out a little hiss of surprise, and Shane looked up to make sure he was okay. Ilya was looking at him, a little confused but clearly not upset.

Shane took Ilya's cock into his mouth almost gently, not sucking him down, not stroking him, just letting the silken flesh rest against his tongue. Ilya's dick twitched in Shane's mouth, hardening just a little, and it was exceptionally hot. Ilya said something under his breath that Shane was almost certain must be a Russian curse word. He really should learn Russian curse words.

It was different than it had ever been, being so unhurried, laving his tongue around Ilya's hardening length. If Ilya had any complaints, he didn't voice them, just let Shane have his way, tonguing him and lightly sucking him until finally Ilya was fully hard in his mouth. But Shane didn't hurry his pace then, even as his jaw started to ache, moved his head in a slow, deliberate way. Ilya sighed, slack and boneless beneath Shane's mouth, releasing quiet little sounds that were so unlike what Shane had heard from him before.

Ilya's orgasm surprised both of them, building slowly before rising seemingly from nowhere. He released a sound that was close to a whimper, shuddering, hand clamped on Shane's shoulder as Shane swallowed him down. Ilya's breathing was ragged and labored.

"Come here," Ilya commanded, almost before he had finished, and Shane was helpless to resist when Ilya sounded that way, so raw and needy. He slid up Ilya's body, flexing his jaw before he let Ilya pull him into a kiss, slow but intense. Ilya's hands gripped at Shane's clothing. "Off."

Shane pulled back enough to remove his shirt, then struggled with his pants and underwear for a minute, trying to remove them without getting up from where he was straddling Ilya's body and without falling entirely onto him. He got them down over his ass before Ilya's casted hand was on his bare hip.

"Good enough," Ilya said, and he wrapped his other hand around Shane's cock, which he'd barely noticed until Ilya's hand was on it, and then it was all he could think about—how hard he was, how desperate for release. "I love how hard you get. When you suck me."

Shane groaned, thrusting into Ilya's hand helplessly. Ilya was better at dirty talk in English than Shane would ever be, and Shane groaned, half embarrassed and half aroused. But Ilya was right. He loved sucking Ilya's dick, loved making him moan and making him come. Ilya reached his casted arm behind him, struggling for a moment beneath the pillow before pulling out a bottle of lube. Of course, Ilya had been prepared.

"I don't know if I will need this," Ilya mused, still stroking Shane's dick almost boredly. "You always get so wet for me." Ilya swiped his thumb over the head of Shane's cock, gathering precome there as if to prove his point, and Shane groaned, his dick leaking even more. Jesus. Shane was so close already, and Ilya had barely touched him.

Shane got a reprieve when Ilya released his dick, then struggled with the bottle of lube. Shane almost moved to help him, but then he got it open, managed to pour some on his good hand, which he wasted no time wrapping around Shane's dick again. It was too cool, made his body try to recoil and jerk into Ilya's hand all at once, but it was also slick and fucking wonderful, and Ilya's cheeks were flushed and his hazel eyes were clear as the bored into Shane's.

"You must be so desperate," Ilya said, and he was right. Shane was somehow trapped here at Ilya's mercy, shackled by his own pants and underwear around his thighs, and he was already breathing hard and feeling the telltale tingle at the base of his spine. "You do not come without me, do you?"

"No," Shane admitted shakily. He hadn't even thought about jerking off since he and Ilya had done it together. "Not...very often."

The admission was somehow embarrassing and it also turned him on, that Ilya had forced it out of him so easily. A catlike grin spread across Ilya's face, and Shane whimpered, thrusting into Ilya's slick grip.

"No, I know," Ilya said, idly stroking Shane's dick, not quite hard enough, not quite fast enough. "You explode like volcano when you come, like you are saving it all for me."

Shane's eyes closed without input from his brain, and his brain felt full and thick with cotton, all of him centered on Ilya's lube-slick hand on his dick, stroking.

"When you do touch yourself, do you think of me?"

Shane wasn't even embarrassed anymore, but his chest felt heavy with emotion, and his body was tight with need.

"Yes," Shane admitted without shame. He hadn't touched himself without thinking of Ilya in a long time. Years, maybe. Even when he'd tried to think of something else, he'd always seen Ilya's crooked smile, his eyes sparkling with mischief, his beautiful body and his hard fucking cock.

Ilya moved his hand a little faster, twisting his wrist just the way he knew Shane liked.

"Every time?" Ilya prodded. Everything in Shane felt tight, like he might scream or come or start crying, and he wasn't sure which.

"Yes," Shane admitted throatily.

"Good," Ilya said, deeply self-satisfied, and the sound of that word, that tone, was almost, *almost* enough. Shane's hips jerked into Ilya's hand, and then he came, hard and trembling, and it felt like it lasted forever. Finally, Ilya pulled Shane down on top of him, and Shane went as best as he could, still encumbered by his pants and underwear around his thighs.

Shane buried his head against Ilya's neck, his chest still feeling tight, and he couldn't hold back a snuffle of emotion. It felt ridiculous, but suddenly all that emotion was *there*, and there was nothing else he could do with it. "It is okay," Ilya soothed softly. "You are okay. I am okay."

God, Shane could *not* be crying on Ilya *again*. “I’m sorry—” he started, but Ilya shushed him.

“No, it is good,” Ilya said, stroking Shane’s hair softly. “Let it out.”

And Shane sniffled softly against Ilya’s neck, letting his tears fall while Ilya gently stroked his hair.

Chapter 17

The Voyageurs lost both the next two home games, and then Shane needed to travel to New York again. It was easier this time, maybe, because Shane wasn't the frantic mess he had been before he'd left the last time. Maybe it really had just been the orgasm and the crying after. The second part was not what Ilya had been aiming for, but maybe it had been what Shane had needed. Or maybe it was that he'd spent enough time with Ilya to know he was okay. Damaged, but okay, mostly.

One more loss and the Voyageurs would be out of the playoffs, and then they would go to Shane's cottage. Shane hadn't asked again, not really, but he'd mentioned it over and over, how much privacy they had. He'd made Ilya think of how much space Ilya would have to walk around without worrying that any fan might see him and see Ilya Rozanov near Shane Hollander, or worse, Ilya Rozanov unable to walk without swaying, Ilya Rozanov with shorn hair and pink scars where a surgeon had cut into his head.

Shane kept mentioning the lake and all the trees, but Ilya did not need to be convinced. He would go, of course he would go. What else would he do now but go wherever Shane went for as long as he could? They would have the summer, and then...then, Ilya didn't quite know.

Ilya was sitting on the couch, scrolling through his phone and responding to messages, when Yuna Hollander came to sit by him. Ilya could manage about twenty minutes with a screen now, which felt like great progress. She nodded at his phone in his hand.

"Any news from your team?" she asked, and Ilya stared at her for a long minute, wondering what she was asking. She knew the news about the Bears. They had lost in the first round of the playoffs in four games. Yuna Hollander didn't need Ilya to tell her that. And then he realized what she was really asking.

"They have not said anything else about a trade."

Yuna nodded, slow and thoughtful. "Have you thought more about it?"

Ilya hadn't, not really. Somehow, too much was happening while Ilya was simultaneously doing nothing at all, and the hypotheticals made his brain hurt a little.

He shook his head, and the world spun a little. He should have answered out loud instead, but there was no point in being angry at himself over it. He closed his eyes to see if that helped; it was never clear whether closing his eyes or opening them would make things better, but this time, closing them was worse, so he forced his eyes open again. Yuna gave him a sympathetic look, so clearly he had not covered the moment well.

"I had an idea I wanted to talk to you about," she said, and then paused. Waiting for him, Ilya realized, to say whether he could listen or whether he needed to go lay down until his head stopped spinning. But he could handle a conversation.

“Okay.”

Yuna nodded to herself. “Have you considered Ottawa?” Yuna paused, giving him a moment to process. “They have the cap space for you. They are probably willing to take the gamble that you’ll be healthy enough to play at some point next season. It’s a two-hour drive from Montreal. And David and I can be around to help you, if you still need it.”

Ilya didn’t know what to say, and so he clung on to the last part.

“You already do too much for me,” he said, his voice thick in his throat. She had dropped her entire life to take care of him already, even though she hadn’t known him at all. Even though from what little she’d known, she’d hated him.

Yuna’s eyes softened, and she reached over to take his hand. Her hand was warm and dry against his.

“We don’t feel that way,” she assured him, and Ilya’s chest felt tight all of a sudden. It sounded...well, it was not perfect. It was still a two-hour drive away from Shane, but it was more than they had, a lot more. More than he would have ever thought was possible.

“I...” Ilya closed his eyes, forgetting that that had made the vertigo worse, and opened them again. “I will talk to my agent.” But it was far from certain that even a team as terrible as Ottawa would want Ilya after they saw his medical reports. The Bears would have to share all the details, or the league would not approve a trade. “But...please do not tell Shane, not yet. I do not want...” Ilya paused, thinking through how to say what he wanted in English. “I do not want him to have false hopes.”

Yuna’s eyes turned soft and kind. Of course they did. She loved it when Ilya protected Shane, because she was his mother.

“I won’t say anything to him for now,” she agreed at last. “But you should. A good relationship depends on communication.”

Ilya grimaced. It felt strange, still, hearing what he had with Shane described as a *relationship*, like it was the same as what Yuna Hollander had with her husband. Even though maybe it was. Maybe Ilya liked that it was—or at least that it could be, eventually.

But he couldn’t tell Shane about this, not yet. Not when it might not happen. Because Shane would start planning, and if it fell through, if Ottawa didn’t want him, Shane would be devastated. Better to wait until it was real, until Ilya had something concrete to offer instead of just another disappointment.

“Yes,” he agreed. “Yes, we are still learning.”

The Voyageurs won the next game. Ilya was only a little disappointed, because if they had lost, Shane would be free of team obligations sooner. And if they kept winning, Shane might have to play another entire seven game series. But Ilya was always proud of Shane when he did well, even if he usually didn’t say it. And Ilya managed to watch about half the game, and

he listened to the other. It was much easier to know which parts important to watch, with Yuna Hollander yelling at the TV.

Ilya went to bed early, hoping that he'd be awake enough to give Shane a congratulatory blowjob when he got home in the middle of the night, if Shane would let him. Instead, he woke up with an itch under his cast that was driving him crazy, and he got up and scoured the entire condo for anything he could use to reach it. There was more in the condo than there had ever been, on Ilya's many visits, but it was still annoyingly bare.

Which was how Shane found him, some time later, with a butter knife up the inside of his cast. Shane stopped in the doorway, his expression going from alarmed to amused.

"You can't cut your cast off with a butter knife, you know," Shane remarked, dropping his bag and walking around the kitchen island to reach him.

"Maybe *you* can't," Ilya retorted, annoyed that he still hadn't quite reached the itch. He jiggled the knife a little. A pen probably would have been better, but Ilya had not found a pen. And that would leave pen marks all over his arm. "I will ask them next week to take off the cast."

Shane's face did that scrunched thing it did when he had a thought he wasn't sure he should say. "That's barely four weeks," Shane protested. Of course Shane was uptight and worried about this.

"They said four to six weeks. They can give me temporary splint. I will wear it all the time if they want. Except when there is itch. This is torture."

Shane's expression turned sympathetic. He opened a drawer and pulled out a plastic chopstick, handing that to Ilya instead. Ilya traded the knife for the chopstick, and the point was much nicer for scratching his itch. He should have thought of it.

"You can't bully them into taking off your cast," Shane said seriously. "If they tell you it's too early, then it's too early."

"Yes, yes," Ilya agreed idly, wiggling the chopstick. He sighed in relief when he finally reached the itchy part. "I do not bully."

Shane snorted. "Sure, okay," he agreed, unconvinced. Ilya removed the chopstick and set it aside. His midnight plan did not need to be entirely abandoned.

"Congratulations on your win. I have a present for you," Ilya said, and then dropped to his knees.

"Jesus," Shane hissed as Ilya started to pull down his pants and underwear. "Ilya, you don't have to..."

Some more nonsense was going through Shane's head, probably, like that blowjobs were too much exertion for him. It was lucky that Ilya had spent years studying the Shane Hollander playbook, and he knew all the best ways to unravel Shane's stress.

“I have not sucked your dick in so long,” Ilya complained, and it wasn’t even a lie. He’d wanted to that day before his brain had exploded, but he didn’t think that bringing that up would help get Shane in the mood. “If you are not careful, I will forget how. You do not want that, do you?”

Shane snorted out a laugh. “You are ridiculous,” he said, but he didn’t protest when Ilya freed his cock, which was already twitching with interest.

“Yes,” Ilya agreed, and then swallowed down Shane’s cock. Shane moaned.

Shane probably should have been more disappointed when the Voyageurs lost. Losing in the first round of the playoffs was a little embarrassing, considering they’d won the cup two years in a row, but at least they’d pushed it to six games. Unlike the Bears, who hadn’t won a single game in their series without Ilya. Shane hadn’t brought that up, since he didn’t know if Ilya would be pleased or upset about the fact that the Bears had lost so soundly without him, just like Ilya didn’t rub it in that the Voyageurs didn’t make it out of the first round, even with Shane’s help.

A part of Shane wanted to bundle Ilya up and whisk him away to the cottage as soon as he was free, but Ilya pointed out that they should probably wait until after he’d gone to the medical appointments he already had booked instead of trying to set something up close to Shane cottage with doctors who didn’t know Ilya’s case as well. Shane begrudgingly agreed, though he suspected that it was because Ilya thought he could sweet talk them into removing his cast, and Shane thought he was probably right.

Shane managed to find himself a therapist who could see him over Skype and was taking new patients, and his first session felt...weird, but good, maybe. Maybe it was good to have somewhere he could say, *I hate seeing the man I love suffer but I don’t want to make him think I see him as weak. So how do I not fucking do that?* and actually get answers, even useful ones, maybe. And even if they turned out not to be useful, it was nice to at least say it out loud to someone who wasn’t invested enough to be offended or hurt or upset.

He was still looking for a therapist for Ilya, which was a little harder, since they wanted one who spoke Russian. Shane was looking in the States, since Ilya would be returning there eventually, but somehow the vastness of the U.S. made it even more difficult. Plus there was the fact that Shane didn’t fucking understand the U.S. health care system at all, but he wasn’t going to make Ilya be the one to worry about this.

Going with Ilya to his medical appointments was strange. The last time, Shane’s mom had gone with Ilya since Shane had been traveling, and it was different actually sitting there listening to doctors and therapists talk about managing symptoms and at-home rehabilitation exercises.

They had Ilya do some supervised exercises where he tried to move his head too fast to trigger his vertigo on purpose, which seemed like an awful fucking idea to Shane but apparently were about habituation, making his body get used to normal movements without reacting quite so strongly. Shane barely managed to keep himself from demanding they stop when he saw how unpleasant it was for Ilya, the way he’d have to sit and breathe for several

minutes afterward until the dizziness subsided. He didn't know how he'd handle watching Ilya do it every fucking day without going crazy.

Ilya gave Shane a shit-eating grin over the doctor's shoulder when he convinced them to remove his cast, and Shane just glared back where the doctor couldn't see. Ilya looked gleeful as they sawed the cast off, as the offending plaster fell away. He flexed his wrist as soon it was free, frowning at it like it had personally offended him. The skin was pale and dry, the muscles thinner than the other side. He turned it this way and that, opening and closing his hand, until the doctor gently took it and slid the splint into place.

"Be gentle with it for another week or two," the doctor instructed, securing the straps snugly into place. "You've healed well, but the muscles need time to catch up. Light use only—gentle stretches, normal daily activities. No heavy lifting."

Ilya nodded. "Yes. Light," he said solemnly. Shane narrowed his eyes, suspicious. Ilya's tone was too innocent, too cooperative.

"As for general physical activity," the doctor continued, "walking is excellent. Swimming if you have access to a pool. Stationary cycling. Ease into things, see what your body tolerates."

Ilya tipped his head, lips twitching. "And sex counts, yes?" He met Shane's eye over the doctor's shoulder. "Is my favorite physical activity."

Thankfully, both the doctor and the nurse laughed. It was a good thing Ilya was so fucking charming, although it was a legitimate medical question. Probably. Maybe it didn't need to be asked nearly as often as Ilya seemed to ask it.

"If you feel well enough and doing so does not cause an increase in your symptoms, there is no reason to refrain from sexual activity," the doctor said quite seriously. Ilya met Shane's eyes, waggling his eyebrows suggestively.

Jesus fucking Christ, Shane thought.

Chapter 18

Even after having seen it on his TV, Shane's cottage was quite a bit more than Ilya had imagined. He had seen the lake, of course, and the dock and the boathouse, but he had not seen the pool or the hot tub or the game room or the indoor hockey training facility. He wasn't really surprised by it, the more he thought about it, but it was definitely...more.

But it was nice, just like Shane had promised, secluded and lovely, and there were indeed so many trees. It was certainly worth the several hours they'd driven to get there. They walked a little on the paths through the trees, and when Ilya saw a bird flying, he tried to follow it with his eyes as he walked like the doctors had told him, but he gave up almost immediately. It was too calm and peaceful to want to ruin it by making himself dizzy on purpose, even if it was supposed to help in the long run, make his brain used to it or whatever.

They watched the hockey game in the evening. It was already halfway into the second round of the playoffs, not that either of them cared all that much since both their teams had been eliminated. Ilya listened more than he watched, not so much because of his brain but because he could lay his head in Shane's lap, close his eyes, and let Shane pet his head. His hair had grown in a little, but not enough to start forming Shane's beloved curls again. Ilya couldn't blame Shane if he was obsessed with Ilya's curls. Ilya was, after all, obsessed with Shane's freckles.

Shane was loose and little sleepy by the time the game ended and for once, Ilya was the one ushering Shane off to bed. It made sense, since Shane was the one who had done all the driving, and Shane had also been the one who had done all the worrying. This time, he'd spent half the drive worrying that the winding roads would give Ilya motion sickness. Which they had, a little, but not bad enough that he'd needed to throw up.

But it was a good time, now, Ilya thought, when Shane was finally as relaxed as Shane Hollander tended to get without being thoroughly fucked, and he was hoping he could manage that, too. So Ilya brought Shane into the bedroom and kissed him slowly, gently.

"Can I fuck you now?" Ilya asked when he pulled back for air. Shane jerked in surprise at the words.

"Jesus, Ilya."

Ilya ran a hand down Shane's still-clothed back, though he hoped to change that soon. "Doctor said it is okay," Ilya reminded Shane. He'd only asked again, in front of Shane, because he thought maybe it would help Shane to hear it.

"If you're feeling okay," Shane reminded him, like Ilya didn't know. Ilya only didn't roll his eyes because doing so might lead to him very quickly *not* feeling okay. "Are you feeling okay?"

"I am feeling good," Ilya assured him. *Good* was maybe an overstatement, but he definitely felt better than some other times. "I am feeling like I would like to have my dick inside you."

If you would like that, too.”

Shane groaned, leaning into Ilya unconsciously. It was so hot the way that Shane’s body responded even before his brain.

“Yes, I would like that,” Shane admitted, and Ilya kissed him again, slowly but firmly, tightening his fingers in the back of Shane’s shirt and tugging. It was nice to be able to *almost* use both hands, though the splint was still clunky. It was not as bad as the cast had been, and Ilya could scratch his arm.

Shane got the message, and when they pulled apart for a minute, Shane pulled his shirt off. His chest was smooth like always, hard and toned, and looking at Shane’s body, Ilya tried not to feel self-conscious. Ilya had lost a lot of muscle tone in a month, but Shane was still beautiful and perfect as always.

Still, Ilya pulled off his own shirt, because he was determined not to be a person who avoided doing something only because it scared him. He walked Shane back toward the bed and climbed on top of him, unfastening Shane’s pants and pulling them and his briefs off in one smooth movement, letting Shane kick them the rest of the way off. Ilya pushed himself up on his knees, bracketing Shane’s body with his thighs.

“Turn over,” Ilya commanded, and Shane did without hesitation, rolling himself onto his stomach and scooting up the bed. Ilya grabbed a pillow from the head of the bed and slid it beneath Shane’s hips; he wanted Shane to be as relaxed as possible. Shane had told Ilya over and over again how wonderful and relaxing the cottage was, but Shane still had not quite relaxed.

With Shane properly situated, Ilya got up and opened one of the bedside drawers, found condoms and lube, and got back onto the bed. He tapped the edge of Shane’s thigh and Shane obediently spread his legs.

God, Ilya loved that so much, how easily Shane took direction, even without words. He loved how much Shane loved to be fucked, and he hated that he hadn’t been able to give that to Shane in so long. He slowly drizzled lube onto Shane’s exposed hole, chuckling as Shane flinched at how cold it was.

“Jesus,” Shane hissed, and Ilya pressed his fingers against Shane’s hole, teasing and massaging, just barely pressing the tip of his thumb inside before retreating. Shane squirmed beneath him. “I can’t—” he breathed, and then his words disappeared into a helpless groan. Ilya didn’t know if Shane even knew what he’d meant to say.

“You can,” Ilya assured him, pressing his splinted hand against the small of Shane’s back, holding him there. “Relax for me.”

Impossibly, Shane did relax almost immediately, as if the words had been some kind of magical spell. He melted down into the mattress beneath him, and only then did Ilya slide his finger inside. Shane sighed, hot and open beneath Ilya, and there it was, exactly what Ilya had been looking for. He prepared Shane slowly, but not too slowly, until Shane was rolling his hips against Ilya’s fingers, thrusting helplessly against the pillow beneath him.

“Please,” Shane whimpered against the pillow. A grin split across Ilya’s face.

“Please what?”

A flush spread across Shane’s face and neck; even from behind, Ilya could tell the way his skin, mostly hidden against the sheets, turned pink. Ilya loved making Shane ask for what he wanted, and secretly, he thought that Shane liked it, too, being pushed a little further than was comfortable for him.

“Please fuck me,” Shane begged, and there was absolutely no way Ilya could refuse those words, spoken in that tone. Ilya slid off the bed slowly, carefully, because the last thing he needed was to trigger a fucking vertigo spell *now*. He’d gotten better at guessing what might do it, anyway, although sometimes he was wrong and it seemed to happen for no reason at all. Shane squirmed impatiently on the bed as Ilya removed his own pants and underwear.

Just as carefully, Ilya climbed back onto the bed. He ripped open the condom wrapper and rolled the condom onto his dick, and he replaced his hand where it had been against the small of Shane’s back. Like that was a signal, Shane’s body relaxed again, just a little more. Ilya used his other hand to guide himself inside Shane’s body.

Shane groaned, then whimpered, seemed to try to push back against Ilya’s body and pull away, all at once. It had been a long time since they had last fucked. They had thought they’d be able to, a month ago, and maybe they would have been able to since, but Shane never would have enjoyed it if he’d been stressed and worried the whole time that he might hurt Ilya somehow. But now he was soft and pliant and relaxed as Ilya slid inside of him, but maybe his body had forgotten, just a little, what it was like. Ilya would gladly remind him.

Ilya started slow. It was a lot for him, too, to feel the tight heat of Shane’s body around him, to watch the muscles of Shane’s back pulling and flexing, to hear the soft sounds Shane released into the pillow. But Ilya wanted to make this last. Maybe not forever, because maybe Shane was right about the fact that his stamina wasn’t what it could be, but he wanted to make it last, at least a little.

He braced his knee against the mattress, his splinted hand pressed between Shane’s shoulder blades, his good hand wrapped around Shane’s hip, holding him in place. Ilya rolled his hips slowly, searching for the right angle, rewarded when he found it by Shane’s helpless, squirming moans.

That’s it, Ilya thought to himself, satisfied with his efforts. He wanted Shane to melt beneath him, to become an absolute puddle of a man who could barely form words. Maybe that was too ambitious, but Ilya would try.

After a good minute of that angle, when Shane was squirming and whimpering in something that was growing closer to pain than pleasure from the overstimulation, Ilya leaned forward, blanketing Shane with his body, his front pressed to Shane’s back. His thrusts became shallower by necessity, but he took the lobe of Shane’s ear into his mouth and sucked, then pressed down with his teeth—gentle, teasing, then harder, enough to sting.

Ilya felt the beginnings of his own orgasm creeping up, which was not the plan at all. But Shane was so hot and receptive beneath him that it was impossible to stop. Ilya straightened again, gripping Shane's hips as best he could with both hands, thrusting harder, faster. Shane was panting against the pillow, burying his head in the crook of his arm, flushed and sweaty and so needy beneath him.

"Fuck," Shane hissed into the crook of his elbow. *"Ilya. Fuck."*

The sound of his name, so ragged and needy, nearly undid Ilya. He started to reach around to take Shane's dick in his hand, but Shane was already writhing and tensing and coming beneath him, and that was too hot, too much, and then Ilya was coming too, his vision whiting out for a second.

When he'd gotten his bearings, Ilya carefully lowered himself to the side and disposed of the condom. Shane remained where he was, boneless, facedown against the sheets. This really *was* Ilya's favorite physical activity. Much better than walking or swimming or stationary bicycle. Ilya leaned over and pressed a kiss against Shane's shoulder blade.

"Ugh. I'm in the wet spot," Shane complained into his pillow after a moment. Ilya let out a low sigh. He did wish he'd gotten Shane to relax for a tiny bit longer than this.

"Wet spot is only the extra pillow," Ilya pointed out, then reached beneath Shane's body to carefully wriggle it free. He tossed the pillow carelessly across the room. "There. No more wet spot."

Shane laughed softly, then rolled backward into Ilya's arms. They were on top of the blankets still. At some point, they would need to get under them, but that was a problem for later.

"I can see why you say cottage is relaxing," Ilya remarked into Shane's hair. "I am very relaxed right now."

As he'd hoped, Shane laughed again, then softened a little further into Ilya's arms. "Me too."

Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

In every universe, they will have this specific conversation... 🌀

Shane woke to Ilya already awake, which was odd enough, but what was even stranger was that he was also standing at the dresser, fumbling through its contents. Ilya was never up first, although Shane wasn't sure if that was something intrinsic to Ilya or if it was something that had changed since the injury. But now he was wide awake and clearly on a mission, yanking drawers open and shoving things aside. Shane sat up blearily.

"What are you doing?" Shane asked, rubbing his eyes. Ilya didn't quite turn to look at him.

"You have swimming shorts here, yes?" he asked. He closed the drawer, then opened the next, moving the clothes inside around. Shane was going to have to fix it all later. He had had those organized very precisely.

"In the bathroom drawer," Shane told him slowly.

"The bathroom?" Ilya echoed, sounding confused. "You are so strange, Shane."

Ilya disappeared into the bathroom, and Shane got out of bed and followed him as far as the doorway. He leaned against the doorframe and watched as Ilya pulled open drawers. There was a frantic, restless energy to him, which was interesting considering that he was the one who kept trying to convince Shane that he needed to relax.

"Are you okay?" Shane asked as he watched. Ilya was definitely tired of hearing that question, but this time, Shane definitely meant more, like...emotionally than physically. Physically, Ilya had been doing mostly okay for the past week since they'd arrived at the cottage, except when he'd do all his horrible exercises. Ilya didn't seem to mind doing them as much as Shane minded watching him do them.

"I want to try swimming," Ilya declared, as if that wasn't obvious. "I am tired of stationary bike."

Shane wasn't surprised, not really. Ilya had become all but obsessed with the stationary bike, but mostly because it was one of the only things he could comfortably do—besides sex, of course, which Ilya had not exaggerated about being his favorite physical activity. The pleasant ache in Shane's ass after having been fucked several times in the past week was testament enough to that fact. Ilya could barely lift weights because his wrist was still in the 'gentle stretching and no heavy lifting' phase of healing, and he had Ilya had already walked

in basically every direction they could from the cottage without wandering onto someone else's land.

"In the pool, though, right?" Shane prodded. "Not the lake."

Ilya gave him a long-suffering look. "Yes, the pool," he agreed blandly.

The doctor had said Ilya's incisions were healed enough more than a week ago, before they'd even driven up to the cottage, but Shane still imagined some weird lake bacteria finding its way in, straight through a not-quite-healed incision and into Ilya's brain.

He knew the thought was irrational. He didn't even need his therapist to tell him that. Ilya feeling dizzy and drowning in the lake was maybe a more rational fear—and Shane was neurotic enough to have both irrational *and* rational fears. Lucky him.

Ilya laughed suddenly, pulling a garment out of the drawer. It was a black Speedo.

"Is this one for you or for me?" Ilya asked, scrutinizing the size on the tag. Ilya's hips were wider than Shane's, so it was obvious enough from the size who they were for. Ilya laughed even harder, and Shane felt himself flush.

"I bought a couple of different styles!" he defended. "I didn't know which one you'd prefer."

The only time Shane had seen Ilya in a swimsuit had been at the All-Star Game in Florida, but he didn't actually know if Ilya had only worn trunks then because so many players had their kids around. He wondered if maybe Ilya would prefer something less baggy for actual swimming. And he was European, for fuck's sake.

"You don't have to wear them," Shane said when Ilya had been laughing for at least a full minute without stopping.

"Oh no, I will wear them! I know you want to stare at my dick in them."

Shane pressed his lips together tightly, because he couldn't exactly deny that.

Ilya sat just at the edge of the pool, knees drawn up, head pillowed against his knees. Both he and Shane were wet, both breathing hard. Water dripped from Ilya's hair onto the ground, forming a small puddle beneath him. Shane's heart was still racing from the panic.

"I am sorry," Ilya apologized, sounding genuinely angry with himself. His voice was muffled against his knees, tight with frustration. "In water, was too hard for my brain to know which way is up."

Shane rubbed his hand up and down Ilya's wet back trying to soothe him, but none of the tension left the muscles in Ilya's back, and he didn't lift his head. He stayed curled in on himself, closed off, like he could make himself smaller if he tried hard enough. Like he wanted to disappear.

“No, *I’m* sorry. They suggested swimming because it’s low impact. No one warned us this could happen.”

Ilya released a ragged, humorless laugh against his knees. He looked so small, somehow, with his wet hair plastered to his head, his body drawn up into a tight ball.

“They said brains are weird, yes?”

Shane thought that they said something more complicated like, ‘The human brain is extremely complex and it’s difficult to predict how any one person’s brain might react to specific stimuli,’ but Ilya had gotten the gist. Fuck, it struck Shane again that Ilya had had to navigate all this shit in the wrong fucking language. He wondered how much shit the doctors had said to Ilya that he’d had to fight to even understand.

“Maybe we should stick to walking,” Shane suggested, continuing to stroke Ilya’s back. Ilya groaned. “Or graduate to jogging?”

Ilya could probably manage jogging, Shane thought. He managed the stationary bike just fine.

Ilya lifted his head, finally, rubbing his hand over his face. Shane couldn’t tell if the wetness clinging to Ilya’s eyelashes was water or tears.

“I want a cigarette,” Ilya complained. Shane winced a little. He knew he’d been nagging Ilya about smoking basically since the moment they’d met, even before he’d had any right to. And it had seemed like Ilya had been tapering off, mostly. He definitely smoked a lot less than he used to. But maybe that hadn’t been Shane’s influence at all. Maybe his trainers had finally convinced him that he’d perform better if he quit. And the doctors had definitely told Ilya that he shouldn’t smoke, though they would have said it regardless of his injury, Shane was sure. Doctors were always telling people they shouldn’t smoke, for obvious reasons.

“You shouldn’t.”

“I know I shouldn’t,” Ilya hissed, annoyed. “I don’t even have any. But I want one very badly right now.”

Shane dragged in a slow breath. It was only now that it struck Shane how little frustration Ilya had showed through all of this. Probably because he’d been stuck dealing with Shane freaking out about it the whole time instead. Another fucking thing for Shane to talk to his therapist about, he guessed. And he really needed to find one for Ilya, hopefully soon.

Shane felt antsy, couldn’t just sit there. He needed to do something, anything to help. He pushed himself to his feet and grabbed their towels from where they’d left them on one of the pool chairs, shaking one out before draping it carefully around Ilya’s shoulders. The sun was shining on them, so it wasn’t cold, but still.

“Do you think you can walk?” Shane asked, his arm lingering around Ilya. Ilya sighed.

“Yes, I can walk,” he affirmed. “It will be a pain, though.”

It struck Shane that he didn't really know what it was like for Ilya, that he'd never quite asked. He'd seen Ilya sway or list to one side, seen him need to sit down or lie down, but he didn't really know what it *felt* like for him.

"What's it like?"

"Hm?" Ilya grunted, sounding a little surprised. God, and people thought *Ilya* was the asshole, and here Shane was, the guy who never asked simple questions. "Is a little like...the ground is tilted, but I need to walk on it like it is flat. I can do it if I concentrate, but inside my head is like...what is English word? Airheaded?"

Shane fought the urge to laugh, but the guess had been stupidly adorable. "Lightheaded," he corrected, then felt suddenly concerned. "But you don't feel like fainting or anything?" Ilya never had, not since the surgery, but if anyone could avoid it out of sheer determination, it would be Ilya.

"No, no, not like that," Ilya dismissed. "Sorry, is hard to describe. Not just because of English. In Russian, it would be hard, too, I think."

"Well, would lying down help? Maybe in bed, not on the pool deck?"

Ilya snorted, seeming a little less frustrated than before. "Yes, maybe," he agreed. He held out his hands for Shane to help him up.

Ilya let Shane dry him off when they got to the bedroom, though sitting in the sun had already done much of that work for him. He also let Shane pull off his ridiculously tiny swimming clothing and help him into a pair of boxer briefs instead. It was a shame. Ilya had imagined teasing Shane with his dick in wet, skin-tight briefs, but of course his brain had objected to that. Stupid brain.

Shane retrieved a fresh towel from the bathroom and set it over the pillow to keep Ilya's hair from getting the pillowcase wet, because of course he did. Ilya's hair wasn't so long, still, but it was long enough to start to curl at the ends again, long enough that water was still clinging to it even after Shane had squeezed a lot of it out. Shane was always very careful about that, like maybe he'd read somewhere about how to take care of curly hair. It seemed like such a Shane thing to do, to look that up, and he was so careful and thorough and sweet that it made Ilya want to pull him down and kiss him until neither of them could breathe.

Instead, Ilya laid down and closed his eyes. He felt the mattress dip next to him, and then Shane was sitting beside him. Ilya shifted a little, so his head was resting against Shane's hip. Shane had changed into shorts, and he didn't even complain that Ilya was getting pool water all over his clothes. Instead, he carded his fingers through Ilya's hair, just as Ilya had hoped he would.

"Having me here with you doesn't make it worse, does it?" Shane asked after a moment, sounding genuinely worried. Stupid man.

“Having you with me is better,” Ilya assured him, clasping his hand around the meat of Shane’s thigh, as if to prevent him from moving away. “Always better.”

They remained there in silence for a long time, Ilya’s head pillowed against Shane’s hip, until Ilya’s head started to feel better—less like the world was spinning, less like his head was cottony and slow. Ilya stroked his hand up and down Shane’s thigh, a thought niggling persistently at the back of his mind.

“Can you live with this?” Ilya asked slowly, nervously. “If your boyfriend is like this forever?”

Ilya held his breath, afraid of what the answer might be. What if Shane said no? What if he’d been thinking it this whole time but hadn’t known how to say it until Ilya had asked him directly? Or worse, what if Shane lied, said everything was fine when it wasn’t, and let the resentment build silently until one day he just couldn’t take it anymore and left? That would be worse than hearing the truth now. Ilya thought that would break him completely.

But Shane didn’t say yes or no. Instead, what Shane said was, “Boyfriend?”

It was only then that Ilya realized that they’d never used the word before, or any other one. “Yes, I think so,” Ilya said tentatively. “Unless you want to use other word? Lover?”

Shane physically flinched against him. “Ew, no,” he protested. “Not that one.”

Ilya sat up slowly, looking at Shane. He was physically cringing.

“What is wrong with word ‘lover’? ‘Love’ is right in it!”

Shane looked at him as if he couldn’t quite tell whether Ilya was joking or not, whether this was a trolling thing or an English thing.

“It makes it sound like...never mind,” he dismissed, though a light pink flush was coloring his cheeks beneath his freckles. Ilya thought he maybe understood what it sounded like. That they fucked, maybe a lot. Which they did. But Shane could be very shy about things like that, even though the people who knew must also know that they fuck.

“So not ‘lover’,” Ilya concluded. Shane’s face screwed up even further.

“Please stop saying that word,” he pleaded. “‘Boyfriend’ is okay. Or ‘partner.’ I used that when I talked to Hayden.”

Ilya’s chest felt warm when he imagined Shane telling anyone, even if it was Hayden Pike. He wished he’d been there. He wished he’d seen Pike’s face. But even more than that, Ilya felt warm at the word Shane had chosen.

“‘Partner’ is nice,” Ilya acknowledged, settling down against Shane’s side again. “Sounds like we are a team.”

Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

You'll recognize another book scene appearing here. I borrowed a bit of dialogue from the book for it, because why mess with the parts that don't need messing with? 😊

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

Shane watched as Ilya collapsed onto his back in a patch of grass at the head of the trail, breathing hard and covered in sweat. But he was smiling, staring up at where Shane loomed over him, watching for any sign of something worse than exhaustion from the run. Well, it had been more of a jog. Maybe something halfway between a jog and a run, but it still felt like a pretty big accomplishment, all things considered.

“Shit, Hollander, you could not let me win?” Ilya panted, brushing his sweaty hair away from his forehead. The June sun made the lightest brown strands in Ilya’s hair shine almost blond, and his hair had grown long enough to form back into soft little curls. Though now the curls were in disarray, standing up in every direction or plastered to his head with sweat.

“Never,” Shane said, grinning.

“But I am injured!” Ilya protested dramatically. “It is not nice to take advantage of injured people!”

Shane sat in the grass next to Ilya. “That’s not what you said last night,” he remarked, raising an eyebrow. “You complain if I *don’t* take advantage of you.” And he knew Ilya wouldn’t want Shane to go easy on him, anyway, for all that he was complaining. “Anyway, you’re fine.”

And Ilya was, mostly. He was definitely better than he had been. His wrist had healed enough that he could start lifting weights again somewhat seriously, which made him stop complaining so much about how skinny he was and how he was surprised Shane could still find him attractive, which Shane worried had been a joke that had hidden a real insecurity. But he looked closer to his old self now, if maybe his conditioning wasn’t quite where it used to be. And maybe they hadn’t quite gotten him back on skates yet, which Shane was a little thankful about, because the thought of it terrified him a little. Which was the sort of thing Shane said to his therapist, not to Ilya.

Ilya swung himself up to a sitting position next to Shane, then blinked a few times, pulling in a sharp breath through his nose. And *that* was why Shane really didn’t want Ilya back on fucking skates.

“Okay?” Shane ventured after a second, when it seemed Ilya had gotten his bearings again. Shane had gotten a little better at not internally panicking every time this happened. He’d

probably have had a heart attack already if he hadn't.

"Yes," Ilya confirmed. "Just moved too fast."

Yes, and playing hockey at their level was predicated almost entirely on moving way too fucking fast. Still, Ilya's episodes of vertigo had decreased a lot in the last couple of weeks, enough that it seemed like maybe there *was* a chance he'd be able to play hockey this season. Maybe not at the beginning of the season, but within the next year? Well, Shane wasn't a doctor, but maybe. That freaked him out, too, another thing his therapist had already heard exhaustively about. She probably regretted taking him on as a client, for as much as he told her the same stupid things over and over. Or maybe he was a really easy paycheck since she never needed to come up with anything new to say.

"Бсѐ хорошо?" Shane asked, and Ilya's smile was always so fucking worth it. He felt guilty that he hadn't been studying Russian more, but since they'd gotten to the cottage, he'd mostly spent every possible moment wrapped around Ilya or helping Ilya. He asked Ilya to speak to him in Russian sometimes, and he understood maybe ten percent of it, but maybe it helped train his ear or something. Or maybe he just thought Ilya speaking Russian was sexy as hell.

"Хорошо," Ilya confirmed, and he held his hand out, patiently waiting for Shane to stand and help him up. Shane couldn't imagine anyone being as good-natured in Ilya's situation as Ilya was, honestly. Shane was sure he would be a nightmare if he'd had to rely on Ilya and his parents for so much help. Some part of Ilya seemed to genuinely enjoy it, though, and it was nice to think that Ilya could find any kind of enjoyment in something so horrible.

Of course, then Shane realized that the reason that Ilya probably enjoyed it was that no one had taken care of him since his mother had died. Maybe even before that, if his mother hadn't been in a good enough place mentally to take care of someone else. Shane didn't know. That was something Ilya would hopefully talk to *his* therapist about, once Shane found him one. Which he still hadn't. And even now, once Ilya was able to look at screens more, Ilya didn't seem in a rush to do it either. Maybe it was some lingering Russian sensibilities about therapy that Ilya probably wouldn't admit if he had.

Shane stood and helped Ilya to stand, and Ilya rocked against him a little as he came to stand upright before he steadied. Still, Ilya was sweaty and bright, and...well, sweaty.

"We really need a shower," Shane remarked after a second. The particular musk of sweat on Ilya was definitely more appealing than, say, a hockey dressing room, but it still wasn't Shane's favorite.

"Last one to the shower gives the blowjob!" Ilya exclaimed, then took off running toward the cottage before Shane could react.

"Hey!" Shane protested and took off after him, even though the only way Ilya would win right now was with a significant head start. Still, it was fucking *cheating*. "Asshole!"

Ilya's laughter echoed back toward Shane as he pursued. Shane did win, because he was definitely faster than Ilya right now, and he wasn't going to *let* Ilya win.

But in the end, they both gave each other blowjobs.

“I can’t believe New York is finally going to win the cup,” Shane said as they sat on the couch watching the final game of the final series of the playoffs wind down. Or, well, Shane sat; Ilya laid with his head in Shane’s lap, Shane’s fingers tangling through his hair.

It wasn’t even because Ilya was feeling bad. He was feeling fine, really, had even been able to watch basically the whole game, though he didn’t know why he’d bothered. He’d missed so many chances to watch Shane play in the playoffs because he’d been dizzy and sick, but now he got to watch every single minute of Scott fucking Hunter hoisting the cup? It really wasn’t fair.

But no, Ilya had his head in Shane’s lap because he’d learned that if he laid like that, Shane would start petting Ilya’s head. It was like a reflex, almost, like Shane did it on instinct, maybe even barely noticed that he was doing it. Or maybe he did notice, because Ilya felt him pause every time his fingers brushed past the surgical scars hidden beneath Ilya’s curls, like he wasn’t sure what to do with them, wasn’t sure if he could touch them. They didn’t hurt, though, didn’t feel like very much at all.

“Well, Boston could not make it without me,” Ilya pointed out. “So this was only chance for the Admirals.”

Shane poked him hard in the side. It actually hurt a little, but Ilya was glad. Because that meant that Shane didn’t see him as this fragile, delicate thing, even if maybe he was still a little fucked up. Well, more than a little, but much less than before.

“I was still playing with Montreal, remember?” Shane said testily. Ilya turned onto his back, so he was looking up at Shane. Riling Shane up was always better when he could see Shane’s expression.

“Yes, and Admirals beat you,” Ilya reminded him with a grin. “So maybe you are not so good as you think.”

“Fuck *you*!” Shane protested. “Montreal won the cup the last *two years*.” Shane’s face had scrunched up in that cute way it did when he was annoyed, which might be Ilya’s favorite part of annoying Shane. “You are *such* an asshole.”

Except Shane said it in that same tone of voice he used when he said *I love you*, so there wasn’t much bite to it. Ilya reached up and booped Shane on the nose.

“You are very cute,” Ilya said, and Shane’s expression immediately relaxed into something soft and adoring. Ilya still had a hard time getting used to the fact that he could look at that face—those sweet, dark eyes, those cute freckles—every day...for now. And when the summer ended, it wouldn’t be so bad, either. They wouldn’t have to go months without seeing each other.

Because the Ottawa trade was so close to going through. The Bears had been annoyed when he’d first requested it; no team liked trading away a good player to a divisional rival. Except

Boston was pretty convinced that he might not be a good player anymore, especially when he told them he was still having symptoms two months after the injury. And the Centaurs weren't a good team—even with Ilya back to perfect form, one player was not enough to make a team a contender for the cup, or even for the playoffs.

So they'd agreed to the trade, at least in principle. They were still arguing over details, whether Ottawa would take responsibility for Ilya's full remaining salary, whether there would be any draft picks or lower-level players included in the trade. But really, it was almost a done deal. There was no reason not to tell Shane about it.

Except Ilya hadn't. He didn't know why. Maybe there was some part of him that was afraid it would still fall through at the last second. Maybe there was some part of him that was terrified of expecting anything good. It was probably something he should talk to his therapist about...the therapist he still didn't have. Because he'd been trying to sidetrack Shane every time it came up, trying to stop him from doing any more work to look for one, because there was no way to say *Maybe you should look for one in Canada* without having to explain why.

"Holy shit," Shane said all of a sudden, staring at the screen in openmouthed shock. "Ilya, fucking *look at this*."

Ilya turned back toward the TV, not sure what he was meant to be looking for. He'd seen these celebrations before; hell, he'd been a part of these celebrations. The ice would be swarmed with players and their families, everyone hugging, and...holy shit, *kissing*—

Scott Hunter was *kissing a man*. At fucking center ice, the Stanley Cup in the background, kissing a man in street clothes—and not in a friendly way, but in a very, *very* romantic way. With his hand on the back of the man's neck and his tongue in the man's mouth. The man who was very probably Scott Hunter's boyfriend.

"What the fuck?" Shane said, echoing...well, all of Ilya's thoughts. "Is that his fucking boyfriend?"

It seemed like it, the way Hunter cupped the man's face and leaned in to kiss him again. Ilya just stared, dumbfounded. Concussions couldn't cause hallucinations, right? Hallucinations shared with your partner who did *not* have a concussion? No, obviously not. Still, Ilya blinked a few times as if he expected the image to go away. It did, finally, but only because the cameras cut away.

"What is happening?" Shane demanded frantically. "Did he really just *do* that?"

Ilya sat up at last, too fast, to the familiar sway in his brain. It wasn't so bad anymore, or maybe he was just used to it. There was a twinkle of rapt fascination in Shane's eyes, and suddenly, so many things that had not seemed possible before felt very, very possible.

"Holy shit, Ilya! Can you belie—"

"I asked for a trade to Ottawa."

Chapter End Notes

...yes, there is a sequel coming...

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