

Confidence, Poor Judgment, and a Death Wish

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Confidence, Poor Judgment, and a Death Wish

by [TheHeartWantsWhatTheHeartWants](#)

Summary

Troy Barrett comes to Ottawa wanting stability. He tells himself he wants the team, the routine, the structure, the safety of fitting in without needing too much from anyone. This is his clean start, and he needs to do whatever it takes to keep it.

What he finds instead is Shane Hollander, amazing perfect Shane Hollander, and the uncomfortable realisation that the thing he's been trying hardest not to want might be the only thing that actually feels like what he needs.

As lines blur and tempers rise, Troy learns the hard way that wanting to belong can turn into wanting to keep, and that some things aren't up for negotiation, especially when there's a Russian captain who's already decided what's not on offer.

or

"Hey, Ilya?" Troy asks, already regretting it. "I was actually going to ask you about someone."

The moment he says Shane Hollander's name, the locker room goes quiet, and Troy knows he's crossed a line he didn't fully understand.

*under renovations from 23/03 because i know i can make it better and my therapist said its better then deleting it (sorry comments off in the meantime)

Notes

Hi guys!!!!

I genuinely did not have posting a fanfiction on my end of 2025 bingo card, but here we are.

also 23/03 I am editing the hell out of this because let's just say it is the least favourite child of the POV's and not getting left anything in the will :)

Hope you enjoy!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!! (this is so much fun)

Chapter 1: An Epilogue to a Poor Man's Eulogy

Chapter Notes

(re establishing the old the chapter from the 11th and changing the revised versions from the 20th! sorry i just like the old story better and shouldn't have deleted it and changed it to this fic lol anyway...)

weeeeeelcoome!!!!

please look at the tags obvs before starting in this adventure and hold onto the handle at all times keeping your feet in the cart :)

welcome to the most dramatic heated rivalry fic you'll maybe read, have fun!!

It was a peaceful day in the Centaurs' locker room. A quiet Troy had learned to appreciate.

It came only once the emptying of skates and shouted jokes and background of bodies had cleared the walls and left him alone. Alone, where he could breathe deeper than earlier in the day.

Alone, when a door shut and the metal could say what Troy already knew...*everyone else had moved on.*

Now there was just the old smelly walls and Troy.

Peaceful. Like he'd said.

-

Troy knew he'd been dragging his feet on purpose. Practice had ended ten minutes ago, but leaving meant stepping back into the rest of his life, and lately that felt like a lot more effort than he had in him. Hiding in locker room, at least, made him feel like he was doing *something*. Like there was momentum in it. Like staying still, here, counted as movement in whatever direction he was currently spinning.

He was halfway through the laces on his skates, when the locker room door swung open, and Ilya Rozanov walked in like the peace had been waiting specifically for him to eat up and spit out whole.

"Barrett!" Ilya announced cheerfully. "You did okay today. Better than last week. Much improvement."

Troy looked up, startled enough that his fingers slipped on the lace. "Oh. Uh. Thanks."

It came out mumbled as he nodded once, eyes dropping back to his skates, and hoping that settled the exchange. Or at least made it clear he wasn't in the mood to talk.

Ilya, of course, did not take this as a cue.

He wandered over and leaned casually against the bench opposite Troy's stall, studying him with the same open curiosity he brought to everything else in life. Food. Other people's business. Gayness. Troy's general existence.

"You are settling in," Ilya continued. "*New city. New team.* This takes time. But you are doing fine, yes?"

"Yeah," The sitting man said, still avoiding any eye contact.

Ilya tilted his head. "So," he drew out, clearly happy to dig a little deeper. He must be accustomed to making conversation with little eye contact. "Have you met anyone yet?"

Troy's stomach clenched in pulses.

"Anyone," Ilya clarified helpfully as if that was the issue, "you want to date or... *fuck.* Maybe"

Heat rushed straight to Troy's face. He turned away, suddenly very invested in stuffing his socks into his bag. "No," he said, too fast. "Nope."

He could feel the blush gaining on him, the way his ears burned, the way his shoulders had gone tense. He kept his back half-turned, hoping Ilya would pick up on *this* message.

Ilya hummed thoughtfully instead. "Any gay bars again?" he asked, undeterred.

Oh my god, how do you say fuck off in Russian.

Troy shook his head, faster this time. "No. Definitely not."

Ilya just laughed, as if this were all perfectly normal conversation between teammates in an empty locker room. As if Troy hadn't just come out to a man he'd known for less than a season and then immediately wanted the floor to open up and swallow him whole.

Maybe it was normal. Troy had no real metric for these things yet. He was new to this whole version of himself. New to saying it out loud. New to having it exist in the space between him and someone else.

"Do not worry," Ilya said kindly. "You are attractive hockey player. And yes, paid *less* than me... but still good." He grinned, clearly pleased with himself. "You will find someone."

Troy nodded again, still not quite brave enough yet to turn all the way back around. "Yeah," he mumbled. "Sure."

He wasn't exactly accepting or denying what he suspected were meant to be compliments. He just letting them hover, and disintegrate in the air.

It's soon after that, the quiet Troy had been hoping for finally slipped back into place, and he took it as permission to actually start packing up his things.

Because sleeping here would be one step too far down a self-destructive spiral he had no interest in exploring. No matter how aggressively the floor smelled like bleach, he was fairly sure it could still give him some kind of disease. That felt like a line worth respecting.

He shoved his gear into his bag and slung it over his shoulder, pausing when he caught sight of Ilya on the other side of the locker room. Ilya was smiling at his phone, laughing softly to himself as he typed, completely at ease.

For all how tense and shut-down Troy felt most days lately, he was glad he'd told him. Glad there was someone here who knew he was gay. Someone who seemed, shockingly, interested in his life. Or at least the *depressing* highlights of it. Still. It counted.

Troy cleared his throat. "Hey, Ilya?" he said, already halfway regretting it. "I was actually going to ask you about someone."

Ilya looked up, his attention snapping into focus like Troy had flipped a switch. "Oh yes?" he said with a new smirk growing. "Who? I have many options for you. Like *Harris*, remember?"

Troy shook his head, a small laugh slipping out. "No, not *Harris*." He hesitated, fingers around the strap of his bag. "I mentioned him the other day, when I told you I was... gay. Um. Not Harris, but—"

He stalled, suddenly sweatingly aware of his own heartbeat.

"I know you're close," he added carefully. "And I don't even know if he is *gay*, but—" He winced. "He's *hot*. I thought maybe..." He forced the words out. "Shane Hollander?"

Before the last name even left Troy's mouth, the locker room went quiet.

Too quiet for two people to be actively breathing in it. One of them must have stopped, held their breath, and Troy wasn't entirely sure if it was him.

Ilya blinked.

Just once. The Russian smile disappeared completely.

"Oh," Ilya said, after a beat.

Looking at Troy in a way Troy was fairly certain *he never had before*. It was a brief, almost imperceptible assessment scan. Up and down. Gone as quickly as it came. Then, instead of saying anything else, Ilya glanced down at his phone and shoved it into his training bag, pushing it deep.

Troy was suddenly aware that he'd maybe crossed a line. One he'd suspected might have been there all along. Like asking Ben Affleck for Matt Damon's number just because they

were best friends. It was awkward and unprofessional. Like using *one person to get to* another.

Troy didn't wait for either a pitiful yes or horrible no from the captain, instead he scrambled backward, eager to patch over whatever he'd just dented. To preserve whatever goodwill he'd found with this man, someone who, Troy was now certain, was clearly *insulted*.

God. Of course. He was an idiot.

"No...no, forget I said anything," he blurted, raising one hand, physically rewind the moment. "I'm sorry. I just thought, because, *you know*. I don't *know*. I'm sorry. Just forget it."

The more he scrambled, one useless word after the other, the more solid Ilyas turned back became.

It was enough to send Troy fully into retreat as he bent to grab the rest of his things, moving too fast and nearly tripping over himself in his rush toward the door. Two steps. That was all he needed. But unlucky, he didn't make it that far.

"Troy."

Ilya's voice rang clear, it wasn't cheerful now. It was flatter and the terrible confirmation Troy had been bracing for, he fucked up.

"Did he mention something to you?"

Troy froze. *What?*

"What?"

"When he was here yesterday," Ilya continued carefully. "To pick up his bag before party. Did he talk to you about this?"

Troy shook his head, trying to pick up any context to what the man is referring too. "No. No, I didn't...I didn't even see him. I didn't know he was here."

Ilya's eyes didn't let him go. They held Troy there as the distant broken wheel of a cleaner's cart rattled down the hall.

"And you didn't talk to him," Ilya said evenly. "Right?"

"No," Troy said. "Definitely not."

"You go for *Harris*," Ilya continued, casual again. "Yes? Like a good boy." He tilted his head. "He is the word you used before... *hot*? He is hot too, right?"

Troy nodded, eager for solid ground. "Yeah. Harris is probably better than Shane. You're right."

Ilya blinked. "No," he said flatly. "I did *not* say that. That was you."

“Oh.” Troy winced. “Right. Sorry. I didn’t mean to...” He gestured, mortified. “I didn’t mean to offend your best friend.”

The words hung there, idiotically apologetic. Troy watched Ilya take the note, nodding like he understood. Like *best friend, yes, of course*.

Troy nodded too, mirroring him automatically, really honestly scared in this moment, not too. They stood like that for a moment, still as anything, the air between them holding something neither of them seemed willing to name.

Then Ilya pulled a smile back onto his face, but it didn’t fit. Not with whatever had repainted the walls of the room within the past five minutes in a shade Troy was painfully aware he’d created.

Ilya clapped his hands together once. “So,” he said, cheery. “Any big plans tonight?”

Troy opened his mouth, then hesitated. He wished, more than anything, that he’d kept his question to himself. Or asked someone else. *Anyone else*. If he even wanted to bag Shane like that.

“No,” he said finally. “Not really. Probably just go home. Watch another movie.”

Ilya nodded, the smile still pulled across his face, his attention feeling distant now.

But before Troy could actually do anything to change it, a phone chime sound dinged once, obviously from Ilya's bag.

Troy let the sound and the way Ilya didn't go to answer it be his signal to jerk his thumb over his shoulder. “I should go.”

Ilya laughed softly and shook his head, not dismissing his departure but instead the too late arrival of it. “Yes, sorry. I held you too long.” He waved a hand. “You did good in practice. I’ll see you tomorrow, yes?”

“Yeah,” Troy said, nodding. He hesitated, then added, quietly, “And I’m sorry. You know. I really... *appreciate* you.”

Appreciate you? Who is he, your server?

Ilya nodded once more. “See you tomorrow.”

Troy turned for the door, the locker room quiet behind him again, in a drag that followed him out, stuck to the bottom of his shoe. But as he left the rink that afternoon, one thought settled in and refused to move.

He just hit on the captains decade long friend. *To his captain face*.

What was he thinking? He couldn’t be happy with a sneaky grinder hookup?

He had to go straight for the Taylor Swift of hockey?

Troy started to breathe, maybe a little too deeply.

He should've just been happy with this team, with what he had. That stepping out, wanting more, a relationship, of all things, had been greedy. Too much. That he'd put something good in jeopardy over and over again because he never knew when to stop.

God, he could be so stupid.

The embarrassment of it rose in his chest, the instinct to name every mistake he'd ever made from middle school to now pressed down hard until it hurt. But he paused, hand briefly around his bag strap, and forced himself to slow it down.

In.....and out.....

He needed to show Ilya he didn't want Shane. He had to fix this.

He probably did want Shane, but he didn't want Ilya to know that. Troy *didn't want* Shane more than he wanted *this team*.

He needed to show Ilya that he was normal. *Chill*. That the question had been nothing more than a misstep. Curiosity without intent, curiosity already corrected.

If Shane was important to his captain, then Troy could be important to the team without making things complicated.

He liked it here. Liked the routine, the people, the sense of belonging he hadn't realised he'd been missing until it was suddenly his to

The only card his brain can draw is for next time he saw Shane Hollander, he would talk to him. He'd make a point of standing close. Of laughing. Of being friendly. Casual. In front of Ilya, if the opportunity presented itself.

That was what he'd done wrong, wasn't it? His dad always told him he couldn't tell when he misstepped but Troy could see it clearly this time.

He couldn't think of anywhere else he'd gone wrong.

Hockey didn't really love gay guys hitting on straight men. That was just how it worked. So Troy would be the bro-est bro possible to Shane Hollander. Easy and maybe stupidly harmless.

He would be around Shane Hollander in plain sight, and as much as possible until things with Ilya settled. Until it got back under control.

Until the air cleared.

Until all of this, Troy thought, passed happily over.

How hard could it be?

Chapter 2: The Penalty Box

Chapter Summary

Troy Barrett comes into practice determined to fix a mistake he definitely shouldn't have made, by being normal about it. Very normal. Unfortunately, his plan involves bonding with Shane Hollander, learning Ilya's signature move, and proving to his captain that nothing is weird at all.

It goes badly.

Chapter Notes

Hi again, guys!!!! I know I said I'd post the first full chapter later in the week, but the response to the opening completely hijacked my brain and I genuinely couldn't think about anything else. So... here we are.

Thank you so much for all the love, comments, and commotion already, it means the world. I hope you enjoy diving properly into this mess with me. I was giggling and kicking my feet writing <3

Hockey drills were really fucking hard.

No one ever talked about that part. Not properly. Everyone loved to talk about the games, the goals, the hits, the *glory*. No one mentioned that practice itself was a waking nightmare made up almost entirely of activities that had *very little to do* with actual hockey.

Right now, for example, Ilya had them skating full speed, jumping over cones, spinning mid-stride, and then firing shots on goal. Skills Troy was fairly certain he would never need in a real game. Not unless the league quietly pivoted to some kind of dystopian Hunger Games style head-to-head, where you had to execute a perfect pirouette in the air, land on one foot, and shoot, *or die*.

Maybe this was how they trained in Russia.

Maybe the coaches there just set up an army crawl drill across the ice, and the last kid to finish got sent to the gulag. Forced to endure whatever happened there until he could shoot one-handed, one-eyed, upside down, and backwards. Troy had a sneaking suspicion Ilya could probably do that if asked. The bastard.

Troy, on the other hand, clipped a cone with his skate and nearly ate shit.

He caught himself at the last second and took a second too long to recover, which, of course, Ilya noticed.

“Again,” Ilya called out, already skating past him.

Troy muttered something uncharitable under his breath and pushed off, legs screaming as he rejoined the drill. He was going to survive this practice. He was.

-

Halfway through another agonising run, and close enough to the teammate in front of him that he nearly clipped both their skates this time, a voice was heard from somewhere off the ice.

“Ilya!”

The name pulled the captain’s attention away instantly.

Which was lucky, because Troy was fairly certain he’d messed up the jump again, and he didn’t have a single run left in him. The inside of his helmet was already somehow damp despite being surrounded by ice. Troy slowed just enough to keep from fully slamming into the boards and risked a glance over his shoulder.

Shane Hollander stood near the locker room, smiling.

He lifted one hand in an easy wave, the other holding what looked like a thin stack of papers. What they were for, Troy had no idea. Probably something charity-related. Shane Hollander was a superstar and the kind of man who spent his spare time doing philanthropic things. He seemed to enjoy making everyone else in the league look worse by comparison.

Ilya didn’t even look back at the team.

“Okay,” he called, already pivoting on his skates. “Everyone, cool off for a moment. I’ll be back.”

Then he was gone, skating toward Shane and, leaving a collection of huffing, puffing hockey players behind him like discarded, red-faced toddlers.

Troy stayed still, hands braced on his knees, chest heaving as he watched the two of them lean in together near the boards.

He couldn’t hear what they were saying, or what had them smiling like that. Just that they were clearly on the same wavelength in whatever they were discussing. Shane kept trying to press the papers into Ilya’s hands, gesturing animatedly as he talked, and Ilya, uncharacteristically, didn’t even glance at them at first. His attention stayed on Shane, face soft in a way Troy hadn’t seen aimed at anyone else.

Eventually, Ilya took the papers. He skimmed them quickly, pointed toward the stadium seats, said something, and then pushed off, skating away toward the locker room without another look back.

Shane watched him go, smiling to himself for a moment longer before wiping his face with the back of his hand, then finally turning toward the ice. Sitting down in the seat Ilya had pointed out and looked up at them.

He scanned the players still catching their breath until they, for some reason, landed on Troy.

Just for a moment, before snapping to the floor.

It wasn't long enough to really mean anything. But Troy still felt all the same, like the awareness of a spotlight on and then off again.

Troy looked away as well, choosing instead to focus very hard on his skates. On his breathing. On anything else.

God, he hoped Ilya hadn't told him.

About what he'd asked, or how he stupidly said it. The locker room awkwardness replayed itself like a bad movie in his head. Ilya hadn't really spoken to him today. And Troy was still far too embarrassed to bring it up himself.

Honestly, he was more than happy to move on.

Forget it ever happened.

Like he'd decided, he would just be normal about it. Like everyone else. Buddy-buddy with the captain's friend. Teammates. Bros.

With enough time, enough proximity, maybe Ilya would forget Troy had ever asked about Shane at all. Once. Or twice.

Troy straightened slowly, exhaling, and made a decision.

This was his opening.

He raised his hand toward Shane and yelled his name, waving a little too enthusiastically in an attempt to get his attention. Shane's focus came up from the cones and scattered drill setup, probably trying to work out what bizarre torture Ilya had just put them through, and landed on Troy.

A pass of confusion crossed his face as his eyebrows knitted together. Then he lifted his hand and gave a small, polite wave back.

Okay. Good. Progress.

Troy gestured again, motioning for him to come over, pulling what he hoped passed for a friendly smile onto his face. It didn't really suit him. It felt like a cheeriness he'd borrowed

from Harris and forgotten how to wear it like a normal human person.

Shane looked more confused now. He glanced around the ice, clearly checking to see if Troy was trying to get the attention of literally anyone else. When nothing clarified the situation, he nodded slowly, like a man resigning himself to something mildly strange.

He reached into the bag beside him, pulled out his skates, and laced them quickly. Then he pushed off and skated over.

Up close, Shane still looked politely baffled, the smile on his face clearly something he'd put on out of habit rather than understanding, but Troy couldn't blame him. If a guy he'd never spoken to before had waved him down mid-practice, Troy probably would've assumed it wasn't for a good reason either.

Shane came to a stop a few feet away, waiting, and Troy swallowed, and as it went quiet between them.

He was suddenly aware that whatever came out of his mouth next was about to set the tone for everything. Aware that one more second of whatever this was would officially tip into awkward.

"Hi," Troy blurted.

Shane blinked, clearly not expecting that to be the opener. His head tilted with hesitancy around his eyes. "Uh," he spoke in breath. "Hello?"

Great. Already fucking it up.

This was not how bros acted. Bros did not stand around saying hello like they were meeting at a Sunday picnic. Bros had a reason. Bros had a thing.

Think. Think. Think.

"I saw your game last Friday," Troy said, latching onto the first hockey-adjacent thought his brain could offer. "It was amazing."

Shane's expression defrosted quickly after that, a real grin easing into place, as something had finally clicked into a familiar groove. Praise. "Oh. Thanks," he grinned. "Yeah, it was a really fun one. San Francisco's a good team. Close battle."

"Yeah," Troy said, nodding along a little too earnestly. "It looked that way."

After the natural thread of conversation hit the cliff edge, and silence came back in again.

Shane shifted on his skates and glanced away, then back. "Were you there?" he asked quietly, trying to give the moment somewhere to go.

"Oh...no," Troy said quickly. "No, I just watched it. On TV." He paused, then added, rushing ahead before he could second-guess himself, "I saw you do that really awesome move. The Ilya. Was it?"

Shane laughed. Phew.

Okay. Good. This was good.

“Yeah,” Shane grinned. “Ilya wasn’t too happy about that.”

“Oh, I would know,” Troy said, relieved enough to joke. “I asked him to show me how to do it once and he laughed in my face.”

Shane tilted his head again. “Yeah,” he said. “He’s like that sometimes.”

“Well...could you show me a few pointers?” Troy asked, the words tumbling out now that he had momentum. “I’d love to be able to do it one day. Shock *the shit* out of Ilya.”

Shane’s face twisted into a dramatic grimace. “Absolutely not,” he said, shaking his head. “No way. He almost killed me for that, and I’m his—” He stopped himself, huffing out a breath. “I’m me.”

Right. Best friend. Franchise player. Untouchable, apparently.

Troy waved a hand, brushing past it with a confidence he absolutely had not earned yet. “Come on. Please. We’re on the same team. If I learn it, that technically helps Ilya. Even if he’s too arrogant to admit it.”

Shane studied him for a moment, head swaying as he turned the plea over in his mind. Deciding whether this was a bad idea or just a mildly stupid one.

Finally, he sighed. “Okay. Fine.” He held up a finger. “But I’m not teaching you the whole thing. Just the setup. The skill part. After that, you’re on your own.”

“Deal,” Troy said instantly.

“And,” Shane added, pointedly, “this is not one of my charity bootcamps. I expect to be actually listened to”

Troy grinned. “Yes. Definitely. Thank you.”

He gestured toward the far end of the ice. “We can do it over there. Empty net. Away from... whatever this is.” He nodded toward the cone madness Ilya had left behind.

Shane laughed again, pushing off to skate alongside him. “What did he have you doing?”

Troy shook his head. “CIA training or some shit. You don’t want to know.”

Shane snorted, and Troy felt another dangerous surge of victory.

This was working.

Which, historically, was when things tended to go wrong in the world of Troy Barrett.

They trained on their quiet side of the ice for about five minutes.

At some point, the rest of the team drifted off, back to drills, back to the benches, or back to whatever coaching Ilya had planned next, but Troy barely noticed. Shane was surprisingly still there with him. Heating the ice until it felt less frigid beneath Troy's skates.

Shane showed him how to build speed properly, how to come in on the angle instead of charging straight at it like an idiot. He'd said earlier that he wasn't going to teach him the whole move, but he was doing a pretty good impression of it anyway. Walking Troy through the logic of it instead.

"You can't just go straight at it," Shane said, skating a small arc to demonstrate. "You either commit to the angle, or you don't do it at all."

That made sense. In a Troy way that felt annoyingly easy and undoable at the same time.

He showed Troy how to flip the stick at the right moment, how to twist his wrists instead of muscling through it, how to adjust if a defender was blocking him, this way if they're here, that way if they're not.

It was actually fun, which explained a lot. Troy got why everyone loved this guy.

Shane was mid-demonstration, standing close enough that he could feel the shift of his weight through the ice, when he reached over and adjusted Troy's grip again. His hand closed over Troy's, nudging it lower on the stick.

"No," Shane said, sighing. "Not there. Here. Remember?" He repositioned Troy's hands. "That way when you swing, you get the angle and the power."

Butterflies flew low, low in Troy's chest, but all of a sudden, he caught the movement of Ilya watching them near the locker room doors out the corner of his eye.

Troy couldn't read Ilya's closed-off face. But despite this, a relief bloomed in Troy's chest.

Yes. This was perfect.

This was exactly what he'd wanted. Ilya could see them now, happy, working and *teammates*. Friends. Proof that last night had been *nothing*. Just a tired question asked at the end of a long day. Something Troy would never have said if he'd been properly caffeinated and fully conscious.

He glanced at Ilya once more, letting himself take it in. Watching Ilya's eyes meet his own.

Then he turned his attention to Shane, who still hadn't noticed their audience. Shane's focus was entirely on Troy, on his hands, on the stick between them. On hockey as usual.

“No,” Shane droned again, annoyed and working to adjust Troy’s grip once more. “There. That’s it.”

Troy nodded, swallowing.

Everything was fine. Everything was working.

Troy opened his mouth to ask another question, something about what to do if the angle was tighter, if he had to dodge closer instead of giving himself space.

“What if it’s closer than that?” he started. “Like, if you don’t have the full—”

“You don’t,” Shane said easily, already answering. “You give it up. You need at least three feet to do the twist properly, otherwise you—”

When a voice cut in close.

“What are you doing.”

Both of them jumped.

Troy’s skates scraped against the ice as he turned, and Shane swore under his breath, twisting around at the same time. They ended up half-facing each other, half-facing the interruption, caught mid-movement like they’d been children found drawing on the wall.

Ilya stood right behind them.

Oddly close enough that Troy was confused as to why he hadn’t heard him skate up at all. He is like a Russian trained spy, deployed to be great at stick sports.

For half a second, no one said anything. But that didn’t stop the air from feeling charged. Like the second right before a referee blows.

It built moment by moment, the three of them standing there, no one was quite sure who was supposed to move first. A Western kind of standoff, complete with tumbleweeds and lone whistles. Then, in the question of who’d draw first, Shane and Troy spoke at the same time.

“Nothing,” Shane said.

“We were just messing around,” Troy said.

And then, because apparently Troy’s mouth was no longer receiving instructions from his brain, he added, “He was showing me the Ilya.”

The quiet that followed these stupid words was worse.

Shane’s head turned slowly toward him. Just a speed enough to make it *very clear* that Troy was not supposed to have said that. The look wasn’t bro-coded anymore. It wasn’t amused or even the slightest amount of indulgent.

Ilya didn't move.

His eyes moved between them instead, like he was watching a replay of whatever he just saw from three different angles, and as the seconds ticked on, Shane finally cleared his throat.

"Yes," he said, a little too brisk. "I was showing him a few pointers. On how to do the Ilya." He nodded toward the locker room, already trying to steer things somewhere safer. "Just passing time while you were signing the releases. Where are those, by the way?"

It was a good pivot in all honesty, the brown-haired man must be good at redirecting, and Troy could have let him have it.

It would have been easy to step back, nod along, let Shane change the subject and skate away with the moment intact.

But Ilya was still looking at him. *Not* at Shane and his question.

And in this moment Troy had the sinking realisation that whatever he'd just tried to prove, whatever picture he'd been trying to paint of friendship and brotherhood, hadn't at all worked. Because apparently Ilya wasn't seeing *friends*. He wasn't seeing normal.

He was just... seeing. With his eyes. Trying to place puzzle pieces, in spots that didn't make sense right now.

So before Shane could try again to redirect things, Troy acted.

He lifted his hand and gave Shane a light punch to the shoulder, very *straight Frat-boy* casual. Then in succession, without quite thinking it through, he let his arm settle across Shane's shoulders, pulling him in just enough to make the point.

"Yeah," Troy said, forcing a grin he hoped read as effortless. "You know. Shane's just a *great guy* like that."

For half a second, after the comment was released into the air no one breathed.

Shane went very still under Troy's arm.

Troy went still under Ilya's eyes.

And Ilya...well Ilya's eyes twitched.

"Penalty box," he said.

Just like that.

In the most mystifying manner at first.

So everyone just froze, uncertain, with no real idea what the Russian meant. The sound of a record scratch clear in the background.

Shane was the first one to break it. Again.

“What?”

Ilya didn't look at him. He shook his head once and said, “Troy. Go to the penalty box.”

Troy's arm dropped from Shane's shoulders as he stared at Ilya, genuinely baffled. “What?” he echoed, the word coming out very disbelieving.

Ilya just snapped to him then, something lit behind his skin now.

“You heard me,” Ilya said, lifting one hand and pointing across the empty ice toward the box. The penalty box. The one that only ever got used during games, when refs were being unfair and everyone knew it. “Go.”

Troy opened his mouth again, panic blooming fast. But Shane beat him to it.

“Ilya, don't do that,” Shane said quickly. “He just wanted to learn your trick. I didn't show him the move. I was teaching him the parameters.”

Ilya let out a humorless scoff. “Yes. I was watching *all the parameters* of my trick.”

He stepped closer, voice fine-tuning with each word. “You hear that? My trick. Not Troy Barrett's trick. And it will never be Troy Barrett's trick for as long as I live. I worked very hard for that trick,” Ilya continued. “Many years. Many, many years.” He gestured stiffly toward the ice. “So *the trick* steps away. Far away. And Troy goes to penalty box. Now.”

Troy looked between them, heart hammering, the world tilting just slightly off its axis.

Okay. *Ilya's English had gotten a little tangled there toward the end*, but Troy thought he understood the message.

He'd stepped on Ilya's toes again.

Worse, he'd asked his best friend to teach him something Ilya had built for himself. Something that clearly wasn't *just* a move, but a line, and Troy yet again stupidly crossed it.

He swallowed hard, nodded once, and pushed off toward the penalty box, the scrape of his skates breaking ice in the sudden quiet.

This had gone terribly wrong, and judging by the look on Ilya's face, it wasn't over yet.

Troy was one push of his skate away when a hand suddenly closed around his arm.

It stopped him cold.

He turned his head just enough to see Shane Hollander's fingers wrapped firmly around his forearm. Shane wasn't looking at him. His attention was locked entirely on Ilya now.

“No,” Shane said. “Troy, you stay here. *You* didn’t do anything wrong.” His grip wrapped. “I shouldn’t have shown you.”

Ilya didn’t look at Troy. He didn’t respond to Shane right away either.

He just stared at the hand on Troy’s arm.

Then Ilya said, flatly, “You too.”

Shane blinked. “What?”

“You,” Ilya repeated, eyes never leaving that point of contact. “Penalty box as well.”

Shane let out an incredulous scoff. But Troy barely had time to process it before the words were tumbling out of his own mouth.

“The penalty box?” he said. “With me?”

Ilya's eyes widened a fraction as he shook his head, visibly agitated now and fraying at the edges. “No. Not together.” He gestured flailing as he backpedalled. “Troy, you go to penalty box. Shane, you go to....*locker room*. That’s an order,” Ilya added, doubling down. “From your captain.”

Shane promptly laughed. “You’re *not* my captain.”

Ilya exhaled, running a hand back through his hair. “Right now, I am.”

Shane just stared at him for a long second. He went to open his mouth one last time, but Ilya cut him off, repeating himself without hesitation.

“Troy, *penalty box*. Shane, *locker room*.”

The words bounded off the arena walls, echoing slightly as the demand sunk into the frozen water below.

Shane, looked at Ilya's eyes back and forth for a quick moment, then shook his head and turned away, already pushing off. Disbelief clear on his face.

“Yeah,” he called back over his shoulder. “I heard you, asshole.”

Troy although watched Ilya *watch* Shane skate away. For just a second, something appearing across Ilya’s face, before it vanished.

His gaze locked back to Troy right after.

“Penalty box,” Ilya said again, louder this time.

Troy lifted his hands, palms out. “Okay. Okay. I get it. I get it.” Then pushed off slowly himself toward his timeout corner.

When Troy stepped into the box and pulled the door shut behind him, he looked up and found Ilya still staring at him.

Arms still crossed and almost daring him to try something. *Wanting* him to give him a reason to move.

Troy opened his mouth, maybe to apologise, maybe to explain, maybe just to say something.

But...

“No talking in the box,” Ilya said immediately.

Troy shut his mouth.

He swallowed, suddenly very conscious of the glass between them, and very grateful that the rest of the team had scattered somewhere else and didn’t have to witness this particular brand of humiliation. Being benched was one thing. Being benched *like this* was another.

Troy saw Ilya inhale and his mouth part like he was about to say something anyway, break his own rule, maybe when “Ilya!” rang out from the far side of the rink. The same one as before but angry in a way Troy didn’t want to unpack.

Ilya gave Troy one final look, then turned and skated off without another word, leaving Troy alone. The last soul left in the rink.

And painful clarity, he understood what he’d just done.

It was no better than asking someone at a bar to show you how to handle a pool cue. It was very gay. Not at all something you did with someone you felt mildly, safely, teammate-adjacent about. Add in the fact that it was Ilya’s signature trick and Ilya’s best friend, and suddenly it felt like an unconscious triple hit.

Troy Barrett, world-class idiot.

He’d managed to step on Ilya’s pride, blur a boundary with Shane, and make himself look exactly like the thing he’d been trying not to be.

At least, *at least*, Shane hadn’t seemed annoyed with him. That counted for something. Maybe that was salvageable. Maybe that was a thread he could still work with.

This morning, Troy had thought he was already starting at the bottom.

Now he understood what the bottom actually looked like.

And he needed to find a way out of it. Fast. Because judging by the look on his captain’s face, Ilya didn’t have much patience left to spare, and Troy wasn’t sure he’d survive running out of it.

But luckily, there was a Christmas party coming up.

The whole team had been invited, and it was hosted by Shane, of course, because apparently he was *also* the kind of guy who casually threw holiday parties on top of everything else. That gave Troy a few days to think. Time to plan.

Surely he could come up with something by then.

He could fix this. Apologise in a way that didn't make things worse, because he always somehow seemed too.

By the new year, this could all be behind them. Maybe they'd all laugh about it someday. Troy could get that think he wished for, stability. He just needed to actually act like someone who knew what it was.

Maybe they'd even have a New Year's kiss...Or not.

Jesus Christ. Get it together, Troy.

He had a plan now. Sort of.

And at this point, that would have to be enough.

Chapter 3: Watch your head!

Chapter Summary

Troy goes to Shane Hollander's Christmas party fully intending to keep his head down and survive the night quietly. The team has other plans. Between bad card games, peer pressure, and one strategically placed piece of greenery, Troy leaves with the uneasy sense that something important just happened, and that Ilya Romanov was very much involved.

Chapter Notes

Hi <3

(No sleep, bus, club, another club, nother club, plane, next place, no sleep no fear, nobody believed in me)

Troy didn't have a plan.

This was, *admittedly*, not ideal. He was fairly certain he'd said out loud, to himself, and possibly to God, that he would take a few days to think things through. That he would come up with something reasonable and really *really* fantastic.

But the more he thought about it, the less he trusted his own decision-making skills.

Because case in point. The *locker* room. The *rink*. He genuinely believed those were good ideas at the time. And then there he was, banished to the penalty box like a child who'd thrown their broccoli at their brother during family dinner.

So Troy had made an executive decision.

His plan was to have no *plan*.

He was choosing to believe in the possibility of a Christmas miracle. One where nothing happened. Where everyone behaved like normal adults. Where Ilya didn't look at him like he was one more stumbled word away from being launched back into Toronto.

To help this miracle along the river, Troy had purchased a truly horrendous ugly Christmas sweater. It was an ugly red one with blinking lights, and a reindeer wearing sunglasses was on it. He'd put it on with the vague hope that if he looked *stupid* enough, Ilya might feel

better about him. Or at least feel superior, which Troy was increasingly convinced was the next best thing. Reparations, you know.

Still, as the Uber rolled through Shane's neighbourhood, Troy found himself staring down at the sweater with growing unease. What if he'd misjudged this? What if everyone else was dressed nicely? What if this came across not as charmingly self-deprecating but deeply idiotic?

What if Ilya took one look at him and thought, *wow, this guy can't even try?*

Troy sighed and leaned his head back against the seat with a thud. He was *already* committed to the stupid sweater and staying out of the way. Committed to being the chilliest, least noticeable version of Troy Barrett tonight as humanly possible tonight.

He would revisit the whole *my captain wishes I was dead and my career may never recover* situation later. When he had more brain power and was not walking into a Christmas party hosted by the man he had accidentally offended, humiliated, and possibly flirted with.

Tonight, the goal was simple.

Show up. Be polite, and don't *touch* anyone named Shane Hollander.

And persevere. God, did he hope to persevere.

—

As Troy stepped up to Shane Hollander's front door, he found himself thinking, somewhat unfairly, that it was surprisingly a *really* nice house.

There wasn't a hedge out of place, or a loose stone on the path. The concrete trail leading up to the door curved around a small pond, the water still and never once known moss or a rogue leaf. *Very Type One-coded*, Troy thought.

He would bet actual money that Shane owned matching dishware as well. Proper sets and cups too, with nothing chipped, and if it was, it had already been replaced or hidden from sight.

He was actually midway through admiring the random pond next to the entry way, noting the small fish darting rapidly beneath the surface, when the front door suddenly swung open.

And smacked straight into him.

“—oh, shit!”

Troy stumbled backward, arms flailing as he tried to keep his balance and nearly dropping the gift in his hands onto the wealthy looking concrete. Harris, who had apparently been on the other side of the door moving at lightning speed, bounced back into the frame with a startled laugh.

For a brief, deeply humiliating moment, they just stared at each other panting. Harris recovered first, laughing as he steadied himself against the doorframe. “Sorry! I didn’t see you there.”

“It’s...it’s okay,” Troy said quickly, regaining his footing as well and forcing his hands to stop gesturing wildly. “I hadn’t even knocked yet. I was just—” He waved vaguely at the house, the path, the air. “Don’t worry about it. Are you okay?”

Harris nodded, still smiling. “Yeah, I’m good.”

Then his eyes dropped.

“Oh my god,” Harris said, delighted. “I *love* your sweater.”

Troy’s stomach sank.

Because suddenly, Troy realised he’d been absolutely right in the Uber. Harris was dressed... well. Like a *photographably* well outfit that could end up in a candid team Instagram post and become style inspo for next season’s game-day looks.

Oh shit. Were there Instagram posts tonight?

A wave of self-consciousness rolled through him. He nodded, tugging lightly at the hem of the sweater. “Yeah, I just thought, you know... *fun*.”

Harris grinned wider. “It’s very fun. Honestly, if I’d known, I would’ve brought my own ugly sweater. Missed opportunity.” He paused, then winced slightly. “Actually, I’m so sorry...I was just running back to my car. I forgot the wine I brought.”

“Oh,” Troy said. “Yeah. No worries.”

“I’ll see you inside?” Harris asked.

Troy nodded, stepping aside to let him pass. “Definitely.”

Harris gave him a gentle smile, then jogged down the path toward the driveway, still grinning to himself, leaving Troy alone again on the doorstep.

Troy took this quiet final second to steal a breath as he watched the man go, adjusted his sweater one last time, and finally stepped into the house. Knowing whatever was going to happen tonight, it was better to get it over with.

The moment he crossed the threshold, the noise hit him before the sight did.

He’d thought the locker room got loud, but this, this was something else entirely. Eleven fully grown men talking over one another, all layered on top of aggressively cheerful Christmas music. Compared to this, the rink might as well have been a silent buddhist meditation retreat.

Troy followed the sound deeper into the house, drawn along by it, taking in the decorations as he went. They were, *unsurprisingly*, impeccable as well. Everything, yet again, coordinated. Everything, yet again, beautiful.

Jesus Christ. If Troy ever got real money, he was absolutely asking Shane Hollander who his interior decorator was. Exterior designer too. Fuck it, *an all-around designer*. Clearly this man knew people.

Lost in a secondary round of admiration, he blindly turned the corner and bumped straight into another body. Not as hard as with Harris, but enough to spin them both slightly, hands lifting on instinct to keep their balance.

He looked up and, *of course*, it was Shane Hollander. The man of the hour. Or week.

It took a moment for Troy's brain to come back online, reboot to full working capability. Apparently, a brief power outage ruptured through him the second he recognised Shane's face.

Shane looked just as caught off guard, blinking once in surprise but, like everything else he did, he recovered faster. He slipped into a radiance with ease, expertly laying a smile over his usual baseline flatness.

"Troy!" Shane said, energy up. "We were just wondering where you were."

Troy blinked, slightly disoriented by the *We* and the *hit*, as he glanced past him into the house. "Oh. Am I the last one here?"

Shane nodded, letting out a faint laugh. "Yeah. We were starting to think you'd tapped out and just didn't tell anyone."

"Oh," Troy said, then laughed softly. "I wish."

He meant it. Sort of.

Then, because silence was nobodies friend, he added, "I couldn't miss *Christmas with the team*. How fun."

Something flickered across Shane's face at his slight sarcasm, quick but Troy caught it anyway. He couldn't help wondering how much Ilya had told him about his personal life. What version of Troy lived in Shane's head now.

"Yeah," Shane said after a beat, his voice gentler. "It's a really great little family, from what I've seen. I think it'll be really good for you."

Troy nodded, the motion automatic, even as his chest went haywire. Because yeah. He knew *that*. Knew this mattered. Knew there wasn't really any other reason for him not to be here, or any other family to go too.

He looked down for a moment, suddenly not ready to meet Shane's eyes.

There was something else present now. Ghost of Christmas past, maybe. Or at least awareness. Whatever had happened at the rink had left a residue embarrassment between them Troy would've happily scrubbed from the day if he could. Instead, he focused on what was right in front of him.

The Ghost of Christmas present. Literally.

Right. He'd brought a present.

Not just for Shane. For Shane *and* Ilya. A joint gift.

It had felt important when he bought it, like maybe part of what had gone wrong before was that Troy had tried to approach one without properly accounting for the other. Like he'd treated friendship as something you could isolate instead of something tangled. Shane-and-Ilya were a unit and Troy had no interest in disrupting that. Had never wanted to.

This was him acknowledging it, and offering something to the whole shape of them instead of accidentally wedging himself into the middle.

When he looked back up, Shane was still watching him but with now something sad sitting behind it.

Troy lifted the wrapped box, forcing a small but hopeful smile. "I brought this for you and Ilya," he said. "It's not much, I just... *Christmas*. And you're hosting, so I thought—"

"Oh," Shane cut in quickly, warmth flooding his voice. "Thank you, Troy. You really didn't have to."

The relief that spread through Troy's chest nearly folded him. He shrugged, suddenly blushing as Shane took the box and turned it over in his hands.

"It's heavy," Shane noted, amused.

Troy laughed softly. "Yeah. I didn't really know what to get you, so—"

"Wow," a familiar voice said. "What is this? *A present?*"

Troy's blood stopped. Both he and Shane looked up at the same time again just like the Ice.

Ilya stood farther down the hall, already smiling as he slowly approached, head tilting in that assessing way of his. He looked between them, then at the box in Shane's hands, eyes loud with interest.

"Troy," Ilya continued, tone almost teasing. "You are *too* kind."

And just like that, the night tilted. *Damn not even five minutes in.*

Shane looked at Ilya, in a way Troy didn't quite understand.

"Ilya," Shane said, clearly, "Troy got us *both* a present. Isn't that nice?"

Ilya nodded steadily, stepping closer until he was standing almost between them, the three of them forming a narrow, accidental triangle in the hallway. “Didn’t I just say that?” he replied easily. “He is *very* kind.”

Shane opened his mouth, like he was about to add something else but for once, Troy beat him to it.

“It’s for you too,” he said quickly. This was, apparently, the third time this had needed clarifying, which felt excessive. “I just...I didn’t really know what to get you, so I hope it’s not terrible.” He laughed lightly at the end, like that might soften the moment.

Shane shook his head, trying to attempt a smile again. “I’m sure it’s fine, whatever you—”

The sentence never finished.

The box was gently but decisively removed from Shane’s hands and transferred into Ilya’s.

“Well,” Ilya said, already tugging at the wrapping paper, “let us see what we have, then.”

“*Ilya*,” Shane started, his tone turning faintly scolding, but it was too late.

Paper tore. Festive red and green gave way, and a twelve-pack of ginger ale sat there, unmistakable as the hallway went quiet.

Troy felt the duos silence settle into his bones. He watched Ilya’s expression change as the Russian lifted his gaze slowly from the box to Troy.

Shane, meanwhile, smiled instantly. “Oh, I love—”

“Last time I was at Ilya’s place,” Troy blurted, overlapping him, the words spilling out before he could stop them, no longer partially confident in his gift. “I saw the fridge *absolutely stacked* with these, so I just thought—”

Perfect Ilya gift, he didn’t say out loud. But it hung there anyway.

The moment stretched, balanced on the edge of a reindeer sweater wearing knife, then Ilya’s eyes locked onto Troy’s.

It was the same look Troy had seen at the rink, and again in the locker room, but this time it was closer. Close enough that Troy could register the exact shade of hazel and the way the light caught in it. Close enough that the intensity felt like a slow press against his lungs.

Surrounded by Shane’s immaculate Christmas décor, the warm orange glow of fairy lights, and the soft whistle tones of Mariah Carey, Troy had never felt less safe.

Shane’s voice cut in from beside them, a clear attempt to salvage the moment. “Thank you, Troy. That was *really* thoughtful.”

Neither of them looked at him.

Troy watched as Ilya's mouth curved slowly into a smirk, his gaze never leaving Troy's face. His eyes moved left, right, back again, seeing something clearly for the first time. The puzzle piece's he was trying to place on the rink finally clicked into place.

"Thank you... *Troy*," Ilya said at last, drawing every syllable enunciated with unsettling precision. Then, without looking away, he passed the box of ginger ale into Shane's hands. "Can you put this in the fridge?"

Shane hesitated, glancing between them, wariness painting across his face. "Yeah..." he said slowly. "Sure."

But still, even with this, he turned and walked away.

The second Shane moved, Troy felt an overwhelming, instinctive need to follow. As if his life genuinely depended on putting distance between himself and Ilya. As if staying in this hallway for even another second might be a catastrophic end to his already sad life.

He took the moment Ilya glanced away to check that Shane was around the corner, to quickly sidestep the Russian, slipping past him with a muttered, "Sorry,".

"Troy," Ilya said, his name dangerous, barely more than a breath. Spinning back around to face him.

Troy didn't stop at the call. Nope. Nope. Nope.

He rounded the corner as fast as his legs could carry him and spilled into the main room, into noise and bodies and *safety*. The team spotted him instantly, a few of them cheering his name, welcoming him and waving him over like he hadn't just escaped deep waters without a boat or paddle.

Ilya followed a moment later, cutting the corner at a neck breaking speed. For half a second, his face looked genuinely terrifying.

But before, Ilya could reapproach Troy a hand caught his arm, and he startled hard enough that his breakfast jumped straight into his throat. Boodram, already red-cheeked with a beer caught in his fingers, gave Troy an enthusiastic tug.

"Barrett!" he shouted over the music, grinning. "Come on, man. You're in. We need another body."

"What—" Troy started, but he was already being hauled sideways, pulled out of the entry of the room and into the busy safe centre. Although Troy wasn't listening, he twisted around again, half-dazed, trying to reorient himself, to relocate the threat but only to find Ilya Rozanov gone.

The space where he'd just been standing was empty. Troy scanned the room again to doorways, and corners, shadows and walls. To find Nothing. No flash of blonde hair or European posture. Just Christmas cheer and movement and people laughing too close to his ears.

It was unsettling.

Like losing track of a spider in your apartment. You tell yourself it's fine. That it's probably already dead. But a part of your brain stays on alert anyway, waiting for it to crawl out at the worst possible moment. Waiting for it to reappear when you're vulnerable. In the dark. In your bed.

Troy shook his head, fast, like he could physically dislodge the thought.

Jesus Christ. Get a grip.

Ilya was not a spider. He was a hockey player. A captain. A human man who had strong opinions and poor boundaries and an admittedly unsettling way of looking at people when he was annoyed, but still. A man. A normal one. Mostly.

This wasn't that serious.

He let Boodram shove a red cup into his hand and nodded along as someone explained the game rules he was apparently about to join. He forced a laugh out of himself at a joke.

Ilya was just being *protective*.

That was all.

Protective of his *best friend*. Protective of his *stupid signature move*. Protective in that intense, overbearing Russian way. It didn't mean anything.

It definitely didn't mean Ilya cared *this* much. Troy was not important enough for that.

More likely, Troy was just doing what he always did.

Reading too much into everything because that was easier than admitting he didn't know how people felt about him unless they spelled it out in very clear terms. Something everyone did.

Ilya probably wasn't even thinking about him anymore and couldn't give two shits. It was probably a bad reaction to his shitty present more than anything.

Troy took a sip of his drink, grimaced immediately at the taste, and focused harder on the game in front of him.

This was just a party. A Christmas Party. At Shane Hollander's house. Nothing bad was happening. And Troy was definitely, absolutely, being overdramatic.

—

By the time dinner was ready to be served, Troy was didn't know why he'd ever thought not coming was the better option.

The night slipped past whatever unsure nature he'd walked in with, and before he knew it, he was laughing so hard his cheeks hurt. It was kind of ugly.

He'd forgotten, somewhere between hockey and the rest of his life, how fun the holidays could be. How light they felt when they weren't being overhauled by bad family. When no one was yelling from another room and only shouting your name because you'd said something stupid, or because you were being handed another drink you absolutely did not need.

Someone, *Hayes*, probably, or *Haas*; Troy wasn't sure, had produced a battered old box of *Cards Against Humanity*, and from there everything had gone completely batshit.

It was a good thing half the team was queer because these cards were slapped down without hesitation. Without *shame*. People yelled suggestions across the room, booed bad combinations, screamed louder than they did when the team scored in overtime. Troy learned very quickly that there were no boundaries here, or lines that wouldn't be crossed for the sake of a laugh.

At some point, Shane wandered over, drawn in by the noise and the sound of people enjoying themselves. He perched on the arm of the couch and tried to get a handle on the rules while someone explained them terribly. But he only lasted maybe three rounds.

The moment he was asked, *very enthusiastically*, to read a card out loud that involved at least three explicit acts and obama he froze, his ears turning red instantly.

"Oh, absolutely not," Shane said, laughing even as he tried to hand the card back. "I am not saying that in front of all of you."

The room went into booing and giggles, and swore his name. Troy laughed as well and nearly spilled his freshly poured eggnog, watching Shane shake his head, muttering something about boundaries and closed doors before retreating back toward the kitchen, still smiling.

Then eventually, somehow, dinner happened as well.

They stumbled into the dining room, tripping over one another and the furniture, collapsing into wooden chairs with a huff. Then plates were passed down the table and the meal commenced.

Haas was halfway through telling a very over-the-top story that involved a train and a bar, and a decision that had clearly seemed stupid even at the time, when Ilya interrupted him loudly, confidently denying at least half of it.

"That is *not* how it happened," Ilya insisted, gesturing emphatically with his fork. "You are lying. Again."

"I am absolutely not lying," Haas shot back, delighted. "You're just mad because you were wrong."

Hayes leaned forward, eyes lighting up. "Wait, wait...wrong about what?"

And just like that, it devolved further.

Ilya corrected details no one else cared about. Haas embellished harder out of pure spite. Harris prodded and escalated until it became a full-blown mess of competing narratives and shouted accusations, with the rest of the table howling in hysterics.

Then came the cleanup, when everyone was full and happy in the post-Christmas-dinner spell.

Troy raised his hand and volunteered to help, feeling like it would be impossible that anything bad could happen now.

Also he liked being helpful, and being helpful wasn't on his *No No list* for the night. If anything, it would be a benefit to his image. He gathered plates and forks and half-empty glasses, ferrying them into the kitchen while the rest of the team stayed at the table.

He made one trip. Then another. Then a third. And by the time he was heading back into the dining room again, stacked carefully with cutlery, Shane was coming the opposite direction, balancing his own pile of dirty forks in his hands.

They slowed at the doorway at the same time, and for a split second, Troy thought they were about to collide again, the second near-disaster of the night, but they both adjusted accordingly, sidestepping just enough to avoid it, and exchanged an almost sheepish smile.

"Sorry," Troy said automatically.

"No, I'm...sorry," Shane replied, equally reflexive.

They moved to pass each other, when a shout came from the dining table that was entirely confusing.

"Watch your heads!"

Both Troy and Shane paused and turned at the same time, blinking toward the room, completely unsure why a sentence like that had just been thrown into the middle of a post-dinner melt. Who was throwing anything to watch? an for a heartbeat, the dining room was oddly quiet.

Every single man, slumped at the table, was turned around and Troy realised, looking at them.

He felt a prickle of unease crawl up the back of his neck.

"What?" Shane asked, half-laughing and clearly confused as well.

Dykstra thought just grinned and slowly pointed upward, tapping the air above the doorway like this was the most obvious thing in the world.

"*Mistletoe*," he announced, in a kind of sing-song voice.

But the word landed like a gunshot to the chest.

Troy tipped his head back without thinking, eyes flicking up to the top of the doorway, and there it was. An evil sprig of green, tied with an festive red ribbon and hanging directly above them. Why the fuck would Hollander hang a mistletoe? Who was he planning to kiss?

Maybe it was that interior designer, it was *definitely* too high for *Shane* to reach.

His stomach dropped so fast he was fairly certain all the blood in his body followed it, draining straight to his feet. His grip on the spoons and knuckles was going white, while his brain short-circuited as it tried, and failed, to catch up.

“Oh,” Haas said, far too pleased. “Oh *hell* yeah.”

“Don’t be shy,” another voice chimed in.

“You know the Christmas rules!” someone else called.

The room spun into the feel of almost high school bullying attention Troy usually avoided at all costs.

Troy suddenly became overtly aware of how close Shane was standing now in this little doorway; he could feel the warmth and sense the shift of his weight as Shane glanced up, too, then back down. And for one terrible, suspended moment, Troy couldn’t move. Or think.

Couldn’t remember what the socially acceptable response to this situation was supposed to be when you were not, under any circumstances, meant to be kissing the man standing next to you.

He risked a glance sideways to see Shane looked... panicked as well. His mouth moved into something that might’ve been a grimace, but his eyes were searching Troy’s face.

“Well,” Shane said lightly, trying to keep things from tipping too far in any direction. “That’s ___”

“I—” Troy started at the exact same time.

They stopped.

“Just do it!” Luca yelled.

But Troy didn't *just do it*; instead, he swallowed hard, pulse roaring in his ears.

This was bad. This was very bad. This was not part of the plan. This was the opposite of chill. The opposite of everything he’d promised himself tonight would be.

And somewhere in the back of his mind, another thought cut through...

Ilya is absolutely watching this.

Troy’s heart slammed harder at the idea, even as he forced himself to breathe and not drop an entire stack of spoons at Shane Hollander’s feet. The million-dollar hockey feet.

He flicked his eyes just over Shane's shoulder. And there he was. Death. Actual, incarnate death.

Ilya Rozanov sat at the dining table, leaned back in his chair. The joking smile he'd worn earlier was gone, and every trace of charm stripped away. What remained was terrifying in its stillness.

Ilya's gaze set on Troy with a focus that made him vividly aware of his own weak skin, his very flimsy and human skin. Of the narrow doorway and, more importantly, how close Shane was standing.

The awareness that if he made a wrong move, which was *any move at all*, he had no doubt Ilya would be out of that chair in a second and reenacting way he moved on the ice with no wasted motion. Although really, he didn't need to be.

He already had complete control of the situation. Ilya knew what was *allowed* and what *wasn't*. He was just waiting to see if *Troy* understood this as well from just the look in his eyes. Troy did.

Troy flicked his eyes back to Shane, who still looked at him like he'd been struck by something terrifying.

There was a pause in him, a hitch, like his body had stalled a half-second behind his thoughts with one inhale catching and shaking through him a little too hard.

Troy only caught it because he was a foot away, but across the room, Ilya also seemed to detect this in absolute understanding of the man.

His attention pulled away from the mistletoe and swept the room instead, as he sat up in his chair, voice through the noise with an anger that hadn't been there a moment ago.

"Okay," Ilya said, louder. "Fucking *enough*. Relax." But despite the rare actual anger in his tone, no one relaxed.

If anything, the cheering ramped up, as eleven drunk men emboldened by alcohol and momentum wanted the thrill of a spectacle they hadn't planned but were very invested in receiving.

Shane tried to step back, shaking his head helplessly.

"Hey...hey," someone laughed. "No backing out now!" and Dillon's voice rose above the rest, slurred. "Come on, Ilya," he said, pointing vaguely. "Is Hollander, your—"

Troy barely registered the end of the sentence. Because all of a sudden Shane was leaning in. Actually leaning in.

For a split second, Troy's brain simply refused to register it as his depth perception broke. Shane actually just started to lean in, and coming toward him.

The cheering paused in anticipation and Troy felt it press in on him from all sides, devouring everything else. He'd heard people say that intense moments slowed time down. He'd always thought that was just something people said to make stories sound better afterward. But now...

Now all Troy could see was Shane's face. Closer. Closer. *Closer*. The freckles on Shane's face becoming more defined. And then...Ilya. Ilya standing up.

He shoved back from his chair so swiftly the wood *screeched* against the floor, the piercing sound through the silence for half a second before it was overcome like everything else. Ilya crossed the room at flying speed, the movement carried out in one decisive line.

He reached the pair under the mistletoe just before Shane could close the distance. Just as Troy was starting to smell mint.

Ilya's hands coming up, catching Shane's face mid-lean, fingers against his jaw and brushing over cheekbones and the freckles. He tipped him suddenly sideways in one smooth motion, almost a waltz dip, and pulled him out of the team's line of sight.

And then Ilya leaned in and pressed his mouth to Shane's cheek, stealing the kiss.

But from the room's angle, and beer and golden lights, it looked exactly like a full dramatic mouth kiss. The team lost their minds, screaming reigned in the small dining room once more.

Troy stood nudged backward into the hallway by the whole show, spoons still clenched uselessly in his hands, staring at the two men.

Ilya stayed close to Shane, leaned in again to murmur something Troy couldn't hear, but was never meant for anyone else and Shane nodded once as Ilya guided him upright. He didn't let go until he was certain Shane was balanced on his own feet, and no longer the center of anyone's attention. Only then did he release his grip.

"Oh, come on!"

"That wasn't *your* mistletoe, Roz!"

"You're such a party pooper!"

The yelling came back playful, already turning the moment into a joke, and Troy watched as Ilya turned back toward the table and slid effortlessly back into the commanding charmer he was known to be.

Shane on the other hand pushed past Troy without a word, heading for the kitchen and murmuring words Troy didn't think he knew.

"You know me," Ilya called, voice boastful again. "I am the captain. If anyone gets to kiss anyone tonight, it is me kissing *you*."

The room sighed with whines and groans.

“So,” Ilya continued, pausing beneath the mistletoe now himself, arms spread in mock invitation. “Who is next? I already have one friend down. Haas, are you next?”

Haas snorted loudly. “You couldn’t handle me, Roz.”

The cheerful Christmas ambience found all night slide rightfully back into place, as the party moved on. Everyone happy and refilling their glasses. Well everyone but Troy.

He stayed in the hallway, suddenly aware of how separate he felt now, watching the room through zoo thick glass while he remained stuck in what had almost just happened. His attempt at *nothing* becoming *something*. He almost just had to *kiss* Shane Hollander.

His gaze drifted to the kitchen.

For a moment, he thought about following. About finding Shane and saying...he wasn’t even sure what. Sorry, maybe. Or *are you okay*. Or *that wasn’t supposed to happen*. It felt like the right instinct, the familiar one.

But it also felt wrong. Like any attempt to touch the moment again would only make it worse. How did he keep ending up in these situations? Was there a voodoo doll hidden somewhere?

Troy stepped back. Then another step. And another. Until he was standing at the front door.

A stir of gaping guilt, froze him for a moment but Troy pushed it aside.

He’d tried. He really had. That had to count for something.

Maybe Christmas just wasn’t for him. Not like this. Not when it came wrapped in people and almosts and moments. So he slipped out quietly.

Bracing the cold air as he walked, again, past the pond, the trimmed hedges, the immaculate path leading away from the house. He followed it down to the curb and sat, elbows on his knees, waiting for his Uber. Sat on the dirty pavement and hoped he’d recognise what a Honda Civic looked like when it pulled up.

He watched every pair of headlights slow on the street, his breath fogging faintly in the tail lights as the air grew colder with each passing second, then vanishing again when they moved on.

Troy wondered if he should skip the New Year’s party next weekend. Or if that decision would be made for him. If invitations quietly evaporated after moments like this. It would definitely be easier, he thought, to *bow out* early. To save face and pretend he’d chosen distance from the team he once loved instead of being fringed into it.

But as Troy was sitting, waiting, something keep pushing at his mind, refusing to settle.

Troy hadn’t seen it before, but now it was obvious. Because whatever had just happened hadn’t felt like a *best friend* protecting a *best friend*. The same with the rink.

But then again, Troy didn't have a reference point. He'd never had a *real* best friend, like what Shane and Ilya were to each other. Maybe that was why this felt so strange.

Still something smelled very...*fishy*.

And maybe Troy is in too deep to not try and find answers. He might need to be around Shane for a little bit longer...

A car slowed at the curb. Troy stood, brushing his hands against his jeans. He guessed there was only one way to find out. And really, who goes into the new year without a bang? Who finds a bruise and doesn't want to give it just a little push.

Chapter 4: A New Year's Equation

Chapter Summary

Troy Barrett is bad at math, but he's great at adding things up. Ever since the Metros' Christmas party, the numbers around Shane Hollander and Ilya Romanov have started looking...suspiciously together. Armed with spite, curiosity, and a questionable detective strategy, Troy shows up to the team's New Year's rooftop party determined to stick close to Shane and see what he can prove. Unfortunately for everyone's blood pressure (especially Ilya's), Troy is also determined to push a little. Flirt a little. Test a theory or two. Uncover somethings. But what happens when you uncover too much?

Chapter Notes

okay i'm not going to lie i read through this once, and needed to fully send it <3

buckle in guys because you about to enter the sting zone with the tarantula hawk, see you on the otherside soldier.

Troy had never been good at math.

He hated long division. Hated fractions. Hated anything that required one of those fancy calculators that cost three hundred dollars and somehow needed instructions to use.

There was a reason he'd chosen hockey over anything remotely STEM related, and it wasn't because he loved big sticks. Although it may appear to be the case in his Google search history.

Troy, however, was good at simple math.

The problems you didn't need paper for. The problems that live in the back of your brain and ruin your day. Problems like, if a train leaves the station at eleven pm and arrives at three am, how long was it moving? Or, more recently, and far more unhelpfully, if Shane has two apples and Ilya has two, are they gay? And, more importantly, are they gay *for each other*?

Putting two and two together, you know. That one had been sticking with him.

The problem wasn't that Troy couldn't *do* the math. It was that he kept getting an answer to a question he wasn't asking. An answer he hadn't even realised he'd been calculating until the result was already there, staring back at him in a very big and blaring *gay* result.

The more Troy looked at the result, the more he started to wonder if everyone else was just... fucking blind. Like, genuinely. Medically. Should not be driving on the road blind.

Because if they were, maybe they also shouldn't be on a professional hockey team that required depth perception and the ability to score goals.

Since the Christmas party, Troy had actually taken the time to think about the whole situation. Really think about it. Which, in hindsight, might've been a mistake, because the more he pulled at the thread, the more the sweater started to unravel.

He'd Googled everything he could about Shane Hollander and Ilya Rozanov's, which was...a lot. Ten years of professional hockey between them. Almost a decade in the public eye. And somehow, in a sport where guys went through blonde women like Kleenex, not one of them had really dated anyone. In ten years.

There was Rose Landry, sure. For a minute. But that had ended quickly, quietly, and now she was still Shane's best friend. Which was fine. Normal. Except that literally all of Rose's other close male friends were *gay*.

That felt relevant.

Troy stared at his phone more than once and wondered if he was losing his mind.

He even went back and rewatched the footage from when Shane got hit on the ice. He didn't know why he did it. Some instinct he couldn't explain. But watching it again, slower, pausing and replaying, something about it made his stomach twist even more. The way Ilya had reacted. The speed. The fury. The lack of restraint. Just like the mistletoe.

And then there was the *charity*.

The fact that Shane and Ilya had started a charity together. *Together*. Which Troy felt qualified to say was, objectively, the gayest thing two men could do.

Like, in order. One: having gay sex. Two: caring deeply about the political and economic state of the world.

Straight guys did not do that. Straight guys barely knew the word recycling.

Troy wasn't stupid. He knew Ilya was bi. That was public. And it had been...hinted, more than once, that Shane might be gay. Or at least not *aggressively straight* like the rest of the Metros team. Which was fine. Love that for him.

But sometimes, just *sometimes*, if two guys were gay, they were also *gay together*.

And Troy wasn't saying that was a bad thing. He really wasn't.

He was just saying he didn't want to be an idiot.

Didn't want to step into something, whether that was a relationship or a hookup or whatever, and then get viciously pulled apart for not realising there was already something there.

Something unspoken but understood by everyone except him.

Troy decided, firmly, that his one good idea all week was going to be this. Again. But refreshed.

He was going to stay close to Shane Hollander. As much as possible. Which, sure, had started out as a misguided attempt at smoothing things over. At pretending the locker room hadn't happened. But now? Now it felt...correct.

Strategic.

Troy was going to become a kind of Sherlock Holmes and get answers. A deeply unqualified American Sherlock Holmes. He was going to *hover. Observe. Ask questions* that sounded casual, but were absolutely not. Step on a few toes and see what mole rats pop their Russian heads up.

Because if Ilya Rozanov was actually mad at him, if *all of this* was really about one stupid comment Troy had made, then fine. He could live with that. He could apologise again. He could be more careful. He could take the loss and move on.

But it didn't *feel* like that.

It felt bigger. Much bigger. Like, there was a deeper reason Troy wasn't seeing yet. And maybe he needed to believe that, for his own well-being. He needed to refuse the idea that this was all happening simply because he was simply fundamentally, incurably unlikeable.

That couldn't be the answer.

So, if there was truth, it was hiding somewhere near Shane; it lived in sideways glances, interrupted conversations, and the way Ilya watched the room, and Troy was going to find it.

—

Walking into the Centaures' rented rooftop bar, Troy had the immediate and mostly useless thought that New Year's decorations were *better*.

Christmas decorations were nice sometimes, if people didn't lose their minds and shove green and red into every available corner of their house, if they kept it *simple*. New Year's didn't bother with the same stupid idea of tasteful restraint. It relied on mass manufactured cheap gold, and glitter that would still be clinging to the floor come March.

The holiday was nothing without tackiness, without things meant to be used once and thrown away, without alcohol. Everything about it was slightly terrible, which Troy appreciated. It was also significantly better when you were absolutely and completely drunk, which was, conveniently, his first and favourite goal of the night.

He pushed through the glass doors and stepped straight into the party, the atmosphere covering each of his senses. The place was vibrating as midnight crept closer, bodies moving in uncoordinated disgusting grinding while the DJ pounded out Flo Rida loud enough that Troy felt it reverberate through his sternum. Apple Bottom Jeans carved directly into his ribs.

Beyond the railing, the city sprawled below them, with the skyline caught in the moonlight too, shining extra cheap silver for the occasion. Troy took it in for half a second, pulled in a steadying breath, and then went looking for the bar.

As soon as he caught the mixologist's eye, he ordered two tequila shots and two margaritas. Lingering while the drinks were made, forearms resting against the counter as he drifted his gaze over the room.

It was more crowded than he'd expected, with random people all around and conversations rising between terrible club songs. He spotted a few teammates easily enough, and Troy offered a couple of waves that were happily returned.

The room looked fun, but he wasn't looking for just anyone. He was looking for two faces. Or, realistically, one.

Because Troy had learned, *very recently*, that spotting one of them meant the other would follow. Like the gravity of the sun. Like blood in the water. Every interaction so far had reinforced it to the point that Troy had stopped expecting anything else.

On his second sweep of the room, he found him. The freckled face and ginger ale, even under bar lighting.

Right, Troy thought. *Okay*.

This was happening.

The mixologist slid the drinks across the counter, and Troy rolled his shoulders. Taking an unnecessary second to fix himself, aware that he'd put more effort into his appearance tonight than usual, and that he wanted that effort to mean something. He tipped back both tequila shots in quick succession, barely pausing between them, then picked up the margaritas, one in each hand, and turned back toward the crowd.

Game on, Ilya Rozanov.

"Hey," Troy said, smiling as he dropped into the empty seat beside Shane.

Cutting neatly into whatever conversation he'd just been mid-way through with the woman next to him. Shane turned toward Troy's cheerful voice, surprise across his face before settling into a smile that mirrored his own. It was a little awkward, as if Shane wasn't quite sure what emotion fit right now.

Once Troy was settled in the cushions, he gave an exaggerated little sigh, shaking his head as if burdened by the weight of his upcoming words. He set the margarita glass down in front of Shane, nudging it closer to him.

"I wanted to give you this," Troy said, tipping his head toward the drink. "To make up for Christmas. I really should've been paying attention. I didn't even see the mistletoe, I *swear*."

Shane glanced down at the margarita, then at the ginger ale already in his hand. His mouth nudged into something more tentative as he nodded.

“It’s okay,” Shane said. “I’m sorry too. I didn’t see it either. Everyone was just... really drunk.”

“Yeah,” Troy agreed easily, accepting this as a shared conclusion rather than a carefully chosen one. He reached out then and tapped Shane’s shoulder once, then let his hand rest there. A friendly hold with nothing to see *unless*...

Troy looked around as the music pounded on every side of them, filling the space where conversation might’ve gone next.

Then someone cleared their throat.

Troy’s eyes slid past Shane to the woman sitting on his other side of the couch set, the one he was talking to before Troy sat down. She was watching them with an face that hadn’t quite settled into anything polite yet, and something foreign at the corner of her mouth.

“Oh...*sorry*,” Troy said immediately, shaking his head once. “Forgive me. I’m Troy.”

Her eyes moved over his face for a slow moment, then she smiled tightly and said, “Svetlana.” Extending her *right* hand in a calculated manner.

Troy clocked it instantly, but obliged, lifting his left hand from where it laid on Shane’s shoulder to shake hers, the exchange feeling oddly formal for a rooftop bar.

“So,” Svetlana said, smiling as she tilted her head, “where are you from?”

It was in that moment, mid-sentence and smile, that Troy caught the faint Russian lilt.

Jesus Christ. There were two of them.

Was this woman Ilya’s body double? Had Shane somehow collected possessive Russians like Pokémon?

“Oh,” Troy said, blinking once. “I play on the same team as Ilya.”

Svetlana laughed in a clearly disbelieving tone and turned toward Shane instead, as if Troy were something to be stepped around rather than addressed.

“I have *never* heard of you,” she sung. Then, to Shane, “Have *you* heard of this man?”

The words cut through Troy as embarrassment turned his skin to lava, chased by something more like pride, purple and bruised. He flicked his gaze to Shane as he waited for whatever response was going to follow.

But Shane just shifted beside him, like he would rather be anywhere else. Answering anything else. His smile, when he spoke, didn’t quite reach his eyes.

“Yes,” Shane said evenly. “I know him. He’s pretty good.”

Troy nodded his head, the corner of his mouth lifting as he looked back at Svetlana, waiting for a rebuttal. She studied him again, then shrugged.

“Well,” she said, unimpressed. “If you say so.”

Right.

That was it. That was the moment Troy accepted he was not going to get anywhere tonight with Little Miss Russian Number Two camped out beside Shane like an unexpected guard dog. He ran through options quickly, mentally discarding most of them as either ineffective or deeply embarrassing. He didn't need any more of those.

Then something else occurred to him.

Something he could feel bad about later. But honestly? Two Russians had already made him feel like shit tonight, and his patience was dead on arrival.

Troy let his shoulders slump a little as he put on his best vaguely apologetic, slightly sulky expression. “Actually,” he said, turning to Shane, “I wanted to talk to you about something. About *Christmas*.”

Shane glanced at him, attention pulled immediately.

“Do you have a second?” Troy added, throwing in a little frown. “Maybe somewhere a little quieter?”

Shane didn't look at Svetlana when he answered.

“Yeah,” he said, already starting to stand. “Of course.”

Shane handed his ginger ale to the woman, murmuring that he'd be back in a minute. She watched him for a second, eyes between the two of them, then shook her head and laughed softly.

“Okay,” she said, her tone light but pointed. “Decision is in your hands. Not mine.”

Troy *pretended* not to notice the way that landed. *How were there two of them?*

He quickly led Shane away from the bar, steering them toward the only quiet-ish corner he could spot on short notice, a low couch tucked just far enough from the speakers that conversation might actually be hearable. They sat, shoulders brushing, and Troy hadn't even opened his mouth yet when Shane beat him to it.

“The team really is a *good* little family,” Shane said quickly, like he'd been holding onto the thought. “I swear. It just takes time to warm up. And Ilya, he's being...well. He'll warm up too. I know your family situation is kind of...*and* that's why I told him—”

Troy lifted a hand, eyebrows raised in a gentle *whoa* that brought Shane to a halt mid-sentence.

“Oh,” Troy said, carefully. “I didn’t want to talk about that.”

Shane blinked. “Oh.” He shifted, suddenly looking like he was the embarrassed one. “Then... what?”

Troy shook his head once, a small smile tugging at his mouth. “Nothing really. I just wanted to catch up.”

“With...?” Shane prompted.

“With *you*.”

Shane stared at him for a beat, clearly waiting for more. *More* words. *More* clarity. *More* anything. When none came, his brow twitched.

“But you said you wanted to talk about *Christmas*,” he murmured like Troy might’ve forgotten his own words.

Troy just took a sip of his margarita, buying himself a second. “Yeah. I know.”

“So,” Shane said, still confused, “you *don’t* want to talk about *Christmas*?”

Troy nodded. “Correct.”

“Okay,” Shane said slowly. “Then... what do you want to talk about?”

Troy exhaled through his nose, fighting the urge to laugh. Butterfly fluttered lightly in his chest yet again at this man.

“I just wanted to talk to *you*,” he said again, a little more pointed this time. “You know. Alone.”

Shane stared at him, still completely baffled by any sentence Troy was currently saying, head tilting as he tried to parse it.

“About...?” he asked.

Troy closed his eyes for half a second in dismay.

Did he really have to spell this out?

Troy laughed and nudged Shane’s leg with his own. “Anything *you* want to talk about,” he said easily. Then, softer with a little shrug, “You’ve got a nice voice.”

Shane looked at him for half a second before he tilted his head. “Like... *hockey*?”

Troy closed his eyes and tipped his face up toward the lit up night sky, like maybe God was hovering somewhere above the rooftop and would intervene, *step in* to help Troy.

“Sure,” he said after a beat, resignation creeping into his voice. “If you want to talk about *hockey*.”

He shifted closer as he spoke, their legs brushing now, close enough that it was no longer accidental. Feet almost on top of each other. Troy lifted his drink between them, giving it a little shake.

“Do you want a sip?” he asked. “It’s really, *really* good.”

Shane looked at the glass. Looked back at Troy. Looked down again at where their knees were touching.

“Oh,” Shane said thoughtfully. “I don’t know if that fits with my—”

“I don’t know if that’ll suit his diet,” a familiar voice cut in smoothly, “but I’ll have some if you’re offering.”

Troy froze.

Before he could even turn, the margarita was lifted cleanly out of his hand, and Ilya Rozanov downed it in one go.

Just tipped it back like it was water, throat working as he swallowed the entire thing, lime and salt and all. He exhaled satisfied, then dropped down onto the couch beside them with a contented sigh.

“This is very cozy over here,” Ilya said, settling in like he’d always been part of the conversation. “Nice couch, yes?”

Troy stared at him.

Shane blinked between the two of them.

And somewhere deep in Troy’s chest, the final piece clicked into place. He squinted, fighting the smirk tugging at his mouth. Because *there it was*. The confirmation. The mouse strolled straight into the mousetrap without even being suspicious about it. Troy had been right. He *was* onto something.

He let out his own loud, performative sigh and turned toward Ilya. “Ilya,” Troy said, “Shane and I were actually having a private conversation. If you wouldn’t mind.”

But Ilya didn’t look at him, he instead pouted his lips, pursed as he tilted his head, like he was turning the offered sentence over slowly in his mind, examining it from all angles. “Mmmh,” Ilya said. “*Yes*. But not anymore.”

He finally looked up, eyes sliding lazily back to Troy.

“Not private,” he continued. “I am here now. But please, *keep* talking.”

Troy paused, sensing the two paths that had opened up in front of him, both clear as day. He could retreat. Laugh it off. Backpedal like he always did when they got to this point. Or—

Persevere, a stubborn voice reminded him. The same word he'd been clinging to on that terrible Christmas day. The day this man ruined.

Troy shrugged, easy. "Okay then."

He turned back to Shane, who was looking between the two like a game of tennis.

"So," Troy said lightly, "what were you saying? *Hockey*? Tell me about that."

Ilya snapped his eyes to Troy then, genuine shock flashing across his face. *Right*. That made sense. Troy hadn't pushed back yet. Historically, he panicked and ran for the hills, screaming wolf and Ilya had learned that pattern and maybe counted on it.

but not tonight.

Shane opened his mouth, clearly about to say *something*, either about hockey or about this increasingly strange situation, but Troy beat him to it.

He leaned in just a little, voice casual.

"I bet you look really good in your uniform."

It wasn't the smoothest thing Troy had ever said. It barely qualified as flirting. It was almost embarrassingly middle schooler. But it worked.

Shane froze.

Just for a second, but Troy saw it. The way his breath caught and posture shifted, his body registering the comment before his brain could, and colour crept into his cheeks.

And beside them, Ilya went very, very still.

Oh. Yeah.

Troy's smile widened.

He shook his head and laughed, scrubbing a hand down his face like he was sheepish about himself. "*Play*," he said quickly. "I meant play. I bet you play really good in your uniform. Sorry...don't mind me. I've definitely had too much to drink already."

He let it land messily and harmlessly, and he knew Shane would grab onto it instantly.

"Oh," Shane said, laughing with relief, shaking his head. "You're okay. I thought you meant —" He waved a hand, already abandoning the thought. "Never mind. Don't worry about it."

"Yeah," Troy said easily. "Definitely the tequila talking."

But beside them, Ilya did not laugh.

Not even a little.

His face had gone flat in a way Troy was starting to recognise, and knew who it was only associated with. It was a face where it looked like all the humour had been removed from the room entirely. Like nothing had ever been funny once.

Although Troy just sighed and stood. “Well,” he said, lifting his empty glass. “I think I need another one of these to clear my throat. Either of you want anything from the bar?”

Shane shook his head. “I’m good.”

Troy glanced at Ilya. “You?”

“No,” Ilya said shortly.

“Alright then.” Troy smiled, casual as a bee in honey. “I’ll see you guys at midnight?”

Shane nodded, already relaxed again, and happy to let the moment dissolve. “Yeah,” he said. “See you then.”

Troy hesitated just long enough to look at Shane again.

“I’ll come find you,” he added.

Shane smiled, entirely missing the weight of it. “Okay.”

But Ilya though didn’t miss it, as his eyes met, and for the first time all night, it felt like the room dropped away completely. Suddenly, there was no music and no crowd. It was just the two of them, on opposite sides of one man and Ilya’s expression twitched, just a fraction.

Oh, Troy thought. You just realised I know. You know that I know.

You know that I know you’re.....fucking?

You’re fucking each other.

Oh. My. God.

Ilya looked at him as if the knowledge itself was a problem that needed to be dealt with. Put down.

Troy held his gaze for one beat longer than necessary, then pleasantly smiled. He tilted his head. “Okay,” he said with finality. And turned and walked away.

Troy walked. And walked.

He didn’t stop walking when the music faded, or when the crowd thinned, or when the lights dimmed at the edge of the rooftop. He kept going until he rounded a random corner and found himself boxed in by trash bins, stacked crates of backup alcohol, and a wall that smelled faintly like spilled beer and piss.

Perfect.

He planted a hand against the concrete and leaned into it hard, chest collapsing as he finally let out the breath he'd apparently been holding since Christmas. His heart was going a mile a minute, with adrenaline firing under his skin as he just laughed.

Party Rock Anthem played distantly through the wall, bass vibrating through the concrete, and that, *of course*, made him laugh harder. The soundtrack to whatever the hell he'd just walked into was the same as The Chipmunks.

He dragged a hand through his hair and tipped his head back hard against the wall.

"Oh my fucking god," Troy breathed. "Oh my *fucking* god, I was right." His laughter replaced by something wild and almost hysterical.

He *was right*.

Not just a little right. Not overthinking it, *right*. *Right* right. There was something here. Something deep and tangled and very, very messy. Something he had accidentally stepped straight into it.

Shane Hollander. Multi-Cup *winner*. Franchise *darling*. The *best* defenseman in the league.

Was *fucking* Ilya Rozanov.

Shane *motherfucking* Hollander was screwing Ilya *motherfucking* Rozanov.

Troy's brain short-circuited entirely, as he stared at the crates in front of him, like one of them would suddenly start talking and explain how this was possible. How this had been happening, apparently for *years*, without anyone noticing.

Did anyone else know? Did the team know?

Was *he* the only one who had managed to put this together? The only idiot who'd tripped over it by accident and ended up in fucking wonderland?

His chest tangled and panic wiggled together until he couldn't tell which was which. "Oh my god," he whispered again, softer this time.

What now? That was *his* captain.

Oh my god. That was his captain. The captain of his hockey team. Of his current career. The man who decided ice time and line changes and whether you got iced out of drills or pulled aside.

Ilya Rozanov.

And Shane Hollander.

And something rejected the idea in Troy's chest.

Ilya was...intense and scary. Kind when he chose to be, but cold in a way that felt sometimes mean, and he had a Playboy edge to him.

And Shane...*Shane* was kind.

Shane did charity work. Shane helped Troy with his skills after practice without making him feel stupid about it. Shane noticed when Troy cleaned up after dinner and thanked him. Shane asked about his family. Shane laughed, like pure joy.

Shane had almost *kissed* him under the mistletoe.

His chest didn't reject that idea.

“Oh my god,” he muttered. “Oh my god.”

His chest didn't reject that idea.

Oh no.

Somewhere in the mess of trying to prove, to himself or Ilya, that he *didn't* like Shane, he had apparently done the opposite. Somewhere along the way, he'd started to.

Because Shane was pretty. And warm. And nice. And Troy had been drawn to it before he'd even noticed what was happening. Before even the locker room.

Jesus Christ. Pull it together.

He scrubbed a hand down his face, pacing half a step before stopping himself. This was not the issue he should have been focusing on. Not when he'd just realised that two of the league's biggest stars, two men whose names were printed on jerseys kids wore to school, had apparently been together for...how long?

Years? And no one knew?

His mind spun faster, turning accusatory without his permission.

Was it Ilya's fault they hadn't come out?

That thought came unfairly, he knew. But Ilya *did* seem controlling.

Was Shane even happy?

Because Shane didn't feel like someone who'd be content living under a blanket like that. Being hidden or managed. Shane felt like someone who deserved...more than that.

Was Shane even...

Stop. Stop. Stop.

Troy pressed his forehead back against the wall, squeezing his eyes shut and breathing hard.

This was not his business.

This was *so* far from his business it was ridiculous.

And yet.

And yet he was standing here, heart racing, knowing something he couldn't unknow. Feeling something he hadn't meant to feel. Having tripped into the middle of something enormous and dangerous and very, very real. And he had no idea what the hell he was supposed to do next.

Troy suddenly felt too sober for all of this.

He pushed off the wall and left his hiding spot, weaving back into the party with purpose, alcoholic purpose and the bar was mercifully close.

He ordered another margarita and this time didn't pretend he'd sip it. He took it straight from the bartender, swallowed half in one go, tequila burning a clean line down his throat.

He turned to head nowhere in particular, and then he saw them.

Ilya and Shane standing off to the side, just out of the main grinding and pushing of bodies. Shane's arms were crossed tight across his chest, his mouth moving as he spoke, but his face wasn't kind anymore, and Ilya was facing him, his own head tipped slightly as he shook it once, done with whatever this conversation was supposed to be.

Something in Troy made a decision without consulting the rest of him.

He spun back to the bar and ordered a ginger ale.

As soon as the can hit his palm, he didn't hesitate. He crossed the floor without announcing himself, and without thinking too hard about what he was doing. He just stepped into their space and held the can out between them, angled toward Shane.

"I thought you might want this," Troy said.

Shane startled, eyes bouncing to him in surprise while Ilya just muttered something under his breath in Russian, я убью его, but before either of them could respond, before a hand could reach for the can or a word could land...

"Ten!"

The shout rang out over the music as the countdown began.

"Nine!"

Troy's hand was still suspended between them.

"Eight!"

Shane looked at him. Ilya looked at Shane.

“Seven!”

No one moved.

“Six!”

The music dropped out entirely now, replaced by voices and anticipation.

“Five!”

Troy was aware of how close they all were. Of the ginger ale sweating in his hand. Of the way Shane’s expression dropped, just a fraction.

“Four!”

Ilya exhaled through his nose.

“Three!”

“Two!”

“One!”

The room burst.

“Happy New Year!”

The cheer crashed in from every direction, colliding in celebration while firework cannons went off somewhere behind them, and for a split second, the three of them just stood there, suspended in the celebration with confetti raining down on top of them. Coloured paper landing in their hair.

Shane reached out and took the ginger ale.

Troy smiled. “Happy New Year, Shane.”

Shane didn’t look anywhere else as he answered. His voice stayed low, almost lost beneath the cheering. “Happy New Year.”

Behind him, Ilya’s gaze stayed on Troy. “Happy New Year, Troy,” he smirked.

Troy met his eyes and smiled wider. “Happy New Year, Ilya.” *And game on.*

Chapter 5: House tour

Chapter Summary

Troy realises that whatever is going on between Shane and Ilya isn't something he's going to reach head on. So he changes tactics. He shows up early, stays polite, leans into the edges of Shane's personal life, and convinces himself he's finally found a way in. It doesn't go the way he expects and by the end of the night, Troy learns exactly how dangerous it is to push at things that were never meant to move.

Chapter Notes

Merry Christmas!!!!!!!!!!!!

Sorry this was meant to be up yesterday but i had a pre-christmas breakdown so its up today :)

I probably wont update for a few days but i just needed to leave you on this note to be mean and dramatic <3

Have fun!!!!

Troy had a grandfather on his dad's side named Steven.

He was a quiet, frail man. Not tender and never *ever* comforting. Troy didn't see him that often thankfully, mostly on holidays or the occasional birthday. Really just enough times a year for the memories of the man to stick without ever really fading away.

Steven lived alone in a small one-bedroom house that always felt a little spooky, with decades-old furniture smelling of mildew, and that old person's aftershave they must hand out at geriatric doctors' appointments. The house itself wasn't much to look at or be in, but the yard was enormous, and that part, younger Troy loved. He adored the big trees and fallen sticks he could turn into swords. Ant hills he could crouch beside for hours and watch tiny wars play out in the dirt.

They didn't talk much because Steven never seemed to want to. But it was okay, Troy liked sitting in the silence, knees tucked up on the couch, watching whatever daytime television happened to be on. Game shows or terrible soap operas.

But sometimes, on rainy days, when the yard turned to mud and puddles drowned the poor little ants whole, Steven didn't want the TV or the familiar episodes playing themselves out. Those were the days he pulled out the *chessboard*.

It was a flimsy black and white board old enough to be peeling apart and the table they sat at together was even worse. But still, Troy would perch across from Steven whenever he motioned as the water droplets hit the windowpane. His feet never quite reached the floor and his grandfather never quite explained the rules out loud. He'd just moved a piece on the board and then look at Troy expectantly.

So Troy learned how to play by watching. And by *losing*. Over and over.

His grandfather *never* let him win. Not once. Troy only realised later that it wasn't cruelty or some masculinity hardness test. Steven needed the win and needed to prove something to himself. Or to the quiet.

So, stormy day by stormy day, Troy got better.

He learned how to think ahead and not just the move in front of him, but the one after that. And the one after that. He'd learnt how to work with the pieces he had instead of complaining for the ones he lost.

Steven taught him that nothing was *really lost* just because you were under pressure. That being backed into a corner wasn't the end until the word *checkmate* was spoken out loud.

He taught Troy that the best players weren't the loud ones or the ones who attacked early or tried to dominate the board through sheer force and will. Those players always got sloppy in the end. They forgot that every piece mattered. They forgot that they were alone if the rest of the board turned against them.

But most importantly, he taught Troy the best checkmates were those that were quiet.

The ones that crept up. Made someone think they still had options. Made them believe they were in control, right up until the moment they realised every square was covered. Every exit was gone and there was nowhere left to move.

Only then did the game end.

Troy didn't like his grandfather. Not really.

But it was raining again, judging by the grey smear of sky outside the window, and Troy felt something ready in his bones. The calm that came right before the game. Right before the wind.

He was ready to play some fucking chess.

-

For how prevalent Shane Hollander's whole being was, on *billboards* and *buses*, and *every TV across North America*, he could disappear remarkably well when he wanted to.

Or when he was told to.

It was actually kind of insane.

Troy looked for him at practice and during games. He lingered longer than necessary in the locker room, and hovered near the Metros' bench when they played against each other. He watched the space Shane was occupying, waited for him to turn, to catch his eye, to smile the way he always used to.

But there was nothing. Not in eleven days.

He tested it once, during a game and skated up alongside Shane to say something harmless like *hey*, or *you're playing well*, something so mundane it couldn't possibly be a problem or misconstrued. But he didn't get the chance and instead got body-checked by his *own captain*. On his *own team*.

Ilya muttered an unapologetic, "*oops*," as he skated away, like it hadn't very clearly been on purpose. Like they hadn't locked eyes for a split second, a *split second* long enough for the message to land loud and clear.

Don't try that again.

And Troy, for all his faults, was very good at understanding when he'd been warned. After that, he only admired Shane from a distance during game time and from the bench, which he seemed to be occupying more than usual. It earned him death stares, sure. But Troy could live with that.

Because he had a plan.

Or, more accurately, he had the beginning of one, mostly it was just a willingness to lie enough to get his foot back in the door he'd been shoved out of.

For the first time since Toronto, he liked someone. And not in the *cute barista at the coffee shop* way he'd let himself blush when he was lonely. This was someone good. Someone warm and kind and patient in ways Troy hadn't realised he'd been missing until they were suddenly right in front of him.

He wasn't about to lose that.

Not to a man who'd kept him hidden and fucked him for ten years.

Troy knew it deep down, all the way to his toes, that he would be better. That he wouldn't make Shane feel like something that had to be tucked away.

He just needed time and one real chance to prove it.

But if this was how Ilya wanted to play, if he couldn't get through to Shane, Troy would just have to work with the next best thing. The plan started the day he found out Hayes was going to be away all summer.

They were in the car park after practice, when Hayes jogged up beside him, looking stressed. “Hey,” he huffed, rubbing the back of his neck. “You wouldn’t happen to know any goalies, would you?”

Troy blinked. “Goalies?”

“Yeah. I’m supposed to be coaching at Shane and Ilya’s charity camp this summer, but I’m out now. I thought I had time to find someone to take over, but apparently Shane’s holding a planning meeting this weekend.” He winced. “And I need a replacement. Like. *Fast.*”

Something in Troy’s brain just clicked. It felt biblical. As if God himself had leaned down, finger gun pointed directly at him, and said, *you deserve a clean shot at an open net Troy Barrett.*

“You know,” Troy said carefully, “I used to work with goalies back in Vancouver.”

This wasn’t true, but Hayes’ face lit up instantly. “Seriously?”

Troy shrugged, pitching overly casual. “Yeah. A bit. Nothing fancy.”

Hayes grabbed onto it like a lifeline. “Man, that would be perfect. You’d be doing me a huge favour.”

And just like that, Troy was back on the board. *Suck it Ilya.*

He told Hayes he’d tell Shane and Ilya personally about the switch. That Hayes didn’t need to worry about a thing.

Did he actually do that? No. Obviously not.

Because if he had, Troy wouldn’t be standing on Shane Hollander’s doorstep right now, by that little fish pond again, and be knocking on solid wood feeling his pulse mountain climb his inclined throat.

The door swung open and a middle-aged Asian woman stood there, surprise flickering across her face before settling into a polite smile.

“Yes?” she said gently. “Can I help you?”

Troy took her in quickly. The resemblance around the eyes and put it together almost immediately.

This was Shane’s mum.

“Oh,” Troy said, straightening. “Hi. I’m...uh I’m stepping in for Hayes. For the goalie coaching spot.” He gestured vaguely said goalie actions stupidly.

“There’s a planning meeting today right?,” he added quickly. “Did Shane forget to mention me?”

The older woman's smile widened in apologetic confusion. "Yes, *of course*. I'm sorry... please, come in. You're actually the first one here. It's just me and my husband at the moment."

She stepped aside to let him through. "Shane had to run back out," she continued, closing the door behind him. "He forgot some division plans with one of the sponsors. He won't be long. You're welcome to sit and wait."

"Thank you," Troy said, smiling and nodding, like he wasn't fist pumping the air at how winningly intentional this all was.

He stepped into the house, the space settling around him.

He'd gotten here early on purpose, *duh*.

The meeting wasn't actually supposed to start for another half hour, but that was sort of the point. He wanted the buffer. He wanted *this*.

The woman smiled again and stepped fully aside. "I'm Yuna," she said, gesturing him deeper into the house with an easy warmth that set Troy a little more at ease. "I don't think I've seen you at the rink before."

Troy nodded, slipping his hands into his pockets in a way he hoped read as not *actively lying*. "Yeah, I'm...*uh*...I'm on the same team as Ilya. I just transferred over."

Yuna's eyebrows lifted slightly in recognition. "Oh," she said. "That makes sense." Tilting her head and studying him with polite curiosity. "How are you liking Ottawa, then?"

"Oh, I love it," Troy said easily, this part was at least true. "It's a great group of people. And the city's actually pretty nice too. Not *half bad* at all."

Yuna laughed softly. "That's what we tell ourselves too."

Before Troy could respond, a man peeked his head around the corner from the hallway, drawn in by the sound of voices. He was older and greying at the temples, with Shane's same relaxed posture. His Dad.

"David," Yuna called, smiling fondly. "Come meet our new goalie coach."

The man blinked. "Goalie coach?" he repeated, stepping closer. "What happened to Hayes?"

"Yes," Troy said quickly. "He's out for a wedding this summer. Something big and overseas."

David let out a low whistle. "Lucky bastard," he said, shaking his head before sticking out a hand. "I'm Shane's dad."

"Troy," he replied, shaking it firmly.

They probably had no idea what was going on. Between Shane and Ilya. And if they did... well.

Troy didn't think *Ilya Rozanov* was exactly the kind of man you brought home to meet your parents and everyone was happy about it. He was... *Ilya*. He carried himself like a lightning storm you were supposed to buckle down through and endure, not like.

Troy, on the other hand, *absolutely* could be that kind of man.

He could make conversation and smile. *He could* say thank you and offer to help clean up. *He could* be the kind of man parents relaxed around. The kind they trusted. The kind they wanted to stick around.

Troy glanced between them, then smiled. "You really raised an amazing son," he said. "And not just hockey wise, though obviously that too. I mean... as a person."

Yuna's expression melted, pride warming her face in a way that was impossible to miss.

"He's been the kindest to me since I transferred over," Troy continued. He hadn't quite planned to say this much, but the words kept coming anyway. "I didn't really have anyone back home. Or here, at first. But Shane just... made it comfortable. Everywhere. He made me feel like I belonged."

Yuna smiled, touched. "Thank you," she said gently. "Shane is very special."

"Yeah," Troy said, quieter now. "He really is."

He let the moment sit just long enough, then shifted gears. Ready to actually try and make these people like him, it's why he's here after all.

"He's also a *great* designer," Troy added lightly. "I was admiring the place at Christmas."

David blinked. "You were here at Christmas?"

Troy nodded, a grin tugging at his mouth. "Yeah. I was kind of... dressed to match the house. Reindeer sweater. You know, *Stupid* commitment."

The three of them laughed at that, David shaking his head in amusement.

"Did you see the deck outside?" David asked. "Shane just had it finished last weekend."

"Oh, no," Troy said, smiling and shaking his head. "I didn't get a chance."

"Well, you have to," David smirked back. "If you love the architecture of this place, you'll appreciate it."

Yuna hesitated, glancing toward the hallway. "Maybe we should wait for Shane—"

"Oh, come on," David interrupted easily. "It'll be fine. We've got time to kill anyway."

Troy smiled, agreeable on the outside as something settled satisfyingly beneath his ribs.

Yeah, he thought. That would be fine.

David led them outside first, he pointed out the new deck and the clean lines of the railing. Yuna added a comment here and there, filling in details about the building process, giggling softly when David got a little too technical in things he "*apparently knew nothing about*".

From there, the tour carried them back inside, flowing naturally through the kitchen and into the new walk-in pantry Troy *just had to see* too.

"This is European too," David said, gesturing around. "Just finished it."

Troy nodded his head appreciatingly, taking it in. He genuinely didn't know how Shane had found the time between hockey and travel and charity work to apparently throw in home renovations as well, but he is multi talented that way. Troy wonders if he's talented at something els—

"Would you like a glass of water?" David paused at the counter.

Troy nodded quickly, shaking out the thought. Realising now his throat was dry from talking more than he usually did. "Yeah, please."

David let out a sturdy nod and turned toward the fridge, it was because of this Troy saw those most strange and out of place things just beside the metal doors.

Two plastic rings, sitting on the pantry shelf.

They looked like they fell straight out of a children's birthday party bag or a kid's dress-up set. They looked cheap and flimsy and completely wrong among the neat shelves and carefully organised storage and for a second, Troy just stared at them. Then the understanding of the objects landed.

Of course.

Of course that was what they were. They were a compromise or a sad stand in. Something symbolic enough to feel romantic without actually meaning anything. Something you could give someone when you refused to do it properly, when you wouldn't say it out loud, wouldn't commit in a way that anyone else could see.

The image of Shane accepting them, of him smiling and being grateful, made something ugly twist in Troy's stomach.

God. Ilya was pathetic.

So Troy didn't think. He just moved quickly and quietly, before David could turn back around or before Yuna reappeared from the hallway and reached out, closed his fingers around one of the rings, and slipped it straight into his pocket.

"Cold water or room temperature?" David called from the fridge just two feet from him.

Troy spun around, pulse racing. "Cold," he said fast, then steadied himself. "Please."

David hummed in acknowledgement, none the wiser.

It was then, right in the middle of Troy trying to slow his breathing, that the front door opened. Two voices carried in from the entryway, and one of them was unmistakably Shane's.

"Mom?" he called, voice slightly muffled as he moved down the hall. "I couldn't find the image clause agreement anywhere. Do you remember where you put it?"

Yuna's voice floated back from somewhere else in the house, probably upstairs. "Ask your dad. He's in the kitchen with Troy."

The footsteps in the hallway stopped and there was a pause. A silence just long enough to register the cease of wet boot prints carried in from the snow.

Then, quietly, like the word wasn't meant to be said out loud. "Troy?"

Troy barely had time to turn before a man rounded the corner.

Not Shane. The other voice.

The face Troy had seen it plenty of times *on the ice*. Usually behind a helmet and a visor, but never like this, never in jeans and a sweater, hair still damp from the cold outside.

Hayden Pike.

The man's expression lifted immediately when he saw Troy, eyes brushing over him before he smiled. He nodded once to himself, then stepped forward and held out a hand. "Troy Barrett, right?"

Troy took it automatically, shaking once. Unsure what the smile was for but he'll take it. "Yeah," he said, warily.

That was when Shane appeared.

He came around the corner more slowly than the man proceeding him, hesitating in a way Troy had never seen in the freckled face before. His eyes found Troy's and stalled there for a fraction of a second, long enough for something like alarm to cross his face before he tried to smooth it away.

Shane smiled. Or tried to. Then, instead of acknowledging Troy, he looked past him, toward his dad. "Ilya isn't here yet?" he asked.

Before David could answer, Hayden rolled his eyes, laughing. "Shane," he said, amused, "are you not going to say *hello*? Don't be rude."

Troy tried to laugh along as well, but the sound didn't quite make it out. Because standing there, in Shane Hollander's kitchen, it landed with uncomfortable clarity that Shane had no idea *why he was here*. To Shane, Troy hadn't been expected. He'd just... shown up. In his house. Without warning. With his Dad.

“Oh...uh,” Troy said, stepping in before the silence could stretch too far. “Hayes can’t make it this summer. Wedding overseas. Big one. So he asked me to step in as goalie coach for the camp.”

Hayden nodded, accepting this with eagerness. But Shane didn’t. Something fearful just crossed his face before he got control of it, but not quickly enough. Shane’s eyes bounced around the room.

Yuna appeared in the doorway then, wiping her hands on a tea towel. “Did you find it?” she asked.

Shane startled, as he shook his head fast at the question. “No. No, I didn’t.”

Before quiet could fall again, Hayden stepped in once more. “We were just catching up with Troy here,” he said, resting a hand on the counter. “Did you hear? He *volunteered* to take Hayes’ place this summer. *Very* generous of him.” He glanced at Troy with a smile of evaluation. “Extremely kind, too. You’re kind, right, Troy?”

It took Troy a second to realise he was being asked.

“I...uh,” he said. “I guess?”

Hayden nodded, satisfied with the pathetic answer, then turned that same approving look on Shane, the kind that suggested *I am happy with this man, look at this man Shane*.

But Shane didn’t meet it. “I’m just...” he said abruptly. “I’m going upstairs for a second.”

And then turned, walking away before anyone could even register his escaping words. Speed walking and accepting the swallow the hall gave him.

Hayden just shrugged, unbothered. “Alright then,” he said lightly, turning back to Troy. “Can I get you something? Juice? Water?” He leaned in just a little, voice dropping. “Shane’s number?” Then he straightened, laughing. “I’m kidding. I’m kidding.” A beat. “Unless...”

Yuna rolled her eyes and swatted at his arm playfully.

Troy smiled politely, still trying to recalibrate whatever had just happened as the room moved around him for the next few minutes.

That was when the front door opened again to the sound of more footsteps. “Yes, *yes*, I am here now,” a voice drifted in, accented and mildly annoyed. “See I said two minutes and it was two, все в порядке.”

Troy didn’t need to turn to know who it was.

Ilya Romanov came around the corner with his phone still pressed to his ear and fast steps. He pulled it away as he spotted them, ending the call as his smile widened “Hello,” Ilya called brightly.

“Hello,” Yuna replied at once.

“Hi,” David echoed.

Hayden’s smile faltered. Not gone, but just ...dented. He muttered a short, “Hey.”

Troy said nothing, instead his eyes met Ilya’s across the kitchen.

The sound of more footsteps suddenly filtered in behind the Russian as apparently Troy's half an hour buffer ended and the rest of the volunteers and coaches arrived. A dozen or so voices pulled down the hall again as coats were shrugged off and greetings traded. The house filling up quickly into something resembling a house party more than a boring meeting to go over summer camp plans.

Shane came back downstairs a moment later, his eyes straight away finding Ilya’s as something softened there as a small smile was exchanged and gone before anyone else could notice.

“Hey, everybody,” Shane said, cheerful. The words clearly practiced while he was upstairs. “I think we’ll go through the itinerary for this year in the lounge area, so if you can all follow me through there. I’ve got food and snacks set up already.”

There was a chorus of nods and murmured thanks as people started drifting away, conversations breaking off and reforming as they moved. But it was just as Shane was about to turn and follow, a call rang out. “Hey, Shane.”

David’s voice cut through the busy air as he stepped closer, placing a hand on Troy’s shoulder.

“You think you could give our good man Troy here a quick house tour?” David said. “He’s been talking about the architecture and design since he got here. Pretty knowledgeable about all this stuff too. More than me, at least.”

Yuna made an amused sound. “David—”

“Oh, come on,” David said easily. “It’ll be quick.”

Troy felt the question shift in the room as the words found a place to land. He saw it in the way Ilya’s eyes dropped to David’s hand, and with the flash of that lately familiar anger painting his expression. Troy straightened in a faint, *yep Shanes dad just did that. What now Ilya? I’ve found a work in.*

He looked back at Ilya and held his gaze, then reached up and gave David his own friendly pat on the back. “Really, it’s okay David” Troy said, humbly. “I don’t need a tour.”

David shook his head. “No, no. I’m sure it’s fine.”

Shane hesitated. “I’ve got a lot to get through today, so—”

“Just a quick spin around the top floor,” David cut in. “Five minutes.”

Shane shook his head again. “I really can’t—”

“Honestly,” Troy tried again, “I’m good—”

“But Ilya can.”

The words landed final as Troy suddenly went very still. He snapped his head toward Shane as the room dropped away around him and the meaning caught up all at once.

Ilya could.

Troy flicked his eyes to Ilya in an instinctive panic.

Ilya was looking at Shane with pure pleasure, the earlier anger wiped clean from his face, replaced by something almost proud. A smile at his mouth, like he’d just been handed exactly what he’s wanted for a long *long* time.

Ilya looked back at Troy then as he tilted his head and shrugged easily. “I could *definitely* do that.”

David’s hand was still on Troy’s shoulder. It hadn’t moved an inch, but it felt like it gained a hundred pounds. Troy shook his head quickly. “No...no, really, it’s okay,” he said. “I swear.”

David gave him a gentle push, completely missing the drop that had just occurred in the room’s temperature. “No, go on. Ilya knows his way around. He can do it.”

Troy stumbled a half-step in Ilya’s direction.

“Really,” he tried again, breath coming a little too fast now. “It’s okay. I can just...go when *Shane* has time later—”

Ilya laughed softly and reached out, placing his own hand on Troy’s shoulder.

“*Come on,*” he said. “It’ll be quick. I *promise*”

Troy’s stomach rolled violently as he felt suddenly and unmistakably sick. Sicker than he could remember ever feeling before, the vomit already on its way up the expressway of his throat. Ilya’s hand pressed just enough to guide him backwards as they started to move, casual to anyone watching, deliberate to Troy alone.

Troy started mumbling half-sentences and false starts as his eyes darted around the room, searching for something, *someone*, to intervene. To save him.

No one did.

Shane even turned away.

They were all smiling and talking. Already moving on. They had no idea what was happening.

And that was when it hit Troy. The room couldn’t help him. The sense of safety he thought he’d found here was an illusion, something he’d talked himself into believing because he

wanted it to be true. He hadn't just wandered into the lion's den. He'd walked in willingly. And kicked the bear.

Ilya led him toward the stairs, his hand never leaving Troy's shoulder for a second. If anything, it seemed to settle there more firmly as they stepped in time, like an executioner to a chopping block. The smile never leaving Ilya's face as well.

They climbed the stairs and slipped out of sight as the noise of the house faded behind them, the last change for salvation draining away. Troy knew what was coming, had known the moment Shane said Ilya's name, but the awareness didn't make it easier to breathe.

Sill at the top of the stairs, he tried anyway.

"So," Troy said, forcing the word out. "Do you know what inspired the colour palette choice —"

He didn't get to finish as the impact came without warning.

His back hit the wall hard enough to knock the air straight out of him, and a deep, brutal sound forced from his chest as the world jolted. Ilya's hand slammed flat against his sternum to pin him in place, enough to make it clear Troy *wasn't* going anywhere.

Ilya stepped in close, crowding the space. His forearm braced against his body, blocking every possible angle of escape as Troy stuttered trying to pull air back into his lungs. Smelling mint as Ilya's smile grew close and the tilt of his mouth pleased.

"You are *very bad* decision maker," he said calmly. "*Terrible.*"

Troy opened his mouth on instinct, a reflexive *but* already forming, then stopped himself. He swallowed, cleared his throat and tried to force his voice steady.

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

Ilya didn't move away. If anything, the words drew him closer, close enough that Troy could feel the faint brush of his breath against his cheek and the soft exhale from his nose warming his now starting to sweat skin.

"*Really,*" Ilya murmured. "No idea." Holding a pause that was meant to seem thoughtful. "Hmm."

"Yep," Troy said, pulse roaring in his ears. "None."

Ilya nodded once, like he'd been expecting that answer. Wanting it. Then he laughed quietly to himself. "You play stupid *very badly*, Troy," he said. "But that does not matter to me." He tilted his head, studying Troy's face. "You can play," Ilya continued. "Shane will *feel bad* for you. He will let you hang around because you are *sad*, and have *no family*, and is *scared* of what you know." His mouth curved. "That is fine."

Then he leaned in again, voice dropping.

“But I will tell you this now. I will end you so completely, you will never play terrible hockey ever again. Do you understand?”

The last words were almost intimate, pressed into Troy’s space. His heart was hammering close to painfully against his left side, the wall hard at his back. And still, *still*, something stupid or brave or completely stupid flared up inside him. He swallowed once and said, quietly, “*Is Shane happy?*”

Ilya stilled. Just for a second. But Troy felt it.

He pulled back then, enough to *really* look at Troy, amusement clear across his face, but now with something else close to rage.

Troy didn’t give him time to recover. “Is Shane *happy*,” he repeated stronger, “with whatever *arrangement* you’re making him—”

Ilya surged forward.

He grabbed Troy by the front of his shirt, hauled him half a step off the wall, just to slam him back again before the sentence could finish, the impact rattling through his bones and absolutely heard throughout the house.

“Careful,” Ilya said through his teeth. The words a threat as the man’s voice dropped even lower, so low Troy almost couldn’t make it out through the suddenly thickened accent. “You *look* at Shane again,” he said. “You *speak* to him. Or you *tell anyone* what you *think* you know, and I will—”

“What?” Troy cut in. His head still ringing from the impact of the unforgiving wall. “What will happen if I tell? You’d have to stop? Maybe that’s for the better. Maybe that’s what Shane—”

But he never finished.

Ilya, still holding him by the front of his shirt, threw him downward and Troy hit the floor hard as the impact knocked the air he’d just gotten back from his lungs. His palms slapping against the wood as he failed at trying to catch himself at the last second. His body trying and failing to keep up with *what ever the fuck* just happened.

For a moment, everything felt blurry.

Then Troy laughed.

It came out more bark than sound, but he rolled onto his side and sucked in air. Then he turned around, ready to say something, *anything*, strong enough to prove he hadn’t broken. That Ilya would need to do *a lot more* to get rid of him. But the words died in his throat. Because Ilya wasn’t looking at him. Because he was staring at the floor.

Troy followed his gaze to the plastic ring that laid beside him.

Pink and cheap against the polished expensive wood and fallen free from Troy's pocket from the shove without him even noticing.

Oh.

Everything in Troy went very still as Ilya *slowly* and *carefully* crouched. Troy watched him the way prey watches a predator when it knows its death is already too close to stop, aware now of the noise downstairs, the shifting voices, footsteps drifting nearer to the stairs. But it didn't matter.

Ilya reached out and picked up the ring with a care that bordered on reverence, and looked at it for a second.

Then he met Troy's eyes and smiled almost fondly, and for a brief, impossible moment, Troy saw something in his face pause as everything else fell away and thought for a second that everything might be okay. That everything...

Then Ilya's fingers curled slowly into a fist around the ring.

He drew his arm back like a batter to the tee.

And the only thing Troy had time to think was *Fuck*.

Checkmate.

Chapter 6: An Extremely Normal Afternoon

Chapter Summary

Everything catches up at once. The secrets, jealousy, violence, and the quiet agreements holding them together.

Chapter Notes

i'm not hungover like i thought i'd be so now you get this!!!!!! Happy cottage day!!!!

(also thank you all for the christmas messages i actually appreciated it so much you dont understand)

Anyway GET TO READING, im already pacing for your thoughts <3

Troy had been hit in the face by a lot of things in his life.

It came with the territory, he supposed. When you lived the way he did, maybe a little or a lot careless. It was inevitable that the world would eventually introduce itself to you *head-on*.

His first scar came when he was six from running straight into a door handle at full speed. He didn't remember it happening, not really. Just the aftermath from it being relayed secondhand. The story was told over and over again by his Dad for many many years. The scar itself was still there if you knew where to look, a small indentation just below his hairline. You could feel it if you pressed your thumb there.

When he was ten, he got his first concussion. Took a hockey stick to the face during little league practice. That one he remembered more clearly, with the crack of contact across his face. The way the world suddenly tilted down towards the ice and little red dots soon followed after. He chipped a tooth badly, like a clean half of it gone. His dad was furious. Not about the injury, or the mean stuck up boy who did it. He was furious that he had to spend his entire Sunday afternoon, during the major league game he had tickets for, and drive from dentist to dentist, trying to find someone willing to fix it before school picture day.

They didn't. Very busy weekend for dentistry apparently.

The photo of Troy grinning gap-toothed and proud still lived on his dad's fridge. So maybe he hadn't been that mad after all.

“Ilya! What the *fuck* are you—”

Then there was sixteen and his first real after school fight, *when all the best fights are planned like sunset duels in the 19th century*. It was over something deeply stupid, something about a girl, which felt especially funny now seeming as he was gay, but had seemed life-or-death at the time. He remembered the shove and swing. The hot bloom of pain across his cheek and the stunned realisation that he could, in fact, get hit. It was a formative experience for Troy, but still very educational.

“Hayden, don't just *stand* there. Fucking *help me!*”

His first major league game came later when he got checked so hard into the boards that he didn't remember that one either. Everyone told him it was unavoidable, that the guy was an asshole. Everyone's bell rang eventually. It was almost comforting, knowing that even at the highest level, pain was still part of the initiation.

And now...

“Ilya! Let him go!”

There was another one. Something recent. Something *very* recent and very close, almost slippery.

A boy. A penalty box. Christmas. A margarita. Wait...that couldn't be right. A ring?

No, he thought dimly. That wasn't it.

Oh wait, he forgot to mention the playground.

That one seemed to be his fault, in hindsight. He'd been seven, maybe eight and tripped at the top of the slide and gone over instead of down, falling four feet straight onto the very hard ground. So technically *the ground* hit his face, and if he was being honest doesn't know if that counts. But if he was actually cataloguing these things, then it probably should be at *least* mentioned. But if that one is mentioned then maybe he had like three—

Oh.

Oh no.

The ring.

The room came back in pieces.

With noise first, then voices raised as someone said his name too urgently. Then came the slight image of blurred bodies where there should've been clear sight and a fist twisted in the front of his shirt, holding him joint together. Other hands waved about as someone else was trying and failing to remove this fist, to drag it away.

The feeling of overwhelming pain followed close behind, as it leaked across his face. It was a pressure so blinding it left him not feeling the rest of his body or the hard wooded floor he

remembered. Troy did try to fully open his eyes, but the effort felt wrong, like it wasn't yet safe too, like something might close back in all too soon.

Something warm rolled down his cheek as well. Troy didn't think about what it was or what it meant, he didn't have time too as his hearing came back and he realised someone was talking. Someone was swearing. Someone was telling someone else to stop.

Troy focused on breathing, the way he'd been taught by one of the many stupid degrading high school councillors posters. Slow. Steady. In and out.

He'd been hit in the face before but never like this. This wasn't hockey sticks or teenage anger or the accepted violence of the game they all loved. This was fury and it filled even Troy's unconscious brain as all around him fear and anger were in every inhale.

"Over fucking *flirting*, Ilya, really?" Hayden shouted, close enough to Troy's ear that the words rattled in his head. Hands were on his shoulders now, trying to pull him sideways. Trying to pull him away from something he couldn't quite see. Or maybe didn't want to.

"Ty *mertv*, Troy! Chertovski *mertv*."

Ilya's voice was closer than anyone else and Troy realised belatedly that it was because it's Ilya's fist that was twisted into the front of his shirt, holding him still and within reach. The words out of the man's mouth didn't land with understanding, just with heat on Troy's aching face.

"Ilya, let him *go*!" That was Shane.

Troy could see him then, just barely as he tried to squint open his eyes. Shane had a hold of Ilya's other arm, braced awkwardly, trying to pull him back. Or maybe just keep him from swinging again. He looked smaller like this with strain and panic covering his normally cheerful face.

"Shane, just grab him!" Hayden yelled.

"I fucking am!" Shane yelled back.

"Yebat... let me—"

"No," Shane cut in, louder now. "*No*. Let go!"

Troy watched it all from somewhere slightly outside himself, like he'd slipped half a step out of alignment with his body and the room. He tried to lift his hands and pressed them weakly against Ilya's chest.

"Get *off*... me, asshole." he mumbled. It came out slurred, in an attempt for who knows what, but they only seemed to make things worse.

Because with sudden renewed vigor Ilya wrenched his arm free, causing Shane to lose his footing and go down hard.

Then, there was no more flinching to be had as another blow landed cleanly onto Troy's face.

His head snapped sideways and the world went white yet again as his cheek hit the floor. Somewhere above him, Shane was shouting Ilya's name once more as Hayden moved in, physically this time between them now, also yelling for Ilya to stop.

Troy didn't move.

Not because he didn't want to.

Because his body couldn't, either from the weight, the fist or his body just genuinely giving in.

"*Oh my god...* what is happening?" A woman's voice blared out. Shocked in tone and bewildered in the speed the words fell out.

Shane's mum.

"Go downstairs!" Hayden said immediately. "Please. Just go."

"Mum," Shane said, his voice pitched too high and trying to regain his hold on Ilya "...go! Don't let anyone come up here."

And then because five isn't enough of a party, another voice joined the mayhem, just as confused and stunned as the first. "Let me help—"

"*Dad,*" Shane said quickly. "Stop. Go."

There was a stretched second after the warding off words, then as quickly as they came footsteps retreated back downstairs.

"Ilya," Shane said again, attention back. "Stop. *Please.*"

Suddenly, the fist in Troy's collar loosened as air rushed back into his lungs hard enough to make him cough. Hayden took the opening and dragged his body backwards down deeper into the hall, swearing under his breath.

Shane grabbed Ilya too, pulling him in the opposite direction.

When everyone stopped, content with the distance, Troy immediately rolled onto his side with one hand scrabbling for the wall. He tried to push himself up once and failed, then again, managing to only brace on his elbows long enough to suck in a shaking breath.

No one was touching him anymore, but that didn't mean he couldn't still feel it.

The shouting continued in the hall, as every part of his body rang trying to catch up.

"Ilya, what the *fuck,*" Hayden said hoarsely, one hand careful under Troy's jaw as he turned his face toward the light. "I think you broke his nose."

Troy thought, distantly, *yeah*. That tracked. His face felt extremely broken. He tried to lift a hand to see for himself, but someone caught his wrist. “Don’t,”

“He *fucking* deserved it.” Ilya’s voice called out.

“For *flirting*?” Hayden shot back. “Really? You’re unbelievable.”

“Stop!” Shane’s voice cut through as well.

Troy turned his head slowly, as nausea rolled and his vision swam. Shane was on the floor behind Ilya with his arms wrapped around, holding him there. Not because Ilya was fighting anymore, he wasn’t, but because Shane didn’t seem able to let go. Just in case.

Blood streaked Ilya’s knuckles. *Troy’s blood*, his brain supplied. Shit.

“*Shit*,” Shane said quietly, pressing his face into Ilya’s shoulder. “I thought you said you could *restrain* yourself.”

“I told you,” Ilya said. “I *don’t know* that word.”

“Don’t joke right now,” Shane snapped. “I said it’d be fine if we just ignored—”

“The ring.” Ilya’s single word cut through the hallway.

“What?” Hayden and Shane said together. Troy just closed his eyes.

The small plastic ring laid on the floor between the two pairs. Pink and completely harmless-looking, like a child’s toy that shouldn’t have been able to cause any of this.

“It was in his *pocket*,” Ilya said. “Shane. In his *pocket*.”

Hayden dragged his fingers down his face, dropping Troy’s chin from his hand completely. “Fuck, man,” he muttered. “Really Troy? Fuck.”

Shane stared at the ring laying in perfect stillness on the wood. Then at Troy.

Confusion painted in his eyes as he searched Troy’s face, for anything that might suggest Ilya was exaggerating, or at least some explanation that made this make sense.

Shane didn’t find one. Because, *honestly*, there wasn’t one.

“Was it?” Shane asked quietly. “In your *pocket*?”

The hallway suddenly felt more echoey as Troy heard his own breathing bounce off the words, wrong as it was. He could also feel the wetness at his nose start to dry in crusty cracks, the steady flow spreading across his face.

He didn’t answer. He just sat there, backed against the wall and pinned by a silence he had no clue how to fill. And for the first time since this started, Troy understood there was no version of this where he walked out untouched. Or winning.

Troy looked anywhere else. “Yes, but—”

He never finished.

Someone was on him faster than his brain could catch up, the violent movement sudden and brutal as another punch landed, snapping his head sideways as the bursting sent the world white again for the too *many*-th time within the last ten minutes.

“Shane! What the *fuck*!” Hayden yelled.

Shane.

Troy barely had time to register the second body on top of him before everything merged once more. Hands grabbed Shane from behind, strong arms wrapping around his chest and hauling him backward, lifting him clean off the floor.

“Ilya!” Shane shouted, wild now and furious too. “Let me—”

“Ilya, stop him!” Hayden yelled at the same time.

Ilya kept moving wordlessly as his arms locked Shane in place, pulling him back with steady steps even as Shane viciously twisted and kicked, still trying to get at Troy despite his arms being out of action.

“*You* got to punch him,” Shane snarled, his voice breaking. “*You* were allowed to! *Let me* fucking get—”

“No.” Ilya said, breathless now, strained in a way Troy hadn’t heard before. “I am *very bad*, remember. Very bad.”

His grip adjusted to keeping Shane contained even as Shane fought harder than Ilya had clearly expected. “I had *him*,” Shane went on, almost frantic. “Did you see? I got *him*. I could —”

“Yes,” Ilya cut in, sounding almost amused despite the physical effort he was going through. “I saw, John Cena. It was very clean. Good job.”

The joke landed oddly against the jagged violence of the hallway as Troy laid where he was, fresh blood warm against his lip. Out of focus as his brain tried to press play on living, dealing with another impact.

Shane’s parents’ voices, heard back then, were unexpected as they started to reappear at the top of the staircase again. Probably due to the new upturn in sound.

Troy painfully turned his head and saw them at the end of the hall, both frozen in place. Their faces changed when they took him in his state, the blood, the way he couldn’t sit straight, the swelling already pulling one side of his face out of shape.

Then they looked past him at *Shane* and at *Ilya*.

Confusion followed as the picture failed to match what they'd left only minutes earlier. The roles were completely reversed now, with Ilya restraining Shane, *his* arms locked around *his* chest, and the Russian holding the black haired bundle of fury back with visible effort.

Because, Jesus Christ, was *Shane* still *fighting*. Still kicking and still reaching.

"Ilya, get off me!" Shane shouted. "Just let me—"

Another kick somehow landed against Troy's leg.

He tried to push himself farther away, pain flaring with the effort, but he was already at the end of the hall and boxed in by a closed door. Nowhere left to go as Hayden put a hand on his shoulder to stop his wriggle.

"Get *Troy* out of here," Ilya snapped, breathless and not looking away from Shane. "Now."

"No!" Shane yelled. "Ilya, fucking get off me! Stop *protecting* him! Just let me—"

Hayden and David moved at the same time.

They got Troy upright carefully, one on either side of him. His legs wobbled immediately as everything hurt in a way that felt cumulative, like his body had started keeping score of his very obviously losing battle.

They started him toward the stairs, navigating past Shane and Ilya's tangled bodies when all of a sudden another kick caught Troy mid-step. He would've gone down if David hadn't moved his grip, hauling him back upright.

"Shane!" David said. Once. Then again. Louder.

Shane didn't stop and immediately tried to get one last blow in again.

Hayden and David kept moving anyway, faster now and more deliberate, guiding Troy toward the stairs to evacuate him from sight just as Ilya demanded. Troy kept his eyes down, on the carpet or on the edge of the next step. He didn't know, everything was blurry still.

Behind him there was louder shouting and scuffling, the sound of a body being dragged against the floor.

But Troy didn't look back. He couldn't. Knowing he turned Shane into that.

The trio barely made it steadily down the stairs before Hayden and David jointly steered him into the kitchen and sat him against the bench. Troy kind of just let himself slump there, the adrenaline finally ebbing enough for his head to start really pounding in delayed pain.

Fuck. Those two could really throw a punch.

A warm cloth was pressed into his hand, with the accompaniment of a distracted murmur, "Use this. For your... face area." Troy didn't quite catch whose voice it was but he nodded anyway.

He tried to lift the damp fabric to his face, then hissed and pulled back, the skin more tender than he'd expected. Troy tried again, but slower this time, holding it in place with a wince as his eyes watered.

When he looked up, Shane's parents were standing across the kitchen whispering to each other in low, urgent voices. Troy could see the tension in the way they leaned in, the way their hands kept fidgeting. Their eyes flicked to him, then to Hayden, then back toward the stairs as another raised voice carried down.

Shane.

Still tangled up in obvious physical effort, but unmistakably breaking now. Troy couldn't see him, but he could hear it in the hitch in his breath, the way his voice cracked around the words.

"He's going to ruin *everything*, Ilya. *Everything*. He knows—"

A deeper voice answered, cutting him off in a placating way. But whatever Shane said back came quicker and closer to a sob, dismissing the voice.

Troy stayed where he was with the cloth pressed uselessly to his face, listening to it all with a sense of guilt that was maybe breaking records. He was still lost in himself when Hayden abruptly caught his chin, turning his face a little more roughly than necessary to inspect his nose.

"I was on your team at first," Hayden said, exhaling through his teeth, "but do they have schools in Toronto, or do they just release you into the world free-range to be fucking idiots? I have a stupid cousin there as well."

Troy started to huff out something close to a laugh, but stopped when he realised the other man was not having it. Releasing his chin blunter than the initial grab.

Troy cleared his throat and started to say, "I didn't mean for this to—" but Hayden cut him off with a fast, "Don't."

So Troy didn't. He sat silently and pressed the cloth back to his nose instead, pushing hard enough this time that his face was burning from the effort.

Across the kitchen, it looked like Shane's parents were coming to some kind of quiet agreement as Yuna moved toward the stairs with a purpose, like she'd decided something needed to be handled before it got any worse.

It was only then that it hit Troy the house was quiet. That all the volunteers, the coaches and people who'd swarmed in here not that long ago. A dozen or almost thirty people were swept away.

Troy didn't know when it had happened. Just that it had.

Embarrassment washed over him, hotter than his face and followed closely by self-loathing. *Seriously. What the fuck is he doing?*

How had it spiralled this fast? This far? How had he ended up bleeding in Shane Hollander's kitchen with a head pounding, face wrecked, after getting beaten to hell by Ilya Rozanov over...*what?*

A hook-up? *This* was how you reacted when someone flirted with the guy you were fucking?

Okay. Fine. Maybe taking the ring had been too far, even Troy could admit that. That part had been... ill-advised and split second.

But still.

They were almost *thirty* years old. And he'd just been *punched* into the floor over a *cheap plastic ring* and a *fuck buddy*.

None of it made sense.

Troy sat there with the cloth pressed to his face, listening to voices he couldn't quite hear, wishing, desperately, that someone would just tell him what the hell was actually going on.

Because right now, it felt like he'd stepped into the middle of something already broken and shattered beyond belief, and was the only one getting cut for not knowing the rules.

In his moment of mentally falling, footsteps sounded on the stairs again, and Troy looked up, bracing himself for Yuna but that wasn't who he found.

It was Ilya.

Troy was on his feet immediately, stumbling back a step with one hand raised before he could think better of it. His body remembered faster than his brain did. Ilya stopped at the bottom of the stairs and watched him, blood still smeared across his knuckles, shirt rumped and darkened with damp little wet droplet patches along his shoulder.

He smiled in a strange expression mixed into the tilt of his mouth.

Ilya lifted his hands then too, mirroring Troy's posture in a way that felt mocking. "Relax," he said. "You are fine." Then he flicked his fingers toward Hayden, wordlessly calling the man over.

Hayden scampered across the wood floor, and the two of them leaned in together, whispering. Their eyes cutting back to Troy again and again, like he was the subject under discussion. Troy had the distant, unhelpful thought that this was how people decided what to do with a problem they hadn't planned for.

Great, he thought. *Now they're deciding whether to finish the job.*

That feeling rose up in him again. The same one from New Year's. The same one that had got him here in the first place. The one that had flared right before Ilya shoved him to the floor in a stupid mix of recklessness and exhaustion. The sudden and overwhelming sense that he was already in too deep to back out now.

“Can someone tell me *what the fuck* is going on?” Troy said.

He said it louder than he probably should have, but still the effect landed. The room stopped.

Everyone looked at him then. Even Ilya stilled.

Troy didn’t bother reacting to the familiar spike of danger that usually followed moments like this. He was past that now. If it came, it came. “I *thought* I knew,” he continued with a slight laugh, “But *clearly* I don’t.”

Shane’s dad shook his head slowly, eyes flicking to Ilya and back to Troy. “Troy, look—”

But then all of a sudden no one was actually looking at him anymore. They were doing it again, the talking with their eyes, the exchanging glances and having a silently knowing conversation he wasn’t part of. Troy let out a long breath through his nose, dropped the bloodied cloth onto the counter, and scrubbed a hand down his face. “No,” he said, tired now. “*Really*. Someone tell me *what the fuck* is going on. Because I’ve been confused since some *random-ass day* in the locker room a month and a half ago, and I’m officially done guessing.”

He looked around the kitchen then, at the tension and the man who’d just beaten him bloody standing five feet away. “So,” Troy added with a punch. “Please, *somebody*. Catch. Me. Up.”

It was the silence after these words that finally did it for Troy.

The way no one spoke. The way they all stood there, looking at each other instead of at him again, like even *they* didn’t quite know how things had ended up here. Like the situation had outpaced all of them at once as well. Like no one had a real hold on it to begin with. Ilya closed his eyes and shook his head, rolling his shoulder, flexing his fist slowly as if he were the one trying to work pain out of his body.

That, more than anything else, made something in Troy snap.

He laughed again, astonishingly disbelieving. “Unbelievable,” he said, mostly to himself as still, as no one answered. So he turned and walked out of the kitchen, not storming or slamming anything as he went, just moving with steps that could only be called fast. Knowing if he slowed down even a little he might do something worse than leave. Knowing he needed air and distance. A door between himself and whatever *this* had become.

Someone finally called his name behind him. But it was too late. Troy didn’t stop.

So Footsteps followed as a hand closed around his shoulder and yanked him halfway back. Troy startled again as he flinched almost into the wall to see it was Ilya.

But this time, there was no smile.

His face was set, and his eyes on Troy with a controlled intensity that made his stomach drop. “You can’t leave yet,” Ilya said. His voice was lower now. “Just sit back in the kitchen and... *wait* for Shane to come down.”

Something bitter coated the walls of Troy's chest at the demand. "Oh," he said, a hollow edge creeping into his voice. "So *now* I can talk to Shane."

The words barely made it out before Troy reeled himself back in as Ilya's expression repositioned.

Troy had already learned to recognise the fury the hard way. But it was from this reeling that the room seemed to dial in. *Right. This wasn't a negotiation. He was done.* Troy swallowed, shaking his head slowly as he backed away another step. "Yeah," he said, quieter now. "No."

He could feel his pulse in his face, the ache spreading in steady waves. Whatever the hell was happening in this house, *whatever history and rules and landmines he'd stumbled into*, he was not staying here. Not waiting and definitely not sitting quietly while they figured it out around him.

Not for one more fucking second.

Ilya looked at him, and for a moment, Troy genuinely couldn't tell what was going to happen next.

He didn't know if the man was about to grab him again, or step back, or do nothing at all. Judging by the way Ilya stood there still, it didn't seem like he knew either. They were both just silently running through every possible outcome of the next ten seconds at once, weighing them and discarding them, then circling back again.

Then a sound drifted down from upstairs, muffled but clearly a voice, maybe, and enough to push something raw across Ilya's face.

He shifted, almost unconsciously as his hand came up to touch the damp patch on his shoulder, fingers pressing into the fabric as his hand slid up to rub at his ear, a nervous, grounding gesture Troy hadn't seen on him before.

When he spoke, it caught Troy completely off guard.

"Let me take you to hospital," Ilya said. "For your nose."

The offer *completely not* in the options Troy had turned over.

So Troy just stared at him, shaken out of whatever defensive posture and shook his head, suddenly wondering if Ilya had actually knocked a concussion into him and this was what hallucinating felt like.

"What?" Troy said, stupidly.

Ilya nodded, as if the motion might help him believe in what he was presenting himself. "Yes. If you don't want to *stay here*, then let me take you to the hospital." He hesitated, searching for the rest of it. "And... and then *we come back*. We talk."

Troy let out a laugh at the proposition and shook his head, more firmly this time.

Something seemed to snap in Ilya then, as he started speeding up his words. “It will be fine,” he said quickly. “Okay? Then we can all talk. We figure things out. *Everything* can be figured out. I told Sha—”

Troy didn’t wait for him to finish.

“Yeah,” he said, breathless but clear. “No. I’m not doing that.”

He could feel the certainty of it settle into his bones. He wasn’t getting into a car with Ilya Rozanov. He wasn’t going anywhere alone with him ever again and he *definitely* wasn’t circling back into this house under the promise of *later* and *talking* and *it’ll be fine*.

Ilya’s hands lifted then like he was preparing to grab onto Troy. To stop him. To make the decision for him if Troy wouldn’t follow what he wanted.

And that, more than anything else, made Troy step back further with his heart thudding again, every instinct screaming at once. *No*.

Troy was sure for a second he was going to do it.

He genuinely believed Ilya was about to grab him, throw him over his shoulder and haul him back into the lounge room like none of Troy’s protests mattered at all. But then Ilya looked at him and it was nothing like upstairs.

Nothing like the fury, or the violence Troy had already learned to fear. This was something else entirely and whatever expression crossed Ilya’s face now made Troy’s stomach clench as the nausea he thought passed made a new resurgence.

Ilya shut his eyes. “Okay,” he said, nodding his head, quietly. “Okay. That’s *fine*.” His voice off in a way Troy couldn’t quite understand, just yet. “Just...don’t *tell* anybody. Okay?”

Troy blinked at him, so thrown off he almost laughed. “About my nose?” he asked, stupidly. “I’m not...I’m not going to *press charges* or—”

“No.”

Ilya cut him off. He opened his eyes then, and the sight of them shocked Troy more than anything else had so far. They were wet.

“I mean this,” Ilya said, voice wobbling. “About this. You can tell people. Tell people about *me*, okay? You can say you find me in bed with literally anyone you want. Anyone. Be creative.” A breath hitched in his chest. “Queen of England. I will not deny.”

He laughed once, then stopped just as suddenly.

“Just don’t,” he said, voice breaking outright now. “Please. Just don’t mention *Shane*. Okay?” The plea sat there between them, awfully naked. Ilya dragged a hand down his face, wiping at his eyes like he was embarrassed to have them. When he spoke again, his voice was steadier, but only barely. “I am *sorry*,” he said. “For all of this. Okay? I am sorry. Just don’t put this on him. Please. Just say *my* name.”

Troy stood there, bleeding and aching and dizzy, and realised with a strange sort of futile clarity that this, *this*, was the part no one had explained to him.

Troy didn't know what to respond. There was nothing he could say that didn't feel wrong. So he just stood there, staring at Ilya Romanov, finally understanding that whatever he'd stepped into wasn't a mess or a mistake.

This wasn't something trapped by silence, but something carefully contained within it. The only way it had endured or lived to bloom. And Troy had walked straight through the middle of it with a fucking jack hammer.

Troy shook his head and Ilya who had been watching him too closely read it wrong. His face folded in on itself, panic climbing again as he rushed to stop the shake. "Just for a few weeks then," Ilya said quickly. "At least let Shane...*fuck*...let Shane get ready, please. This is my fault. Just—"

"No," Troy cut in, firm despite how wrecked he felt. This wasn't anyone but his own fault. "I won't tell. I won't tell anyone, Ilya. I won't."

Ilya froze, and started searching Troy's face to decide whether this was real or just another thing about to slip out of his hands. Then something in him loosened, just a fraction. "Yes?" he said, careful. "Really?" He hesitated. "For now, or—"

"Ever," Troy said. He didn't even have to think about it. "I swear. I really just didn't—" He huffed out a breath, shaky. "I'm sorry. I wouldn't have actually...well. Maybe *I would have*." He let out a short, distrustful of himself laugh. "But I won't. I swear."

Ilya stared at him, eyes moving over his face, over the blood he put there, over the exhaustion they both have. He tried to laugh too, a sound that didn't quite make it all the way there. "I swear," Troy repeated. "Ilya. I won't tell."

Ilya nodded, once. Then again. "Okay," he said quietly. "Okay." He straightened a little, something of the captain slipping back into place. "I will give you good play time," he said. "Good minutes."

Troy shook his head. "No. No, really. You don't have to do that."

"No, no," Ilya said, almost gently. "I am good captain." A pause. Then, drier: "And I need you to be in debt to me somehow."

That landed as they let out a real laugh. The first one together since the locker room. Both of them seemed to have completely forgotten and then remembered too well what had just happened upstairs. Troy swallowed, suddenly aware of just how deep this had gone without him ever agreeing to it. But he nodded anyway, because there didn't seem to be another option that didn't end worse. "Okay," he said quietly.

Ilya and Troy looked at each other one last time as he flicked his fingers over his shoulder, an incomplete gesture. "I should probably—"

“Yeah,” Ilya said, already nodding. “Okay.” He stepped back, finally giving Troy the space to reach for the front door. Letting him open it and letting the cold air attack his face hard enough to suck in a breath.

“Bye,” Hayden called from somewhere behind them in the house. The cheer in his voice was a little too unnatural for this current moment, but Troy saw Ilya roll his eyes, and something lightened just a smidge.

He paused on the threshold.

“I’m serious,” Troy said, turning back. “I won’t tell. I really won’t.” He swallowed. “I just...I don’t even know what I thought I was doing. I thought you were—” He shook his head. “I thought Shane was—” He stopped, exhaling. “I just want him to be happy,” Troy said. “You know? He deserves it. He really is... amazing. And I’m sorry for all of this too.”

Ilya’s face fell more as Troy went on. He didn’t agree but he just nodded once. “I am sorry about your face,” he said. Then, after a beat, “Do you *want* a ride to the hospital?”

Troy shook his head, laughing at the seventh offer. “No. Really. It’s fine.” He huffed out a breath. “I kind of deserved it.”

“Yeah,” Ilya said, without hesitation. “You did.” Then, more carefully, “And I know. About Shane.” He hesitated. “He is happy. I try.”

He attempted a smile as well, but it didn’t quite work.

And Troy didn’t think he’d ever felt worse about himself than he did in that moment, standing there and realising that whatever monster he’d built Ilya into over the last few weeks, whatever justification he’d clung to, it didn’t line up with the man in front of him now. Or the one he ever saw.

Troy was a fucking idiot. But it was too late for that. “I know,” Troy said softly. “Well. See you at practice, Coach? Got another death trap set up for us?”

Ilya snorted, “You know it.”

Troy nodded, lifted a hand in a small flick of farewell, and stepped back onto the path outside as the door closed slowly behind him. He stood there for a second, unmoving, on the exact same patch of concrete he’d stood on at Christmas, only now his nose throbbed in time with his pulse and his swollen face aching.

He tried to feel if he was angry with Ilya, but nothing was coming up. Troy seemed to realise now whatever he maybe half wanted has already been taken for years, apparently if his stupid research was anything to go by.

He can’t blame the man for reacting the way he did.

He wiped at the blood again, winced, and pulled his phone out.

Broken nose emergency room or doctor appointment.

Because, honestly. Fuck did his nose hurt.

Chapter 7: Whistle Blown

Chapter Summary

Some endings aren't victories, they're choosing not to repeat what came before.

Chapter Notes

well guys we are here :(

I cant thank you enough for all the love and support, i have read every single comment and reaction. I have laughed and almost cried at how sweet and amazing they are (and you are)

But i'll say more later, let's end this bitch (lovingly)!!!!

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

It was a peaceful day in the Centaurs' locker room. A quiet Troy had learned to appreciate.

It came only once the emptying of skates and shouted jokes. After the constant background of bodies had cleared the walls and left him alone. Alone, where he could breathe deeper than earlier in the day.

Alone, when a door thudded shut and the metal could say what Troy already knew...*everyone else had moved on.*

Now there was just the old smelly walls and Troy.

Peaceful. Like he'd said.

-

Troy knew he'd been dragging his feet on purpose. Practice had ended ten minutes ago, but leaving meant stepping back into the rest of his life, and lately that felt like a lot more effort than he had in him. Hiding in locker room, at least, made him feel like he was doing *something*.

Anything right. A rare commodity these day.

He was halfway through the laces on his skates, with each knot almost breaking at the seems, when the locker room door swung open and Ilya Rozanov walked in like the peace had been

waiting specifically for him to shatter. Already talking. Already *shattering* what Troy had just built.

Again.

“Barrett!” Ilya announced cheerfully. “You did not do good today. Worse than last week. Much improvement still to be had.”

Troy didn’t bother looking up at the overly fake joviality. Rather he tugged at the lace between his fingers with more vigour than the shoe really needed, and flattened it against the tongue of his skate, choosing to focus on the manageable violence instead of the slight verbal one.

“Always nice to feel seen,” he said blandly.

Ilya laughed, seeming completely unbothered by the flatness of his tone, and dropped his bag onto the bench a few stalls down. “I see you very clearly,” he said. “That is the problem.”

The words staining in the stale damp locker room air, as a context-dense second ticked past “Wow. *Really*,” he muttered, rolling his eyes.

Ilya raised his gaze, pausing mid-bag rummage, and Troy felt the moment when this stopped being a drive-by comment attack and became a conversation.

Jesus. Couldn’t he get a break?

Ilya leaned back against the lockers, arms crossing over his chest, as a hmmm came in his throat. He didn’t speak again just yet, he just watched Troy with an infuriating stare. Looking over the train wreck of a man. “You stayed late *again*,” Ilya said, delivered with a tilt of his head.

Almost mimicking him, Troy let out his own hum at the astute observation. He was just about to fire back something dry, something like *It seems I have* just as the locker room door opened again, stealing his thunder. Both men turned toward the sound just in time to see Shane walk in, already mid-sentence. “Ilya, did you want to go get—”

His eyes landed on Troy and almost like a fireproof moth to a never dying flame, and everything about him shut down at once. As if someone had grabbed his tongue mid syllable the words cut off and Shane’s face flattened into something very akin to furious. His eyes bouncing between Troy and Ilya, once and twice. Then, without another word, he turned on his heel and walked straight back out, the door swinging shut behind him.

Troy went still with his skates half-untied in his hands, the intent departure making him remember that this attitude he has held onto should not be carried out as proudly as he was currently doing. Especially after the mess he created.

He hadn’t seen Shane’s face up close since he’d been on top of him, fists swinging over something Troy had tried, repeatedly, to apologise for. Something neither man had ever wanted to hear in the weeks previous.

At least Shane made it clear where he stood.

Ilya, on the other hand, was still here almost every day. Still occupying Troy's personal bubble like none of it had happened. Like the Russian was still keeping tabs on him and monitoring his every step, like a helicopter parent waiting for him to trip.

He thought once he left Shane alone it would stop. But it only seemed to put the man more on edge.

He was Troy's captain. Which meant Troy was supposed to just lay down and take it.

He just wasn't sure he wanted to anymore.

He had been thinking lately about the option to move teams, if he even had that option. This place might have been something for him if he'd gone after Harris like Ilya had nudged him toward, multiple times. But too much had happened now for him to stay and be happy.

Troy moved his grip on the laces in his hand, and exhaled, going back to work. What he needed wasn't a fix or an explanation, he needed a second restart. And this time, he'd try not to turn it into another Barrett level catastrophe. "I don't think I'm re-signing when my contract ends," Troy said suddenly, into the quiet.

He hadn't planned to say it out loud in this exact moment, but it just slipped free in a first step he couldn't now take back.

Troy looked up, expecting to find a pleased or relieved expression on his captain's face, but what he saw was Ilya still watching the door, like it might open again if he willed it hard enough.

"Oh really?" he said, half listening.

Troy nodded. "Yeah. I...just don't think Ottawa's for me."

Ilya just turned away and stepped toward his locker, his hands busied themselves with nothing at all, like an inessential jersey and pads rearrangement. Troy recognised it for what it was, an excuse not to be seen for a moment. "You know," Ilya said lightly, "Shane asked me if I could use *my Russian mafia connections* to keep you quiet." Then laughed in a way to keep the words absurd, to lessen the implication.

"I told him *I do not know mafia* just because I am Russian," he continued. Then, more cautiously, "But I do want to know if you leaving is because... you think you can tell. Maybe. Elsewhere if you are apart from me."

Troy directly rolled his eyes after the half question and let out a disbelieving breath. "Jesus Christ," he whispered, exhausted more than angry. "Is everything fucking about this?" He shoved his shoes into his bag. "Look," Troy said, because apparently this was happening whether he liked it or not again. "I had no idea what I was encroaching on, okay? I didn't know there was a ten-year secret or a marriage with plastic fucking rings or whatever this is."

Ilya didn't interrupt. He just watched him like he always did, willing to see where this one went.

"Maybe next time," Troy went on with his voice climbing, "you tell a guy before he falls in way over his head. And maybe you don't break his nose. Which, by the way, is healing fine. Thanks for asking." He dragged a hand through his hair, breath uneven now. "And I would never tell anybody, I already said that," he repeated. "I just want to calm everything down. Get through this. Sail through until we can part ways and leave all of it behind—"

"How long is left on your contract?"

The question pulsed like blood through the room as Troy stopped mid-motion with his fingers whispering around his bag strap. "What?"

"How long," Ilya repeated, staring him down now, expression done, "is left."

Troy swallowed. "Thirteen months."

Ilya nodded once. "You want out?" he said. "Okay. You are out. I will make it happen."

"What...no," Troy said quickly. "I don't—"

"I am serious," Ilya pushed in. "If this is what you want, I can make it happen."

"I don't want people thinking I was forced out."

"They won't," Ilya said immediately. "I will make it look mutual."

A scathing beat.

"You keep *my* secret," he added, measured now, "and I will keep *yours*."

The room went very quiet as Troy studied him for a long second, something understanding creeping into his expression. "Oh," he said. "Is this the *Russian mafia* blackmail?"

Ilya smiled in almost amusement. "No," he laughed. "Shane is too serious about that. You should hear the things he says." Then, carefully added "This is called a pact of silence," Ilya said. "I looked it up last night. Very legal in Canada. And wherever else far away you may go."

The hesitancy Troy felt at accepting the thinly veiled threat, he means *offer*, was small, but it was the finality of what would come with this acceptance that stopped him from speaking. If he did this, that was the end of the road, right here. Not later. Not eventually. Now. The conversation that had been circling for weeks was finally transpiring, in the locker room he only ever liked when it was quiet. And Troy didn't know if he was ready.

Ilya stared at him, waiting for an answer. Or maybe a fight back about the said legalities and if this was really an offer.

Troy knew he could try and turn it down. But if he did, it wouldn't be because either of them wanted him to stay, it would be because some stubborn part of him wanted to push forward just to prove he could. Just to avoid losing. Just to avoid becoming the thing someone had decided he was a long time ago. And if he'd learned anything over the past few months, it was that the voice wasn't all knowing. It wasn't brave. It came from somewhere older and mean.

The same place that had put his dad where he was now. The same place that had kept his grandfather locked in that old rotting house with pride, until there was nothing left but a chess board and little boy. Finally, Troy exhaled, "Okay," he breathed. "I accept."

Ilya looked him over one final time, like he was recognising something in Troy that hadn't been there before. He nodded once. "I'll talk to the heads tomorrow morning," he said. "It'll be sorted. Maybe you're traded. Maybe leave until your contract ends. Either way, I'll see to it."

Troy murmured a quiet thanks and slung his bag over his shoulder. His body moved before his head caught up, carrying him toward the locker room door the same way it had so many weeks ago. Wishing maybe he could say goodbye to Shane as well. But Troy thinks he's pushed his luck far enough.

His eyes burned with enough heat to blink harder than normal to focus on the handle, on the metal and the silver. But just before his hand reached it, Ilya spoke again.

"You know," he said, voice different now. "You'll find someone too."

Troy paused in a sudden stop.

"I used to be like you," Ilya went on. "Maybe that's why I need Shane so much. But you don't have to become what's around you. That's not what the world is. It's just what you learned it could be."

Troy slowly looked over.

"It clicks," Ilya said. "One day. When you find a place that fits. And then you look back at all the shitty, horrible things you did and were done to you with new eyes." He swallowed. "You don't hate yourself quite as much."

He stared at Ilya like he was trying to spot the punchline, waiting for this to turn into another *you did shit at hockey today Troy* moment.

"Where is this coming from?" he asked. "You giving seminars now? To people who tried to ruin your relationship and steal your partner?"

Ilya barked out a genuine laugh. "Do not get confused," he said. "I will absolutely re-break your nose, Barrett, if you even step close to him again. I do not regret it. Not even a little."

That earned a weak huff from Troy before he could stop it. "Appreciate that," he muttered.

“But the rest,” Ilya resumed. “Not letting myself make decisions for me. Making them to prove that the people who hurt me were wrong. That they were bad, and I could have the things they said I couldn’t.”

His mouth twitched. “They *were* bad. But you already know that, you don’t have to *prove it*. Your choices don’t need to show it. Your life can’t reflect something you don’t feel.”

Troy nodded once, “Yeah,” he said. “Whatever that means.”

Ilya straightened at the dismissing words as the moment finally went clearly passed, just as quickly as it had arrived. The captain settling back into place. “Go,” he said. “Before I say something worse.”

Troy almost smiled, but he turned back to the door, opened it, and stepped out into the hallway. The air felt cleaner as behind him, the locker room door closed for the final time.

Was that Ilya telling him that going after Shane had been some big unrealised plan to prove something to himself? No way. Troy knew what he was thinking. *Always*.

Somewhere in the next few months, Troy started seeing Shane and Ilya everywhere again. But now for a reason completely apart from himself. At first it was background noise, with headlines as he scrolled past, clips that autoplaid when he wasn’t looking. A fan video posted by Hayden Pike, of all people, showed the pair caught with tongues tangled enough that no one could pretend they were good bro’s anymore.

He hoped, briefly and without any real justification, that Ilya had broken Hayden’s nose this time.

It was only fair.

He did open his messages and scroll to Ilya’s name after watching it, the chain sitting there untouched since that last day in the locker room and quickly typed something like Saw the news. Hope you’re okay, and then just as quickly deleted it.

They hadn’t spoken since. There was no need to start now.

Troy ended up on the west coast in a new team and new city. Trading tons of snow for floods of rain. Trying, consciously and deliberately, not to make any more obviously bad decisions. It was going... okay.

He still impulse-bought a fruit juicer the other day. He didn’t own nearly enough fruit and couldn’t picture himself actually using it anytime soon, but still he liked knowing the option was there.

Sometimes, usually late at night, he’d reminisce about his old choices and time in Ottawa. Most of them now make him wince. One or two made him physically shiver, like the New Year’s Eve ginger ale memory was particularly brutal.

Seriously what the fuck was he doing? Shane did not give him one hint of interest and he pulled that? To prove what? He was right about a obviously secret for a reason relationship?

But Ilya was right about how those choices didn't feel tempting anymore, not because he'd grown wiser in his time away, but because he wasn't the person who'd made them. *Damn Russian hockey philosopher.*

It was almost New Year's again now, and Troy knew, with absolute certainty, that he would never repeat that show. But as he scrolled past Shane and Ilya's first very official Instagram post, something warm kindled in his chest. If Ilya Rozanov could have that, then why couldn't he?

Troy opened his messages and pulled up the number of a guy he'd met the previous weekend at a bar with his new team. He was cute and normal and little boring.

Coffee sometime? he typed, and hit send before he could overthink it. Maybe this would turn out to be another one of those choices he'd look back on and cringe at, but Troy was starting to realise that maybe hindsight wasn't proof of failure.

It wasn't evidence of how terrible you are and how much you suck and need to be held inside at all costs. Perhaps it was proof that somehow along the lines all your terrible choices one of them made you change. And now because of that awful memory you are better.

And lately, the more he looked back the more Troy desperately wanted to be.

It was scary, sure. But he'd rather be scared with the hope of love and happiness given and taken freely than steady in the belief that it had to be controlled, saved, or endured before it could be ripped away to never return.

His phone buzzed in his hand.

Sure! Where did you want to go?

Troy smiled and started to type back something about *a new place on forty fourth st* when he hoped, that Shane and Ilya knew whatever they'd built together had a love so deep it seeped outwards, not just making them better, like Ilya had said, but quietly changing everything it touched.

And for the first time, Troy let himself believe he might be able to make something that'll do the same.

Sent message.

Chapter End Notes

and too the end we arrive :(

i couldn't do anything else to poor troy but kill him so i had to set him free.

BUT..... if you want more i am currently doing Ilya's pov of this whole story (but of a tone shift as well) in the series above!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

I've already made it the next in series above for you to bookmark if you'd like to stick around and dig that hole with me <3

i couldn't end Troy too hard because i did sort of get Stockholm syndrome (one direction) for him and had to give him a little hope but you can believe he gets hit by a car the next day if you still hate him!! creative liberties can be taken.

Also i am reviving my twitter account if you wanna pop over!!

[Twitter!!!!](#)

Anyway!!!! see you soon i hope <3

End Notes

Thank you so much for reading my tad bit!!!

I'm on Christmas leave and don't have a family, so this is very much what I'll be doing with my time. Consider this my orphan festive activity of choice <3

I'd love to hear what you think so far, genuinely. Thanks again for giving this a chance, and I'll see you very soon!!!!!!

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!