

Honey & Lemon

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by [noedovenest](#)

Summary

Shane catches a cold and Ilya makes him a tea.

The hotel's carpet, patterned in a taste Ilya found offensive, carried him toward the end of the hall. With each quiet step, the knot in his chest cinched tighter. Excitement tangled with trepidation, the need to touch Shane pressing harder than the fear that this time, the door would remain closed.

Perhaps Hollander had already written off their handful of hurried meetings as a fluke. A mistake. But this was Boston. His hometown. And Ilya had already been lucky once tonight. A five-three win, an additional two goals on his record-breaking season. Midnight had only just passed; maybe the day still owed him one more kindness.

When he reached the room number Hollander had reluctantly given him in passing, murmuring in the hallway behind the rink before the game, Ilya paused. He glanced over his shoulder, down the empty corridor, confirming no one would witness him slipping into his competition's room.

Then, with a staccato drum beating beneath his battered ribs, he raised his hand and rapped his knuckles against the door.

Time slowed to a near halt as he waited, restlessly tapping his foot against the floor for any shuffle behind the door. Nothing came. He knocked again, harder.

Most of the Metros were likely out drowning Boston's nightlife, but Ilya was certain Hollander wasn't among them. There was a long list of things he still didn't know about him, but one truth had surfaced early: number twenty-four wasn't a fan of parties, or drinking, or dancing.

Boring, Ilya had declared at the time, unwilling to admit he'd found the abstinence quietly endearing. It was rare, after all, for a man in his early twenties, at the prime of his life, blessed with a generous salary and a face most people recognized, to spend his nights watching juvenile YouTube videos and sipping Ginger Ale alone in a hotel room.

He lifted his hand to knock a third time.

The soft vibration in his jeans pocket stopped him.

Can't happen tonight. Sorry.

Disappointment bloomed bitter on his tongue. He swallowed it down, refusing to give it room to linger. So that was it. Their fling, short-lived, messy, clumsy, infuriatingly fun, was over.

Even as Ilya tried to accept the truth of it, his hand betrayed him, knocking anyway.

At the faint rustle of bedsheets behind the door, he tugged out his phone and typed a quick reply.

I know you're there. Open up, Hollander.

Somewhere inside the room, he heard a humorless sound bleed through the silence. Half a laugh, half a breath. Then, a cough. It sounded hollow, dry.

Another text.

Go away, Rosanov.

Ilya's determination was fierce, an unstoppable force. It was what had carried him this far, onto Boston's starting line, into the life he'd dreamed of as an eight-year-old with a pair of used skates and only the roughest grasp of English. That same tenacity refused to let him walk away now. He sighed, dragging a hand through his brown curls as he weighed his next move.

Someone's going to see me.

It wasn't dignified, dangling the threat of exposure over Hollander's head. Rumors would spread fast if he were found loitering outside a competitor's hotel room in the dead of night, and they'd damn Ilya just as thoroughly as they would Hollander. Still, when it worked, satisfaction curled warm in his chest.

The deadbolt slid free, and the sound sparked low in his stomach.

"Get in," Hollander rasped. "Now, you idiot."

"So excited to see me," Ilya teased, slipping through the narrow opening and pulling the door shut behind him.

The television was the room's only light, its flicker casting long shadows over the rumpled sheets and a small pile of Kleenex on the nightstand. Ilya's gaze snagged there, drifted to a bottle of NyQuil, then lifted back to Hollander. Red nose. Swollen eyes. Instinctively, he stepped back.

"You're sick."

"You think I was playing like shit for fun?" Hollander snapped, though the bite didn't land. Whatever fire he'd burned on the ice was gone now. The man in front of him was spent, shirtless and damp with sweat, trousers hanging low and wrinkled on his hips, exhaustion etched into every line. Still, Ilya's attention lingered. He couldn't help noticing the shape of his bare arms, remembering the way those fingers had slid up his chest, over his cheek, through his hair.

"Not worse than usual," Ilya shrugged, resisting a smile when Hollander rolled his eyes.

"Fuck off," Hollander muttered. Their usual banter fell flat when every word cost him something, when his limbs dragged as he turned back toward the bed and nearly collapsed onto the edge of the mattress. "You want to get sick too? You've got a game tomorrow."

"I am Russian," Ilya said simply. "Russians do not get sick."

“Sure,” Hollander reached for a crumpled tissue. Before Ilya could guess his intention, it was airborne. Ilya dodged with the reflex of a goalie blocking a puck.

Hollander laughed. “That’s what I thought.”

“Funny,” Ilya said, staring down at the tissue like it had committed a crime. “You are much less pretty with cold. Little bit gross.”

“Very gross,” Hollander agreed, pinching the bridge of his nose. “I feel like I’ve been hit by a truck. Nothing’s working. My mom always used to—” He stopped, hesitating. “Never mind.”

“She tuck you in? Kiss it better?” Ilya prompted, taking a careful step closer. Surely the germs couldn’t travel that far. He hadn’t been sick in years and wasn’t eager to break the streak, especially not when he planned on scoring another two tomorrow. Still, he didn’t move away.

“Sure,” Hollander coughed, sinking deeper into the bed. The sound rattled his chest, shook his shoulders. “You want to take over?”

“No,” Ilya’s lip curled. “Get in shower.”

“What?”

“Get in shower,” Ilya repeated, already turning toward the bathroom. Hoping it hadn’t yet been contaminated, he slid the glass door open and cranked the dial hot, the sleeve of his plain white undershirt catching the first spray. He flicked on the light, catching his reflection in the mirror and thinking briefly of a younger version of himself who’d hated the weight of a clogged head and aching limbs.

“I can’t,” Hollander groaned. “Gave it everything I had just to open the damn door for you. Thanks for that.”

“Welcome,” Ilya said, flashing a crooked half-smile. His gaze traced the slump of Hollander’s shoulders. Holding his breath, he crossed the room and wrapped a hand around his wrist, tugging. It was like pulling dead weight. “Come. Steam helps.”

“You just want to see me naked,” Hollander rasped, falling back against the sheets. “Just leave me to die.”

“Are all Canadians so dramatic?” Ilya scoffed, circling the bed. Every logical instinct told him not to do this. And yet, there was Hollander, the man he couldn’t seem to scrape from his thoughts, too weak to move himself a few feet. With a heavy sigh, he slid one arm beneath Hollander’s knees, the other behind his back, and lifted.

“Rosanov!” Hollander gasped, squirming. He was heavier than Ilya expected, the burn in his legs after two hours of play making itself known, but after a brief adjustment, he steadied and carried him toward the shower. “Put me down, idiot. You’re going to get sick.”

“Is stubborn contagious?” Ilya asked, glancing down at him. He fell quiet at the sight of Hollander’s eyes, dark, tired, swimming with surprise. It wasn’t the first time that look had

caught him off guard. He loved watching new sensations cross Hollander's face, the way his body learned Ilya piece by piece. The way his eyes widened when filth slipped from Ilya's mouth.

Steam wrapped around them as Ilya turned sideways through the bathroom door. With a low groan, he lowered one arm and let Hollander find his footing.

Fuck it. His immune system was already compromised.

He dropped to his knees, fingers quick and practiced as he untied the thin strings at Hollander's waist.

"I can't," Hollander murmured, though there was little conviction left in it. "Not tonight. I feel bad enough without leaving you... unsatisfied."

"Shut up," Ilya said, pushing the sweatpants down his hips. His mouth went dry at the lift beneath the thin white fabric, but that wasn't why he'd brought him here. Steam really did help. He remembered the baths he'd taken when he'd been younger, the way heat loosened muscles and cleared the congestion from his chest. If there'd been a tub, he would have added lavender shampoo, let it bubble.

When the last of the fabric slid away, Hollander's body was already responding. A quiet laugh escaped Ilya. "Not so sick, then."

"It's not like I can help it," Hollander whispered, gaze heavy-lidded and fixed on Ilya below him.

That look was a drug and Ilya had quickly grown addicted to it. The awe, the attention that wanted him not as an exceptional hockey player or a paycheck, but simply as himself. Hollander's appreciation was different. Genuine.

A sharp snuffle cut through the moment. Ilya rose slowly from the cold tile, deliberate, drawing Hollander's gaze with him. When he reached his full height, only inches separated their mouths. Any chance of leaving unscathed was gone, so he leaned in, brushing his lips against Hollander's. Brief, controlled. Like an addict taking a whiff of their kryptonite, just enough to steady himself.

"Get in, Hollander," he murmured, his hand sliding along the damp curve of his rival's spine.

Hollander didn't move. Instead, he traced Ilya's face, fingers catching at the hem of his shirt, slipping beneath the fabric. The question came softly, hopeful.

"Come with me?"

Why couldn't he deny this man anything?

Ilya stepped back, barely breaking eye contact as he peeled the long sleeve from his skin, already damp with steam. He unzipped his jeans, stepped out of them, and drifted back into Hollander's orbit as if the distance had never truly existed. As if he was always finding him, on the ice, in a crowd.

“Only because you look like you might fall over.”

“Concussion’s the only way I’m getting out of practice tomorrow,” Hollander muttered. Remembering the ache in his body, he leaned into the glass door. “Maybe you should let me fall.”

“Maybe,” Ilya allowed, slipping an arm beneath Hollander’s shoulder.

They moved together into the heat, both flinching under the first blast from the overhead spout. The team budget had at least stretched far enough for oversized showers; they fit beneath it easily. Hot water plastered their hair to their foreheads, soaking them in seconds.

“God,” Hollander groaned. “That feels good.”

“Like I said,” Ilya murmured, hands sliding over the smooth, hard planes of Hollander’s chest. “Turn around.”

“I already told you—”

Ilya didn’t wait. Hollander was easy to maneuver like this, all exhaustion and loose resistance. He turned him toward the wall, palms settling on his shoulders before Hollander could protest further. His thumbs pressed into the tight cords at the base of his neck.

The groan that slipped from Hollander’s lips was deep, helpless.

Ilya leaned into it, working his thumbs harder, dragging his fingers back and forth, rolling the knots from his muscles. A glance downward found Hollander’s knees trembling, his weight yielding without thought.

Ilya ground his teeth, fighting the instinct to let his hands wander lower. “Feels good?”

“Keep going,” Hollander rasped.

The sound of his demand did something treacherous to Ilya’s stomach, flipping it over on itself. It was impossible not to imagine those words breathed in a different context. And though they hadn’t crossed that final line, hands and mouths doing most of the work in their stolen meetings, it hadn’t stopped him from thinking about it. From replaying it. From lying awake with his eyes shut, satisfying his urges while he pictured the way Hollander would sound when he finally gave in, greedy and unguarded.

He reached for the small shelf, fingers closing around a bar of soap. Peeled it from its thin plastic and tossed the wrapper aside, the soap warm and slick in his palm.

“Face me.”

This time, Hollander didn’t hesitate. He turned like he’d been waiting for the instruction, hoping for it.

The soap was forgotten almost immediately as Ilya braced himself against Hollander’s sudden weight as he fell into him, leaning in. He kissed him beneath the spray, wet and

unpolished, mouths colliding without finesse. His hands explored with purpose, squeezing, grazing, learning. When his fingers brushed along Ilya's length, the reaction was immediate, a sharp inhale, a shudder that passed through them both.

"Behave, Hollander," Ilya warned softly. "Before I change my mind."

The shape of his almond eyes flicked to the bar of soap. Widened. Softened.

It was more intimate than they'd ever been before, a far cry from being tangled in unfamiliar sheets, clumsy and rushed in the dark. The bathroom light was unforgiving, bright enough to expose the vulnerability of the moment. Ilya looked away, grasping for some scrap of pride. This was nothing serious. Hollander was sick and gross; he was only helping.

Jaw clenched, he slid the soap between his hands until it foamed, then let the bar slip from his grasp and clatter against the shower floor. Why hadn't he left the moment he'd spotted the cough syrup on the nightstand? This light was too bright. The silence too loud.

But Hollander was waiting, quiet, wide-eyed, and Ilya was not one to disappoint.

With more gentleness than he typically practiced, Ilya ran his soapy palms over Hollander's firm chest, beneath his arms, down over his thighs. He worked carefully, deliberately, until every inch of skin gleamed, then gestured for him to step beneath the stream and rinse. He wordlessly obeyed.

They stepped from the shower, Ilya first, Hollander following. His accent was thick, words working around the tightness in his throat. "Better?"

"A little," Hollander said, breathless. "Yeah. Uh, thanks."

The gratitude made it worse. Made it real. Ilya wasn't the nurturing type, and he still couldn't name what had come over him, or why the sight of his rival, pale and off-colour, had pulled something unfamiliar to the surface. With any luck, it would sink back down just as quickly.

"I should go," Ilya said, grabbing a towel and tossing another toward Hollander. His rivals impaired reflexes lagged, the fabric landing at his feet. Ilya almost bent to pick it up. Almost. "Feel better, Hollander."

"Hope so," Hollander murmured, a crease pinched between his brows as his eyes fell to the towel, and back to Ilya. Confused. Something unspoken hovering on his tongue. If he was surprised Ilya was leaving without taking anything for himself, the feeling was mutual. Why had he come in, knowing tonight wouldn't follow their usual pattern? He didn't have an answer yet. He filed it away as a lapse in judgment and slipped from the bathroom with a brief nod.

God, he needed a cigarette. Something to dull the blade pressing against his chest. He scanned the bar beneath the television for vodka. Not his first choice, but it would do, and anyway, it wasn't going on his tab. A quick swipe and he'd be gone, in the elevator before Hollander finished drying off.

Instead, he found tea packets. Sugar. Honey. A kettle. Paper cups. No alcohol in the minibar. He groaned softly. Of course they kept Hollander's room clean. *Boring*.

Still, something nagged at him. By the time Hollander emerged from the bathroom, hair damp, the bathroom light haloing his stupidly perfect silhouette, Ilya already had the kettle in hand.

Without a word, he grabbed a water bottle from the spot where liquor should have been and poured it into the kettle. Flicked the switch. Watched the water begin to tremble on the heated plate.

"What are you doing?" Hollander asked, towel slung low around his waist. Ilya ignored the temptation. "...Are you making tea?"

"You ask too many questions," Ilya said, tearing open a small packet and dropping the tea bag into a cup. Honey followed, his fingers sticking together as he squeezed it in, then a pinch of sugar to blunt the herbal bite, just the way his father liked it. The memory made him flinch. He tossed the empty wrappers aside.

"Why?" Hollander asked. The soft creak of the mattress told Ilya exactly where he was now. He didn't turn, watching the water begin to bubble instead.

"Another question," Ilya muttered, annoyed with himself more than anything. Why couldn't he just *leave*?

Hollander coughed. The sound cut straight through his resolve. Ilya glanced over his shoulder, head tipping slightly. "Is it whole team," he asked, "or only you?"

"That got sick?" Hollander clarified. At Ilya's nod, he went on, "About half of us. Airports, I guess. Winter sucks. I don't know." A pause. "You lucked out, though. Nice shots tonight."

"No luck needed," Ilya smirked, pouring the water. The cup warmed fast, so he cradled it with a second one, testing the heat before crossing the room and setting it down beside the pile of used tissues. "Drink it. You sound like chain smoker."

Hollander scoffed. "Coming from you?"

"Eh." Ilya shrugged, scanning the room until his eyes landed on a plush chair in the corner. He crossed to it and sank down. "I cut back."

Surprise flickered across Hollander's face, tugging at Ilya's patience. After a moment, he smoothed his expression into something neutral. "Good. It's terrible for you. My mom caught me with one when I was, like, fourteen. Grounded me for a month. Didn't even taste good."

Ilya leaned his head back, eyes closing. "It's not about taste. Not at first. It's the feeling. The —" He frowned slightly. "I don't know word in English. *Oblegcheniye*. Like peace."

Hollander didn't answer, but Ilya heard the slurp of tea, the quiet hum that followed. The television volume ticked up a few notches. Hollander's voice drifted, softer now, like he was

already slipping toward sleep. A few more sips and he'd be done for. What harm was there in staying a little longer?

"I used to watch this when I stayed home sick from school," Hollander said.

"Ah," Ilya replied, unimpressed.

"Boring, I know," Hollander added, and Ilya could hear the smile in it.

They listened to the muted cadence of a game show, speaking no further. Every so often, Ilya cracked one eye open. To check on him, he told himself, though he wasn't sure what he expected to find. It wasn't as though a cold was lethal. Hollander would be fine in a day or two, skating circles around him again by their next game.

Still, he couldn't stop himself. Couldn't deny the quiet relief he felt watching the tension ease from Hollander's face as he finished the tea and sank deeper into the pillow, eyes slipping shut.

When a soft snore parted his lips, Ilya rose silently from the chair.

He was halfway to the door when he noticed the bedsheets bunched in a forlorn heap at the foot of the mattress.

He shook his head. *No*. He wasn't doing this.

Then Hollander rolled onto his side, curling inward, as if searching for warmth.

Muffling a groan into his palm, Ilya turned sharply. He grabbed the heavy comforter and lifted it, carefully drawing it over Hollander's legs, his hips, up to his chest. The corner of Hollander's mouth curved.

Had he—?

"You asshole," Ilya hissed.

Hollander burst into laughter, loud enough that they risked waking the neighbors. "I hope this cold kills you," Ilya added viciously.

"You tucked me in," Hollander wheezed, clutching at his ribs.

"I'm never coming back," Ilya snapped, and then, because there was no dignified way out of this, he seized the blankets and ripped them off again. It only fueled Hollander's amusement.

"Stop," Hollander gasped, hand pressed to his stomach. "Stop making me laugh, Rosanov, it hurts."

"Good," Ilya muttered.

But when he finally turned for the door, the smile tugging at his mouth refused to fade. He stepped into the hallway still grinning.

God. He loved that laugh.

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