

Full Contact

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Full Contact

by [cjr2](#)

Summary

Newly traded to the Ottawa Centaurs, Ilya Rozanov is so close to having everything he'd never thought he was allowed to want. He can see the man he loves more than four times a year, he's surrounded by a team who supports him through his injury, and Shane's parents have unhesitatingly accepted him as part of the family.

Except his lingering concussion symptoms have kept him sidelined from hockey, his boyfriend is still two hours away, their schedules are a disaster, and Shane's team is, well... it's full of assholes. There must be a way to make this all work out.

or

A sequel to a whump fanfiction with more whump...that is also, secretly, a fix-it.

Chapter 1

July 2017—the cottage

Ilya had been staring at his tablet for at least half an hour, which Shane didn't love. He was happy about the reason, of course, because what Ilya was looking at was some paperwork related to his transfer to Ottawa, and Ilya had been scrolling through the document, merrily signing his name in various places with a stylus. Shane just kind of wished that it didn't require Ilya to stare at a screen for so long.

They must have had a way to handle things like this before the internet, before digitally signing documents had become a thing. Hadn't they used to courier over fat stacks of documents or something? Not that he necessarily wanted Ilya to tell his agent to send his new contract to Shane Hollander's cottage. And he didn't even know if Ilya staring at pages and pages of physical documents would be better than a screen, anyway.

But Ilya had been making his way through it at a pretty good clip, until he'd gotten to something that had stumped him. His agent was Russian, so hopefully he'd explained any of the too complicated parts to Ilya, but maybe the English was still giving him trouble. Or did they give Russian players a Russian version of their contract for reference? Probably not. They probably thought it was too much trouble to have such a long document translated, and if Shane knew anything about languages, it was that you rarely got good results by just running something through Google translate or whatever.

Ilya's contract really wasn't Shane's business, anyway. That kind of thing was private, although the details would be public. Well, the main details, anyway, maybe not every tiny thing in there. Shane wasn't entitled to know every little detail of Ilya's life.

Except, well...they were partners. They'd both agreed to that. So maybe Shane *was* entitled, just a little bit. But just to make extra certain that Ilya wouldn't get upset, Shane detoured to the bedroom first to retrieve his glasses case. He came back to the table and pulled up a chair beside Ilya, glasses on.

"Is there something confusing in there?" Shane began tentatively. "Something I can help with?"

"Hm?" Ilya grunted, distracted, then looked up at Shane, and did an honest-to-God double-take. "Oh, *hello*."

Ilya sounded very pleased, ignoring his tablet and leaning in to kiss Shane instead. Which wasn't a *bad* outcome, honestly, both because Shane liked being kissed by Ilya and because it meant Ilya wasn't staring at the screen until it gave him a headache. But it didn't answer Shane's question at all. Shane could absolutely let them get sidetracked until Ilya was fucking him over the table. But he probably shouldn't. He pushed Ilya away, gently, and Ilya pouted.

"You cannot come to me looking like *that* and expect me not to kiss you," Ilya complained, and Shane shook his head, smiling. He didn't know what it was with Ilya and his glasses, but

he also wasn't about to try to explain why he loved Ilya's curls so much either, loved tangling his hands in them, loved twirling them around his fingers. If Ilya was so easily pleased, why would Shane deny him? Even if he felt a little self-conscious about it, for some reason.

"Your paperwork?" Shane prodded. "Something about it bothering you?"

Ilya's expression turned pinched. "Is nothing," he said, so very clearly lying. Shane raised an eyebrow at him, and Ilya winced, holding his hands up as if in defense. "No, do not look at me like that, I feel like naughty schoolboy."

Okay, well...Shane was filing *that* away for later. Although he felt like maybe Ilya wasn't ideally suited to be the naughty schoolboy. In temperament, definitely, but Shane was *not* the strict teacher who was going to...spank him? Jesus fucking Christ, Shane could *not* do that.

"Did you want to try telling me the truth?" Shane asked, and ugh, maybe he *was* an annoyingly strict schoolteacher. He immediately felt embarrassed. "Only if you want to. I mean. It's not really my business."

Ilya's expression immediately turned fond, then torn, then also embarrassed. It was a pretty wide range of emotions for Ilya Rozanov in just a few seconds.

"They are asking me for emergency contact," Ilya admitted at last.

It should be me, Shane almost said, though that was fucking ridiculous. Not in an ideal world, obviously. In an ideal world, of *course* Shane would be his boyfriend's emergency contact, and it wouldn't be a big deal at all. It would be expected, after they'd been together for seven years. Or...well, whatever they'd been doing for seven years. Of course, in an ideal world, they wouldn't have had to do that, could have just been a couple, or whatever, from the start. But they didn't live in an ideal world.

"Who was it before? When you were with the Bears?"

Shane was surprised he hadn't found out, actually, through all of this. Maybe it had been his father, but Ilya's father had died not long before his injury. And Ilya's father had been so far away in Moscow. Would he have even had time to change it to his brother? Would he have wanted to?

"It was only team doctor. It is common, I think, for players with no family in same country. They would try to contact my father, too, but..." But Ilya's father was dead now, and he hated his brother, and he had no other family.

Except he did. He had Shane, and Shane's family.

"You should list me," Shane said, before he thought better of it a second time. And Ilya laughed, which kind of fucking hurt. Ilya must have seen the hurt on Shane's face, though, because his laugh stopped abruptly.

"You are serious?" Ilya demanded. "Is not a joke?"

Shane looked at the ceiling for a second, trying to hide how annoyed he was. Because of course Ilya had thought it was a joke. Of course he hadn't realized that Shane was bearing his soul, going out on the ricketiest limb possible. He knew Ilya hadn't tried to hurt him on purpose. He knew Ilya never would.

"It's not a joke."

Ilya stared at Shane, and it looked like he was trying to see all the way into Shane's soul. Shane wondered what he'd see if he could.

"And what will Centaurs team doctor think if he must call Shane Hollander if I am injured?" Ilya asked, very reasonably.

It was a ridiculous suggestion. Shane knew it was. But Shane tried to imagine what would happen if Ilya got injured again and Shane wasn't there. It had been horrible, watching Ilya get hurt, watching him lying confused and disoriented and in pain on the ice, but not being there seemed almost worse. And even worse than that was Ilya being injured and Shane not knowing for hours or maybe days because no one knew to contact him. Finding out later, from some TV broadcast, that Ilya had been injured in some random city and not even knowing what hospital he'd been brought to. Shane couldn't fucking handle that.

"We'll tell them..." He trailed off. He had no idea what they'd tell them. But there must be something they *could* tell them, right? Maybe even something close to the truth. It started to come together in Shane's mind just as he started speaking the words.

"We'll tell them that after you got injured, I went to check on you in the hospital," Shane asserted more confidently. "And when I realized you would be stuck in Montreal for the foreseeable future and you didn't know anyone in Montreal, I offered to help. And then we became friends."

"Wow," Ilya deadpanned. "You are such a good guy."

Shane rolled his eyes at Ilya. He wasn't saying that to bolster his image, even though it probably would. He could already see the headlines about how he was such a polite and wonderful paragon of the sport. His mother would be pleased.

"But we can tell everyone that, or something like it," Shane insisted. "And then if people see us together, it makes sense. We bonded when you were stuck in Montreal. And we don't have to lie about liking each other."

Ilya's expression turned thoughtful. He didn't reject the suggestion outright, at least.

"Is almost the truth," he remarked, and Shane's heart soared. And then it crashed, when Ilya continued, "But you are not good emergency contact."

"What, why?"

"Because you are hockey player. I am hockey player. If I am injured, it is because I am playing hockey. You will also, probably, be playing hockey at same time. Maybe in some city

far away.”

Shane sucked in a slow breath. They both spent half the season playing hockey in some city far away, and so did every other hockey player. If another hockey player got injured at an away game, their wife or mother or whoever would *also* be in some city far away. But maybe Ilya really *was* just concerned that they might both be in different cities far away at the same time.

“Can you list a secondary contact?” Shane asked. He was pretty sure you could. He’d done all this so many years ago that he barely remembered, but he thought he’d listed both his parents, in case one of them couldn’t be reached. “List my mom. Or my dad. It doesn’t matter which.”

Ilya gave him a look. “Yes, it is definitely normal if my emergency contact is Shane Hollander’s mother,” he drawled. Shane couldn’t tell if he actually objected or if he was just being realistic about this. Because yes, whoever on the Centaurs had access to this information would probably think it was weird. And if Ilya got injured again and Yuna Hollander came running, everyone who saw would think it was weird. Except that still seemed better than Ilya being injured and alone.

“My parents offered to help when you were injured, because they are nice people, and they were already visiting me in Montreal,” Shane explained. “Done.”

Ilya softened a little. “Is also true,” he admitted. “They are nice people.”

“So. You shouldn’t have problems telling the press that if it ever comes up. Right?” Shane prodded. “Even if we’re still in the same division, it’s not as...intense as it was before.” Because Ottawa was not a winning team, and also because they didn’t know if Ilya would even be playing, but Shane didn’t say either of those things. He was sure Ilya knew anyway. “Plenty of guys in the league have friends on other teams.”

Ilya sighed, grasping Shane’s hand. “Yes, I will tell them that Shane Hollander is a nice boy, and I will not tell them that he loves sucking my dick.”

Shane flushed, even though it was true. He *did* love sucking Ilya’s dick.

“Ilya! Jesus Christ.”

Ilya ignored him. “And I will tell them that Shane Hollander’s parents are wonderful and kind, and the reason they love me is *not* because I love their son.”

Shane’s heart went gooey inside his chest, the same way it always did when Ilya said the word *love*. “Your delivery could use some work to be ready for the press,” Shane remarked thickly.

“Mm,” Ilya agreed. “I will practice what to say.”

And he turned back to his tablet and woke the screen back up. And Shane watched as he very carefully typed *Shane Hollander* where it asked for an emergency contact and then typed

Shane's phone number from memory.

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

Answering the *most* important question raised by *The Long Game*. According to me, anyway... 😊

August 2017—the cottage

Shane loved sucking Ilya Rozanov's dick. He thought he'd known that before, but after having months to experiment, Shane had found that he liked it even more than he'd thought. There were so many ways to do it, and Shane had tried nearly all of them. Hard and fast, slow and teasing, playing with Ilya's foreskin, his balls. Applying just the tiniest bit of his teeth.

He was playing with Ilya's balls now, in the way he'd learned Ilya really liked. He liked firm pressure, liked when Shane would tug on them, and Shane knew to do it when he wanted Ilya to come really fast. Or—and Shane let up a little, slowing the movement of his mouth on Ilya's shaft—when he wanted to tease a little, bring Ilya close to the edge and then ease off.

“Господи,” Ilya hissed between his teeth, which Shane now knew meant something like *Jesus Christ*. One of his favorite things to do was to get Ilya to curse in Russian during sex, or even to mumble a slew of words Shane didn't know. He liked to know he could get Ilya into that state, where he let go and didn't worry if Shane could understand him.

Ilya tried to thrust up into Shane's mouth, but Shane held him down by the hips, forcing Ilya to accept his pace. Ilya grunted in frustration but settled, letting Shane have his way, and that turned Shane on more than anything. It was like taming some giant beast, making it come to heel for him.

Shane teased Ilya's balls more gently this time, tracing his fingers around them. Ilya had more hair here than Shane did, but Ilya had more hair *everywhere* than Shane did. Shane kind of liked that, aesthetically speaking, but he didn't always love it quite so close to his mouth. With his fingers it was okay though, and Shane's fingers explored unhurriedly while his mouth worked Ilya's dick, slowly and thoroughly. Shane's fingers dipped behind Ilya's balls, and he felt the pucker of Ilya's hole clench against him. Jesus.

Shane pulled his head back, heart suddenly hammering in his chest. He kept his fingers where they were, just pressed against Ilya's hole, not moving. Ilya's face was flushed from everything Shane had been doing, but he didn't look uncomfortable or upset. Why hadn't they ever talked about this? Shane had always just assumed that Ilya wouldn't want to. Ilya was just so...in control all the time, so sure and dominant, and Shane already knew he preferred to be the one who got fucked. Or...he thought he did. He'd only tried the reverse with women. And Ilya had never brought it up, either. In seven years.

“Have you ever?” Shane asked, biting his lip. He couldn’t quite get the rest of the question out, but he pressed a questing finger a little harder against Ilya’s entrance, which probably communicated what he meant. Ilya sucked in a breath.

“Yes,” Ilya said simply. Which didn’t give Shane much at all. He blinked, and his hand was still *right there*. It was heady and strange.

“Did you...like it?” he ventured.

Ilya’s expression turned thoughtful. God, maybe they should have had this conversation at a different time, not when Shane was knelt between Ilya’s thighs on the bed, Ilya’s dick inches away, Shane’s fingers pressed against Ilya’s asshole. Maybe this was like...a sofa conversation, with a beer or something. Shane didn’t usually drink, but he would probably want to for a conversation like this. Except he was trying to keep Ilya from drinking any alcohol either, because nothing mixed worse with vertigo than alcohol. It would be a dick move if Shane was drinking and Ilya couldn’t.

“Not really,” Ilya admitted at last. “Was maybe not the right time. Or not the right person.” He paused, looking nervous. “Did you want—?”

Jesus fucking Christ. Shane had no idea. He didn’t know why he’d even brought it up, why his curious fingers had gotten so curious.

“I don’t know,” Shane admitted, exasperated. Maybe more with himself than with Ilya’s answer. “Definitely not if you don’t like it.”

Ilya pursed his lips, almost shy. “I liked...some of it. Before the fucking.”

It took Shane a few seconds to parse that answer. It wasn’t like Ilya to be so reserved about sex. But he must have meant he’d enjoyed the preparation more. Shane liked that part, too, but he was always eager to get to the actual fucking part. He loved the feel of Ilya’s dick in his ass, stretching him open. He hadn’t really ever thought about not progressing to fucking, and on purpose. Whenever Ilya tried to be slow and teasing with him, Shane just ended up begging for Ilya’s dick.

But maybe it made sense Ilya had liked that better, even if he hadn’t liked being fucked. He had a prostate. Even straight men would probably love a finger or two in their ass if so many of them weren’t afraid that playing with their ass somehow made them gay.

Suddenly, Shane was very, very interested, at least in this one thing. He traced a finger around Ilya’s hole, feeling it clench and spasm against him. “Can I?”

“You can do anything to me, Shane,” Ilya said with full sincerity, and Shane suddenly realized he probably meant it. He’d probably even let Shane fuck him if Shane wanted, even if Ilya hated every second of that. Hell, just talking about it had made Ilya’s erection flag a little, even after at least ten very determined minutes of Shane having sucked his dick and played with his balls. And Shane hadn’t *really* wanted to try it, but now he definitely didn’t want to try it.

But Ilya had implied he'd liked fingers, so...Shane would try fingers—one, maybe two, nothing more than that. And if Ilya wasn't into it, Shane would stop immediately and go back to blowing him and make him come so hard he forgot how awkward and uncomfortable the whole thing had been.

"Pass me the lube," Shane requested, and Ilya did without hesitation. If he had hesitated, Shane would definitely have called it off. He wasn't *that* curious. But Ilya was watching him with hooded, trusting eyes, and so Shane uncapped the lube, poured some on his fingers...

...and realized *he had no fucking clue what he was doing*. The only ass he had had his finger inside was his own, and that was just...really fucking different. He could feel everything, so he knew immediately when it was uncomfortable. Also, he was really limited by the angle when he'd done it to himself, since his hand didn't quite bend that way. Which was why he'd bought a dildo in the first place.

Shane slid his lips around the head of Ilya's dick again, which made it jerk in his mouth and was, oddly, very calming. Taking a slow breath through his nose, Shane moved his hand behind Ilya's balls again, dragged his lubed finger in a slow circle around Ilya's hole, feeling it flutter against his finger. He thought Ilya might tense up, that he might have to coax him open, but Shane's lubed finger slid inside Ilya's body easily, in one smooth motion. Ilya sucked in a sharp breath. Shane moaned around his dick.

It was strange, and...intimate, in a way that was different than the things they had done before. Not better or worse, really, but different. Shane moved his finger slowly, experimentally, and he kept working on Ilya's cock with his mouth at the same time, waiting for any sign of discomfort. But it didn't come. In fact, it was like Ilya was even more pliant beneath him, more relaxed. Shane let Ilya's dick fall from his mouth and grasped him behind the knee, guiding him to plant his foot on the mattress, to give Shane better access to his ass. Ilya didn't tense, didn't object, just...went, followed Shane's direction. It was heady.

Shane focused on the movement of his finger inside Ilya, and Ilya's eyes were closed and there was a tiny hitch in his breathing, but his dick stayed hard even without Shane's mouth on it, which was probably good for Shane's jaw. It wouldn't be the first time Shane's ambition had outstripped his ability when it came to sucking Ilya's dick. Shane watched Ilya's face, concentrating on where his hand was. He turned his wrist, crooked his finger, frowned. God, where even *was* the prostate exactly? He didn't have an anatomy book open in front of him. Would he know when he—

Ilya groaned, hips jerking, and a bead of precome dripped from the head of his cock, pooling on his stomach, and it was so fucking hot. Shane reached down to grip his own dick, like that helped anything at all. Now that Shane's mouth wasn't occupied, he felt like he should say something, but even imagining himself saying something like, *Does this feel good?* was somehow mortifying and definitely wouldn't be sexy.

He could tell that it felt good, though, from Ilya's reaction, so he did it again, moved his finger at what he thought was the right angle and was rewarded by Ilya rolling his hips, thrusting up against nothing and down against Shane's finger all at once. Shane stroked his own dick once. He literally could not help it, looking at Ilya splayed out beneath him, flushed and loose, his dick leaking onto his stomach.

Okay. Shane could definitely do this. He knew what it felt like from the other side, too, so he knew not to overdo it. It would probably be easier with two fingers than one, and Ilya was nice and relaxed beneath him, so Shane slowly removed his finger and pressed two of them against Ilya's entrance.

"Okay?"

Ilya nodded, eyes still closed. "Yes, is okay," Ilya agreed, and Shane pressed two fingers inside. Ilya's body spasmed around him, then subsided, and Shane crooked his fingers, searching again until he got that same soft moan from Ilya. Ilya's dick was leaking constantly now, definitely more than usual, and Shane wondered if Ilya could come just from this. Shane had come from just being fucked, so maybe Ilya could, but maybe that was a lot of pressure for the first time Shane did this to him.

And maybe Shane really, really wanted to taste Ilya again. So he begrudgingly abandoned his own dick and wrapped his hand around the base of Ilya's again, leaning down and wrapping his lips around Ilya's cock. Ilya groaned, hips jerking enough that he nearly choked Shane on his dick, would have if Shane's hand hadn't been there. That was also really fucking hot.

"*Shane*," Ilya groaned, and Shane literally could not take it. He moved his mouth hard and fast, crooked his fingers just so, and then Ilya was moaning, thrusting, shuddering into Shane's mouth as he came. It was a fight not to rip his fingers out of Ilya's body at that second, to wait for Ilya to ride out his orgasm before Shane's hand was around his own dick, fingers still slick with enough lube to glide against his skin in a way that was on the pleasurable side of too much friction. Ilya's hands were grasping at Shane's shoulders.

"Up here," Ilya urged, voice still thick from his orgasm. "I want to see you come."

The words almost made that impossible, but Shane struggled up the bed, onto his knees, stroking himself with hard, fast movements. Ilya's hand gripped the side of Shane's thigh, held him tight as Shane came all over Ilya's chest.

Shane folded over, rested his head against Ilya's still-raised knee as he caught his breath. He felt Ilya shifting on the bed, looked up to find Ilya wiping himself clean with a tissue, and something about that niggled at the corner of Shane's orgasm-addled mind.

"Did you *really* want me to come on your chest?" Shane asked, suddenly suspicious. Ilya shrugged.

"I do not mind. It is hot to watch," Ilya said carelessly. "And this way, you do not bitch about the sheets."

Shane snorted. He didn't know if that was considerate or annoying, but it was definitely true that Shane could not change the sheets every time they fucked, or he'd be changing them multiple times a day. They would be doing nothing but laundry, or have closets filled with nothing but changes of sheets.

"Am I *that* annoying?" Shane asked seriously.

“Hm,” Ilya grunted noncommittally. “You just like things a particular way. Everyone does. For example, I like if my naked boyfriend is much closer to me instead of barely touching me.”

Shane rolled his eyes, but he moved so that he could settle himself against Ilya’s body, which was warm and hard and...yep, Ilya had probably wiped Shane’s come away so quickly because he’d hoped Shane would end up just like this, naked and half on top of him.

“There. Perfect,” Ilya said, wrapping his arm around Shane. “I am simple man with simple needs.”

Ilya really, really wasn’t. He was maybe the most complicated man that Shane had ever known, and he felt like he was still only just learning half the things that lived beneath the surface of Ilya Rozanov’s crooked smile. Between the two of them, Shane was probably the simple one. Shane nuzzled his face into Ilya’s neck.

“Sure you are,” he replied, unconvinced.

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

Okay, y'all, I am writing this way faster than I thought, so...hi!

September 2017—Montreal

Shane was twitching like a nervous mouse, shifting from foot-to-foot as they stood on Hayden Pike's doorstep. It was late already, past nine o'clock, because that was when the older Pike children would already be in bed. "Older" was relative, of course, because the oldest two were...four? Ilya had forgotten already, even though Shane had given him a primer on the Pike family not very long before.

Ilya would blame his concussion if anyone called him on the fact that he couldn't remember. Shane wouldn't believe him, of course, because he hadn't had any memory problems from the concussion before. Then they could have a tiny argument and Ilya could fuck Shane until he forgot about it. That actually sounded quite pleasant. It was always enjoyable to take Shane from annoyed to bonelessly satisfied.

The twins had stupid names; Ilya remembered that much, although he didn't remember exactly what they were. They were named after gemstones, maybe, like...Ruby and...Pearl? Or something. Were those names in English? Ilya wasn't sure.

Ilya caught Shane's arm, stopping his nervous shifting. If he was any twitchier, he'd drop the bottle of wine they'd brought. It was a nice bottle of wine, too. Ilya had only let Shane hold it because he'd thought that Shane was *less* likely to drop it, but maybe he'd been wrong. Maybe it was still safer with the idiot with unpredictable episodes of vertigo.

The door opened to a beautiful woman with long, dark hair and an exceptionally fit body considering she had given birth not very long before. Definitely too good for Hayden Pike, who was...average, at best, and not even a very good hockey player. Who could explain people's tastes, though?

"Shane!" the woman exclaimed, clearly ecstatic to see him, which made Ilya like her already. Ilya might be biased, but he had to at least consider liking anyone who understood how great Shane was. She pulled back and held a hand out to Ilya. "Hi, I'm Jackie."

Jackie. Ilya would definitely remember her name, if not the names of all of her many spawn with Hayden Pike.

"Ilya," he told her, entirely unnecessarily, he was sure. Still, it would be very weird if she wanted to call him Rozanov or something. "Is nice to meet you."

Jackie ushered them inside and noticed the wine Shane was carrying. “Oh, that’s so sweet!” she said, and she even sounded like she meant it. She scrutinized the label for a minute and raised her eyebrows, looking impressed. “I didn’t think you knew anything about wine.”

Shane did this thing that was halfway between blushing and beaming. “Oh, I don’t. Ilya picked it.”

Oh, that was what it was. Embarrassment for himself and pride for Ilya. Well, that was strange. Ilya had never quite been on the receiving end of someone’s pride like that, and for something so simple. He liked it, though.

“You have good taste,” Jackie said with a smile as she led them further into the house. It was spacious enough, but it definitely showed that it was a house filled with babies and toddlers. Toys and blankets were scattered all over. “Please forgive the mess.”

“Oh, no, it’s our fault,” Shane apologized. “I wish we could have had you over instead.”

Shane had been stressing about that for a week, since the Pikes had invited them. But Shane still lived in an apartment, which would be fine for dinner with just one other couple, probably. Ilya had seen it, finally. It actually wasn’t that much more personal than his secret fuck condo had been, although he did have pictures of his family inside at least. Shane was going to buy a house at some point, but they’d just finished the logistics of moving all of Ilya’s things to Ottawa, and so Ilya understood that Shane wasn’t excited about another grand moving adventure. Also, the season was starting.

“It’s fine.” Jackie waved off the apology. “It’s better if we don’t have to find a babysitter right now, anyway. Although I will apologize in advance for Amber interrupting. The other three will sleep through, I assume, but she’s not exactly sleeping through the night yet.”

Amber...wasn’t that another gemstone? Did they name all their kids after gemstones? Didn’t they have a son, too? What was his name, Onyx?

“Is okay,” Ilya said before Jackie and Shane could get into a competition of who could apologize more. “She is a baby. Who could be mad at a baby?”

Ilya didn’t think he’d said anything particularly profound, but Shane stared at him with hopelessly fond eyes, like maybe he’d thought Ilya really *would* be angry with a baby for just being a baby and Ilya had proved him wrong. But they’d known the Pikes had an infant before they’d accepted the dinner invitation. It would be stupid to be mad about it now.

“Where is Hayden anyway?”

“Well, Amber’s already interrupting our evening,” Jackie said with a laugh as they entered the living room, where Hayden Pike was bouncing a baby up and down in his arms. She was whimpering a little but not crying, but maybe Pike was bad with babies. Even though this was his fourth one. “Thankfully, I just fed her, so I can have a glass of this wine. Yay!”

Shane walked over and awkwardly hugged his friend around the baby before he turned back to Jackie.

“Let me help you with the wine,” he offered, and Ilya almost snorted. He was pretty sure Shane had never independently opened a bottle of wine. Not that it was hard, but he seemed to only drink when someone else started it, which was probably not a bad thing, with the season starting and everything. Shane was annoyingly strict about what he put into his body, although thankfully Ilya’s dick was among the approved products. Also maybe Ilya couldn’t complain, because Shane’s body was incredible, but it would probably be nearly as good with fewer disgusting protein smoothies.

But even Ilya had barely had a drink in months, because the doctors had told him he should avoid almost everything fun. Caffeine, alcohol, nicotine. But Ilya had had a glass of wine and two cups of coffee this week, which was the most exciting development he’d experienced in a month. Still no cigarettes, because Shane made sad eyes at him whenever he even mentioned it, but that was probably for the best.

Shane followed Jackie into the kitchen and left Ilya alone with Hayden Pike. Ilya had never been alone with Hayden Pike before, because when would he have? It wasn’t like Pike had ever been invited to the All-Star Game, and the only Montreal player Ilya ever spent time with before or after a game was Shane. For obvious reasons.

“Um...hi,” Pike said after a minute, still jiggling his whimpering child. The sound of her soft whimpers hurt Ilya’s heart a little bit, except babies probably did that all the time, right? Ilya liked kids, but he’d never spent that much time around babies.

“Hi,” Ilya deadpanned back. He wasn’t making this easier for Pike if that was the best he could come up with.

“Um...” Hayden started again, and how was this Shane’s best friend? Could he hold a conversation at all? Maybe they both just sat around and did not talk to each other. “How is Ottawa?”

And this was why Ilya didn’t like small talk.

“Very much like Montreal, but more boring,” Ilya answered, although he hadn’t really spent that much time there since he’d officially become a member of the Ottawa Centaurs. Still, he was pretty sure it was the truth. “Just a little bit west.”

Pike laughed nervously. “Yeah, I guess that’s true.” Another long, awkward pause. Maybe Ilya could just revel in this. Let Pike stew in his own nervous energy. That idea held promise. “Are you...doing better?”

Oh, this was why Pike was awkward. Shane had talked like Hayden Pike hated Ilya, thought he was a total asshole, but apparently, he felt bad being mean to an invalid. Ilya didn’t know if he was offended or amused.

“Better, yes,” he said, which was true. His therapist tried to remind him of that whenever he was frustrated, which was more often now that the season was fast approaching. He was better this week than he had been last week, and better than the week before that. Even if he wasn’t really *good*.

“Great!” Hayden said, too brightly. He winced at himself, and his baby let out another little noise, because he still wasn’t doing a good job of soothing her. “Do you, uh...want to hold her?”

Ilya bit back at least three responses that were probably too mean, because he knew Shane would be upset, and they must be coming back with wine any minute. And also because there was really a more important thing he needed to say, because she was a *baby*.

“You should not trust me to hold your baby.”

Pike looked at Ilya through narrowed eyes. “Why would I not trust you to hold my baby?” he demanded, obviously offended. “I mean, I know you’re an asshole, but if Shane’s been with you for seven fucking *years*, he must think you’re trustworthy enough—”

God, this was exhausting. Maybe he should also let Hayden exhaust himself being offended. Except Ilya might have to have these conversations forever. Maybe it was best to try it first on Pike.

“No, Pike,” Ilya said slowly, very clearly enunciating in case somehow Hayden Pike was too stupid to understand. “I have balance problems still. I might fall and hurt your baby.”

Hayden looked horrified with himself, which was fun. It was a nice balm on the fact that Ilya had had to admit that things were still bad enough for that to be a concern. Probably Hayden hadn’t known that, because Shane had been nice enough to respect Ilya’s privacy.

“Oh. Um. If you’re sitting maybe?” Hayden tried. Why was Hayden so obsessed with making Ilya hold his baby? Were all new parents like this? Or maybe he just knew that he sucked with his own baby. “Unless you hate babies. You probably hate babies.”

Ilya rolled his eyes. He could do that without it totally ruining his evening now, so that was good, too.

“I do not hate babies.”

Hayden looked immensely relieved. “Oh, good. Because I think Shane wants them.” Hayden immediately looked horrified with himself. “Which you probably already know, and is none of my business, sorry, I—”

God, even *Ilya* was starting to feel uncomfortable. He had to stop this. He planted himself down on the couch.

“Give me your baby,” he commanded, holding out his arms. And even though Hayden had been the one to suggest it, he looked absolutely horrified that he was handing his child to Ilya Rozanov. Which...good. Ilya took the baby into his arms.

She was so small, her face almost featureless in that way babies’ faces sometimes were. Except her little face was scrunched up as she sniffled, and that was an awful thing to look at and an awful thing to feel. Wasn’t it mothers who were supposed to feel some visceral terror

at the sound of a baby crying, even if the baby wasn't theirs? Why the hell did *Ilya* feel it? He pulled the baby to his chest, rubbing her back.

"I know," he told her softly in Russian, "I would also cry if my father was Hayden Pike. It must be terrible for you."

The baby quieted, her little face settling into the crook of Ilya's shoulder. Probably it was the cadence of Ilya's words, even though she couldn't understand them. Maybe the sound of Russian was soothing to little Canadian children. Maybe also because he was calmer than Hayden, who had been a bundle of weird nerves. Babies could probably also sense that, the same way animals could.

"Oh my God," came Shane's voice from the doorway where he stood with two wine glasses, one in each hand. His eyes were locked on Ilya with a kind of desperate longing. Hayden Pike was right. Shane definitely wanted babies, and he apparently had just learned to envision having them with Ilya.

Well. Ilya had no idea how they would make that happen—with their lives, with their careers, with everything. But it was very interesting information to see painted so clearly on his boyfriend's face. Maybe Ilya should thank Hayden Pike for this.

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

A different phone call in another universe...

September 2017—Ottawa

The sports channel's logo spun across the screen before settling into a shot of the rink in Montreal—empty now, gleaming under the lights. Ilya wasn't sure, didn't remember exactly, but the camera seemed to be focusing on the part of the rink where Ilya had been injured. It felt strangely like there should be blood there, somehow, although Ilya didn't think there had been any blood. He didn't remember any blood, anyway, but maybe there had been. There was a lot he didn't remember clearly about that day.

“One of the fiercest rivalries in the league took an unexpected turn this spring,” the reporter narrated as highlights of past games flickered by. Shane poking the puck off Ilya's blade and Ilya turning to pursue, Ilya pushing Shane into the boards. Ilya celebrating after scoring a goal, and then Shane doing the same.

“When Boston's Ilya Rozanov suffered a severe concussion during a game in Montreal, few could have predicted that his fiercest on-ice opponent would become one of his closest allies.”

The image changed to one of the two of them, walking down the street near Ilya's new house in Ottawa, where the two of them now sat watching the clip. Shane's hand was on Ilya's arm as he stumbled, which was ridiculous and embarrassing to watch. He'd never imagined he'd see something like this on screen without it being the end of their careers and their lives, except Shane could almost hold his hand in public now, and they could just say it was the concussion.

“After a brutal hit by Voyageurs player Gilbert Comeau in April, former Boston center Ilya Rozanov's life completely changed,” the voiceover said. Ilya watched in detached interest as Comeau hit him from his blind side, as his head collided with the boards. Ilya didn't really feel anything except curiosity watching it; he didn't remember the hit, barely remembered what came after. But Shane was coiled tight with tension where he sat next to Ilya on the couch—because, of course, Shane remembered. Shane was more traumatized by the whole thing than Ilya was, but at least he talked to a therapist about it now. Ilya reached out and grasped Shane's hand. It was cold and clammy.

He watched on the screen as the scene progressed, as Ilya lay prone on the ice, surrounded by medics. And then Shane was kneeling beside him, and there was no audio to the clips, but this part, Ilya remembered blearily. He remembered hearing Shane speaking Russian to him.

He'd thought it was a dream, later. Sometimes, Shane spoke Russian to him in his dreams—fluently, without an accent—and told him everything he wanted to hear.

“While teammates returned home, Rozanov stayed behind—alone, far from home, and uncertain about his future.”

Well, that was dramatic. Maybe it was true, but it was also dramatic. But that was what news needed, wasn't it? Drama.

“But one person reached out to make sure he wasn't alone: Shane Hollander, captain of the Montreal Voyageurs, Rozanov's longtime rival on the ice.”

The footage shifted to Shane sitting in a team facility, dressed casually in a Voyageurs hoodie. The lighting was soft, flattering, catching the scattered freckles across his nose and cheeks that Ilya could never stop noticing. He looked composed and sincere.

“That really shows a lot of grace, to reach out to your rival like that,” the reporter's voice said from off camera.

Shane gave a small shrug. “Maybe I'm naïve, but I'd like to think that most players would. Something like that really brings to light the dangers that come with playing this game we love. That could be any of us. And I'd want another player to step up for me, if the situations were reversed.”

It was such a poised and flawless answer. Shane was going to come out of this looking like a perfect, selfless angel. It was so annoying, and Ilya loved him desperately. He squeezed Shane's hand, and Shane squeezed back.

“Reaching out to him initially is one thing, but it seems as though you two have developed an unlikely friendship.”

A hint of a smile crossed Shane's face, and that was a danger they hadn't considered. Could everyone who watched this see the love in Shane's face as clearly as Ilya could? Probably not. The thought would probably never cross their minds. At least Ilya had to hope that was true.

“He's not that bad once you get to know him,” Shane said. “He's actually a nice person. He just hides it really well.”

The shot cut away to a montage of Ilya and Shane, facing off on the ice.

“Rivalries are one thing,” Shane said in voiceover, “and when we meet on the ice, we take that very seriously. But sometimes I think everyone needs to remember that off the ice, we're all just people.”

The footage transitioned to Ottawa's practice facility, where Ilya sat in front of a Centaurs logo backdrop. They'd filmed the segment just a few days ago.

“Shane Hollander called you a nice person,” the reporter prompted. “What do you think about that?”

“No, how dare he say such things?” Ilya saw himself immediately protesting. “It is lies, Shane Hollander is liar. I will sue for defamation.”

The crew chuckled audibly. Ilya was glad that it was loud enough to be heard on the camera.

“When we asked Rozanov about his current health status, his answer was more serious,” came the reporter’s voice. There was another clip from later in the interview.

“It is day-by-day still,” Ilya saw his lips saying. He sounded surprisingly even. “I need to work through league protocols. It is very frustrating, but I am grateful to my new team for putting my health first.”

Ilya wondered if his words came across as an insult to Boston. He wasn’t sure if he’d wanted them to or not. Probably he had, at least a little. Ilya was not quite done being angry at how quickly Boston had given up on him, even if he was happy with the result.

The scene cut back to Shane in his Voyageurs hoodie.

“Will you and Rozanov stay in touch during the season?” came the offscreen voice.

“I mean...yeah, probably,” Shane answered. Hopefully only Ilya knew how feigned Shane’s hesitation was, because he knew Shane so well. “Ottawa is only two hours away from Montreal, and my parents live in Ottawa. I’m there pretty often. And as unlikely as it sounds, my parents have kind of adopted him. To tell you the truth, I think he might be their favorite son.”

Shane had said that on purpose, to head off any questions about why Yuna Hollander was Ilya’s emergency contact, if it ever came up. Still, it sounded strange, to hear those words out of Shane’s mouth on a television broadcast.

The reporter’s voice returned as her face reappeared on screen, standing in front of the Centaurs’ practice facility. “A reminder that sometimes the best stories in sports aren’t about the goals scored or games won, but about the humanity we find in unexpected places.”

The clip cut back to the studio, and Shane turned to Ilya, squeezing his hand almost too tightly. “That was good, right?” Shane asked nervously. “Not like...weird, or suspicious?”

Ilya could barely believe that the composed man who had appeared on the screen just seconds ago was the same as the nervous wreck who sat next to him.

“They did not say, ‘and then they go home and suck each other’s dicks’,” he pointed out dryly. “So I think it is okay.”

Shane punched Ilya in the arm quite hard. So Ilya grabbed Shane and pinned him down to the couch, his thigh between Shane’s legs. Shane was immediately panting and hard against Ilya’s thigh. He really was too easy. Ilya would not want him any other way.

“You were very confident and professional in that interview,” Ilya told Shane, grinding his thigh down into Shane’s cock as Shane moaned. “Everyone will believe you. You are very...trustworthy.”

Shane probably needed to hear it, but it helped that it was even true. Most people hated public speaking, were terrified about interviews, but not Shane Hollander. Shane Hollander stressed about everything *but* speaking to the press and performing well on the ice in front of thousands of people.

Shane's phone buzzed on the table, and he reached over, picked it up, and looked at the screen. He answered the call and brought the phone to his ear, though interestingly he did not push Ilya off of him or make any attempt to sit up.

"Hi Mom," Shane said into the phone, and he still didn't move, his dick hard against the muscle of Ilya's thigh. Well. "Yeah, we saw the segment. It was good, right?"

Yuna was clearly saying something to Shane, because Shane went silent and nodded along as if she could see him. It was a good thing that she couldn't. Probably even someone as accepting as Yuna Hollander was not ready to see her baby boy grinding against his boyfriend's thigh. No mother was really prepared for *that*.

Slowly, experimentally, Ilya moved his thigh again, rubbing against Shane's hard dick. Shane made a face at him that said *what the fuck*, like he hadn't been the one who had answered his mother's call with his dick against Ilya's thigh. Maybe this really was a step too far, but Shane had kind of...started it, hadn't he? He definitely wasn't stopping Ilya, anyway.

"Yeah, I think it's plausible," Shane said into the phone. Ilya reached down and stroked his cock through his pants, and Shane bit his lip, fighting the little noise that wanted to escape. He still hadn't pushed Ilya away. "I mean, it's almost the truth, if you ignore the reason I went to the hospital in the first place."

Shane's skin was fully flushed now, and he was staring at the ceiling like that would keep him from reacting as Ilya stroked him through the fabric. Ilya wasn't going to actually, like...make Shane *come* on the phone with his mother. He just maybe wanted to convince Shane to hang up so they could move on to more interesting things. Not that he didn't think Yuna was wonderful, but some things were obviously better.

"Yeah, Mom, he's here. Just a second." Shane held his phone out, looking at Ilya pointedly. "My mother wants to talk to you."

Ilya suddenly felt very, very awkward. He moved his hand away from Shane's cock like Yuna had caught them red-handed, wiping his hands on his pants like somehow that would erase the memory of what they had been doing, like Yuna might sense it through the phone if he didn't. *What the fuck*, Ilya mouthed back at Shane. Shane shrugged and handed the phone to him more forcefully, and so Ilya took it.

"Yuna, hello," Ilya greeted awkwardly.

"Oh Ilya," she said much more warmly, "do you *always* have to be so gruff with the press? Would it kill you to show them that you're human sometimes?"

This was...was this motherly nagging? Was he on the receiving end of Yuna Hollander's nagging? It was very strange.

“It is an image that works well,” Ilya explained. Shane’s hand pressed against Ilya’s chest, finally guiding him off of Shane’s body, except then he was pushing back further, until he could slide his legs out from under Ilya’s, and until he was pushing *Ilya* back onto the sofa. Ilya shot him a confused expression. “Gets, what do they say on the internet now? *Engagement.*”

Yuna sighed. “I suppose so,” she begrudgingly agreed. “How are you doing?”

“I am good,” Ilya said. It was true. He was in his new house in Ottawa, and Shane was still with him even though he had to report to the Voyageurs’ facility in two days, because he could make the drive there in just a few hours. Also, Shane was straddling his legs, which he *certainly* wasn’t going to tell Yuna Hollander.

“I’m glad,” she said. “How are you settling into the new house?”

They hadn’t had the Hollanders over yet, mostly because Ilya was still missing most of his furniture, except for the most essential parts. The master bedroom was the first thing he’d furnished. But he wasn’t ready to host anyone yet, and certainly not Shane’s *parents*. Although they had already seen him at his worst, so maybe seeing him without art on his walls and with only four chairs wouldn’t be such a big deal.

“Still...waiting for furniture,” Ilya said haltingly as Shane unzipped Ilya’s pants, looking up at him with a devilish grin. What fucking sex monster had he created out of shy and proper Shane Hollander? Not that Ilya was complaining exactly.

“Are you shipping all your cars to Ottawa?”

“Only a couple.” Ilya stared at Shane as Shane guided Ilya’s dick out of his underwear. “I sold most of them.”

Which had made Shane very, very happy when he had told him. Of course, Ilya was not sure he’d ever be able to drive that kind of car again, not in any way that was fun, without it being very dangerous. More dangerous than it should be, anyway. He wasn’t even totally sure how great he felt about driving the few miles to the Centaurs’ practice facility once Shane had left. Ilya hadn’t driven anywhere since the injury. Though he was confident enough he could manage to pull over safely if he had one of his worse moments of vertigo.

“You have a car here, though, right?”

“I—” Ilya stopped, shoving his knuckle into his mouth to keep from crying out as Shane swallowed him down in one swift movement. Shane had gotten very skilled at blowjobs while they had been at his cottage. He had never been bad at it, exactly, had always been very eager, but he had never before been exactly *skilled*. Ilya swallowed thickly as he fought to calm himself down.

“Yuna, I am very sorry. I need to go,” Ilya said quickly. “Something...came up.”

Ilya jabbed his finger against Shane’s phone screen, and Shane laughed around Ilya’s dick, which was...a very interesting sensation. Shane was grinning as he lifted his head, Ilya’s dick

falling out of his mouth with a soft *pop*.

““Something came up’?” Shane echoed, snickering.

“I panicked! What are you doing?”

Shane looked at him like it should be obvious, which...yes, okay, it was.

“You started it!” Shane argued.

“What? *You* started it, answering the phone with me on top of you,” Ilya argued back.

Arguing with Shane Hollander was, somehow, still one of Ilya’s favorite things to do, even if Shane was now his boyfriend. “You could have ignored the call! You could have told me to mo—”

Shane leaned over and swallowed Ilya’s dick again, and...okay, Ilya respected that. That was a very reasonable way to win an argument.

Chapter 5

September 2017—Ottawa

“You are in extremely good shape, considering how serious your injuries were,” Terry, the Centaurs’ team doctor said, stepping away and noting something down on his chart.

Of course I am, Ilya didn’t say. To the press, he would have said it, all the cocky arrogance they expected from him, but this wasn’t the press. This was a man he should probably be very nice to, if he wanted to get out on the ice again. But Ilya had spent most of the summer working out, as soon as he’d been able to. It had been frustrating at first, when his broken wrist had still been healing, when he hadn’t been able to lift anything heavy. When he hadn’t been able to run outside because the trees or the birds or whatever would trigger his vertigo and all he could do was use the treadmill or the stationary bike.

But then he’d slowly started lifting weights again, and then he’d graduated to jogging outside, then running outside, and only sometimes had he needed to stop and sit down. And, of course, he’d spent most of the rest of the summer engaging in his absolute favorite activity, which was fucking Shane Hollander. That part, he would *not* tell the team doctor about.

“I followed very strict plan,” Ilya told him. “Doctor approved, of course. And very strict diet, too.”

Mostly the diet had come from living with Shane, who knew how to cook maybe ten things, and all of them were grilled or prepared with only the tiniest bit of oil or butter. And every new recipe he’d looked up to try had been the same, and some of them had contained things like fucking quinoa and farro, too. Also because Shane mostly did not drink, and Ilya had not been supposed to drink alcohol either, on the doctor’s orders. And he hadn’t smoked even one cigarette in months, so his lungs were probably thanking him.

“When is the last time you had concussion symptoms?”

Ilya pressed his lips together. He thought about lying. Lying might get him into the starting lineup on opening day. Ilya had lied about a lot of things in his life, but he did know you were not supposed to lie to doctors. Well, he had lied to doctors in Russia about fucking men, but that was different. That had been a necessary kind of lie, the kind that would keep him safe. But this would not be a necessary lie, or a safe one.

“A few days ago,” Ilya admitted. “But they are very rare now! Almost never.”

Terry looked at him with penetrating eyes, like he didn’t quite believe him. “What does ‘rare’ mean to you?” the doctor prodded.

Ilya thought about giving an answer about steak. He’d already gotten the impression that Terry wouldn’t find that joke very funny.

“Maybe one time in a week. Or two. Like I said, almost never.”

Terry made a difficult to interpret sound and wrote something else down. “What symptoms are you experiencing?”

“Just dizziness, mostly. Vertigo.” Ilya still hated that he had learned the English word *vertigo*. He wanted to be able to unlearn it.

“Mostly?” Terry asked. “Any headaches?”

Ilya shook his head. “Almost never,” he said again. “I did at first, before...” Ilya trailed off. Probably it did not help his case to mention he’d had brain surgery, but of course Terry knew he’d had brain surgery. He had all of Ilya’s medical records. He probably knew everything better than Ilya did. “...before the surgery.”

Terry nodded. “And now?”

“Only a few times since. Maybe once, twice in a month.”

Terry sighed. Ilya knew what he was going to say before he said it.

“We really want to see you symptom-free for longer than that before we allow full return to play,” he said. Ilya had known it. He even knew that it was probably the right answer, but he hated it. If he got vertigo only once a week, then he could manage three hours a few times a week. Probably.

Except Ilya knew it didn’t work that way. One of the reasons he had had fewer symptoms because he had been doing fewer things that caused symptoms. Because he’d learned which things caused them and how to avoid them. But he couldn’t avoid moving fast or turning his head too fast and also play hockey in the NHL.

“Practice?” Ilya ventured hopefully. Terry gave him an exasperated look, like he wasn’t the first very annoying hockey player he’d dealt with coming off injury. Because Ilya definitely wasn’t.

“I can’t in good conscience approve you for full-contact practice yet,” he said seriously. He wrote something else down, then looked at Ilya. “Let’s continue to monitor your symptoms, and we can try limited non-contact drills. See how you feel.”

What Ilya felt was annoyed at being limited to non-contact drills, although he didn’t think that was what the doctor had meant. At least the doctor hadn’t said no to everything. At least he’d given Ilya something.

September 2017—Montreal

Shane snatched up his phone the second it began buzzing against the table. Not that he had been staring at it, waiting for it to ring. Or...well, maybe he had, but only because he knew that Ilya had his workout and physical with the Centaurs’ team doctor and he had all but ordered Ilya to call him as soon as it was over. It seemed like it had taken...kind of a long

time, though. Which maybe made sense. They probably had a lot to talk about, since Ilya was new to the team and since he had...such a complicated medical history.

“Hey,” Shane greeted, trying to sound casual and not like he had been waiting and staring at his phone, trying to will it to ring. “How did it go?”

There was a long, slow exhale on the other end of the line. “Limited drills. Non-contact only,” Ilya said, his voice frighteningly even the way that it got sometimes, when he didn’t want to give away what he was feeling. And Shane wasn’t great at reading that tone over the phone, either. In person it was easier.

But Shane...Shane was relieved. Because he was fucking terrified at the idea of Ilya going back into a real game, where everyone was amped up and fighting for the win and not always conscious of exactly where their body or their stick was. Or, even worse, where some players tried to take out other players on purpose. Maybe good players who were vulnerable and coming back from injury. Shane loved his sport, but sometimes it also really fucking sucked.

“It’s what we expected,” Shane said in his best soothing voice. He wondered if it was actually soothing. It worked on Hayden’s kids, sometimes, but he hadn’t had to practice it much before that. Ilya sucked in another long, slow breath, and then Shane realized. “Wait...are you smoking?”

He almost expected Ilya to deny it, even though it was really fucking obvious. Ilya hadn’t smoked in nearly half a year, and Shane knew because he’d been with Ilya almost nonstop since then, and when he hadn’t been, his parents had been. Shane had thought that maybe Ilya had finally, actually quit this time.

“Just one,” Ilya admitted. “I will throw the pack away after this.”

Shane sighed. Ilya definitely wouldn’t. But he had called Shane while he’d been smoking, not waited until after, which meant...what? Shane still hadn’t unlocked all the secrets that made up Ilya Rozanov, even though it sometimes felt like Ilya had with him. But Ilya was so much smarter than Shane was, even though no one thought so. In Russian, he probably spoke beautifully and articulately and dazzled men and women alike with his intellect. If Shane had done something like this, Ilya would probably know why immediately. But Shane had to work harder at it.

Maybe Ilya had been hoping Shane would get angry at him for smoking, which Shane wanted to. He wanted to tell Ilya that smoking was bad for him *always*, but probably even worse for him now. But Ilya already knew that, so there didn’t seem to be a point in harping on it. Maybe Ilya had wanted Shane to understand that he was upset, since he couldn’t just say it for whatever stupid reason. Or maybe he just trusted Shane, even though Shane didn’t know what to say to make it better.

“Ilya...” he said slowly.

“I know,” Ilya snapped. It was always surprising when Ilya snapped at him, when it wasn’t just some playful off-ice chirping but something real and frustrated. “I knew this was what they would say, but...I am still angry. It is stupid.”

It wasn't stupid, not at all. Ilya had been so upbeat for most of the summer, relaxed and seemingly unconcerned about the future of his hockey career. He had a year left on his contract, which meant that he had a year before he had to start worrying about a visa, even if he couldn't actually play. And he'd be in Ottawa, close to Shane. Those had been the only things he'd talked about, not about whether he'd be able to return to the ice for an actual game. Shane had started to wonder if Ilya actually cared about that at all, besides as a path to keeping a visa.

But of course Ilya cared. Of course that was why he had spent the whole summer training so hard, running and lifting weights and trying, desperately, to get back to full form. He definitely looked the part again, all lean, hard muscles and not an inch of fat on him. That was why he'd diligently done every horrible exercise the doctors had given him to do to try to fix his balance and get rid of his vertigo, even though it had obviously been awful and annoying for him, and it hadn't quite worked all the way.

"It's not stupid," Shane told him. Annoyingly, Shane felt like he might cry, even though nothing had happened to him. Even though he wasn't ready to see Ilya back in a full-blown NHL game, not yet. Even though this was the outcome he'd secretly wanted. "I would feel the same way in your position. I would probably be even worse."

Ilya chuckled, seemingly exhaling a plume of smoke. "You would be a nightmare," Ilya agreed. Shane wasn't even annoyed that Ilya was agreeing with him, because it was true.

"How are your teammates, though?" Shane prodded, hoping to lift Ilya's mood. Unless they were assholes, in which case he'd have the opposite effect.

"Don't know, really," Ilya admitted with a long breath. God, the sound of Ilya smoking should not be strangely soothing and also kind of sexy. Shane would never tell Ilya that, or Ilya would use it as an excuse not to stop doing it. He must have lit up right before he called Shane, or he was lying about only having one. Shane hadn't heard the click of a lighter, though. "I have barely met them. I have been too busy moving houses—and fucking you."

Shane huffed out a laugh. Ilya was probably feeling better if he was making sex jokes. Although it hadn't really been a joke. They had been fucking a *lot*. It felt weird that they hadn't fucked in, like, a day. Shane didn't know how he'd ever gone months without it.

"Are you home?" Shane asked after a second. Ilya made a soft noise.

"Ah. No. Not yet."

So the only thing he'd done after leaving his appointment with the Centaurs' team doctor had been to buy a pack of cigarettes, probably. Shane had told Ilya to call right after, but maybe this was close enough.

"Well, why don't you *go* home, and then you can..." Shane hesitated. God, he was bad at this. "...fuck me some more? Um...virtually? I, uh...ordered some new toys."

Despite how bad Shane was at dirty talk, that seemed to cheer Ilya right up.

“Not just that one lonely dildo anymore?” Ilya teased, and Shane heard the huff of Ilya’s breath now that was him walking, thankfully *not* smoking, and at a brisk pace. Hopefully to his car, which was *hopefully* his very sensible silver Mercedes SUV and not the two insane sports cars he’d had shipped to Ottawa. “What did you buy? One of those vibrating dildos? Tell me.”

Shane felt his face heating, but he was pleased anyway. If it made Ilya happy, he’d push through the embarrassment.

“Um...yeah, one of those. And, a, uh...prostate massager?”

Ilya barked out a laugh. “Oh my God, you will kill me, Shane. Tell me about your *prostate massager*.”

Shane heard the sound of a car door opening. Did it sound like a ridiculous sports car? He couldn’t tell, obviously.

“Well, uh...I haven’t tried it yet. I was waiting for you.”

The car door closed. Shane heard the sound of the engine starting. “Describe it. Tell me what it looks like,” Ilya commanded.

“I’m not fucking telling you anything while you’re driving, asshole,” Shane said. “And you’d better be hands-free.”

Shane could practically *hear* Ilya roll his eyes. “So interested in road safety,” he teased, then sighed. “Fine, I will drive home safely, at the speed limit. I expect you to be naked with lube and your *prostate massager* by the time I am home. It will take me ten minutes.”

Shane scrambled, afraid he couldn’t get the thing out of the box in ten minutes. Because he still hadn’t unwrapped it. And he had to, like...wash it first. Because who the fuck knew what happened at sex toy factories?

“At the speed limit!” Shane reminded him.

“Naked and ready for me, Hollander,” Ilya said, and hung up.

Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

If you are a hockey fan who was watching in the year of our lord 2017 and you feel a sense of déjà vu, that might be because I yinked details from Ottawa and Montreal's *actual* 2017-2018 season for this fic. Because why would I make up an entirely fictional hockey schedule when I could just mercilessly steal the real one?

October 2017—Ottawa

Finally, *finally*, Ilya was on the ice again, for real this time. Not for skating drills or stick handling drills but in full pads, skating...well, not quite like it was an actual game, but as close as he could get before the season actually started. Well, there was preseason, but that didn't count for shit. It felt...free, and exciting, and fun in a way that drills never did, even if he was on the ice, performing some of the same movements he would be in a real game. Drills always felt like work, and not the fun kind, the kind where annoying people bragged to you about how much they loved their jobs.

Ilya knew he wasn't going to play in a real game, probably. He hadn't had any symptoms in a week, which is why Terry had finally cleared him for full-contact practice, but the season was starting in two days. Ottawa was playing at home, so they hadn't had to confront the question of whether Ilya would travel with his team. But he knew the Centaurs would have announced it already, if they expected Ilya to actually play in the game. But there wasn't *no chance*. Ilya could still change their minds, maybe.

The team wasn't bad, not really. Or, well, they weren't *awful*. Their goaltender was a little bit awful, maybe, or maybe Ilya was just too good, because it seemed like every shot he took sailed past him, over his shoulder or through the five-hole, but none of Ilya's teammates were even grumbling about it. Actually, they seemed energized by Ilya's presence in a real practice with them, which felt...good. It felt good that he could still do that. Good that the concussion hadn't stolen that from him.

The captain, Zane Boodram, was pretty good on the left wing and also annoyingly nice and encouraging to all of his teammates. Their first line right winger was...passable, and they had two good defensemen. Who were also very fucking *nice*. Everyone was very nice, maybe because most of them were Canadian. Maybe it was true, that stereotype about Canadians. Boston had had nice players, too. Marlow had been nice, anyway. But not like *this*.

They were a little less nice on the ice as Ilya chased a loose puck in the corner of the rink. Nick Chouinard got there at the same time. But if there was one thing that Ilya still was, it was fast, and he wasn't awful at stick handling, either. He'd done a *lot* of drills recently, more than he had in a long time, because he hadn't been able to do anything else.

They grappled for the puck in the corner, and Ilya swiped it away, turning to absorb a hit in the shoulder from Chouinard as he did. Ilya was glad his teammates didn't hesitate to hit him any more than they hesitated to hit anyone when it was only practice against their own teammates. Ilya broke away with the puck.

He had missed this. He'd missed the speed, the battle, and yes, maybe even the violence of it. He had a clear lane to the goal, about to embarrass the hopeless goaltender *again*—

Someone poked the puck off his blade from behind.

What the fuck? Ilya thought as he turned, and—

The move sent the world tilting. For a few seconds, his balance went, and he clipped another player as he stumbled. He righted himself almost immediately, thought maybe no one had noticed.

A whistle blew. "Rozanov! Off the ice!" the coach called.

Well, shit. Ilya closed his eyes, breathing carefully through his nose, waiting for his brain to remember which way was up. Ilya wanted to argue that he was fine, that it was nothing. But he could feel the faint spinning still, like his head wasn't quite screwed on right. And he knew arguing wouldn't help, anyway.

Ilya slammed his hand against the boards. Not hard. And he was wearing his glove, so it wasn't like it hurt, not really.

"Hey, Roz, it's fine," came a voice from next to him, and Ilya opened his eyes and saw Zane Boodram, giving him a sympathetic smile. "Your health comes first."

Ugh, he was being so nice. Ilya wanted to punch him, just a little bit, not that Bood deserved it at all. But he was Ilya fucking Rozanov, all-around asshole. Everyone was supposed to hate him or maybe at least fear him. Most of his teammates in Boston had had a healthy kind of wariness around him, even if some of them had kind of liked him despite that.

But not here. Not these desperately kind fucking Canadians.

Ilya didn't punch him. He only gave Bood a tight nod and pushed just enough that his momentum took him on a slow glide to the bench.

Ilya sat, removing his gloves and trying not to look at the worried glances from the trainers. He closed his eyes and silently willed them not to come over. What were they going to do about it, anyway? Nothing. There was nothing they could do.

They must have concluded the same thing, because no one came over, but thankfully no one told him to leave, either. Ilya took off his helmet, running a frustrated hand through his sweaty hair and breathing slowly through his nose. He wasn't sure if that actually helped with the vertigo, but it at least helped with his heart rate, which was something. Ilya opened his eyes, and fuck, the ice was so bright. He could see the afterimage of it when he closed them again. That was a very unfortunate thing about this stupid sport after a concussion.

It took a few more minutes before Ilya took the chance of opening his eyes again. No one was looking at him, because they were busy playing hockey. And...okay, maybe they *were* terrible. It wasn't the first practice Ilya had watched, because they hadn't banned him from the facility after drills in the last few weeks. And yeah, they were pretty bad. Definitely better with Ilya on the ice with them, but even Ilya at one hundred percent couldn't carry this team, and Ilya wasn't at one hundred percent. If he couldn't even be in the game in the first place, he was technically at zero percent.

Ilya watched as the forwards ran a three-on-two rush, building speed through the neutral zone. Bood carried the puck on his forehand, Tanner Dillon trailing on the right wing. Boodram blew past the blue line and cut toward the center. One defender committed to him, but Bood was faster. It left the lane wide open. The goaltender was square but off balance; Ilya could see it from where he sat. It was an easy shot.

Ilya waited for the release, for the puck to sail past the terrible goaltender and into the net. But it didn't come. Boodram shifted his weight, faked, and slid the puck sideways to Tanner Dillon.

The pass was fine. The shot wasn't. Dillion missed high and wide, the puck pinging off the glass.

Ilya blinked, baffled. He could still see the opening that Bood had ignored, could practically trace the line of the puck that should've gone in. "Why the hell wouldn't you shoot?" he muttered under his breath in Russian. The coaches didn't even say anything, just reset the drill.

Ilya watched as Boodram did it fucking *again*, ignored an opening and went to the pass instead. It hadn't been the cleanest lane, but he probably could have made it. Well, *Ilya* could have made it.

Ilya grabbed Boodram before he even left the ice, while everyone else was going back to the locker room to change. Bood looked at him with a confused expression but went along where Ilya dragged him. It probably wasn't Ilya's place to say anything here; Ilya was new to the team, and not even able to play, and Bood was captain. Ilya might have been captain right away, in his first year, if he were actually playing. But he wasn't. But he *was* Ilya fucking Rozanov, Stanley Cup winner and league MVP, even if a few years had passed since then.

"You had a clear shot. Why didn't you take it?" Ilya demanded. He expected Boodram to be annoyed, maybe, to be called out by the asshole Russian newcomer to the team. But Boodram only looked bemused.

"Dillion had a better shot," he explained, like it was simple. Dillion *had* had a better shot, that second time. That much was true.

"Yes," Ilya agreed impatiently, "but did he score goal?"

Zane Boodram shuffled on his skates like a chastised child. "No," he admitted sullenly.

Was that enough? Ilya didn't know these players well enough to know what would motivate them, or how much criticism would demoralize them. It wasn't even his job, anyway. He wasn't the captain here. He wasn't even playing, and might not ever. But hockey players were often very stupid, and they sometimes needed things beaten into their heads very clearly.

"You are not selfish enough. You pass too much," Ilya told him. "Sometimes quick is better than perfect."

Boodram stared at Ilya for a long time, assessing. Ilya didn't know if he'd offended his new teammate and captain by overstepping, but he didn't really care. It was just so annoying, when Ilya couldn't be on the ice himself, watching a good player make himself worse for no good reason.

After a long minute, Boodram clasped Ilya on the shoulder and smiled. "That's really profound, Roz," he said, grinning widely. "Good life advice, maybe."

And then Boodram skated off the ice, leaving Ilya staring after him in confusion. Why were the Ottawa Centaurs so fucking *nice*? It was annoying.

October 2017—Montreal

When the Centaurs left for their first away game, Ilya drove to Montreal. He didn't tell Shane he was nervous about it, because that would stress Shane out, and the Voyageurs had already had a terrible start to the season without their captain and star center having another thing to stress about.

The Voyageurs had begun their season with three road games, and all had seemed well when they won their first game in Buffalo. But then they'd lost their second and third games on the road, and no team liked to start off the season with a losing record. The Centaurs had lost their first two games, too, but Ilya had expected that. They'd lost them both in shootouts, though, which had been...a better showing than Ilya had expected from his sad little team. So maybe they weren't so terrible. Unlike the Voyageurs, they at least hadn't lost a game by five goals. Yet.

Ilya had been able to watch Ottawa's first two games in person, but he wouldn't travel with them to their road games until he was cleared to play, which might be never at the rate Ilya was going. The bright side, if there was one, was that Ilya would have had to wait until the end of the month to see Shane in person if he had been playing, because Ottawa always seemed to be home when Montreal was away, and the opposite seemed also to be true. Thankfully, being injured meant he could see Shane sooner.

Maybe. If he got to Montreal without crashing. It was probably a stupid fear; Ilya rarely got any symptoms anymore, and he had had to wait for a mythical full week without symptoms before Terry had approved him for full-contact practice. A timeline that had now been reset, of course, though Ilya hadn't had any more symptoms since that practice. And Terry wanted *two* full weeks before he even considered allowing Ilya in a real game. That might be impossible.

It had been almost a week since that bad day at practice, though, and Ilya had been symptom-free. No headaches, no vertigo, no blurring or annoying dancing spots in his vision. So he could probably make the drive to Montreal without incident. It was just that he hadn't done it before, hadn't driven more than ten or fifteen minutes at a time back and forth to the practice facility or the store. He could reliably bet on having ten or fifteen good minutes and feel very confident about that. He wasn't sure if he could bet on having two good hours, even if he *had* had an entire good week, twice.

But the drive went entirely without incident. The traffic hadn't even been that bad, though it had been rainy and foggy nearly the whole drive, and there were still somehow some idiots who did not put their lights on. They would deserve it when someone crashed into them, although thankfully, that someone was not Ilya.

That night, Ilya fucked Shane very thoroughly, and again in the morning. Maybe their captain being thoroughly fucked before the game would help the Voyageurs. Except it didn't, or not enough. They lost 3-1 to Chicago, although the one goal *had* been Shane's. So there was really no proof that having a captain who had been thoroughly fucked didn't help.

Ilya didn't go to watch Shane play in person, obviously. He could have, maybe. People knew they were friends now. But it probably wasn't a good idea to let the world know that they were the kind of friends who would drive two hours to see each other multiple times a month. So Ilya watched at Shane's apartment—his *real* apartment, since he had finally sold his paranoia fuck building.

The Ottawa game was halfway through the third period by the time Shane got home, because west coast games were stupid and started way too late. Surprisingly, Ottawa was tied with Vancouver, and Ilya hadn't had anything to do with it. Well, maybe he'd had something to do with it. One of the Centaurs' goals was from Zane Boodram, who had taken the shot instead of passing. Maybe learning to be selfish at last.

"Good goal," Ilya said when Shane walked through the door, watching him loosen his tie.

"Thanks," Shane said, walking around to look at the TV. "What the fuck, they're tied?"

Well, Ilya thought it was weird, too, but he wasn't going to tell Shane that. In fact, he was going to take all the credit. "I told Bood how to score better," Ilya proclaimed happily. "Everybody plays better when they listen to me."

Shane snorted, rolled his eyes. "Well, I'm glad there was no injury to your ego," he said, disappearing into the bedroom to change. Ilya smirked. If Shane was annoyed with him, he would probably forget to be annoyed by the fact that the Voyageurs had lost three games in a row.

Shane came back a few minutes later in sweats and a hoodie. Ilya lifted the blanket he had thrown over himself and let Shane fold himself underneath, settling himself on top of Ilya. It was nice, comforting.

"This fucking sucks," Shane said into Ilya's neck after he'd been lying there for a minute. Ilya knew he didn't mean lying under a blanket on his couch with Ilya while a hockey game

rolled into overtime in the background. He meant losing three games in a row.

At least you are playing, a part of Ilya wanted to say. A frustrated, angry part of him. Thankfully, Ilya was not frustrated enough today to say those words out loud. He would not be the one who said Shane had to bottle up his feelings about hockey just because Ilya was not playing, might never play again. That would make him a very bad boyfriend.

“I know,” Ilya said instead, petting Shane’s head gently. Shane didn’t look up at the game, just remained with his face nestled into Ilya’s neck as Ilya watched his team play the overtime period, and then as, surprisingly, Tanner Dillon—who Ilya had watched miss wide dozens of times in practice—got the puck into Vancouver’s net to end the shootout.

Huh.

Chapter 7

October 2017—Ottawa

“Come on, Roz,” Bood whined as he watched Ilya take off the last of his gear, even though Ilya had been stuck doing only non-contact drills *again* and had spent the rest of the morning watching his team practice without him. The coach hadn’t objected when Ilya had skated out onto the ice to correct Tanner Dillon’s grip on his fucking stick so he’d stop shooting wide of the goal, at least. It had worked, sort of. Maybe Ilya should be the fucking coach.

“I don’t think so,” Ilya said slowly. He was tired, even though he’d barely done anything, and annoyed for pretty much no reason at all. He wasn’t exactly good company at the moment.

“But there will be *barbecue*,” Bood said in a sing-song voice he presumably thought was enticing, “and *beer*.”

Zane Boodram was an annoyingly likable man who never seemed even a little upset when Ilya criticized his playing, always had something to say to cheer everyone up, and would not shut up about how much he loved his girlfriend, who he had just proposed to. Who, admittedly, sounded quite wonderful and was very beautiful, from the pictures Bood had showed him. Ilya thought he would probably gush about Shane, if he could. So he couldn’t really be that annoyed by it.

“I am not supposed to drink beer,” Ilya reminded him, tapping his temple as if his captain could forget why their star fucking center wasn’t on the ice with them on game nights. Although Ilya could probably have alcohol, at this point. Or maybe he couldn’t, since he couldn’t go two full weeks without vertigo or headaches.

Bood waved that concern away. Physically, with his hand. He was half undressed, too, showing off his full sleeve tattoos—which were, admittedly, very cool. Just like most things about Zane Boodram.

“Then have ginger ale or something,” Bood dismissed. “You can have *barbecue*, come on.”

Just the mention of ginger ale should not make Ilya’s chest go mushy inside, but of course it did. Because ginger ale made him think of Shane, and everything that made him think of Shane made him go mushy inside.

“Well...”

“Yes!” Bood exclaimed, pumping his fist. “You’re breaking, I can tell. Come to my barbecue.”

Ilya sighed. “Fine.”

October 2017—Anaheim

It was unbelievable. As in Shane literally could not believe what had just happened. That the Montreal Voyageurs—his fucking team—had just lost their seventh game *in a row*, and only one of them was an overtime loss. Every other loss had been a loss outright in regulation. It had been only a year since they had won the Stanley Cup. Two years in a row.

Shane was shaking his head to himself as they made their way back to the dressing room. The whole team seemed shell-shocked, and Shane could not blame them. They'd all hoped that their stretch of three games in California would be a turning point, would be when they would start to click again, to play like a team. Or...Shane had hoped that. Maybe some of his teammates had just been hoping to get in bed with some hot California girls. Some of them had definitely played like it.

Shane was methodically pulling off bits of his uniform in the visitors' dressing room when he heard the mumbling in the corner, Comeau, Drapeau, and J.J. with their heads ducked together, all speaking in French. At a distance, Shane could not hear most of their words, just the timbre of Drapeau's rising and falling voice. But then he heard the name *Rozanov*, and Shane turned, suddenly hyperaware.

"What about Rozanov?" Shane demanded, turning to face them. All three of them stopped talking, and Comeau and Drapeau glared. J.J. looked awkward and torn, shifting back and forth in just his pads and undershirt. Drapeau murmured something under his breath. "What was that?"

Drapeau stood up, his eyes suddenly furious. "I *said*," he hissed in English, clearly wanting the whole dressing room to understand him, "that maybe our *captain* would play better if he focused more on *our* team and less on being best friends with fucking *Rozanov*."

Shane felt his veins go icy cold. This was kind of his fucking nightmare, someone drawing attention to his relationship with Ilya, making it sound...like something more than what he'd told the press that it was, a friendship formed from post-injury empathy. Like something wrong and twisted, something that might make people take a second look. Shane was terrified—and then, abruptly, he was fucking angry.

"What the *fuck*?" Shane demanded, an unfamiliar rage rising in his chest. "And who the fuck let them score six goals, then? Am I in the fucking net? Am I a defenseman?"

This was very...not-captainly behavior, Shane knew, and he couldn't make himself stop. After months of watching Ilya suffer, he could not stand there and listen to his teammate blaming Ilya Rozanov for Montreal losing games that had nothing to do with him. When Ilya wasn't even playing at all, and he was suffering from that, too.

"Everything on this team has been fucked up since you became obsessed with being friends with Rozanov," Drapeau said, glancing over at Comeau beside him. Comeau was also glaring, because...yes, they had definitely not forgotten when Shane had punched him. And thinking of that just reminded Shane what Comeau had said all those months ago, and that didn't make him *less* angry.

"Guys," Hayden began uncertainly, "I think we should—"

“I scored a goal tonight, and what did you do?” Shane heard himself saying the words without really being conscious of speaking them. “Oh yeah, let them score *six fucking times*.”

Drapeau leapt up, and J.J. wrapped an arm around his chest, dragging him backward. His other arm was thrown in front of Comeau, who looked like he wasn't far behind. J.J. used his considerable size to drag a struggling Drapeau backward before he could lunge at Shane.

“What the *fuck*—” came a booming voice, and they all turned around to see Theriault looming in the doorway, glaring at them all “—is going on in *my fucking dressing room*?”

October 2017—Ottawa

Ilya was sitting in the corner, begrudgingly nursing the one beer he'd allowed himself, when Bood came to sit next to him. Ilya had eaten what had turned out to be an absolutely *alarming* amount of barbecue, which had been, of course, delicious.

“Having fun?” Bood asked as he sat, and Ilya thought about the question. Maybe he was. It wasn't like he'd never gone out with his teammates in Boston, but that had mostly been partying, when they had been out drinking and picking up women, or when they'd gathered together to watch hockey games when Boston had already been eliminated from the playoffs. He wasn't sure he'd ever gone over to a teammate's house to eat food just because. Somehow, Ilya had ended up with the nicest team in hockey. It would be great if more of them could actually play at the elite level demanded of them.

Not sure exactly how to answer, Ilya just tipped his beer bottle in Bood's direction. Bood followed the movement with his eyes.

“I thought you weren't supposed to drink,” Bood reminded him with narrowed eyes, which would be more annoying if Ilya hadn't mentioned it just hours before. It also sounded like Zane Boodram actually *cared* whether it was bad for him.

“One will not kill me.”

Bood nodded as if Ilya had said something very profound. He did that quite a lot when Ilya didn't think he'd said anything very interesting at all.

“Hey, so...I wanted to thank you,” Bood said suddenly, out of nowhere.

“For fixing your passing problem?” Ilya returned with a raised eyebrow. Bood released a low, rumbling laugh.

“That isn't the only problem you fixed.” Bood looked around, his expression slightly sheepish. “You know, I proposed to Cassie because of you.”

Ilya stared at him, dumbfounded. “I did not tell you to propose to your girlfriend,” he said, and then followed Bood's eyes to where his now-fiancée was standing, talking to Nick Chouinard's wife. Ilya was pretty sure he'd never given anyone *any* relationship advice, ever.

He would be the worst at it, and no one would even think of asking him. As far as anyone knew, Ilya Rozanov had never been in a serious relationship. And if they knew the shitshow of seven years of hookups that lead to the one he was in now, they'd probably be even *less* likely to look to him for relationship advice.

"You kind of did, though," Bood said with a soft, stupid smile as he looked at Cassie. Ugh, that was probably the same expression Ilya got when he looked at Shane, and it was gross. "I was really worried about it, you know, like...it had to be the perfect place, the perfect time, was it special enough, all of that."

Ilya nodded along like he understood what that was about, but of course Ilya didn't. He and Shane had barely admitted they were in a relationship. They were not talking about marriage and probably would never be. Ilya knew he couldn't propose to Shane, not in a perfect way and not in an awful way, either. Shane would say no, without question.

"But then you were like, 'Sometimes quick is better than perfect.'" Bood did an absolutely horrendous impression of Ilya's accent. Ilya definitely did *not* sound like that. "And something just *clicked* for me, you know? I was like...I want to marry this woman, why am I stressing about making it the perfect moment? If she wants to marry me, too, she won't care if it's not perfect."

Ilya stared at him. "Was hockey advice, Bood, not life advice."

Bood shook his head meaningfully. "No, man, it was definitely both," he said confidently. "And it was good advice. I mean, she said yes, and now we're engaged. I might have waited months if you hadn't said that to me."

Ilya blinked, then took a sip of his beer. It felt strange, being complimented for something he hadn't even done on purpose. In fact, he was pretty sure Bood was mostly a huge idiot for trying to make hockey advice into life advice. Ilya was not drunk enough for this conversation.

"I am glad I helped," Ilya said dryly.

"You help more than you think," Bood said confidently. "We're already a better team with you on it."

Ilya fought the urge to roll his eyes. He probably should not roll his eyes at his captain, who was apparently trying to motivate him while he continued to sit on the bench.

"I have done nothing."

Bood clapped Ilya on the shoulder. "You fixed my *passing problem*," Bood pointed out, echoing Ilya's own words back at him. "And Tanner's scoring more because of you."

More was very relative, because he'd barely scored at all the previous season. But three goals over seven games really was quite good, especially for a mediocre player like Tanner Dillion. And the Centaurs had been winning more than Ilya had expected. They had a better record than the Voyageurs, anyway—although nearly everyone in the league did, since Montreal had

only won one game. The Centaurs had even been doing well enough that Ilya had started to wonder if they really even needed him on the ice at all. And maybe Bood could tell, because he was a good captain, and he was trying to reassure Ilya. That made Ilya a little annoyed, at himself more than anything. He shouldn't make that Bood's problem, though.

"Thanks," Ilya said simply. He found that short answers were usually best in these circumstances, and sometimes people would just leave him alone and assume his English vocabulary was too limited. Not Zane Boodram, of course.

"So, uh..." Bood started awkwardly. Ilya internally cringed, and he wondered if it would be too rude to just get up and walk away. Nothing good ever came after someone began with *So, uh...* "Do you...have anyone special? Here in Ottawa, or maybe back in Boston?"

Oh no. Bood thought that Ilya had given him good romantic advice, and now he apparently wanted to give some in return. Maybe he just hadn't read enough gossip shit about Ilya Rozanov, or else he would assume that there was no way that Ilya Rozanov *could* have someone special, just a string of beautiful, disposable fucks. That's how the internet talked about him, anyway—of at least they had, before his injury. Ilya didn't like to see how they talked about him now, with skepticism and pity. And they hadn't been wrong back then, except for that big missing piece named *Shane Hollander*.

And stupidly, part of Ilya wanted to tell the truth. Not the whole truth, obviously. But he wanted to say that he *did* have someone special, someone wonderful. He wanted to gush about Shane and how beautiful and caring and talented he was. But he couldn't. He knew that if he told his teammates there was someone, he wouldn't be able to put off introducing them forever. And if he tried, they might get suspicious, might start digging. And that might be the end of everything. It was easier, and safer, to lie.

"No, I have no one," Ilya said, and Bood's expression immediately dropped into something gentle and filled with pity. Ilya ran through his words in his head again, and he realized how that probably sounded. He should probably have picked different words. Why was English so annoying? People always thought he meant something deeper when he was only being direct. "I am not looking, right now."

"It's not...I mean, it's not because you don't feel well enough to—" Bood waved his hand vaguely. It was only because Bood looked slightly embarrassed that Ilya realized what he meant.

"I would have to feel *very* bad for that to be the reason," Ilya said, laughing. After his injury, he *had* felt sick enough to not want to have sex. For a few *days*, and that had been when his brain had been slowly leaking blood into his skull. But there was almost nothing that could make Ilya not want sex—even if his dick stopped working entirely, Ilya would still want to kiss Shane until he was breathless, suck his dick until he couldn't take it anymore, and maybe try every single one of Shane's growing collection of sex toys. Ilya would find a way. Obviously, he wouldn't say any of that to his teammate.

"Good," Bood said, and Ilya was pretty sure he was happy about Ilya's general state of health more than the state of, specifically, Ilya's dick. He even seemed sincere about it, like he cared for reasons other than how soon Ilya could be on the ice with his team for a real game. "If

you ever *are* looking, Cassie's got lots of friends who are single." Bood paused. "You probably don't need help, though, huh?"

Ilya snorted. So maybe Bood *had* read a certain amount about Ilya Rozanov on the internet, and not just about his hockey skills.

"I will let you know if I am looking," Ilya said, even though he was pretty sure that would be never. Even if Shane left him, Ilya didn't think he'd be looking for someone *special* then, either. Maybe just another string of beautiful, disposable fucks so he never had to think about anything again.

Later that night, Ilya fell asleep on the sofa watching Montreal losing to Anaheim in another stupidly late west coast game. Ilya couldn't tell what the fuck was wrong with the Voyageurs. They hadn't had a huge personnel change, they hadn't had a coaching change, and Shane was still scoring as many goals as he ever had. And still, they were a fucking mess, for the seventh game in a row.

He woke up some time around two in the morning with a message from Shane that just read, *My team fucking sucks.*

Chapter 8

November 2017—Ottawa

Ilya slammed the paper planner Terry had given him onto his desk.

“Two weeks, no symptoms!” he declared brightly, watching as the Centaurs’ team doctor picked up the spiral-bound planner and began flipping through it, though Ilya couldn’t say for what. There were two weeks worth of completely, totally, blank boxes with nothing written in them. “So I am approved to play in real game, yes?”

Ilya thought maybe he was too excited, but Terry must be used to hockey players who acted like big, annoying children. Also, the Centaurs’ next road game was in Montreal, and the only thing that Ilya liked as much as fucking Shane Hollander was playing hockey against Shane Hollander, so the timing seemed perfect. A sign sent down by the universe.

Still, Terry stared thoughtfully at his little planner for longer than Ilya thought was really needed. Ilya had kept notes on his phone, mostly, and transferred them to the planner later, because it wasn’t like he was going to carry it around with him everywhere. But he’d diligently noted down every time he’d gotten symptoms, even if part of him hadn’t wanted to. Even if part of him had wanted to lie.

Terry flipped back a page, looking at the last things Ilya had actually written. Maybe Ilya’s English handwriting was too ugly, because he spent a long time staring at it before he finally looked up.

“Okay,” Terry said at last. “I’ll sign off on it.”

Ilya almost couldn’t believe it. “For tonight’s game?” he prodded. Terry sighed, shaking his head in obvious exasperation at Ilya’s impatience. It probably wouldn’t change very much, whether Ilya played or not. Ilya hadn’t played in a real game in more than six months. Practice wasn’t the same thing. They would probably lose to New York, and probably to Montreal, too, who had finally figured their shit out, maybe. They’d won more games than they’d lost in November, so the media was talking like maybe they’d turned things around. But from talking to Shane, Ilya really wasn’t sure. Definitely nobody on the team seemed to like each other very much.

“Yes. You should be able to play tonight,” Terry affirmed.

Ilya strolled through the facility grinning so widely that their equipment manager, Dale, physically took a step back from Ilya like maybe he thought Ilya was possessed. Ilya didn’t care. It was a good day. He strode into the locker room—and stopped, as he realized the entire team had turned to stare at him expectantly.

Ilya narrowed his eyes at Bood, who gave him a very guilty look. It was very clear to Ilya what had happened. He had told Bood that he was going to talk to Terry, and then Bood had told...everyone. Not that it had been a secret, exactly. It was just that he’d thought it was

better if no one got excited too early, just in case. But now all of them were standing there with puppy dog eyes, waiting for an answer. Ilya was glad he could give them a good one.

“Terry said I can play,” Ilya announced.

The room erupted into cheers, and suddenly Ilya was being hugged by a dozen men at the same time. It was strange. The only time he’d ever been hugged this much, all at once, was when his team had won some major trophy. And for a second, if he closed his eyes, it felt almost as good as winning the Stanley Cup.

November 2017—Montreal

Shane’s phone started ringing almost as soon as he got home from morning skate, and he wasn’t surprised to see that it was Ilya calling. Ilya basically had both their schedules memorized the same way Shane did, the same way that Shane knew Ottawa had a game that night at the same time that Montreal did. And Ilya had been doing full practices with his team, so he would probably be coming back from morning skate, too.

“Hey,” Shane greeted.

“Guess who will be seeing you on game day in Montreal?” Ilya said instead of a greeting. There was a note of excitement in his voice that was audible even over the phone. Shane felt himself smiling; Ilya’s happiness was always infectious.

“They’re letting you travel with the team?”

Ilya had been symptom-free for a little while, but when he’d asked if he could go along on the Centaurs’ last road trip, he’d been told no.

“Well Montreal is only two hours from Ottawa,” Ilya annoyingly reminded him, like Shane was the one who needed to learn Canadian geography. “But no, I mean that I will see you on the ice. Maybe you will see my ass as I skate away from you and score a goal.”

Stupidly, it took a long time for Ilya’s meaning to get through. “You’re playing?” Shane choked out, his voice catching on the words. He could almost hear the way Ilya rolled his eyes.

“Yes, do not sound so excited for me,” Ilya deadpanned, and then Shane felt like shit.

“No, of course I’m happy for you,” Shane said, because he was. He also felt a whole bundle of other, complicated things, and the biggest one was fear. “I just...sorry, I’m not being very supportive, am I?”

Ilya laughed softly, which loosened a knot of something in Shane’s chest. “I know you are scared, мой любимый,” Ilya said, which...really wasn’t fair. Shane legitimately could not think straight when Ilya used terms of endearment in Russian. “But it is hockey. It is dangerous for all of us, not just for me.”

Well, that had taken all of Shane's soft, squishy feelings away very quickly. But it definitely wasn't Ilya's way to promise he wouldn't get hurt again. He knew he couldn't promise that.

"That isn't exactly comforting," Shane pointed out.

"Should I lie? Hockey is scary sport. I also am scared for you, sometimes."

And that soft feeling was back in a heartbeat. Not that Shane wanted Ilya to worry, but...it was still nice to know that he did, maybe. That Shane wasn't the only one of them who cared that much.

Shane sat down with a sigh and pulled out his laptop, flipping the top open. He put on his glasses as he waited a second for it to wake up.

"Are you excited?" Shane asked, making an attempt to be a better boyfriend.

"Hm," Ilya grunted, which of course meant that he was very excited. "We will probably lose to New York still."

Shane pulled up a sports news website, then navigated to the NHL page—and yes, there it was, an announcement that Ilya Rozanov had been activated off IR. Not that he'd thought Ilya was lying, obviously, but there was something about seeing it written there in black and white that made it real in a way Ilya's words hadn't.

It wasn't like Shane hadn't seen this coming, obviously; Ilya had talked to him about it, and Shane had exhaustively read maybe every article that had been written speculating about when Ilya Rozanov would be able to return to playing. Not for any actual reason—or not any good reason, anyway. He knew he was being weird and obsessive about it, but if he read all the articles when Ilya wasn't there, then at least Ilya didn't have to feel like Shane was hovering over him, annoying him by worrying.

"You might win," Shane posited unhelpfully. And it was actually possible. Puck luck was a thing, and even if he was maybe a little rusty, Ilya could probably score a goal or two.

"Dillion is too weak on the right. I need stronger right winger on my line to win games."

"He's been playing a little better lately," Shane tried.

"Yes, he holds his stick so wrong. I corrected it a hundred times already, and that helps when he remembers what I said," Ilya said authoritatively. "But he is too slow. I cannot fix slow."

Shane snorted. Ilya thought *everyone* was slow, even Shane. But he was right. Tanner Dillon *was* too slow.

"Are you still driving to Montreal tomorrow morning?" Shane asked. "You don't have to if you're too tired after the game tonight."

Because it was so easy to forget how grueling playing a full NHL game could be. Shane was smacked in the face with it at the end of every summer, because no amount of working out or practicing on his indoor rink at the cottage really compared to the exertion and mostly the

adrenaline of playing in an actual game. And Ilya had had the summer and a couple more months on top of that. He would probably be exhausted, even if his coach kept him limited for the game.

“I am never too tired to fuck you,” Ilya said confidently. Shane laughed.

“I meant to drive here, asshole,” Shane said. Shane would drive to Ottawa instead, but the Centaurs had a bigger gap between games and an optional practice Ilya could skip. Except now Ilya would have to drive back to Ottawa after that and then get on a team bus and let them drive him right back to Montreal. Because he couldn’t exactly tell them that he was already in Montreal or why.

“No. I will come to your house and fuck you before lunch time,” Ilya promised. “Maybe you will already be naked and in bed waiting for me since I drove two hours, and then we can sleep in the afternoon.”

Shane snorted. Ilya wasn’t lazy, not by any stretch of the imagination, but he definitely liked lounging in bed and dozing wrapped around Shane. Which Shane liked a lot, too. Except sometimes he also felt guilty, like he should be doing something more productive. But if he woke up and went for a run in the morning, he could absolutely doze through the afternoon after being thoroughly fucked. And anyway, sex was exercise. Ilya always made very sure that Shane understood that.

“What about lunch?”

“We will have lunch before we sleep. Or after. Who cares?” Ilya paused. “You are so annoying sometimes, Hollander.”

Shane liked it sometimes, when Ilya called him by his last name, like some of that old, fevered annoyance was still in him. Not that Shane wanted to go back to those days, when they had barely talked, when they hadn’t defined what they were to each other. When they only saw each other a few times a year. But there were still nice memories in there, too, and very hot memories. And they had time to make some more.

Shane sank back into the couch cushions. “It sounds like a perfect day,” he said sincerely.

Chapter 9

November 2017—Montreal

Ilya was on Shane the moment he entered Shane's apartment, pinning him against the wall and kissing him with a ferocity that had been missing recently from their relationship. Not that they hadn't had hot sex—a lot of hot sex, more hot sex than they had had in the whole rest of the time they had known each other. But there was something different about the sex they had after a game, full of adrenaline and excitement and wanting.

Ilya pulled away to look into Shane's face, flushed beneath his freckles, his lips swollen and wet. "Nice goal," Ilya complimented, running his thumb along Shane's bottom lip. Shane's eyes fluttered shut, and he moved like he had to physically stop himself from sucking Ilya's thumb into his mouth.

"You too," Shane said instead. The game had been closer than Ilya had expected, and they had both scored a goal. Ottawa had lost in the end, but Ilya had a difficult time being too upset about it when Shane was horny and desperate in his arms.

This was definitely worth the weird look his coach had given him when he said he'd find his own way home from Montreal, since the team was on their way back now. He should have just stayed in Montreal and come up with some stupid excuse why he'd been here already. At least then he wouldn't have to figure out how he would *actually* return to Ottawa if his car was still in Montreal. The train, presumably.

But that was a problem for tomorrow's Ilya. Today's Ilya was going to stay entirely, thoroughly focused on fucking Shane Hollander straight through his mattress. Maybe breaking his bed. Shane would complain so much, but he would get so hot and horny if they broke the bed together that maybe Ilya would have to fuck him again immediately afterward, probably on the sofa, or maybe even on the floor. They'd never fucked on the floor, obviously. Ilya knew Shane wouldn't go for it. And it would be uncomfortable, anyway, so sometimes Shane's insistence that everything should be done a particular way was better for both of them.

Shane finally gave in to his impulse and pulled Ilya's thumb into his mouth, sucking it filthily, swirling his tongue around it like he would if it were Ilya's dick. He knew exactly what he was doing, and it was working, because Ilya had been hard already, but somehow, Ilya's dick became impossibly harder. He wrapped his fingers around Shane's jaw, purposely fucking Shane's mouth with his thumb, and Shane moaned and writhed against the wall like he was being fucked for real. After indulging in a minute of that, Ilya slid his thumb free.

"Tell me what you want," he demanded, and Shane's pupils were so wide with want that they'd almost taken over his dark irises, just from that. Ilya loved to make Shane lust-drunk like this, and he loved making Shane ask for what he wanted. He loved how shy and hesitant Shane was, and how he'd push through and ask anyway, because Ilya wanted him to. He was

pretty sure Shane wanted to say it, too, but he liked having permission, liked feeling like Ilya was pushing him into it.

“Fuck me,” Shane begged prettily, and without his usual hesitation. He was so fucking *gone*, and Ilya loved it. “Hard and fast. Please. I can’t fucking wait.”

Suddenly, Ilya couldn’t wait, either. He pushed away from Shane, already breathing hard. “Take off your clothes,” Ilya commanded, starting to remove his own jacket and tossing it aside. He knew Shane was desperate because he didn’t even make a face at the trail of clothing Ilya left on the way to the bedroom, just followed obediently behind, stripping off his own clothes.

They were both naked by the time they got to the bedroom, and Ilya muscled Shane down onto the bed. Shane went without a fight, facedown, ass in the air, clearly indicating how he wanted it. Ilya wanted it, too. He loved looking into Shane’s face as he fucked him, loved Shane riding him—but there was something about this, about pounding mercilessly into Shane’s body at just the right angle, about Shane muffling his moans against the pillow, trying his hardest not to be too loud in case the neighbors might hear and know how much he loved to be fucked. Shane really needed to buy a house.

Ilya retrieved lube and condoms from the drawer and climbed onto the bed behind Shane. Impatiently, he poured lube onto his fingers.

“Please just fuck me,” Shane begged, practically a whimper against the sheets. “I don’t need —”

Ilya sucked in a sharp breath at the desperation in Shane’s words. He almost lubed up his dick and fucked Shane right there, without preparing him at all. But they’d never done that before, and it didn’t seem like the right time to try was when they were both barely able to contain themselves, not when they’d never even talked about it. Not when he knew full well that Shane had never been fucked like that.

“I know what you need,” Ilya told him, and Shane moaned helplessly but didn’t protest. Still, Shane’s urgency was contagious, and so Ilya didn’t waste time, thrusting his fingers inside Shane’s body in one sharp motion. Shane released a soft noise that sounded like relief, and he was so open, his body not fighting the intrusion at all. Maybe he’d used one of his growing collection of toys before the game. Ilya imagined Shane lying in this bed, opening himself up with the plug he’d just bought, making sure he was ready for Ilya’s dick. That image was so unbearably hot.

Shane had probably been right. He could have taken Ilya’s dick right away, without waiting. Next time, maybe Ilya would trust Shane when he begged for it, now that he felt how relaxed and open Shane was, though all the rest of his muscles were tense with need. Ilya pulled his fingers out and grabbed the condom.

“We don’t need it,” Shane said, hand grabbing helplessly backward for Ilya, though he couldn’t quite reach. “Please just—”

Something in Ilya's mind just stopped. He was frozen for a moment, and all the lust that had been rocketing through Ilya's veins stopped pumping. They had definitely never done *that*, had never even talked about it. The last time Ilya had fucked someone without a condom had been so long ago, when he'd been too young and too stupid and too fucked up to think about the consequences. A thousand horrible things might have happened. It was only through sheer luck that they hadn't. And Ilya didn't like to think about those years, those reckless, angry years after his mother had died, and everything had been dark and awful and Ilya had been so desperate to feel anything that wasn't pain and sadness.

Ilya sucked in a slow, even breath through his nose. None of those thoughts were thoughts he wanted to bring into bed with Shane. None of those thoughts were thoughts he wanted to think at all. He ran his hand slowly up and down Shane's back, trying to ground himself again in Shane's flesh.

"This is not a conversation for when our dicks are hard," Ilya told Shane seriously. His voice was terrifyingly even. "I will fuck you with a condom, and we will talk about it later. You understand?"

Something about his tone made Shane tense and look back at him in concern. Shane bit his lip, nodding earnestly against the pillow, but that didn't satisfy the fluttering discomfort in Ilya's chest.

"Tell me you understand," he insisted, his voice a little tight.

"I understand," Shane told him immediately. There was still something desperate about his tone, too, but it was different than it had been a few minutes before. "Please fuck me."

Ilya ripped open the condom wrapper and rolled the condom onto his dick. He used more lube than he probably needed, because he had barely prepared Shane at all, and now Ilya felt weird and uncertain about that again. He clenched and unclenched his hands to try to stop the shaking. Finally, he guided himself to Shane's entrance and pushed inside.

Shane had asked for hard and fast, and Ilya gave it to him. For a few minutes, the warm heat of Shane's body was all there was, the muffled sound of Shane's moans. Ilya gripped Shane's hips in both hands, pounding into his body hard enough that maybe his hipbones would leave bruises.

Ilya thought he would feel better after an orgasm. He didn't. He lay in the sheets next to Shane for a minute, but he felt itchy and tight and uncomfortable in his skin, and suddenly he needed to be away.

"I need a minute," he told Shane, and without waiting for Shane's response, he was up and out of bed, putting his underwear back on and walking through Shane's apartment. It was large, but not really large enough to hide, and Ilya knew that was what he was doing. He found his bag by the door and unzipped it, rustling through its contents until he found what he was looking for. He let himself out onto the balcony.

It was freezing outside—below freezing, probably. It was nearly December. Ilya definitely should have gotten dressed, but the frozen air felt refreshing on his skin, like jumping into an

ice bath. The click of his lighter was soothing, but not as soothing as the first drag of smoke in his lungs. He'd finished one cigarette and lit up another one, arms resting on the balcony railing, body nearly bent in half, when he heard the balcony door open and close behind him. Ilya didn't look back, just stared at the tiled balcony floor.

A moment later, something fell over his shoulders. Ilya stood almost unconsciously and slid his arms through the sleeves of the puffer coat Shane had brought him.

"I knew you weren't going to throw them away," Shane said.

It took Ilya a minute to realize that Shane meant the pack of cigarettes, and even now, Ilya couldn't help but feel endeared by how...innocent Shane was. This was a new pack, of course; that pack from months ago would have been stale and awful by now if Ilya had kept it, but of course Shane wouldn't know that. Shane had probably never smoked a single cigarette in his life, not even as an act of teenage rebellion. Shane had probably not even *had* a teenage rebellion.

Ilya couldn't think of what to say, so he didn't say anything. He also didn't turn to look at Shane, because he didn't know what Shane would see in his eyes if he did.

"I know I shouldn't have brought it up that way," Shane apologized into Ilya's silence. "I'm sorry. But...I trust you."

That was a spear through Ilya's heart. He stubbed his cigarette out. He shouldn't smoke around Shane.

"You shouldn't," Ilya said thickly. "I am not...trustworthy."

He had never done anything to earn this level of trust from Shane. There were so many people who *trusted* him now, though he'd done nothing to deserve it. Yuna and David trusted him with Shane, even though he'd never done anything except get hit on the head, and probably ruin their son's life by existing. He was the thing that was stealing away Shane's sweet innocence, and that was fine when it was fun bedroom games, but they didn't know all the other ways he was ruining Shane, slowly—his dynamic with his team, maybe his chance for another cup, maybe his whole career. Ilya's team trusted and supported him, too, even though he hadn't done anything but accidentally give them some advice that might have turned out to be useful. He hadn't even won them a game yet.

Ilya felt the pressure of Shane's hand against his shoulder through his stupid puffer coat. "I think you are," Shane told him. His voice was hard with confidence but soft at the same time, too. Ilya still couldn't look at him. "And look, I know that if you have sex with other people, you're always safe."

It had been a long time since Ilya had had sex with anyone who wasn't Shane. Months. Closer to a year, really, and he hadn't even thought about it. Even when he and Shane had been apart for weeks, he hadn't wanted to. But Ilya realized they'd never talked about that, and he felt like an asshole.

“I will not. Have sex with anyone who is not you,” Ilya said haltingly. He paused. “We are partners, yes?”

“Yeah, but I mean...” Shane trailed off in a puff of air. In Ilya’s peripheral vision, he saw the mist of Shane’s breath. “I guess we never talked about what that meant.”

Ilya had thought that Shane had known, but that was another one of Ilya’s mistakes, one of the many ways he apparently hurt Shane without even realizing it. He was an asshole. Except maybe *Shane* wanted to be open, and that was why Shane had not brought it up, either. Ilya didn’t think so, but suddenly the possibility terrified him.

“Means we are a team, yes? I do not want to have sex with anyone else. Do you?”

Shane released a slightly ragged laugh, squeezing Ilya’s shoulder. “No,” he insisted without hesitation, and Ilya was relieved at how quickly the answer came. “No, *never*, Ilya. I don’t want anyone but you.”

Ilya waited for the warmth he knew he should feel at the words, but he just felt...weird, numb. He wasn’t sure why. He’d been waiting so long for this exact moment, when he’d finally have everything he wanted, and he thought everything would feel...better. He was playing hockey again. He was here with Shane, and Shane loved him. His team was kind and wonderful and supportive. But for some stupid reason, Ilya still felt awful, and he didn’t even have an excuse anymore.

He leaned forward, letting Shane’s hand fall from his shoulder, and pressed his forehead against the balcony railing. Maybe it was cold enough that it would freeze there.

“Are you still...” Shane trailed off, hesitant “...seeing your therapist?”

Ilya sighed out a long breath, which turned to vapor in the air. He wanted another cigarette.

“Yes,” Ilya confirmed mechanically. He was dutifully seeing her ever week, in person when he was in Ottawa, and on Skype when he was not.

“Is it...helping?”

Ilya didn’t know how to answer that at all. At first he had thought...maybe. Maybe it was good to have someone he could say all the true things to, even the hurtful things, and maybe it was good if he could say everything in Russian without frustrating himself every time he didn’t have the words he wanted. Except it turned out that sometimes the words he wanted didn’t seem to exist, even in his native tongue. Sometimes there were no words that were right or made sense. And sometimes, talking just made him feel worse.

“I am fine,” Ilya said, despite how ridiculous it sounded. He was on Shane’s balcony after midnight, in the freezing cold, in just his boxer briefs and a puffer jacket, trying to freeze his forehead to the metal railing.

“It’s just that sometimes...it seems like maybe you’re not.”

Ilya knew this. He knew it was maybe not fine that a little voice was already telling him that his team was better before he came back, that they had lost every game since he had gotten on the ice with them, even if they had only played two games. He knew it was maybe not fine that he thought so much about how he was probably ruining Shane's life. How Shane had done so much for him, especially after Ilya's injury, and Ilya had never given half as much back.

"I know you don't like pills," Shane continued when Ilya hadn't said anything. "But...have you ever thought about maybe taking some? Antidepressants?"

"Have *you* thought about taking anxiety medication?" Ilya snapped. He knew, even when he was saying it, that it was not nice, but that did not stop the words from tumbling out of his mouth. But Shane did not get angry.

"Yes," Shane said firmly, "but I don't think the team doctor would be okay with that. And it definitely wouldn't help the dynamic with my team, if they found out."

Now Shane was upset, which was not what Ilya had wanted at all, was not what Ilya *ever* wanted. Ilya stood up, and thankfully his forehead had not frozen against the railing, so he turned and wrapped Shane in his arms. Shane was warmer than Ilya was, because he had actually gotten properly dressed, and he came easily when Ilya embraced him, sliding his hands beneath Ilya's coat and around his back.

"Your team is terrible."

"Yeah," Shane agreed with a humorless laugh against Ilya's shoulder. "I don't know how I didn't notice that sooner."

Ilya rubbed Shane's back soothingly. "Because most of your brain is always thinking about hockey," he said, "and the rest of it is always thinking about my dick."

As Ilya had hoped, Shane laughed for real this time, some of the tension easing out of him.

"You're not wrong," Shane said, and Ilya could feel Shane's smile against his shoulder.

Chapter 10

December 2017—Ottawa

It was Ilya's eleventh game on the ice with the Ottawa Centaurs, but his presence hadn't really changed much for the team. He had known he wouldn't, had known that one man couldn't turn around an entire team, but maybe a part of him—a very stupid part—had been hoping that there would be more of an upswing with him on the ice. But the Centaurs had only won three of the games that Ilya had played in, though Ilya had been scoring some goals. Not as many as he used to, but Dillon's passes were rarely on target, so that had something to do with it. It wasn't all because of the months of time he'd missed, because he was out of practice and not quite what he'd been before.

They'd managed to win their third outing against the Voyageurs, though, which had been...incredibly satisfying in the way that beating Shane always was, seeing his cute little face pinched and angry when Ilya won a face-off or scored a goal. Ilya had scored two that night, so he'd gotten to see that annoyed face multiple times, *and* he'd gotten to fuck Shane before the game, so it had overall been a great day for Ilya, one of the best he'd had in quite a while.

Of course, a win against Montreal did not mean quite the same thing as it might have in a different year. They had turned things around enough that they had more points than the Centaurs did, sure, but it didn't look like either team would be making the playoffs unless something very big changed. Ilya wasn't surprised about his team, obviously, but the media was full of speculation about what was wrong with the Montreal Voyageurs.

Ilya knew that he, Ilya Rozanov, was at least part of what was wrong with the Montreal Voyageurs. Not because he was beating them on the ice, really, but because they simply could not handle Shane liking him even a little bit. The media seemed to like it, though, loved a feel-good story of compassion overcoming even the most bitter of rivalries. Shane could even come talk to him on the ice now, before or after a game, and the media loved to play the clips later, gushing about how kind Shane Hollander was. Which was at least true.

If it was any other team, Ilya would be glad that his existence was messing with a division rival's head so much, but Ilya hated it because it hurt Shane. There had been some anonymously sourced reporting about bad locker room dynamics in Montreal being the cause of their performance, and maybe that was true. Maybe the reason the Voyageurs were losing was just because Shane's team was full of assholes.

Of course, if a locker room full of assholes was what caused a team to lose hockey games, half the teams in the NHL should be way worse than they were. And the Ottawa Centaurs should win the Stanley Cup.

Instead, it was less than a week before all the Western countries celebrated Christmas, and the Centaurs were losing 5-3 to Minnesota five minutes into the third period. It had looked good for the Centaurs at first; Ilya had scored the first goal barely two minutes into the first period,

and he'd scored again on a power play in the second. They'd gone into the second intermission tied 3-3.

And that was when it had all started to go wrong, as things always seemed to for the Centaurs. Their goaltender wasn't good enough, and they'd allowed Minnesota to take too many shots on goal. It was inevitable that some of them would go in, and they had, four goals in a row without any answer from the Centaurs. A better team might be able to battle back from that, but Ottawa was not a better team. And when they inevitably pulled the goalie for an extra attacker, it probably wouldn't make their goaltending any worse.

Ilya watched as Dillon sent another shot high and wide of the net, cursing silently to himself. Years of muscle memory were apparently impossible to override in just a few months, because he was holding his stick like an idiot again. Ilya didn't know how he'd gotten through so many years in hockey without someone else correcting it. Maybe someone had tried before and it hadn't worked then, either. It was very, very annoying.

But the play wasn't dead yet. Ilya spun toward the corner where the puck was ricocheting back, hoping to get the rebound, hoping to get the chance for a much better shot.

He didn't see the hit coming. Just a flash of color, a body where there hadn't been one. His helmet collided with something. The world went white, his ears ringing.

Fuck, Ilya thought.

"If you are going to call someone, you should call Yuna and not Shane," Ilya said, lying on his back in the medical suite, his arm over his eyes. Even with his eyes closed, the light seemed to pierce through his eyelids, and it was too bright, and his head hurt, and this fucking *sucked*. Ilya had played eleven games. Not even eleven *full* games.

At least it hadn't been a vicious hit; it had been an accident, two bodies trying to be in the same place at the same time. The defenseman he'd run into had apologized to Ilya three times before he'd left the ice, which had been...very nice, actually. Maybe they were a nice team, too. Maybe Shane could play in Minnesota next year, except that was way too far. But Shane deserved a nice team, too. Maybe Ilya could find him one, as soon as his head stopped throbbing. Had his head hurt this badly the last time? Ilya couldn't remember, but then, he had been unconscious for a lot of it. That seemed better, actually.

And Ilya would not be missing the Olympics. Or, well, the whole of the NHL would miss the Olympics, so it didn't matter if Ilya was concussed. That was a nice thought, maybe. Life sucked for everyone.

"We'll have someone call her," Terry told Ilya in his best soothing doctor voice. Ilya was very familiar with soothing doctor voice after everything. "You will need someone to drive you home and to monitor you for the next day or two at least. I think you know the drill by now."

Ilya laughed, and that hurt his head even more. Stupid fucking concussions.

“Yes, not Shane then,” Ilya mused aloud. “I told him he is stupid. He is playing game today in Vancouver. Maybe it has not started yet. Is it ten yet? West coast games are too late. Do they not care about east coast players at all? It is rude.”

Ilya could not seem to make himself stop talking even though he knew he should. Probably he should not be talking so familiarly about Shane Hollander, even though people knew they were friends now. Even though Terry already knew who Ilya’s emergency contacts were. Probably he should not say that he had the Montreal Voyageurs’ schedule memorized and knew where Shane would be almost every minute of every day. Probably that was not a thing that friends knew about other friends.

“It’s not quite nine thirty yet,” Terry told him, and for a minute, Ilya couldn’t remember why. Right. Shane’s game. Maybe the painkillers were starting to work, because Ilya’s head hurt a little less. Or maybe he was imagining it.

“Yes, call Yuna,” Ilya said, and then he remembered. “Or...oh no, she is here! Maybe she is outside already, pounding on the door to get inside. She is very...what is the word? Persistent.”

Ilya realized a second later that he shouldn’t have said that, either. Or maybe it wasn’t weird that a hockey fan living in Ottawa would come to Ottawa games. Yuna and David didn’t come to too many, because they could not go to all of Montreal’s home games and all of Ottawa’s home games, too. They had to do other things sometimes, like work and errands and...card games. Shane’s parents played a lot of card games. Had Ilya said that out loud? He hoped he hadn’t. It was just a little hard to think.

“I’ll see if someone can find her,” Terry said. “Just lie down and rest for a minute, all right?”

Like Ilya was going to do anything else when the second he removed his arm from over his eyes, the light would pierce into his eyeballs like knives. What did Terry think he was going to do, put his pads and jersey back on and run out onto the ice? The game was probably over already, or close to it. Ilya getting injured had paused play for a few minutes, but not that long. They hadn’t needed a stretcher or an ambulance or anything. Ilya had skated off the ice under his own power. But Ilya didn’t hear Terry moving, which meant he was probably waiting for Ilya to respond.

“Yes, I will be here,” Ilya promised. “Resting.”

He heard the sound of Terry’s footsteps retreating and lay there for a moment, breathing slowly and trying not to think any more about how much this sucked. Shane was going to be so upset when he found out. There was no way Shane could find out about this before he had to play a hockey game.

Except...well, fuck, he would definitely be even more upset if he heard about this three hours from now. Even through the throbbing in his head, Ilya knew that. Groaning to himself, Ilya tentatively removed his arm from over his eyes and blinked about a hundred times at how bright the light was. But Terry had told him that they had brought some things from his stall so he could change, which he hadn’t quite managed yet. Which meant that...yes, there was his

phone, which he grabbed and unlocked to call Shane. Even thirty seconds staring at the phone screen seemed to make his head hurt worse. Ilya was tired of this already.

The phone rang three times before Shane picked up. “Hi,” Shane said, and even with just one word, Ilya could tell his voice breathy and confused. Of course it would be. Ilya had never called him before a game before. “What’s going on?”

Well, Ilya had not quite thought through what he would say when he called. That was a problem.

“Do not be upset,” Ilya said, which felt very stupid as soon as he’d said it. The worst thing ever to say to Shane Hollander. In Ilya’s defense, his brain was not working at its best. “I am in the medical suite.”

“Jesus Christ,” Shane hissed, and Ilya heard Shane moving, probably to get far enough away that he had more privacy. “What happened? Are you okay?”

Shane’s voice sounded frantic already. Ilya couldn’t quite figure out the right way to calm him down, either. He knew he was usually pretty good at that, too.

“A small collision, not so bad,” Ilya dismissed. “Nothing is broken.” *Except my head*, he thought, but he definitely could not say *that*.

“*Ilya*,” Shane said in a warning tone, which must mean he was very far away from his teammates. Ilya absolutely could not resist that voice.

“Is a concussion, yes,” Ilya admitted. “But not so bad, the doctor said. Not like last time.”

“And they didn’t take you to the hospital?” Shane demanded, and Ilya wondered if there was a nice way to ask Shane to please talk more quietly without making him freak out more. “A second concussion is—”

Terry walked back into the room, without anyone named Hollander in tow. Ilya wasn’t sure if that was a good thing or a bad thing, but he knew that he was doing a very bad job of keeping Shane calm, and Shane had a game starting in—Ilya looked at the clock on the wall, forcing his eyes to focus on it—less than twenty minutes. His team would probably start asking where the fuck he was soon. Ilya held the phone out to Terry helplessly.

“Will you please tell Shane that I am okay?” he pleaded, squeezing his eyes shut. This was a very bad idea, absolutely, but Ilya didn’t know what else to do. He felt Terry’s hand brushing over his, and then Terry was speaking, and Ilya felt awful about it. Terry was introducing himself to Shane, and Ilya floated for a moment, trying to focus on the words.

“He has a mild concussion, yes,” Terry was saying, and Ilya really hoped his calm doctor voice was working on Shane, because whatever Ilya had been trying to do had not been working at all, and his brain felt a little too fuzzy and wrong to figure out how to do it better. “There was no loss of consciousness, and his symptoms are mild. He will need to be monitored, but there is no indication that he requires hospitalization at this time.”

There. That was exactly what Ilya had been trying to say, but Terry had said it better. Hopefully Shane would listen. Terry talked to Shane for a minute longer, and then Ilya heard a buzz of a phone against the table, which seemed to rattle through his head in an annoying way. And then Terry tapped Ilya on the arm, and Ilya squinted his eyes open to see he was handing the phone back.

“I’m going to go fetch Yuna and David Hollander and bring them back to get you,” Terry said, and his face looked...very strange. “I’ll leave you and Shane to talk.”

Well, shit. Terry had definitely figured something out, or maybe he just thought the Hollander family were the weirdest people ever. Hopefully that second one, and hopefully Shane did not realize that Ilya’s team doctor had caught on to anything. Ilya took the phone back. Some kind of medical privacy law probably covered this, didn’t it? Also, the Centaurs were the nicest team ever, and most of their staff was, too. It should be okay, even if Terry thought he knew something. Probably.

“Shane?”

Shane released a long, slow breath. Hopefully he was doing those breathing exercises his therapist had recommended to him. “You really don’t feel too bad?” Shane asked very carefully.

Ilya felt kind of fucking terrible, but if he thought back, it was not even close to how terrible he’d ever felt. He knew he’d feel better if he slept for a while.

“I have been through this before, you remember,” Ilya said. It was easier to be soothing now that Shane was something closer to calm. “I know what bad feels like. This is not so bad.”

There was a long pause, so long that Ilya thought maybe the call had disconnected. Then, in a high, tight voice, Shane said, “Maybe it’s too dangerous for you to keep playing.”

Ilya’s head hurt and he was suddenly very annoyed with Shane.

“Maybe it is too dangerous for *you* to keep playing,” Ilya retorted sharply. “Could happen to you, you know. Could happen to any of us. Maybe we should *all* quit playing hockey.”

The line went silent again for a long time. “Hey, I’m sorry,” Shane said, his tone still tight with tension. “You’re right; let’s not argue about this now. Just...rest, okay? My parents are on their way to you, right?”

Ilya did not like the implication that they would have to argue about this *later*, but there was no way to say something about it without arguing *now*, and Ilya would rather have an argument when his head wasn’t throbbing in time with his heartbeat.

“Yes, the doctor is getting them now.”

Another long pause. Ilya could not remember ever having such an awkward phone call with Shane before, not even their first one ever.

“I should be there.”

Ilya sighed. He wanted Shane with him, too, wanted to be wrapped around Shane's body in a dark room with Shane's fingers scratching his scalp. He also wanted Shane to not stop playing hockey for him.

"You should play hockey," Ilya told him as firmly as he could manage. "Yuna and David will watch me. I will rest."

Another long, slow breath from Shane. Ilya wished he could see Shane's face.

"Okay," Shane said at last, shakily. "Shit, they are probably looking for me."

"Go," Ilya urged.

"I love you. Please rest."

Ilya smiled to himself. Shane was such a nag. "Yes, I love you," Ilya agreed easily. "Score a goal or two for me."

Chapter 11

December 2017—Vancouver

Shane hit the replay button and let the video run again, like he hadn't seen it a hundred times already. He watched Tanner Dillon's shot go wide and high, watched the puck ricochet off the glass. Watched Ilya clock the trajectory of the ricochet and turn for the rebound. Watched him collide headfirst into the Minnesota defenseman who was skating full speed in the opposite direction.

He watched Ilya stumble, and he couldn't see Ilya's expression from this angle—though he'd found another angle earlier, had seen the shocked wince of pain. He watched Ilya fall to his knees on the ice, and then onto his hands and knees, and Zane Boodram was on his knees beside Ilya, talking to him. And then the trainers were there, talking to Ilya for a long time before they helped him to his feet and he skated very slowly off the ice. The clip ended. Shane hit replay and watched it again.

He didn't know why he was doing this. The Voyageurs had a free night in Vancouver after the game, and most of them were out partying, which of course Shane had not considered doing. Some of them were maybe trying to sleep, which Shane also hadn't really considered doing. Instead, he'd been watching Ilya get hit, over and over again.

He'd thought that watching Ilya get injured had been horrible, but it turned out that not watching, not knowing, had been even worse. Shane had tried to look up a video on Twitter before the game, but he hadn't been able to find one until the first intermission, which was probably more on his search skills than on hockey fans' ability to post quickly. It wasn't that he hadn't believed the Centaurs' team doctor when he'd said that Ilya hadn't lost consciousness, except some part of Shane had needed to *see* Ilya awake and alert and not prone and unresponsive on the ice.

What Shane wanted to do was hop on a plane and fly immediately to Ottawa. Ilya couldn't even get that angry at him, probably, because Shane could fly back to Calgary before the Voyageurs' next game. It would be a lot of hours in the air, but Shane could do it and not miss a single hockey game and Ilya couldn't be mad at him for that.

Theriault would be furious, of course, if his team captain disappeared all the way across the country without permission—although with the way things were going, Shane wouldn't be shocked if he didn't stay captain for that much longer. And he might get scratched, and then Ilya would definitely be upset, because Ilya hated the idea of Shane missing a hockey game because of him.

Or...well, Shane was pretty sure that Ilya liked the idea that Shane *would* miss a hockey game for him, but in practice, he never thought any problem he had was worth Shane missing a game. Shane disagreed, but he wasn't going to go against Ilya's wishes on this.

Instead, he was sitting in his hotel room in Vancouver, replaying the video of Ilya getting injured again and texting his mom every hour. He was pretty sure his mom would strangle

him if he were there, but...well, if he were there, he wouldn't be texting her every hour. It wasn't like Shane didn't know that texting his mom at four in the morning Ottawa time was unhinged behavior, but that didn't exactly stop him.

There was a soft knock at the adjoining door. "Shane, buddy?" Hayden called softly. "Are you awake?"

The Voyageurs tended to give Shane and Hayden adjoining rooms a lot, maybe because Hayden was one of the only ones who seemed able to stand Shane these days. Which Shane thought was definitely a them problem and not a him problem, but he wasn't totally sure about that. He'd never been all that great at making friends. He'd only been good at playing hockey.

"It's unlocked!"

Shane usually left the adjoining door unlocked unless he intended to call Ilya, and...well. Ilya was currently sleeping very peacefully according to Shane's mother. The door opened and Hayden poked his head inside.

"Hey," he said very gently. "I saw your light was still on. I thought you'd be sleeping, so you could wake up and talk to Ilya tomorrow when he's awake."

Bold of Hayden to think Shane had any plans of sleeping in the first place.

Hayden looked past Shane and saw what he'd been watching—because Shane had been replaying the video on his tablet, because even with his glasses, Shane couldn't see the details on his phone screen well enough to satisfy him. Which Shane thought was probably more of a psychological problem than a vision problem, although maybe he *should* get his eyes checked, just to be safe. Hayden strode across the room and grabbed the tablet, like Shane was one of his children.

"Hey!" Shane protested, sitting up straighter in his hotel bed. Hayden flipped the case closed and lifted the tablet too far for Shane to reach without standing up, which...really, if Shane stood up, he could grab it from him. Shane wasn't exactly tall, but he was taller than Hayden.

"Why the hell are you torturing yourself watching this?" Hayden asked, sounding...actually, genuinely upset. Which...okay, Shane got that. He knew that what he was doing was not normal, and probably very much not okay.

"I don't know!" Shane confessed, throwing his hands up in the air in frustration. He swung his legs over the edge of the bed and rested his elbows on his knees, raking his hands through his hair. "I can't fucking do anything from here and I'm kind of going crazy and...I don't know."

Shane felt the bed dip as Hayden sat next to him, and then Hayden's arm was around his shoulders. "I thought your mom said he's doing okay," Hayden ventured gently.

And yes, Shane's mother had definitely said that, on the phone and in response to every single one of Shane's texts. Except that Shane remembered when Ilya had been doing okay the last time, until he had been very, very not okay. And he'd also read a ton of scary stuff about Second Impact Syndrome, which shouldn't happen because the Centaurs' medical staff had been very careful about making sure Ilya was symptom-free before they'd let him play again. But Shane's stupid brain kept wondering what it really meant for a brain to be *healed*, because it wasn't like it was something he could see.

He knew that catastrophic thing would have happened already if it was going to happen, but Shane's stupid brain also kept thinking that maybe it would be a delayed reaction—a very, very delayed reaction—and Ilya would just be *gone* and Shane wouldn't even be there. Except Ilya was sleeping peacefully in Shane's childhood bedroom, which would have been adorable in almost any other context. Now it was just fucking terrifying.

"Buddy, I'm going to need you to breathe for me," Hayden said tightly, and oh. Shane definitely had not been breathing. He sucked in a long lungful of air, and Hayden was rubbing his back. "That's it."

Shane was pretty sure he'd seen Hayden soothing one of the twins like this after a tantrum. Which didn't make Shane feel...great, but maybe it wasn't horrible, either.

"Maybe you should fly back," Hayden suggested after Shane had successfully been breathing for a minute, which...*exactly*! Hayden was speaking absolute sense. Except...

"He would be so fucking pissed," Shane groaned into his hands. At some point he'd pushed his glasses up onto his head, which meant he'd have to clean them. "He thinks this is...so not a big deal."

Hayden was still rubbing Shane's back, which felt nice. "Okay," he said slowly. "Seems like it's a big deal to you."

Hayden really fucking got it, which made Shane feel a little vindicated, and a tiny bit of the tightness in his chest eased. He wanted to stand Hayden in front of Ilya and scream, *See! I'm not being crazy!* Except really, the last thing Ilya needed right now was Shane trying to win an argument against him when he was really supposed to be resting.

"Yeah, it is," he agreed. "I'm not going to, like...stress him out by going expressly against his wishes, though. And my mom might kill me if I keep texting her so much."

Hayden patted Shane on the back. "You have that app with the breathing exercises your therapist wanted you to do, right?" he asked after a second, and it took Shane an embarrassingly long time to figure out why he was asking. "Let's do some."

Shane lifted his head and looked at Hayden skeptically. "You want to do breathing exercises with me?"

Hayden gave Shane a look that seemed to say *well, why the fuck not?* "Sure," he said easily. "I'm not feeling super great about this either, you know."

Shane stared at him for a long minute, flabbergasted, and then very, very amused. “Oh my God,” Shane said. “You actually *like* him and care about what happens to him.”

Hayden looked supremely offended by the suggestion. “I do *not* like Rozanov,” he protested. “He’s an asshole. He told me that I’m bad with my own baby!”

Shane fought not to laugh at the memory. Ilya definitely *had* said that, while Hayden’s baby had slept peacefully against his shoulder before Ilya had gone with Jackie to settle the baby in her crib. Ilya had come back extremely triumphant, and Shane had found it very difficult not to imagine...a lot of things that were really, really impossible at the moment.

“You kind of were, though.”

Hayden stared at Shane openmouthed. “God, is Rozanov rubbing off on you now?”

Shane couldn’t help it; he burst out laughing. “Actually, he’s been rubbing off on me for quite a long—”

“You know what, I know I walked right into that,” Hayden interrupted, shaking his head. “Open your app and let’s do some soothing breathing exercises. And maybe we can even try to sleep after that. I’ll stay and keep you company. Rozanov will be less stressed if he knows you’re taking care of yourself, right?”

That was...well, it was flawless logic. Shane narrowed his eyes at Hayden.

“This is the type of manipulation you use on the twins, isn’t it?” he asked suspiciously. Hayden shrugged.

“It helps if you make them think something was their idea,” he admitted. “Kid logic can be pretty simple like that.”

Shane rolled his eyes, but he felt a little better. “I’m not one of your kids.”

“Then stop staying up past your bedtime and trying to sneak in extra screen time,” Hayden said with a wink. “Let’s get into our jam-jams and get under the covers.”

Shane stared at Hayden. “Hayd, I say this *so* sincerely. Please never call my pajamas ‘jam-jams’ again.”

Hayden smirked. “Deal. Once you’ve gotten into your jam-jams, I promise I will never call them ‘jam-jams’ again.”

Shane glared at Hayden. Hayden stared back at Shane. “Fine,” Shane said, annoyed.

“Fine,” Hayden agreed brightly.

Chapter 12

December 2017—Ottawa

“How is he?” was the first thing Shane asked when he parked his car in his parents’ driveway in the early morning hours of Christmas Eve. The Voyageurs had flown home right after losing in Edmonton, and Shane had gotten in his car almost as soon as they’d landed and started the drive to Ottawa. His mother looked rumpled and annoyed with him when she met him in the driveway, but she *had* come out to meet him, at least.

“He’s fine, just like the last time you asked, and still asleep like most rational people are at this hour on Christmas Eve,” Yuna told Shane, clearly annoyed, although she did drop a soft kiss on Shane’s cheek. Ilya had spent the whole of the week so far at Shane’s parents’ house, which was good, because otherwise, Shane was sure he would have gone insane worrying. “Go on inside. I’ll get your bag.”

Shane normally would have protested the idea of his mother getting his bag for him, but all he had was the one suitcase he’d traveled with, and at the moment, there were things that concerned him more than being chivalrous. He would apologize to his mother later, once he’d seen Ilya in person, once he’d felt the warmth of Ilya’s body and knew he was really okay.

Shane let himself in his front door and took off his boots and his jacket; his father was still asleep, probably, and most of the house was dark, but Shane could make his way from the dim predawn light and his own memory of how to get to his childhood bedroom. He pushed open the door and sighed in relief at the sight of the figure nestled beneath his blankets, a familiar head of curls sticking out. The bed was a queen, at least, so Ilya wasn’t totally crunched up in it, and Shane’s childhood bedroom was still, embarrassingly, filled with all his childhood trophies.

Shane stripped off his pants and then lifted the covers so he could slide beneath them. Ilya made a sleepy sound and his eyes blinked a few times. Even in the dim predawn light that snuck past the edge of the curtain, Shane’s eyes had adjusted enough that could tell Ilya’s pupils were normal.

“Уже утро?” Ilya asked sleepily, and well...it *was* morning, technically, but Shane’s mom had been right that most people would probably like to sleep in. Especially concussed, sleepy Russians. Shane kissed Ilya’s brow. All his own Russian was failing him entirely.

“It’s okay. Sleep,” Shane urged, folding his arms around Ilya’s body. Ilya’s body was warm, far warmer than Shane was, but Ilya had been bundled under blankets instead of driving through the slushy remnants of the early morning snow.

“Mm...хорошо,” Ilya agreed, snuggling into Shane. Shane thought he might stay awake for hours, just holding Ilya, reassuring himself that Ilya was really alive and fine. But a few minutes later, Shane found his eyelids drooping, and he was asleep.

Ilya woke to the glorious feeling of Shane in his arms. The sun was shining through a gap in the curtains, and it was, supposedly, Christmas Eve. After all the years he'd spent in North America, Ilya still didn't know whether he'd settled on Christmas being in December or in January. He wasn't exactly Orthodox, but he wasn't exactly...not, either. The proper day to celebrate Christmas was an argument Ilya could start with Shane the next time Shane was being weird about something.

But now Shane was sleeping, quiet and innocent, the rays of sun falling on his freckles like heaven itself had wanted to highlight how beautiful they were. The room was still mostly dark with the curtains drawn, which was good, because it meant that Ilya felt...fine, for now. Better with Shane in his bed again. The light wasn't enough to pierce his eyes and send his head throbbing, and so Ilya could avoid thinking about how he really didn't want to have to do this whole thing *again*.

Eventually, Shane groaned and shifted in Ilya's arms, so Ilya peppered his face with tiny kisses, along his freckles and his nose and his eyelids, like maybe that could ease Shane into the world of wakefulness a little more easily. It seemed to work, because even before Shane opened his eyes, there was a smile on his face.

"Fuck, did I fall asleep?" he asked, tangling his legs with Ilya's. For once, Ilya was the one wearing sleep pants, and it seemed like Shane was only in a t-shirt and his underwear, which could be...promising. "What time is it?"

"Who cares? Is Christmas Eve."

Shane opened his eyes, and they were soft and unfocused, and he looked for a second like he might actually kiss Ilya even though neither of them had brushed their teeth yet. And then, Shane looked around and seemed to remember where they were.

"God, some of these trophies are so stupid," Shane groaned, and they really, really were. Ilya had looked at all of them over the past few days, though he hadn't been able to read all the inscriptions without his eyes crossing and his head starting to ache, so he wasn't sure what all of them were for. Hockey, obviously, but the specifics were still lost to Ilya.

"Is cute," Ilya assured him, "that your parents still have them all."

All Ilya's childhood trophies were probably in storage somewhere, if they hadn't all been thrown away. Ilya still had every award he'd won since he'd joined the NHL, but everything before that was barely more than a memory.

"It's embarrassing," Shane dismissed, and he was definitely blushing. Even in the dim light, Ilya could see that. He wondered if he could make Shane blush more.

"Did you ever have sex in here?" he asked. "In front of all your trophies?"

Ilya was pretty sure Shane hadn't. He knew he had been Shane's first time with a man, and whatever fleeting encounters Shane had had with his high school girlfriends had sounded very...fleeting.

As Ilya had hoped, Shane's flush deepened, and he squirmed against Ilya. "Do you ever think about anything else?" Shane demanded, though he didn't actually sound upset. Ilya knew what Shane Hollander sounded like when he was upset.

"Besides fucking you? Very few things."

"We're in my parents' house!" Shane hissed, like Ilya didn't know. Like he hadn't been here for days, eating meals with Shane's parents and sleeping surrounded by Shane's childhood things. It was nice, actually, cozy, even if the bed was a little smaller than Ilya liked. It was a good excuse to be pressed up against Shane now, not that he needed an excuse to touch Shane.

"Would be very sexy," Ilya suggested. "Naughty."

Ilya wasn't quite sure what he could manage at the moment. Handjobs, at least, and his morning erection was happier than it had been in days—maybe because he'd rested a lot, probably because Shane's warm body was pressed against his.

"Oh my God," Shane said again, not exactly in protest, though he was wriggling out of Ilya's arms. "I'm going to go brush my teeth."

Which was not a bad sign at all, actually. Ilya should brush his teeth, too, because Shane definitely wouldn't kiss him properly until he had. Also, Ilya's mouth tasted a little like something had died in it. Despite his announcement, Shane hadn't quite moved from the bed yet, stroking his hand up and down Ilya's flank.

"Are you coming?" Shane prodded gently when Ilya hadn't moved.

"In a minute," Ilya murmured, not quite ready to face the prospect of being vertical or experiencing lights. Bathrooms were always the worst, too.

"Okay," Shane said gently, then pressed a kiss to Ilya's temple. The bed shifted as Shane stood up, and Ilya listened to the sound of his socked feet padding along the floor. Ilya closed his eyes, just for a minute.

He woke up some time later to an annoying buzzing sound that his brain very slowly identified as his phone vibrating against the bedside table. Ilya rolled over in bed, intending to silence it, but then he looked at who was calling, and he figured he should answer. He'd talked to Terry a few times, and Yuna had talked to him, too, but Ilya hadn't talked to any of his teammates yet. Ilya answered and held his phone to his ear.

"Merry Christmas Eve!" Bood greeted cheerfully before Ilya could even say anything. Zane Boodram was so obnoxiously cheerful. Ilya could not believe that a man could be so cheerful and also happily smash opposing players into the boards when the situation warranted it.

"Nobody says that, Bood," Ilya complained, even if he was maybe secretly glad to hear from his teammates. Most of his teammates on the Bears had not bothered when Ilya had last been injured, and part of him had thought that maybe the Centaurs were the same. But of course they were not the same. They were the nicest team in the NHL.

“Sure they do,” replied Bood brightly. “I just said it.”

Ilya sighed, but he didn’t argue. Bood was also surprisingly chipper for a man who had just left the sunny humidity of Florida for the frozen slush of Ottawa. Ilya had already been asleep before the game had ended the previous night, so he wasn’t sure if the Centaurs had won or lost. He did have a guess, obviously. Ilya didn’t bring it up, since he didn’t want to ruin his captain’s holiday cheer, which meant he didn’t end up saying anything. Bood didn’t seem to mind.

“How are you feeling?”

Ilya wondered how many days or weeks or months of this he was going to experience this time. Hopefully not months, not again. His concussion had been mild, so Ilya had hoped that it would be one of those concussions he heard players talking about sometimes, the ones that they said were no big deal, the ones that resolved themselves in a day or two. Of course this one hadn’t, though. Terry had told him very apologetically that people who had bad concussion symptoms once were pretty likely to get them after another concussion.

Ilya thought about lying, but that would be a waste of time. Because then Bood might think he’d be back on the ice with them in a week, and Ilya didn’t think that was likely.

“Bad,” Ilya admitted, then considered it. “Not as bad as the last time.”

He didn’t feel like throwing up this time, at least, and his appetite was fine. The vertigo wasn’t even as bad as he had expected, really. It was actually his head that was bothering him the most this time, which seemed stupid. He had been hit harder the first time, but maybe he’d just had too many other aches and pains the first time to really focus on how much his head had hurt. Or maybe enough time had passed that he’d just forgotten what those first few days had felt like.

“Well...if you don’t feel *too* bad, some of the guys were wondering if we could drop by. Maybe bring you some stuff? Groceries or like...whatever else you need.”

Ilya really should not be surprised that his teammates were offering, that they were even nice enough to be willing to go to a store on Christmas Eve instead of spending time with their own families, what limited time they had off before they had to fly to Boston in a few days to play Ilya’s old team. Ilya didn’t know what to say. He couldn’t let them go to his house, obviously, considering that Ilya was not there. And there wasn’t anything he needed that he didn’t have already at the Hollander home. Maybe a new brain, but Ilya didn’t think they’d find that at a supermarket.

“I, ah...I am not at home,” Ilya admitted. “And there is nothing I need. But thank you.”

“Oh!” Bood exclaimed breathily. “You have someone with you still? Taking care of you?”

Ilya pursed his lips thoughtfully. He didn’t know what Bood knew, didn’t know if he’d maybe seen Yuna and David Hollander wandering through the Centaurs’ medical suite after the game when Ilya had been injured. He didn’t know if Zane Boodram would even know who Shane Hollander’s parents were. Not on sight, certainly; Shane looked like both of them,

in some ways, but most people didn't spend as much time contemplating Shane Hollander's face as Ilya did.

"I have someone," Ilya said, as neutrally as he could manage.

"Good," Bood said, sounding genuinely relieved. "But if you do need anything, just call me. I'll get you whatever your need, or I'll coordinate for someone else to do it, okay? Or even if you're just bored and you want to talk. I know how annoying 'no screens' can be."

The Centaurs were definitely the most annoyingly nice team in the NHL. Ilya kind of loved them, even if they were very bad at hockey. Ilya ignored the voice in his head that told him he didn't deserve their kindness, that he hadn't earned it. Kindness wasn't a thing someone had to earn. That was what Ilya's therapist had told him, anyway. Ilya maybe believed that.

"I will call," Ilya promised thickly, "if I need anything."

And maybe he actually would.

Chapter 13

December 2017—Ottawa

By the time Ilya got out of bed, it was already past lunch time. He finally went to brush his teeth, because after sleeping more, it now tasted like a whole new thing had died in it, and even Ilya wasn't gross enough to want to kiss someone when his mouth felt like it was growing fur. None of that activity made Ilya's head feel particularly great, but he wandered into the kitchen anyway, where he found all three Hollanders. David was sitting at the table, Yuna was chopping vegetables, and Shane was mindlessly stirring something in a pot on the stove, probably a task Yuna had given him to try to distract him, bless her.

Yuna was the first one to notice Ilya standing there, since Shane was facing away. "Good morning," Yuna greeted, even though it was definitely the afternoon already. "Are you hungry?"

Ilya was about to answer, but Shane had turned, abandoning his stirring that was probably entirely unnecessary and pointless, and then Shane had his arms around Ilya and Ilya kind of forgot what the question was had been. Still, when Yuna brought Ilya a sandwich with a side of painkillers, he ate that, and then a second sandwich. And then he ate a banana in the most pornographic way he could manage when Yuna and David were looking the other way, enjoying the way it made Shane blush and doing his best to look very innocent whenever one of Shane's parents looked his way. It was a very fun game. Ilya almost wanted to eat the whole bunch of bananas that way.

Eventually, Ilya took Shane back to bed, mostly because Yuna kept shooting Ilya a look that seemed to say that Shane was hurting in the kitchen more than he was helping. Sadly, Shane did not seem all that receptive to suggestions about sex, but Ilya thought maybe Shane would change his mind when his parents had gone to sleep. Or maybe Shane would drive Ilya back to his house so he could sleep in his own bed for a few nights before Shane had to drive back to Montreal. Maybe Ilya would even feel good enough then that Shane wouldn't freak out at the idea of Ilya being unsupervised. Shane's parents were wonderful, but they were also a lot when he was with them twenty-four hours a day, even if he spent a stupidly large amount of those hours sleeping.

Still, lying in bed with Shane was very nice on its own, and not the sort of thing that Ilya was going to complain about. Shane told him more about Montreal's last few games, even though they had already talked about them a little bit on the phone, and then Shane looked up the play-by-play from the Ottawa games and read it out to Ilya like it was a bedtime story, although Ilya wasn't tired anymore. He'd slept like...more than twelve hours. It was ridiculous.

Eventually, even he and Shane ran out of things to say about hockey, though, especially dancing around the topics that neither of them really wanted to talk about. There were quite a lot of things that Ilya didn't want to talk about, but...well, they had time now, and Ilya knew maybe he *should* talk about some of those things.

“I asked Terry about antidepressants,” Ilya said completely out of nowhere. There wasn’t really a good transition into it, not that Ilya could think of, anyway. Shane went very still against Ilya for a few seconds, then went back to running his fingers up and down Ilya’s spine.

“Oh?” Shane said, clearly surprised. Ilya could tell that Shane wanted to say more than that, that he was holding himself back. One part of Ilya wished Shane would say everything he was thinking, but a bigger part of him was happy that Shane hadn’t, because that gave Ilya less time to reconsider.

“Yes,” Ilya affirmed. “I thought, at first...I thought maybe after the season was over. Sometimes takes the body time to...get used to the medication, sometimes there are side-effects. I thought it maybe would be better to start when I am not playing hockey, but...”

Ilya trailed off, but he thought Shane probably heard what he hadn’t said, too. That Ilya thought he probably wouldn’t be playing hockey for a while. Shane didn’t say anything about that, though. All he said was, “And what did Terry say?”

It was an easy question with an easy answer, which was good. “He agrees that it would be good if I take them. But he wants to wait a little, so maybe side-effects do not...build on top of concussion symptoms, something like that. He said starting next week, maybe, see how I feel.” Ilya paused. “He was very happy that I see a therapist already.”

Shane laughed raggedly. Ilya knew what he didn’t say, then, that he was glad that Ilya saw a therapist, too. Ilya was also glad that Shane saw one, obviously. Shane pressed his lips against the crown of Ilya’s head, not quite a kiss.

“I know things have been really shitty for you recently,” Shane said into Ilya’s hair, “but the trade, being here in Ottawa...that didn’t make things worse for you, did it? Did it make you...more unhappy?”

That was a horrible question, and Ilya hated that Shane had ever had it in his brain. Ilya reached for Shane’s hand and squeezed it.

“I have always been this way, I think,” Ilya confessed. He didn’t know if that was reassuring or not. “Before, I had...different ways of ignoring it. Not healthy ways.” Shane squeezed Ilya’s hand back. “But Ottawa is good. You are here sometimes, and Yuna and David are here, and my team is good.”

Shane could not hold back his snort of disbelief. “Good?” he prodded.

“Well, bad at hockey, many of them,” Ilya admitted wryly. “But...good people, maybe even friends. I hope they will keep me next year, but...”

But Ilya had only played eleven games for them, and now he would be out for weeks, at least. Maybe he could be playing again by February, or maybe March. But even nice teams could not hold onto players who could not stay healthy, not forever.

“I know it’s early, but has your agent talked to the team at all? About next year?” Shane’s voice was tight.

Ilya pursed his lips. “I think...probably no. Was different, before this. If I play the rest of the season, I think of course they re-sign me. But now...”

Shane shifted uncomfortably on the bed, then wrapped his arms more tightly around Ilya, like maybe he could keep Ilya in Ottawa if he held onto him hard enough.

“Have you ever...” Shane began, then stopped. Then pulled in a long breath. “Have you ever considered...switching agents? I mean, maybe you really need one who speaks Russian, I don’t know, but if you don’t...my agent is really great. She would definitely advocate for you. And...I trust her. Maybe we could even...well, maybe we could tell her. Why it’s so important that you can stay in Ottawa.”

That was a lot of words, a lot of English all said in a rush, and Ilya could barely keep up, especially when the actual words were so...weird, unexpected. Ilya still couldn’t believe that the man who had bought a whole building so Ilya would never be seen in near Shane Hollander’s home was willing to take so many risks—so many stupid, ridiculous risks. Ilya sometimes wondered if an alien had abducted the real Shane Hollander when Ilya had been unconscious that first time, or maybe when he’d been having surgery, and replaced Shane with someone who wasn’t afraid.

Or, no...Shane was afraid, obviously, was the same anxious yet adorable man he’d ever been, except somehow, he’d learned to push past that fear, and all for Ilya. It was another thing that Ilya didn’t feel like he deserved, or he had earned. He almost wanted to tell Shane no, that Shane should just let this all play out. That Ilya could go back to Russia and be miserable there so Shane could live his life and focus on hockey stop being so anxious and stressed because of Ilya all the time. Except Ilya was too selfish to let Shane go, even if it was for his own good.

“I do not need an agent who speaks Russian,” Ilya said through the thickness in his throat. Maybe Ilya had years ago, when he had first come to North America, but now Ilya could manage...mostly. And if Shane trusted his agent, Ilya could trust her, too.

Shane blew out a long breath. “Okay, yeah. We can do this, we can make sure...” Shane trailed off with a little hitched gasp, like he really *wasn’t* sure. And Ilya was moving, twisting himself in Shane’s arms until he could reach his boyfriend’s lips, until he could press their mouths together and hold Shane’s head until his hitching half-sob stopped and he was breathing smoothly again.

“We will figure something out,” Ilya said, with all the confidence he wasn’t sure he felt. But for Shane, he could be confident. “It will be okay.”

Shane nodded, his forehead pressed against Ilya’s.

Chapter 14

January 2018—Ottawa

“Okay!” Evan Dykstra exclaimed, coming through Ilya’s front door with his cheeks flushed from the cold. Zane Boodram, Tanner Dillon, and Nick Chouinard all filed in behind him, all of them equally flushed and sweaty and half frozen. “Your driveway is officially shoveled!”

Ilya rolled his eyes where he lay on the couch, swinging himself up to a sitting position so he could talk to his teammates. Boyle and LaPointe came in too, and...really, how many men did it take to shovel a driveway? Certainly not *that* many, right? They’d probably goofed off the whole time, because Ilya’s driveway was long, but it was not *that* long.

“I could have paid someone to do that, you know,” Ilya reminded his teammates for probably the fifth time. They were all pulling their gloves, hats, and coats off, just like a day in the locker room but with fewer pads. And they weren’t quite as sweaty as they were after a hockey game, thankfully.

“Why would you do that, when you have a team of big, burly hockey players to do it for you?” Bood asked with a wink. Ilya was a big burly hockey player himself, but even if he had not been recently concussed, he probably would have paid someone for snow removal. But he’d found these men pretty difficult to dissuade once they had gotten an idea into their heads, so eventually he’d just let them have their way about everything.

“I’m going to make coffee,” Chouinard announced once he’d gotten all his outerwear off. Then he shot a look at Ilya, probably remembering that Ilya was meant to be avoiding caffeine. Not that Ilya needed a hot drink, since he had not been outside shoveling snow. “And hot chocolate, maybe? Do we have that?”

The question wasn’t even directed at Ilya, although they were in his house, and Ilya noticed the way Nick said *we*, like somehow the contents of Ilya’s kitchen were communal property. For the past couple of days while the Centaurs had had their weeklong break, they had been. Ilya hadn’t even shopped for groceries; Dykstra and Bood had done that, refusing to even let Ilya help unload them. Ilya appreciated it, sort of, since he wasn’t quite up to struggling through a brightly-lit store, dodging around dozens of other shoppers and their carts, but he could have had his groceries delivered, and he could have managed to put them away, too.

But Ilya had given up on arguing about that, either.

“Of course we do!” Bood exclaimed. “With mini marshmallows. Here, let me show you where it is.”

The whole gaggle of them disappeared around the corner to the kitchen, because apparently making coffee and hot chocolate was also a six man job. Shane would make so many faces if he knew Ilya was about to drink hot chocolate filled with mini marshmallows. He even made a face at how much sugar Ilya put into his coffee, though he usually kept his thoughts to himself. Not that it mattered, since Shane Hollander’s face was an open book to Ilya.

They came back a few minutes later, each with a mug and one extra for Ilya. Ilya was slightly amused to see that Dillon was also drinking hot chocolate with mini marshmallows.

Ilya watched as they all sat around him, except he couldn't help but notice how strange they were about it, none of them sitting next to him on the sofa. Boyle and Chouinard carried in extra chairs from the dining room so they could all sit facing him in a semicircle.

"You do not need to watch me like I am a zoo animal," Ilya reminded them. "It has been almost a month. I will not drop dead."

Ilya, annoyingly, still got headaches but not the vertigo he'd had before. He didn't know which one was better, but he definitely wasn't dying. Even Shane wasn't freaking out anymore, but that was maybe because they'd gotten three days at Christmas and four days during the Voyageurs' week off, though Shane had left a day early to return to Montreal just so he wouldn't be here when the whole of the Centaurs team descended upon Ilya's house, as they had promised—or maybe threatened—to do. But Shane always seemed calmer when he and Ilya were in the same place for more than just a day.

"No, Roz...we know, of course," Bood said awkwardly, looking around nervously at his teammates. Ilya looked across at all of them, hands wrapped around their mugs, exchanging awkward glances, and then Ilya realized. This was not a casual conversation. They were about to say something important. Ilya braced himself for bad news.

"Yes?" he said impatiently. "What is it?"

Everyone exchanged glances again, and this time it was Evan Dykstra who spoke. "Obviously your personal life is your business," he started to say, and Ilya's heart started pounding far too hard. Maybe he *was* going to die. "But all of us—I mean, the whole team, not just us—we wanted to make sure that you knew that...if you *did* have someone in your life...someone you were hiding for some reason, like you think we would be angry if we found out...we won't be."

That was a lot of English words all at once, and none of them were very complicated, but still Ilya's brain fought through it, fought to find some way that didn't mean that they all knew about Shane.

"And why would I be hiding someone?" Ilya was surprised by how even his voice was when his heart was pounding so hard.

Dykstra looked over at Bood like he needed to be saved. His captain did save him.

"Maybe if...and if we're totally off base, please don't punch me, Roz. But maybe if...it's a guy?"

This was not quite Ilya's worst nightmare, because...it seemed like his teammates were trying to tell him, in their own clumsy way, that they would not be upset if Ilya was in a relationship with a man. Maybe it wasn't surprising that they would say that. They were the nicest team in the NHL, who insisted on shoveling Ilya's driveway and buying his groceries and doing his laundry. And they had not said anything about Shane Hollander, so...maybe they did not

know everything. But Ilya didn't know how they could understand half of it but not the whole thing.

"Why would you think I had a guy?" Ilya asked very neutrally. He would not volunteer anything they had not already said. Ilya was not stupid, not even if his team was very nice. Ilya's teammates exchanged another look. Dykstra spoke.

"Well when we were putting away the groceries...there's a lot of stuff in your pantry I'm pretty sure you don't actually eat," he said, and...yes, that was true, Ilya realized. Shane's gross protein powder and like quinoa or something that Ilya actually *would* eat, reluctantly, if Shane made it.

"And there is a glasses case on the nightstand on one side of your bed," Dillion pointed out. "You don't wear glasses."

Shane did leave an extra pair of his glasses at Ilya's house in case he forgot them, and Ilya hadn't thought anything of it, because he hadn't thought there would be a reason for anyone who wasn't Shane to go into the master bedroom—until his teammates had been helping him with his laundry and changing his sheets for him.

"And you have two toothbrushes, and two *toothpastes*," Chouinard continued—and yes, Ilya did, because Shane was very particular about his toothpaste. "Someone else definitely lives here, at least sometimes."

Someone else, yes, but none of that said the someone else was a man. They still hadn't said anything about Shane, either, so Ilya was...a little confused and a little relieved, too.

"Maybe a woman," Ilya said lightly. Bood shook his head.

"Uh...no, definitely not. You have all these clothes in your drawers that aren't your size. But men's clothes, men's sizes." Bood paused, looking awkward. "Look, like we said, you don't need to tell us anything. But we want you to know that...we support you, that's all. And we wouldn't be mad."

Well, this was...not a disaster, Ilya thought. Maybe very far from a disaster, actually. Except if he didn't tell them *something*, something that would keep them away from Shane, they would realize eventually. They paid too much attention, annoyingly *cared* too much. Ilya took a deep breath.

"If we are talking...what is the word, not to confirm anything—"

"Hypothetically?" LaPointe offered. Ilya nodded.

"Yes, hypothetically," Ilya agreed. "If *hypothetically*, there was a man who lived here, sometimes." Ilya paused. He did not know how to say this in English, or even in Russian, to make sure they understood. "I am happy that you...support me. But it is not about trusting, or about not trusting. You cannot know this. It is...maybe not safe for him, if people know this about him."

The words weren't exactly right, not exactly how he meant them, but as soon as he'd said them, Ilya wondered if maybe they were true. That maybe if Shane's team *did* find out, it would not be safe for him there. That maybe it would be more than just insults and angry words. And once that worry was in Ilya's head, he didn't think he would be able to get it out.

"Oh," Bood exhaled softly, looking horrified. "Is he...is he Russian, like you? And maybe he travels back to Russia for work, and that's why he's gone so much? And going back wouldn't be safe for him, if people knew."

Ilya felt his heart melt a tiny bit. It was very wrong, but in some ways, it was not wrong at all.

"Something like that," Ilya confirmed. "He must travel for work, yes. And maybe the place he goes is not the safest place for him. I worry about him, if more people know."

They all exchanged a look. Tanner Dillon's eyes looked a little wet, and Ilya's felt the same.

"We're not going to try to find out about him," Evan Dykstra promised, his tone very sincere. "We won't...dig, or anything, we promise. Right guys?" Everyone nodded quickly. "Let us know when you need us to stay away, and we'll stay away."

"And if you sign with us again next season," Chouinard chimed in, "we will make certain anyone else who joins the team doesn't see anything or know anything. Until we know if they are trustworthy. And if they're not, we will make sure they get traded away somewhere fucking awful."

Ilya felt his eyes starting to sting. It was probably the antidepressants. He felt emotional and weird and Terry had told him to give it a few more weeks until his body got used to them, but right now, it felt like maybe his body never fucking would.

"I would like to stay here next season," Ilya admitted. It wasn't just because of Shane, either, not anymore. Ilya heard people on other teams and in other sports sometimes talk about how their team was like their family, but Ilya had never had anything like that. Well, his teams had sometimes been like his family in that the coach usually yelled a lot and there was at least one guy on the team who resented Ilya for being more talented. But he didn't think that was what those people meant when they called their teams *family*.

"Good," Tanner Dillon said, and it even sounded like he meant it. Ilya shook his head.

"I do not know if the team will want to keep me," Ilya reminded them. He waved his hand in the direction of his head in case they didn't understand why.

"What do you mean if they won't want to keep you?" Boyle demanded.

"Did someone on the team say something?" Bood asked at almost the same time.

Ilya blinked a few times. This was hurting his head a little, but maybe it felt good, too. He probably should have taken painkillers earlier, but he hadn't. He was trying to see if he could push through the pain without them, which was probably stupid of him.

“No one has said anything,” Ilya answered Bood. “But I have played eleven games. Maybe I will not be back until March or April. Or maybe not at all this season.”

There was a lingering silence as everyone seemed to take in Ilya’s words. It was nice that they seemed upset about that, maybe. It was nice that his team didn’t want him to leave, even if he wasn’t helping them win games.

“But we were going to designate him alternate captain,” La Pointe whispered to Bood—too loudly, because Ilya heard it.

“*What?*” Ilya demanded, incredulous. “That is stupid. I have not done anything.”

“You’ve done a fucking *lot*,” Bood insisted, sounding almost angry at Ilya’s words, and Ilya had almost never seen Bood angry. “I’ve scored twice as many goals as this time last year because of you.”

“Same,” Dillon said, which was true.

“Coach said my crossovers were so much more efficient after you helped me,” Boyle said.

“And I execute turns so much better now,” said LaPointe. “Did you see me fake out that defenseman in Detroit?” He paused. “Actually, I hope you didn’t, because you’re not supposed to look at screens.”

“You lost in Detroit,” Ilya pointed out dryly.

“Well, yeah, but in *overtime*,” he agreed. “Hey, do you know stuff about goaltending, too? Could you teach our goalie how to—”

“LaPointe, shut up,” Chouinard said, but he had a point. They did need a better goalie.

“You all are stupid,” Ilya declared, though his voice was thick. “You do not appoint injured guy as alternate captain.”

“I’d say you’ve shown a ton of leadership since you got here,” Dykstra said firmly. “You could practically be our coach. Maybe you can be, if you don’t want to keep playing. Or maybe you’ll coach some other team when you retire after playing another decade and getting into the Hall of Fame. So you know what? Fuck you. I don’t like hearing someone talk shit about my alternate captain like that.”

Ilya didn’t know how a group of guys, a group of hockey players especially, could be so nice, so loyal, so...whatever they were. It seemed impossible that this stupid, terrible hockey team could be so wonderful. Ilya swiped furiously at his leaking eyes.

“Do not make me cry,” he complained. “It makes my head hurt more.”

“Oh shit,” Bood groaned, and then he was getting out of his chair. “Here, lie down.”

Ilya wasn’t sure he needed to lie down, but he let Bood guide him down onto the couch anyway, let him pointlessly adjust the pillow pressed against the arm of the couch. Nick

Chouinard had crossed the room and dimmed the lights.

“Someone get the painkillers,” Bood commanded, then turned back to Ilya. “When was the last time you took some?”

Ilya sighed. “Last night.”

Bood’s eyes looked like they might explode from his head. “Last *night*?” he demanded, though it was not quite a shout, thankfully. “But your head has obviously been hurting since we *got* here. You had those wrinkles between your eyebrows.”

Ilya’s team really was far too perceptive, but surprisingly he didn’t hate it. Bood was still grumbling, half to himself. “Maybe we *do* need to watch you all the time when your guy isn’t here, because you are an idiot,” he murmured. “Maybe I can send Cassie over when we’re on the road. Evan, do you think that Caitlin has time—”

Ilya closed his eyes shook his head to himself, wondering if he could even stop them.

Chapter 15

January 2018—Boston

Shane's phone buzzed, and he smiled as he picked it up to see the name on the display. He leaned back into the pillows of his hotel bed, and answered the phone.

"Hi," he greeted, grinning.

"How is Boston?"

Shane could actually answer, he knew, could talk to Ilya about the flight and the weather and the traffic, but he was sure that Ilya didn't actually care about any of that. The city hadn't really changed since Ilya had left, after all.

"Much less interesting without you here to fuck me," Shane remarked instead, and he was rewarded with Ilya barking out a laugh.

"Yes, obviously," Ilya replied, entirely too smugly. Not that he hadn't earned the right to be smug where Shane was concerned. Shane swore he could hear Ilya's crooked grin through the phone.

"Have your teammates finally left?"

Ilya had been complaining nearly the entire time since Shane had driven back to Montreal that the rest of the Centaurs had been hovering over him, but Shane thought that Ilya was actually secretly pleased by the fussing. Shane was pleased, too, not at all secretly. It was nice to know that someone was watching over Ilya when Shane couldn't be there, and he couldn't ask his parents to be with Ilya all the time.

"Yes," Ilya replied grumpily. "They shoveled my driveway, made me hot chocolate with mini marshmallows, and then forced me to nap. Like I am some child!"

Shane snorted. "Oh no. Sounds awful."

Ilya sighed. "Was very nice," he admitted. And then he was silent for a few seconds before speaking again. "It is only...they noticed things, here at my house."

Shane felt himself tense at the words, at the tentative sound of Ilya's tone. Ilya was so rarely tentative.

"What things?" Shane asked tightly. Ilya was silent for only a few seconds, but those seconds felt like an eternity to Shane.

"That maybe someone else lives here with me sometimes. That maybe...that someone is a man."

The sense of panic that seized Shane was unexpected. He'd thought that he'd accepted this possibility a while ago—that someone might notice, someone might put the pieces together. He'd known he'd taken risks that had made that more likely—being with Ilya at the hospital, walking around in public with him, telling Ilya to list Shane as his emergency contact. He'd *known*; he'd prepared himself. He'd told himself he was being brave, had patted himself on the back about how much it didn't bother him, how he had concluded that the risk was worth taking if it was for Ilya.

And now he was terrified.

"Ilya." Shane's throat felt tight, like he might burst into frustrated tears. "Your team can *not* know about us."

"No, no," Ilya said immediately, soothingly. "They do not know. They know only that there *is* a man. They think my guy is rich Russian businessman who travels for work."

Ilya's words and his tone were enough to keep Shane's tears at bay. He sucked in a shaky breath. "Your...guy?"

"Yes, that is what they call him. Or what they call you. 'Your guy.'"

Well, at least they weren't calling him *Shane Hollander*. But still. Shane chewed on the edge of his thumbnail nervously.

"But they're going to figure it out, right? Like...it's only a matter of time."

"They promised they would not try to find out," Ilya told him softly. "I believe them. They are good, Shane."

Shane pulled in a slow, deep breath. He was not going to panic about this. Or...he probably was going to panic about this, maybe later. Maybe when he woke up at three in the morning and couldn't go back to sleep and worried about every single way Ilya's team might find out the truth about them.

"Okay," he said quietly, waiting for his heart rate to return to normal. "Okay. I'm sorry I'm freaking out."

"No, do not be sorry. I freaked out, too." Somehow, that made Shane feel a lot better. "But we would be okay, I think, if they knew. They are not assholes. They are very supportive."

Shane felt glad for Ilya for about three seconds before he felt jealous, and then he felt annoyed at himself for feeling jealous. Because Shane's own team couldn't even handle the idea that he might be friendly enough with Ilya to actually care when he was injured. They would not be supportive at all, except for Hayden, obviously. And maybe J.J., except J.J. tried too hard to be friendly with everyone, even Drapeau and Comeau, who seemed to hate Shane more than anyone else did.

"Shane, I need to ask you very serious question," Ilya said, breaking Shane out of that thought. "And I need you to be honest."

Well, that definitely didn't seem like anything good. Shane sat up straighter in bed, like that would make hearing this—whatever *this* was—any easier.

“What?”

Ilya seemed to hesitate, which freaked Shane out even more. “Your team, if they found out the truth,” Ilya began cautiously. “Would it be dangerous for you, do you think? Physically?”

Shane's first instinct was to say *no, of course not*. A year ago, he would have answered without hesitation. But something stopped him from saying it now.

A year ago, he would have said that some of them might be assholes about it, that he might be on the receiving end of the slurs they sometimes tossed around, that some of them would bristle at the idea of getting naked in a dressing room with him—like Shane would give any of them a second glance, with Ilya at home. He wouldn't have been surprised if some of them would say stupid shit, like that he was less of a man because he took it up the ass. But he wouldn't have expected more than that.

But now, with the whole team as volatile as it was? With half of them already angry at him, knowing he was gay might be the match that finally set whole house on fire. Knowing that he was having sex with Ilya Rozanov, when even *liking* him was all but a capital offense to some of them?

“I don't know,” Shane said, and his chest felt tight and painful again. “And the fact that I don't is...really scary, really fucked up.”

Ilya didn't say anything, and in the silence, the realization crashed down on Shane all at once. He felt the beginnings of panic churning inside his body.

“I can't stay here for another year,” Shane said, hearing the ragged desperation clawing its way out of him. “But I can't fucking go anywhere else. Anywhere else I go will just take me further from you.”

Shane suddenly felt helpless, and angry, and the whole situation felt fucking hopeless. And Shane had been so hopeful when Ilya had signed with Ottawa. That somehow seemed like a lifetime ago.

“Toronto is far, but not impossible,” Ilya tried, though Shane didn't think even Ilya believed in his suggestion.

“They have Dallas Kent, and he signed a huge contract this season. They don't need me, *and* they can't afford me,” Shane pointed out. “Plus, he and Troy Barrett are definitely homophobes. Have you heard some of the shit they say on the ice? It might even be worse than here.”

“Buffalo?” Ilya suggested, and Shane could hear the wince in Ilya's voice even as he suggested it. Buffalo was the only team in their division that was worse than Ottawa right now.

“Buffalo sucks. *And* it’s a five hour drive to Ottawa. That’s barely better than when you were in Boston.”

“I could change teams, too, if someone would sign me,” Ilya suggested. It meant a lot that Ilya would offer, considering Shane knew how much Ilya seemed to love his current teammates. “New York and New Jersey?”

“You’re fucking kidding. Have you forgotten Scott Hunter’s salary?” Even though it sounded fucking amazing to play on a team he already knew wouldn’t have a problem with him being gay. Obviously, that would be impossible.

“LA and Anaheim?”

Rose was in LA, which would be nice, but, “Basically ground zero for paparazzi. I know they don’t really care about hockey in California, but it would feel...like we couldn’t go anywhere without the fear of someone spotting something...incriminating.”

Ilya seemed not quite ready to give up yet, even though his suggestions were becoming increasingly ridiculous.

“They are talking about expansion team in Seattle. Maybe they would take me in expansion draft? Vancouver and Seattle are close, yes?”

Shane sighed. “That’s years away. Do you remember how long it took Vegas?”

Shane could practically hear Ilya rolling his eyes. “No, I did not follow that stupid stuff. All I know is one day, I woke up and now there is team in Las Vegas for my team to lose to.”

That seemed about right. It didn’t surprise Shane at all that Ilya didn’t care about the details, hadn’t followed it the way Shane—and even more, Shane’s mother—had. That wasn’t the kind of relationship Ilya had with hockey, the obsessive, all-consuming focus that had characterized Shane’s whole life. Shane sometimes still didn’t understand how Ilya felt about hockey, how he’d really feel if it all got taken away from him. Whenever Shane had started to think that maybe Ilya didn’t care, he surprised Shane by caring so, so much.

“This is fucked,” Shane said with a sigh. He didn’t know what else he *could* say.

“Talk to Farah? Maybe she will have a suggestion,” Ilya said after a few seconds. Farah Jalali was now, officially, Ilya’s agent too—and Shane had told her, very awkwardly, how important it was to him that he and Ilya stay geographically close to each other. Shane hadn’t quite managed to force the reason why out of his mouth, but he thought maybe she’d gotten the shape of it, at least. Shane was, it turned out, still extremely bad at coming out to people, no matter what confidence he’d tried to project to Ilya.

He wondered if Ilya had told her more explicitly. Shane had given him permission to, but he was glad he hadn’t been there when Ilya had told her, if he even had. Just thinking about it made Shane’s palms sweat.

“Maybe,” Shane agreed, unconvinced.

“We will figure something out,” Ilya told him again, with confidence Shane did not feel. Probably Ilya did not feel it, either, and maybe he was just trying to make Shane feel better. Or maybe the antidepressants were finally starting to work, and Ilya was actually feeling optimistic about it. He hoped it was that, and that only Shane was feeling like this was impossible.

February 2018—Ottawa

“And how are your headaches?” Terry asked.

“They are okay. Better than before,” Ilya answered, although he could already see the way that Terry was eyeing him with exasperation. He wondered if he was the most annoying patient that Terry had ever had. He hoped not. He wasn’t even trying to be annoying on purpose.

“Rozanov,” Terry chided, and Ilya knew that maybe he was in trouble. Terry usually called him by his first name, except when he was annoyed.

“Yes, yes, I know. What does ‘better’ mean, this is what you want to know?” Terry just raised an eyebrow at him, because they had had this conversation before. Terry said his answers were too evasive. “Maybe twice this week. One time was barely anything, almost not worth mentioning.”

Terry was shaking his head. “I swear, you would say it was nothing even if your arm was falling off,” Terry remarked, writing something down. Ilya hoped that *that* was not what he had written down.

“What does my arm have to do with anything? The problem is my head,” Ilya protested, and Terry was not amused. “I do not think my doctor is allowed to be so mean to me. Is very rude.”

“Ilya,” Terry said softly, and that was good, probably, that Ilya had gotten his team doctor back to first names. But then Terry grabbed the chair from the other side of the exam room and rolled it over so he could sit across from Ilya. Uh-oh. “I know this will not what you want to hear.”

Ilya held himself very still, tensing for what he knew must be bad news.

“It is my medical judgment that the best course of action right now would be, out of an abundance of caution, to sit you down for the rest of the season.”

Ilya knew most of those words, but somehow they did not quite make sense. He searched for a way he might possibly have misunderstood what Terry had said.

“What does ‘abundance of caution’ mean?” he asked very evenly. He thought he knew, but he wanted to make sure. Terry gave him a sympathetic look.

“That maybe we are being more careful than we need to be. But I would rather we be too careful than not careful enough.” Terry paused, looking at Ilya very seriously. “You have had two serious concussions in less than a year, Ilya.”

A protest scraped its way to the surface. “You said this one was not so serious,” he remarked dully. It felt stupid even to Ilya’s own ears, but that was what Terry had said.

“Even if it was less serious than the first, we still don’t fully understand how severely a second concussion can impact the brain. But the fact that you are still experiencing symptoms almost two months after the injury makes me reluctant to put you back out there any time this season.”

This was fucking terrible, the worst possible news for Ilya’s future with the Centaurs. It had been bad already, no matter what his teammates had tried to tell him, no matter the statement they’d tried to make by naming him alternate captain. Ilya had thought he might have a month or two, at least, to try to prove to this team that he was worth giving a new contract for the upcoming season. But now he would have nothing, not even five or ten more games.

Maybe it was better. It probably *was* better for Ilya’s stupid, broken brain to not get even more broken. Except it didn’t feel like it was better.

“The team would defer to my medical judgment no matter what, but management agrees with me on this,” Terry was saying. Ilya was barely listening anymore, couldn’t force himself to focus on the words. “We’d rather preserve you for next season than take a risk of another serious injury this quickly after the last one.”

That stopped Ilya’s racing thoughts.

“Next season?” he repeated, afraid he’d heard wrong. Terry’s expression was gentle.

“Yes,” he confirmed. “That is your choice, of course. After two significant injuries, no one would blame you if you decided this was all too much for you.”

Management had agreed. The Centaurs wanted him next season. It was Ilya’s decision.

Ilya felt stupidly, frustratingly emotional. He didn’t even feel like he could blame the antidepressants anymore. His body was definitely used to them by now. They were helping, maybe. He wasn’t sure if he could tell with everything else that was going on.

“It is not too much,” Ilya told Terry thickly. “I want to play.”

Terry reached over and clasped a hand on Ilya’s shoulder. “Okay,” he said. “Then rest, recover, and do your best to be ready for next season. And that does not mean you aren’t required to keep checking in with me. Understood?”

Ilya nodded. “Yes, I understand,” he agreed. He wasn’t sure he could get any other words out of his mouth.

Ilya felt like a zombie as he walked out of the facility and back to his car. And once he was behind the wheel, he burst into tears.

Chapter 16

February 2018—Montreal

“So I know maybe this offer doesn’t meet your salary expectations,” their agent, Farah Jalali, was saying to Ilya over Skype, “but it’s only an initial offer. And Ottawa’s position is that they want to keep you next year, but they can’t offer you a huge salary when they aren’t sure of your status.”

Shane squeezed Ilya’s hand, glad that he could be here for this conversation, glad that they’d been able to find a time when Shane was available, too. But even sitting beside Ilya at the table right now, Shane *still* could not tell how Ilya felt about it, about being offered far less than he was worth. Ilya’s expression was so annoyingly even, but Ilya had been...very hard to read since Ottawa had told him he’d been on long-term injured reserve for the whole remainder of the season.

“There’s definitely room for negotiation here,” Farah continued. “I can argue for more performance-related incentives for if you are able to play at the same level as before—”

“What if we do not argue?” Ilya interrupted brusquely, which was...weird. God, Shane kind of fucking hated this. He wanted Ilya to heal fully as well, had agreed completely with the conclusion of the Centaurs’ medical staff that it was better to be cautious with Ilya’s recovery. But he also hated the way that it seemed to have made Ilya doubt himself and his worth to the team.

“Ilya, this is normal in contract negotiations,” Shane told him gently. Maybe his old agent had never kept him in the loop for this. Maybe he’d told his agent that he didn’t care about the details, which seemed like a very Ilya thing to do. Or maybe he hadn’t really needed to negotiate. Maybe Boston had offered him an amazing contract outright. “They aren’t going to rescind the offer because we push back a little.”

Ilya gave Shane a look like he thought he was stupid, which...okay, that actually made Shane feel a little better. That there was some fight left in there, that Ilya had not given up.

“No, wait. If I accept this lower salary, do not push for too many bonuses...Ottawa needs a superstar center still, yes? And they still have cap space to pay big salary. Maybe to a center who is not happy with his current team, whose parents and boyfriend live in Ottawa?”

Shane felt himself flush at the word *boyfriend*, so casually uttered in front of their agent. Farah knew, obviously, maybe would have known even if Shane hadn’t clumsily tried to tell her and Ilya had told her outright. Or else she would have thought it was really weird that Shane had wanted to be there when Ilya met with her. Shane was so focused on the word *boyfriend* that it took him a few seconds to realize what Ilya had actually said.

“Ilya, that’s crazy,” Shane protested. There was no way something like that would work. Getting Boston to trade Ilya to Ottawa had already been an ask, but Ottawa had barely had any good players on the team at the time, and Ilya had been injured. There was no fucking

way Montreal would even *think* about letting Ilya Rozanov and Shane Hollander be on the same team, not unless they really thought Ilya's career was over.

"Crazy, why crazy?" Ilya pushed. Well, Shane wasn't going to say any of what he'd just thought. And there were other reasons, too.

"You shouldn't accept less than what you're worth for me."

Ilya rolled his eyes, and Farah just silently watched them argue. Well, maybe Shane *shouldn't* have pushed to be at this meeting. Now their agent was watching them argue like...well, like a couple.

"Who cares?" Ilya asked, and it sounded like he honestly didn't. Shane couldn't quite fathom it. He'd be way more upset with that offer, in Ilya's position. "Is only money. We have enough, and my rich boyfriend will make sure I am okay, yes?"

God, the word *boyfriend* again. Ilya must be doing this on purpose, right? Like he must know that hearing Ilya say that word made Shane's brain stop functioning properly, made him just want to agree with whatever Ilya was saying and then pin him down and suck his dick. Which he definitely couldn't do with Farah watching.

"We will not win cups, though, not now," Ilya continued. "Maybe in a few years, with both of us on the team, and we trade for some good players. A new goaltender, definitely. But maybe never." Ilya paused, hazel eyes boring into Shane's. "Would you give up the chance at cups for me?"

That felt like...such a crazy question. Sometimes, Shane felt like he'd give up everything for Ilya, and sometimes, the thought of never hoisting the cup over his head again made him want to panic. Except he wasn't winning cups *now*, and he couldn't imagine how he ever could in Montreal again, not unless they traded away half the team first. All the bad blood, the angry comments, the lack of cohesion as a team...that wouldn't just be forgotten. They'd probably need a whole new coach, too, one with...a totally different philosophy of coaching. A kinder one, maybe, or maybe even the weirdly hands-off approach Ilya's coach seemed to take.

It would be easier for Montreal to trade Shane away than to try to replace half the team with people who didn't hate or resent or blame him. Shane was a valuable player, sure, but he wasn't more valuable than half a team or more. Maybe there *was* a way.

"It's not just for you," Shane said quietly, his heart constricting painfully in his chest. "It's for me, too."

Ilya pulled Shane's hand to his lips and kissed the back of it. It was such a soft, intimate gesture.

"Yes, same for me," he affirmed. "Maybe eventually we get more money and more cups, but for now I can make sacrifices."

“Would Montreal agree to release you?” Farah asked. Shane jolted back in his chair. He had actually forgotten she was there, staring earnestly at them from the screen, not seeming at all perturbed by the way they’d totally ignored her. They must be her weirdest clients ever. Shane considered the question.

“If I threaten to talk about our team dynamics in public?” he suggested. “Maybe. The rumors alone are enough bad press without the public knowing how awful things really are.”

Shane didn’t know if he could actually do it, make the threat and sound convincing, sound like he’d actually follow through with it. He did have...a huge amount of good will in the press. His image was better than it had ever been after the story about him befriending Ilya had come out. Ilya had been right, that he’d come out of that looking like an absolute angel, the golden boy of the NHL. That had probably been part of what Shane’s team had hated, too.

Ilya’s face flooded with concern. “But if you threaten and they do not agree, it will be worse for you.”

Shane couldn’t imagine management wanting to keep him around at all if he started making threats about going to the press about anything negative. Even if Shane didn’t follow through, the fact that he *would* threaten it, the fact that it could be a possibility, would always be on their minds. It was a very...not Shane Hollander thing to do. Shane Hollander didn’t argue, always followed the rules, always did what was expected of him.

Except that he’d been fucking his rival for more than seven years, so there was that.

“I think they’ll agree,” Shane said. “And I’m willing to take the risk.”

Ilya looked at him with such unabashed love in his eyes that Shane felt his heart, and maybe everything else in his chest too, absolutely melt. And Shane knew in that moment that he could do it. He could make the threat, he could stand his ground until Montreal agreed to trade him. He could be brave, about this at least.

“What is your timeline?” Farah asked, and fuck, Shane had forgotten she was there *again*. “Are you aiming for now or at the start of next season?”

Shane turned back to the screen and just stared at her for a second. He’d thought they were talking about an offseason trade, hadn’t even contemplated the idea of trying to pull this off now. A trade in now would be crazy—except maybe it would be perfect, with the Olympics going on without any NHL players competing. People’s attention was split, and enough of the sports press was occupied with that, so maybe...well, it wouldn’t go under the radar, Montreal trading away their star player, but it might be easier to stomach now than at any other time.

“*Could* we pull it off now?” Shane said, suddenly feeling strangely wired, excited in a way he hadn’t been before. Farah shrugged.

“It could be a possibility,” she acknowledged. “Neither team is making the playoffs, so they aren’t losing you for the playoffs or advantaging the other team. Ottawa’s best center is

injured, so they are theoretically in the market for one. Since Ilya is on LTIR, they have the cap space for you right now, and Ilya's contract next year will be smaller, as we discussed."

Farah paused, looking thoughtful.

"From a PR perspective, Montreal could brand it as a reset. That they're looking to trade for someone big next season and they want your contract off their books. And they'll have a good position in the draft next year for the first time in a while, so they could claim they're gunning for new talent. So if you want to try to make it happen now, we can try."

Shane's throat felt thick with emotion. He turned to look at Ilya, whose expression was soft and so unbearably full of love.

"I want to be in Ottawa as soon as possible," Shane said in a rush. "*If* it's possible."

Shane was barely able to pay attention to the rest of the phone call. Eventually, he gave up entirely and went into the kitchen to get a glass of water while Ilya chatted with Farah. Shane swallowed an entire glass of water and then stood there for a few minutes, hands on the granite countertop, forcing himself to breathe.

Finally, he heard silence from the other room, and then the familiar sound of Ilya's footsteps. A few seconds later, strong arms wrapped around him from behind, and Ilya's lips pressed against the shell of his ear.

"Бсѐ хорошо?" Ilya asked softly in Russian. Somehow, that calmed the racing of Shane's heart a little, that Ilya trusted Shane to understand. Even if it was one of the first phrases Shane had learned and Shane frustratingly didn't feel like he was getting any better at speaking Russian at all. He'd felt like it should be easier, considering he spoke two languages already. Except Russian was so, so different, and Shane felt too self-conscious about making mistakes that sometimes he was terrified to even try. He definitely couldn't handle it right now, and he hoped Ilya didn't take that personally.

"I'm okay," Shane assured Ilya. "Just feeling a little..."

"Overwhelmed?" Ilya suggested after a second, and Shane was really fucking impressed that Ilya had managed to find a fitting English word before Shane could. He placed his hand on top of Ilya's and tugged Ilya's arm more tightly around him, leaning back into Ilya's body.

"Yeah," Shane admitted. He almost didn't say anything else, except his therapist was always chiding him for that. "It's just...really scary to feel like all of that might be possible only to think like...maybe it isn't."

Ilya kissed below Shane's ear, then down the side of his neck. "Maybe it is better not to think for a while," Ilya suggested quietly. "If you want."

Suddenly, Shane really *did* want. He hadn't been thinking of sex at all, except now he was very conscious of the fact that Ilya's body was pressed up against his, and specifically that Ilya's dick was pressed up against his ass—or, well, a little more like his lower back,

probably. Ilya wasn't hard yet, but Shane knew from experience that it would take very little to change that. He reached back and brushed his fingers through Ilya's curls.

"How is your head?" he asked. "The screen wasn't too much?"

Ilya huffed out a laugh. "My head is okay," he dismissed. "Would you like me to fuck you right here in the kitchen or are you not in the mood?"

Shane snorted. Well, it was clear that Ilya was not in the mood to discuss his head, which meant he was annoyed about being asked so much but otherwise probably fine.

"Here in the kitchen?" Shane repeated. Ilya released another little laugh against the side of Shane's neck.

"Do not pretend to be shocked. I know you have condoms and lube in here."

Shane did, even though they'd only fucked in the kitchen like...once. Or, well, maybe twice, but it never hurt to be prepared for the eventuality. In answer, Shane reached over and slid open a drawer, then moved some kitchen towels he never used out of the way.

"I love how much of a freak you are," Ilya commented, then reached over and put the supplies onto the countertop and closed the drawer. He started kissing down the side of Shane's neck again and slid his hand down the front of Shane's body to cup him through his pants. He ground his hips against Shane's ass in an extremely suggestive manner, and...okay, maybe Ilya wasn't the only one who could go from zero to incredibly turned on in less than thirty seconds. "So ready for me, always."

Shane groaned helplessly as Ilya nipped at his earlobe, then bit down a little harder, not quite enough to hurt. Ilya's hands were busy pulling Shane's pants and underwear off, letting them fall into a pool at his feet. One of Ilya's hands wrapped around Shane's half-hard dick, lazily stroking until he was fully hard. Ilya murmured something in Russian that Shane didn't understand. A few seconds later, two slick fingers were pressing at his hole, and Shane kind of forgot he had been worrying about anything at all.

The edge of the counter pressed uncomfortably against Shane's hips, but he didn't even care, just pressed back against Ilya as Ilya continued to lick and kiss at his neck. Shane squirmed as Ilya seemed to take forever opening him up.

"Jesus Christ, Ilya, just fuck me already," Shane whined. They were *not* going to have slow, sensual sex in the kitchen. Shane didn't have the patience for it and the kitchen definitely had too many hard angles to keep this up for long. Ilya's fingers slid out of Shane's body.

"Condom?" Ilya asked against his ear, and Shane tensed. They'd stopped using them after they'd had that awful midnight discussion, and at first, Shane had thought it was weird that Ilya had kept asking if he wanted to use one. They didn't need them, obviously. Except right now, Shane was feeling tense and weird and for no good reason, the idea of Ilya coming inside him or on him suddenly made him feel squirmy and weird and not in a good way.

“Uh...could we...use one?” Shane asked, cringing at himself. Ilya kissed the space below his ear again.

“Of course, sweetheart,” Ilya said softly, and Shane felt himself sagging in relief at how unbothered Ilya sounded. He’d probably known from the start that Shane would be weird like this. Sometimes, Shane thought Ilya understood him better than he understood himself.

Shane heard the sound of the condom wrapper tearing, and then he felt the familiar blunt pressure of Ilya’s dick against his entrance. He released a sigh of relief as Ilya filled him, at the pleasant, slightly painful stretch of it. God, Shane fucking loved this, loved Ilya’s hand against his chest, fingernails digging into the muscle of his pec, hips pistoning in and out.

Except this angle was fucking terrible, and Ilya was too tall to get the right leverage and there was *definitely* a reason they did not usually have sex standing up. Shane leaned forward as far as he could manage, pressing his ass back against Ilya’s hips—and thankfully, Ilya got the message, gripped Shane by both hips and dragged him backward, far enough that he could bend himself over until his forearms were resting on the countertop, and that was way, way better. Ilya seemed to think so, too, and he began fucking Shane in earnest, just the way Shane wanted.

Shane buried his face in his arms and just let himself feel it, the slide of Ilya’s cock inside him, the jolt of pleasure every time the angle was *just* right, brushing against his prostate. Ilya hadn’t touched Shane’s dick yet, but he might not need to. Shane thought he could maybe come from just this.

As if he could sense it, Ilya’s hand circled around the base of Shane’s dick, but instead of stroking, he squeezed. “Don’t come yet,” he commanded breathily, and the sound of his voice raw and filled with pleasure almost immediately had the opposite effect. Shane couldn’t stop the whimper of protest that escaped his mouth, but if Ilya asked, he could try. He balled his hands into fists.

“I might not...be able...to stop it,” Shane groaned, and he felt too hot and slick with sweat and suddenly so fucking desperate to come. Ilya’s other hand pressed against the middle of Shane’s back, as if to anchor him.

“You can,” Ilya assured him, pounding mercilessly into Shane now, breathing harsh and labored. “Wait.”

Shane bit his lip, his legs shaking. He thought he might die when Ilya thrust into him once, twice more before Ilya was groaning and coming and just the *sound* of it made it almost impossible for Shane to hold back his own orgasm. Tears threatened to escape from his tightly closed eyes.

“*Ilya*,” Shane pleaded once Ilya had stilled, desperate and needy and brain too foggy to even begin to understand why Ilya had asked him to wait. Ilya took two slow breaths, three, and then pulled out, and Shane hissed at the sensation. Then Ilya tugged at Shane’s hips until he turned, and Ilya was sinking to his knees.

“Jesus Christ,” Shane breathed.

Ilya swallowed Shane's dick in one smooth motion, and his hand reached back, fingers teasing Shane's swollen rim. It almost hurt, was almost too much, except it wasn't too much at all. Shane's legs were shaking, barely able to hold him up, and then the world whited out and he was coming into Ilya's mouth, Ilya swallowing down his release.

"That was so fucking hot," Shane gasped out as Ilya stood, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand.

"Mm," Ilya agreed, looking supremely self-satisfied. Shane watched as Ilya removed the condom, tied it off, and washed up at the sink. It was maybe the easiest cleanup they'd ever had after Ilya had fucked him. Shane watched Ilya, shaking his head to himself with a smile.

"I love you," Shane said softly. Ilya patted him lightly on the chest.

"I know," Ilya said confidently, and then, "I love you, too."

Chapter 17

February 2018—Ottawa

“So it’s mostly a done deal,” Farah told Shane brightly from the screen of Ilya’s tablet. Shane was picking nervously at the edge of his thumbnail, so Ilya reached over and put his hand on Shane’s so he would stop. Shane was being nervous and weird instead of happy to get exactly what he’d asked for, and Ilya hadn’t figured out why yet. Maybe he was sad about leaving his friend Hayden Pike behind with a bunch of assholes. Even Ilya felt a little bit bad about that.

“Should we, uh...” Shane asked, glancing at Ilya out of the corner of his eye “...disclose, about...you know? Before the trade goes through? Or wait until after?”

Well, Ilya had absolutely *no idea* what Shane was talking about, because he was using words Ilya didn’t know *and* mumbling, so hopefully Farah had a better idea what Shane was trying to ask. Hopefully it was an English thing and not just like...a Shane thing, because if it was a Shane thing, Ilya was probably the one who should understand.

“From an HR perspective, the Centaurs will most likely require you to officially disclose your relationship,” Farah said, and oh, that was what Shane had meant. Ilya still hadn’t heard Shane actually say any words to Farah that directly referenced that he and Ilya were a couple, and Ilya didn’t know if he should be worried or find Shane’s bashfulness extremely cute. “Whether you decide to disclose it early, as a gesture of good faith, is a decision for the two of you to make.”

Ilya sat with that thought for a moment, chewing it over. He’d imagined telling his teammates, maybe, since they already knew half of the truth. He was pretty sure that Terry at least suspected *all* of the truth. But the owners, the general manager, the coach...he’d never really thought about what it would be like to tell any of them. He hadn’t really had the time. The whole process had gone so much faster than either of them had expected, because Ilya had expected the Voyageurs to fight harder to keep Shane.

But they’d barely fought at all. They’d seemed eager when Shane had asked for the trade, had been excited to send him to a team even shittier than they had been this season. The Centaurs management had scrambled to put together an offer at even the hint that Shane Hollander might be available and interested in playing on their team. Ilya was pretty sure the Voyageurs thought that the Centaurs’ enthusiasm meant they didn’t intend to sign Ilya for another year, which he guessed was how assholes thought. Assholes thought everyone else thought like them and were also assholes.

“But what if they like...change their minds, decide that it’s too much trouble and they don’t want to take me anymore?” Shane demanded nervously. “Or is it worse if we don’t tell them until after, and they realize they’re stuck with the gay hockey couple who are going to make everything—”

Well, Shane was halfway to a panic attack already. Ilya could tell. He squeezed Shane’s hand tightly.

“That will not happen,” he assured Shane firmly. He was almost sure that it was true. “Before or after, it does not matter. If management are assholes about this, the whole team would refuse to play.”

Shane stared at Ilya disbelievingly, but at least he wasn’t quite panicking anymore. “The *whole* team?” he asked skeptically. Ilya shrugged.

“At least half,” he conceded. Definitely Bood and Chouinard and Tanner fucking Dillon with his terrible stickhandling and weak skating skills. And Dykstra and LaPointe and Boyle. Probably some of the others, too. Ilya had never been so certain that a group of people would stand behind him, not even when he’d given his most excellent rallying speeches with the Bears, the kind that made men want to run through a brick wall for him.

“I’ll let you two discuss this amongst yourselves,” Farah told them with a smile that was kind but maybe said she was tired of being involved in all their relationship discussions. At least she got to deal with them both at once, though. That maybe saved her time. “And I’ll let you know if any last-minute issues crop up.”

Shane turned to Ilya almost as soon as they’d hung up with Farah, that fever-bright energy in his eyes. “Do you know the owners? Are they...I don’t know, chill?”

Ilya was pretty sure *chill* in this context translated to *not homophobes*.

“I have barely met them,” Ilya confessed. He wished he had a better answer for Shane, something that would calm his boyfriend’s nerves. “They sent me ‘get well soon’ message after I was injured, or they had someone send one. But personally...no, I do not know them.”

Shane stood up from his chair, pacing the room in a way that was making Ilya’s head hurt worse than it already was. He should take some painkillers, he knew, but he had not done it yet. “I mean, they’re pretty young, compared to a lot of owners,” Shane said, mostly to himself. Ilya wasn’t sure if Shane had even listened to what Ilya said, not that it had been helpful at all. “But also...old money family. Maybe they’re ‘traditional.’”

Ilya was pretty sure that *traditional* in this context did mean *homophobes*. Ilya was familiar with that argument at least. Russians said that a lot, that they wanted to preserve *traditional families*, whatever bullshit that meant. Ilya was pretty sure he’d have been better off with gay parents than the sort of *traditional* man who had wanted to marry a woman half his age only to constantly berate her for not knowing the things she’d never had a chance to experience because she’d barely had a chance to live. And none of those thoughts were helping his head feel better, either.

“I think the team would be different if the owners were assholes,” Ilya said. He definitely could not think of the words he wanted in English at the moment. “Usually, those things...opinions from the people at the top, they make people below them assholes, too.”

“Maybe,” Shane agreed dully, sounding very unconvinced. Shane probably knew more about the owners of Ilya’s team than Ilya did, anyway. Ilya was pretty sure that Shane knew the name of every NHL owner and general manager and could pull from memory the Stanley Cup winning team from any year he was asked, complete with their entire roster. But hockey

had never been like that for Ilya, had never been this thing that had consumed his life. It had been an escape, in a way, and a thing that he had been good at. It had never quite been his whole life, even when he hadn't had much else.

"Shane," Ilya said after a second. "Can you please sit? You are making my head hurt more."

Thankfully, Shane stopped immediately. Ilya had hoped he would, but his words hadn't been a lie, either. Ilya didn't love the way Shane's eyes filled with concern, but it was better than borderline panic.

"Do you need some painkillers?" Shane asked very gently. Ilya thought about saying no.

"Yes, please," he agreed, and Shane nodded, turning and disappearing into the kitchen. Ilya took that opportunity to move somewhere more comfortable, and he'd settled himself onto the couch by the time Shane returned with two pills and a glass of water. Ilya took the pills and drank half the glass of water before he lay back on the couch. He opened his arms for Shane, and thankfully, Shane came willingly, settling himself on top of Ilya, head on Ilya's chest. Ilya closed his eyes and waited for the pills to start working, grazing his fingers up and down Shane's spine.

"I don't know what to do," Shane said into Ilya's chest after a minute, and Ilya was pretty sure he knew what Shane was really saying. Sometimes, Ilya didn't speak English very well, but he was nearly an expert in speaking Shane Hollander by now. Shane didn't want to make the decision, wanted Ilya to make it for him.

"We should talk to owners quickly," Ilya reasoned out loud. "It will be better if we have less time to worry."

Shane breathed against him, slower and more even now that they were like one body breathing together. "Okay," he agreed quietly.

They were ushered into a private room by a waiter when they arrived at the restaurant. Shane guessed he shouldn't be surprised by that, that the Centaurs' owners would choose a restaurant upscale enough to have a private room for them to reserve, even if it was just the five of them for dinner. He was relieved, too, because this was not the kind of conversation he wanted to have with a group of rowdy diners just one table away. But it wasn't as if they could invite the owners to Ilya's house or ask to be invited to one of theirs for the privacy.

The three of them stood up to greet Shane and Ilya when they arrived. The owners were siblings, all three of them in their forties, who had inherited the team when their father had died. James, Alice, and Nathan LaFontaine. Shane had known their names, had known of their family from growing up in Ottawa, but he hadn't known much about them personally until a few days ago, when he'd exhaustively researched anything he could find about them. He hadn't found anything that suggested they might be homophobes, but sometimes people were smart enough not to express those views publicly. Shane hoped his palm wasn't as clammy with sweat as he felt when he shook each of their hands.

“I know it’s not official yet,” Nathan LaFontaine was saying as he shook Shane’s hand. Shane could just about hear the words past the nervous ringing in his ears. “But we are so happy to welcome you to the team.”

“Thank you,” Shane heard himself saying through the fog in his brain. He hoped he sounded normal and not like he was a nervous wreck. He wondered again if he should have worn something else. Ilya had said he looked good, but Ilya would probably say that Shane looked good in anything. Stylist or not, Shane still wasn’t sure how he felt about a blazer and jeans. He still wasn’t sure about wearing jeans most of the time, honestly. They were meant to be casual and comfortable, people said, but they were scratchy and annoying against his skin.

They sat at a round table opposite the three siblings, and a waiter appeared immediately to ask Shane and Ilya about drinks. The owners all already had glasses of wine in front of them, and Shane wondered if he should order one, too, not that he knew anything about wine. But then Ilya ordered a coke, and so Shane ordered a ginger ale and immediately second-guessed whether alcohol would make this easier, except the waiter had already left the room.

“And how are you feeling, Ilya?” the other brother, James, was asking. Shane was happy that they were asking, at least, that they were showing concern for Ilya’s health. Although maybe they did just see him as an investment and wanted to know that he would be able to play for them again. It didn’t seem like it, based on what the team doctor had said, but maybe.

“Getting better,” Ilya said stiffly. It was true, too. He was still getting headaches, but not as often, and Shane wasn’t sure, but it didn’t seem like they were as bad as they had been. “I will be ready to play next season.”

“Oh, but don’t push yourself too hard,” Alice said gently. “I know how athletes can be, always thinking that working harder will get better results, but—”

“Give it a rest, Alice,” James said, rolling his eyes at his sister. “I’m sure he gets this same lecture from Terry all the time. He’s probably sick of it.”

Shane felt a little bit of the nervousness in his chest ease. It was nice to see that they were actually just siblings besides being owners of the team Shane was about to join, siblings who were human and bickered and apparently didn’t care whether Shane and Ilya saw that.

The waiter returned with coke and ginger ale for Ilya and Shane, and he also filled their glasses with ice water at the same time. The siblings apparently didn’t care if the wait staff heard them arguing, either, because they didn’t stop at the waiter’s presence.

“Well, we have an actual chance to win something next year,” Alice argued back, almost like Shane and Ilya weren’t there either. Shane looked over at Ilya, and Ilya was looking at him, too, and there was laughter in Ilya’s eyes. He looked more relaxed, too. “Depending on how we utilize our newly-acquired talent, obviously. I mean, *I* think they should both anchor their own line, but of course, the coach might want one of them to play wing—”

“Leave the coaching to the coaches, Alice,” Nathan groaned. “Jesus Christ.”

Shane found that he was fighting back a smile, thinking about his mom. She would probably get along really well with Alice LaFontaine. They both seemed like they cared about hockey a little too much.

“Or maybe we need a new coach,” she said primly.

“And a new goaltender.” Shane looked over, surprised to hear Ilya piping up. Ilya, by his own admission, had only met the owners in passing. Shane knew that *he* wouldn’t have felt comfortable immediately giving his opinion to the owners, but this whole situation was not going at all how Shane had planned. He’d almost forgotten why they’d asked for this meeting in the first place.

“You see!” Alice exclaimed, pointing at Ilya and giving sidelong glances at both her brothers. “You said to give it a season, and it’s been almost *two* seasons and he still has one of the lowest save percentages in the league—”

“He has one of the best shootout save percentages though,” Nathan pointed out.

“Who cares if we never *make* it to a shootout because he’s allowed too many goals?”

“Toronto has a good backup goaltender,” Ilya mentioned quite boldly. Ilya had been complaining, and with good reason, about their goalie all season. Shane wasn’t entirely surprised that he’d been secretly scouting other goalies across the league. “Good enough to be a starter, but they don’t use him. Wyatt Hayes. Maybe a good trade opportunity?”

Alice grinned and tilted her head at her brother Nathan. He looked completely exasperated with her.

“You know how GMs *love* it when the owners butt in with their opinions,” he said sarcastically.

“It’s only a suggestion. A *player* suggestion. A *good* player suggestion.”

The siblings reluctantly tabled the discussion when the waiter returned to take their orders for dinner, and Shane realized he hadn’t even looked at the menu. Ilya seemed to notice, because he jumped in to order first to give Shane more time. Shane wasn’t really surprised when Ilya ordered steak. Shane ordered salmon with brown rice.

And then they were alone in the little private room again and no one was arguing about hockey anymore, and Shane realized he had to do it. It was time to rip the band-aid off. Although Shane wasn’t sure if ripping band-aids off was a wise decision, generally speaking, and maybe it was a really stupid idiom. Shane cleared his throat.

“Before everything is, uh...finalized,” he started, and his voice cracked in a very embarrassing way, “there is something I need to disclose to you. In case you wanted to...reject the trade, after you found out.”

All three siblings had their full attention on Shane now, which didn’t make saying this any easier. None of their expressions gave away what they thought, but of course they wouldn’t.

Shane hadn't even said anything yet. Shane clasped his shaking hands around his knees beneath the table.

"I, um...I'm gay," Shane confessed. He'd only said the words a handful of times before, and they still felt strange coming out of his mouth. Shane tipped his head at Ilya. "And...we're in a relationship."

All three siblings exchanged a look. Shane thought he might die while he waited for someone to say something. He didn't dare look at Ilya, because then he might want to crawl into Ilya's arms and bury his face in his boyfriend's neck until this was all over, and then the owners would *definitely* not want that kind of weirdo on their team.

"We had kind of worked that out already," Nathan LaFontaine said after a long pause.

"What?" That was Ilya's voice, and Shane finally looked over at Ilya, and Ilya looked genuinely upset. "Did Terry say something? Is there no medical privacy?"

That was a weird reaction. Did the Centaurs' team doctor know about them? Shit, maybe he did. Maybe he'd realized the moment he'd heard Shane panicking on the phone after Ilya had gotten injured. Or maybe he'd known from the second he'd seen that Shane was Ilya's emergency contact, just like Ilya had pointed out people might.

"Terry didn't say anything," Alice said soothingly. "But we did notice how often you got tickets for Yuna and David Hollander. And the night you were injured, Ilya, we noticed them rushing to the medical suite looking very worried."

Shane felt like he might laugh or scream, except his body couldn't quite figure out which one it wanted to do. And weirdly, he also felt happy that they had noticed, that someone had been there to care about Ilya when Shane hadn't, and that it had been obvious enough for others to see. He felt happy that his parents loved and worried about Ilya so much.

"And we also noticed that once you were cleared for practice, you attended every single practice, even the optional ones," James added. "Except when the Montreal Voyageurs were at home."

"And we figured we were right when you asked to meet with us together," Nathan added. He gestured to the room around them. "Hence the private room."

Well, this was...weirdly anticlimactic. Shane had all this tension in his chest and it didn't seem to have anywhere to go now. He'd expected shock or maybe even outrage, had expected to have to explain himself more than this. But they weren't surprised, and they didn't seem upset, either. Shane looked over at Ilya, who for once was speechless and looked just as confused as Shane felt.

"We're not going to put restrictions on either of you or give you a stern warning about fraternizing," Nathan told them. "Friendships can break down just like romantic relationships, so if we warned you to keep your personal business out of hockey, we might as well warn every member of our team not to form friendships with each other. That's not sustainable, and it doesn't make for a good team dynamic."

They'd definitely rehearsed this, right? Like they must have met before dinner and practiced what they would say, because it was all coming out...too reasoned, too polished. Shane had had just as much time to practice what he had wanted to say, too, except his words had come out a mess.

"And whatever you want to do, we are willing to back you up. If you want us to keep your relationship private, we will do our best to ensure it is. But you have to know we can't guarantee that it won't get out," James said.

"And if you want to announce it publicly," Alice added, "we will support you in that, too."

This was suddenly too much—way, way too much. When Shane had woken up that morning, he had been able to count on his fingers how many people knew he and Ilya were together, and now they were talking about announcing it to the whole world. Shane's chest felt tight. He couldn't breathe.

Ilya's fingers wrapped themselves around his, and Shane almost pulled away on instinct, almost insisted that they couldn't do this in front of anyone else. Except...they could, couldn't they? That was weird.

"It's okay, Shane," came Ilya's voice, soft and soothing. "We do not need to decide anything now."

With his free hand, Ilya slid Shane's water glass closer to him, and—okay, yeah, that was probably a good idea. Probably better than chugging his whole glass of ginger ale. Shane picked up his water glass and obediently drank, and then he noticed the siblings watching him silently. Well, they didn't care that he was gay, but maybe they'd decide they didn't want him when they realized that he was a fucking basket-case. Except none of them said anything about that.

"Can we ask how long you've been together?" Alice asked instead. "You can tell us it's none of our business."

Shane didn't know if he could answer, didn't know if he could even make himself speak, could force his lips to move or suck in the air that was necessary to actually make any sounds. And he didn't know how to answer, didn't know how Ilya would *want* to answer. Ilya might say that they'd been together for a year. Shane wanted to say eight years, except it wasn't really close enough to summer to justify saying that.

"Close to eight years," Ilya said while Shane was agonizing over it, and suddenly Shane found it hard to breathe again, but for a completely different reason.

James blinked repeatedly. Nathan looked shell-shocked. Alice was shaking her head and smiling.

"Well, we were certainly off base," Nathan said when he'd finally seemed to get ahold of himself.

“Your PR story was very convincing,” Alice admitted. “We really thought that you bonded because you went to visit Ilya in the hospital, Shane.”

Something about the words, about the gentle use of Shane’s name, shocked him out of his own stupor.

“I’m a nice person, but even I’m not *that* nice,” Shane said. He’d gone to visit injured players on the opposing team before, but the visits had been quick and perfunctory, nothing like what had happened with Ilya. “I went because I love him, and I would have gone crazy if I hadn’t seen that he was okay.”

Shane was surprised at how easy it was to say those words after he’d struggled to say anything about their relationship before. Maybe he’d lost his mind. Maybe the part of his mind that was terrified was so overwhelmed that it had gone entirely offline.

“Well,” James said after a beat, shaking his head and smiling. “This should be interesting.”

“We need a good social media manager,” Alice remarked to no one in particular, her expression thoughtful. “Someone who can handle the storm if it comes.” She paused. “We *really* just need a way to filter out any homophobes. Ugh, I wish that were easier.”

“Someone gay?” Nathan suggested. “Checking their social media is part of the hiring process, right? So we just look for bios with pride flags, preferred pronouns...”

Shane looked at Ilya, and Ilya looked back at him with a raised eyebrow that seemed to say, *See? I told you so.*

Shane had never been so happy for Ilya to be right about something.

Chapter 18

February 2018—Ottawa

“Did you see this?” Bood asked in the locker room, shoving his phone in the face of Evan Dykstra, who was in the middle of trying to change. Ilya had mostly finished changing already, since he’d been limited to non-contact drills again, but he wasn’t upset about it anymore. It was hard to be upset about anything when he knew he had Shane to come home to and possibly would forever.

“You are too gullible, man,” Dykstra complained, swatting Bood’s hand away as he tried to remove his jersey. He had a huge purple bruise on his arm where he’d deflected a puck in their last game against Tampa Bay. “You need to stop believing every rumor you read. There is no *way* Montreal is trading away Shane Hollander.”

Ilya couldn’t help it, the way the sound of Shane’s name immediately drew all his attention. He fought back the smile that tried to make its way onto his face.

“It must be a lie,” Chouinard agreed. “I know Montreal has been almost as shitty as we have this season, but they would not just dump Hollander.”

“He *is* their only good player,” Dykstra pointed out. And that was another reason why Ilya loved this team. They understood the value of Shane Hollander, unlike the Montreal Voyageurs.

“But he wasn’t with his team in Philly!” Bood protested, waving his phone as if that proved something, even though the screen had gone dark now. “And he didn’t play at home yesterday, either.”

“You sound like a conspiracy theorist, Bood,” Boyle complained, throwing a sweaty jersey in Bood’s face. Bood rolled his eyes but threw it in the hamper without protesting.

Bood looked over at Ilya, and Ilya didn’t know what showed on his face, but it must have been *something*, because Bood’s eyes narrowed suspiciously.

“Holy shit, Roz,” Bood said. “You know something don’t you?”

Ilya could not entirely hold back his smile anymore. “Maybe,” he said coyly. Tanner Dillon ducked his head around the corner.

“Wait, you and Hollander are friends, right?” he asked. “Did he talk to you about this?”

Ilya’s first instinct was always to lie about Shane, but he realized after a second that he didn’t need to. People already knew they were friends, but the whole world would need to get used to seeing it very soon. And it would not be weird if his friend Shane Hollander had confided in him about his trade before it had quite become public.

“He did,” Ilya agreed. The whole locker room was staring at him now, clearly waiting for more. Ilya decided not to give it to them, mostly because it was funny to see them staring so expectantly.

“So, is it true?” Dykstra pressed after he’d decided Ilya wasn’t going to elaborate. Ilya thought about torturing them a little more with the suspense, but they were so nice that Ilya felt a little bit bad about it.

“It is true,” Ilya affirmed. “They will announce it tomorrow, I think.”

Ilya expected the team to be excited. Of course, any team should be excited to have Shane Hollander join. He was probably the best player in the whole NHL. Except no one was saying anything, all of them just exchanging worried glances. Ilya didn’t know what he would do if this team did not like Shane. Quit hockey forever, maybe.

“No,” Dillon said after a few seconds, sounding upset. “They can’t replace you. That’s bullshit.”

Oh, Ilya’s chest suddenly felt...very warm and full. It sometimes felt impossible that this team even existed, that they could care so much.

“I am not being replaced,” Ilya assured them. Most of the room still looked skeptical. “I will still be here. Shane will be on first line, maybe, but he is the better player.”

“Okay, Hollander is your friend, so I won’t insult him,” Dykstra started, “but you are too hard on yourself. He is not a better player than you are.”

That was a very bold thing for Evan Dykstra to say after Ilya had played only eleven games with the Centaurs. Of course, they could have watched the rest of his career, too. But, then they should also have watched Shane’s. So this was just loyalty from his team, which was very nice but also just factually wrong. And Ilya wouldn’t let them be wrong, not about how good Shane was.

“It is not being hard, it is truth,” Ilya told them. Ilya looked around at them, and no one even laughed at the word *hard*, which just proved how seriously they took this. Ilya sighed. “Shane is better, yes, a little. Maybe I am almost as good. And on the same team, we can both be even better.”

The whole team exchanged some more silent glances, no one seeming quite sure what to say about it. At last, Bood spoke up.

“Shit, so we’re really getting Hollander?” he asked. “And you’re happy about it?”

They absolutely could not understand how happy Ilya was. Even if he could explain it, could tell them everything, they could not understand how much he loved Shane. There were no words for it, none that could do the feeling justice.

“I am happy, yes,” Ilya said, and it was truer than it had ever been in his life. Maybe he was not playing again, but he would be playing next season on the same team as Shane. And right

now, Shane was in his house—*their* house now—waiting for Ilya to come home. He had a team he really wanted to play for, and maybe they could even start winning next season, if they got a few more pieces.

“This is fucking *awesome!*” Bood exclaimed, and there was the enthusiasm that Ilya had been expecting and hoping to see. Bood pulled Ilya up and tried to hug him, and Ilya pushed his captain away and complained about his sweaty hockey gear when Ilya had already showered. There were lots of hugs and backslaps, and everyone was chattering excitedly on the way to the showers, and Ilya felt a little overwhelmed, but in a good way. When enough of the team had disappeared toward the showers, Ilya pulled out his phone to text Shane.

Ilya: The team is very excited you will be joining us.

Ilya didn’t have to wait long for those three little dots to appear, signaling that Shane was responding. The three dots disappeared. Ilya heard the sounds of his teammates laughing under the white noise of the shower spray. The three dots appeared again. Shane did this a lot, always second-guessed what he was typing. He did it less often with Ilya now than he used to, but Ilya didn’t think Shane would ever change so much that he wouldn’t see those dots appearing and disappearing.

Shane: You should invite them over.

Ilya stared at the message for a very long time, but the words did not change. Because Shane was at Ilya’s house right now. And maybe they could lie about it, say that Ilya’s friend Shane Hollander was staying with him until he found his own place in Ottawa...but then they might ask why Shane Hollander, whose hometown was in Ottawa, wasn’t staying with his parents instead. The team had promised not to dig, but they could not keep themselves from digging if they didn’t even know that was what they were doing. Ilya’s fingers hovered over the screen for a minute before he responded.

Ilya: Are you sure? They will figure it out.

Shane: I know. You trust them, right?

Ilya did not even hesitate.

Ilya: Yes.

Shane: Then invite them.

Ilya reread the text exchange with Shane three times, trying to make sure he hadn’t just...forgotten English, or imagined what he wanted Shane to say. He wanted to ask Shane again if he was sure. He wanted to ask Shane a million times to make sure Shane wasn’t going to regret this.

But Shane probably knew. To the media, maybe they could be good buddies Ilya Rozanov and Shane Hollander. But not to the people who would see them nearly every day, work with them, hang out with them. They would definitely see it eventually. It would be better for them to decide the time they wanted to tell instead of waiting for the team to notice.

Ilya's teammates were filtering back in from the showers in ones and twos, changing back into their street clothes. None of them had hesitated to change in front of Ilya, Ilya had noticed, even when they knew that Ilya liked men, so they would be good with Shane, too, Ilya was sure, even once they knew Shane preferred *only* men. Although Ilya was very determined to make sure that he was the only man Shane would ever prefer for the rest of his life.

Ilya waited a few minutes, watching to make sure none of his teammates left. The right moment was when most of them were out of the showers but none had grabbed their keys to leave yet. When Ilya had spotted the right moment, he stood up on one of the benches. It was a good thing the vertigo wasn't bothering him anymore.

"Everybody, listen!" Ilya called out, and maybe he shouldn't have been surprised by the speed at which everyone quieted, all the chatter disappearing in seconds. "I will have gathering at my house, and we can celebrate! But remember that I am sick and broken so I have no beer in my house."

"Boo!" someone called from the other side of the stalls. Ilya did not see who.

"So you all must bring beer if you want it!" Ilya continued, and there were a few whoops and cheers. "And maybe snacks, too."

"Damn, Roz, do you not buy any groceries without us?" Boyle yelled out. Ilya extended his middle finger at Boyle. The truth was that Shane had ordered the groceries and he was very determined that lots of kale would somehow cure Ilya's lingering headaches. It had only been a few days of Shane being in Ottawa, but even if Ilya had seen any improvement in his symptoms, he was very sure that it was not because of the kale.

"I need you or I will starve," Ilya said, then stepped down from atop the bench while his teammates laughed.

Boyle was the first to arrive with a bag of pretzels and a case of beer. "Whose Jeep is parked outside?" he asked as he walked inside Ilya's house without ringing the doorbell, like he owned it. Really, Shane was right that they wouldn't be able to hide this, not after all of Ilya's teammates had apparently decided they could walk into his house at any moment. He and Shane would have to make sure they locked the front door if they planned to fuck anywhere downstairs.

"Put beer in the refrigerator if you want," Ilya said instead of answering. Ilya wasn't sure why Shane hadn't parked his car in the garage, anyway. "You know where it is. And maybe a bowl for the pretzels."

Shane would be happy about the pretzels, probably. At least they weren't greasy potato chips. Shane might even be willing to eat them, once his nerves calmed down. Ilya was hoping he could convince Shane to have a beer because that would probably help. He was hoping he could convince Shane to talk to Terry about medication after that.

"So fucking demanding, Roz, I swear," Boyle grouched and disappeared into the kitchen.

The door opened again to reveal Tanner Dillon, carrying a case of hard seltzer. “Whose Jeep is in the driveway?” he asked. Ilya sighed.

“Boyle is in the kitchen putting drinks in the refrigerator,” Ilya said, waving Dillon that way. Thankfully, Dillon got the message and followed Boyle into the kitchen. They came back a minute later with pretzels emptied into a bowl and a drink in each of their hands.

“Did you want a beer?” Boyle asked Ilya. “I know you’re not really drinking right now but...”

“Maybe later,” Ilya dismissed. If he could convince Shane to drink a beer, Ilya might drink a beer, too.

“Bro, you are *not* going to make a whole charcuterie board,” Dykstra was complaining to Nick Chouinard as they walked through the door, both of them carrying a reusable grocery bag in each hand.

“Of course I will,” Chouinard declared as the two defensemen walked toward the kitchen, barely even acknowledging Ilya as they passed, too focused on their argument. They really *did* think this was their house. “Do you really believe I will eat those cheese puffs that Bood will bring? And Selena cannot eat soft cheese, so the only chance I have...”

“Dude, Nick will *not* shut up about soft cheese,” Boyle said in a dramatic stage whisper as he munched on a mouthful of pretzels. At least Ilya could be assured that even though these hockey players were nice, they could still be as disgusting as any others. Shane would probably chastise him for talking with his mouth full and complain about pretzel bits on the floor. Ilya was really looking forward to that.

“Maybe you’ll start complaining about it too when your wife gets pregnant,” Dillon said. Boyle shook his head.

“I don’t care that much about cheese.”

The door opened again and there was Zane Boodram with another case of beer and a huge, bright orange bag of cheese puffs and another that said they were hot and had flames all over the packaging. LaPointe came in a step behind him.

“Is everyone here already?” Bood asked, looking around the room and clearly seeing only three of them.

“Nick’s making a whole charcuterie board in the kitchen,” Dillon offered.

Bood laughed. “Sounds great. What if I try to sneak some of this onto his charcuterie board?” He held up his bags of chips and shook them with a grin.

“He will literally kill you,” LaPointe said. “Whose Jeep is that outside, anyway?”

Ilya really wished again that Shane had parked his car in the garage. He was staying upstairs for now because they’d decided they’d rather do this all at once rather than over and over again, but Ilya was getting very close to just announcing that it was Shane Hollander’s Jeep

parked outside. It was close enough to time, anyway. The two in the kitchen would come when they heard all the yelling, and leaving Shane to pace upstairs for too long would not lead to anything good.

“It belongs to my guy,” Ilya said. “He is idiot who did not park in the garage.”

Everyone in the room tensed, exchanging worried glances.

“Roz, why did you invite us over if he’s here?” Boyle asked in a breathy tone, a broken piece of pretzel falling from his hand and onto the floor. “I thought we couldn’t find out about him.”

It was very sweet that they’d taken this so seriously, and it was true that in the last month, they had not asked any questions and had never showed up at Ilya’s house without asking first. He knew they were the type of men to keep their word.

“It is okay for you to know now, we think,” Ilya said. He pulled out his phone and texted Shane. “But it is still secret outside the team, yes? Your wives and girlfriends, yes, it is okay to say, but we will not announce to the press that I am bisexual and in love with a man, you understand.”

The sound of footsteps rounded the corner, and everyone turned at once to see Shane standing in the doorway. And he was wearing Ilya’s jersey, the absolute bastard. Ilya wanted to punch him. He wanted to ravage him. He adored him.

“Wait, what is Shane Hollander doing in your house?” Tanner Dillon asked, his face scrunched in confusion. Ilya blinked.

“Dillon, you are very slow,” Ilya told him.

“Oh!” Dillion exclaimed after a second “*Oh!*”

“*Incroyable,*” LaPointe whispered under his breath in French. Ilya watched as Shane shifted nervously in the doorway.

“This is *awesome*,” Bood declared, thunderstruck.

Chapter 19

February 2018—Ottawa

The Canada-Germany game played on mute in the background even though none of them were watching it. Thanks to the time difference, they all already knew the outcome of the game anyway, which meant none of the Canadians were excited to watch it, not that any of them were excited to watch any of the games, not really. Ilya knew that Shane must be watching thinking that he wished he could be at the Olympics instead. He was the only one in the room who could feasibly have been there if NHL players had been allowed to participate, after all.

“So you two spent the whole summer together, training and stuff?” Dykstra asked. “Man, that seems so fucking cool, to have like...a training partner you *also* get to fuck? It’s the best of both worlds.”

“I’ll tell Caitlin you said that,” Bood said, elbowing Dykstra in the arm, right where his bruise was, and probably on purpose. Dykstra hit him back lightly. Ilya looked over at Shane, who thankfully had a beer in his hand and was sitting stiffly next to Ilya on the couch, like he wasn’t quite sure what to make of these men discussing the merits of gay sex. The flush on Shane’s cheeks could be either from embarrassment or from the beer.

“Really, though, sometimes women are like, ‘Ugh, you have to go work out *again*? Why don’t you have more time for *me*?’” Dillon complained, pitching his voice into an annoying falsetto. Ilya wasn’t sure if women actually spoke like that, but he hadn’t properly dated a woman in...well, probably never. Svetlana was one of the only women he’d been with over a long period of time, and she cared about hockey maybe more than Ilya did. “Like it doesn’t take work to get a body like this, and like just anyone can play in the NHL without working for it.”

It was true that Dillon worked very hard, maybe harder than any of them did. He was not the best player, obviously, but Ilya had learned that hockey did not come easy for him, not the way that it always had for Ilya. Ilya had had to work, too, but some things were very natural to him in ways that weren’t for everyone else. Ilya had learned how frustrating it was to try to explain how to do some things when he’d always been able to do them well without too much thought.

“Some advice, dude—don’t marry any of those women,” Boyle said. “No matter how hot they are, it isn’t worth it to be with a girl who doesn’t understand.”

Dillon rubbed his face. “Jeez, now *everyone* is going to be giving me romantic advice. I’m like the only single one left!”

“Nick’s going to have like three kids before you even get a girlfriend,” Bood joked, and Dillon narrowed his eyes at Bood. Shane cleared his throat awkwardly, and everyone stopped, turning to him.

“Uh...you’re expecting your second, right?” Shane asked Chouinard, so awkward and sweet and lovely trying to connect with his new teammates. Ilya had talked about the Centaurs enough that Shane already knew them, sort of. And Ilya had faith in them, but he really hoped that no one would give Shane a hard time for how awkward he was, not now. Maybe later, when he’d had more time to settle in and he knew them well enough to understand that their jokes were not barbed.

“Yes. Due in May,” Nick agreed very seriously, and Ilya silently thanked Chouinard for answering the question earnestly. Except then he said something in French that Ilya obviously could not understand, and Ilya tensed. But Shane just laughed, and LaPointe laughed too, and Ilya’s heart felt warm. Because that meant that Nick knew that Shane spoke French—not like all Canadians who had had to learn it for a few years in school but *really* spoke French. It shouldn’t matter to him that much; it wasn’t like Nick had been watching Shane, knowing that he was Ilya’s partner. But the fact that he’d been watching at all, had learned and remembered things about Shane Hollander, made Ilya very happy.

Shane said something back, also in French, and then Chouinard turned to Ilya with narrowed eyes. “You are good with children?” he demanded suspiciously. “When you are feeling well enough, you must watch my son so Selena and I can go out on dates before the baby is born.”

Ilya looked over at Shane. Shane shrugged, but he’d relaxed a little, and he was smiling. “What? You’re really good with kids,” Shane said. His eyes were sparkling, and he was still wearing Ilya’s jersey like it was the most natural thing in the world, and Ilya’s heart felt like mush.

“I can watch your son,” Ilya said, and he hoped it was true. Children certainly liked Ilya well enough, but he’d never been *responsible* for any of them, not when their parents weren’t around. But if he was watching Nick’s son, that meant it would be on one of the Centaurs’ nights off, which meant Shane would be off, too. And Shane was responsible.

“Mine too, once Cassie and I have some,” Bood said, and Ilya did his best to keep from rolling his eyes. He’d barely proposed to his girlfriend and he was already talking about children. “We’ll watch yours eventually.” Bood stopped, suddenly looking panicked. “Unless you don’t want them. Shit, just because you’re good with kids doesn’t mean you want any of your own.”

Ilya exchanged a look with Shane. They’d never really discussed this, not seriously. Ilya knew that Shane wanted kids, but they’d never talked about what that might look like, how they might make it happen. Ilya could not believe that his team was harassing Shane about children already. He had been hoping for a nice, gentle introduction to the Centaurs, where Shane would maybe drink a beer and calm down and start to feel comfortable with his new teammates. Hockey players were so stupid sometimes.

Shane shifted uncomfortably next to Ilya, and Ilya wanted to take his hand, but he thought that might freak Shane out even more. He still wasn’t used to being able to touch Ilya in front of other people. So Ilya wasn’t really sure what to do or what to say.

“I think that always just seemed...too impossible to even think about,” Shane admitted after a second. Ilya was actually surprised he’d managed to say anything, especially anything quite so true. “We lived in different cities, and our schedules are crazy.”

Bood looked back and forth between the two of them. “Well, you live in the same city now,” he pointed out. “And you’ll have the same crazy schedule. Nick manages it. I’m going to have to, in a few years.”

“Me too,” Boyle chimed in. “Probably sooner than that.”

Okay, this was...interesting. Ilya hadn’t had time to think about this, and he didn’t think Shane had, either. There had just been such a whirlwind of events around them. He was suddenly very happy that his nosy team had brought up children. He really wanted to know what Shane would say.

“Yeah, but you guys have...wives at home,” Shane said. “Who would watch our kid when we’re on the road?”

“Your parents live here, don’t they?” Nick asked, taking the question very seriously again. “Would they want to help? And it’s not like you could not afford a nanny.”

Shane was beginning to look a little overwhelmed, and though Ilya was curious, he figured it was time to stop this. The team had meant well, obviously, but they did not know yet how anxious Shane could be. They’d obviously learn, and he knew they would not be assholes about it. They would probably try their best to learn how to calm Shane down, too. That was nice to think about.

“Yes, an expensive Russian nanny who will speak Russian to our baby,” Ilya agreed with a large grin, making the whole thing into a joke. Shane narrowed his eyes.

“*You* can speak Russian to our baby.” He didn’t even hesitate to say *our baby*, so maybe he’d considered this more deeply than Ilya had thought.

“Yes, but while I am gone, expensive Russian nanny will speak Russian to our baby, and by the time they are three, they will speak better Russian than you.”

“Hey!” Shane protested. “Learning a language as an adult is hard!”

This time, Ilya *did* take Shane’s hand, to make sure that Shane knew that he was not serious. Shane did not even tense.

“Yes, I know,” Ilya told him gently. “And you are doing a good job.”

Shane smiled at him and took a sip of his beer.

The Centaurs had searched “Shane Hollander career highlights” on YouTube and currently had their third compilation video playing on Ilya’s TV. It was so fucking embarrassing, but not really in a bad way, maybe. Zane Boodram and Evan Dykstra were sprawled on their stomachs across the rug, a bowl of popcorn between them and tiny bits of popcorn scattered

all over the floor from the number of times they'd thrown it at each other. Shane was trying his best not to twitch. Cleanup was going to be insane.

Except it was really hard to worry about that because Ilya's hand was curled in his and no one had batted an eye, and Shane had actually been persuaded to have a second beer (Ilya had only had one), so he was feeling loose and relaxed and happy, even if half a team of hockey players was *ooing* and *aahing* at every goal he'd scored since he was nineteen. At least quite a lot of the highlights also seemed to feature Ilya. Shane had played some of his best games when Ilya Rozanov had also been on the ice, which made him feel almost as warm inside as the beer did.

"If only we had a good goalie," LaPointe groaned from where he was sprawled on the other side of Ilya's sectional, watching as Shane got a rebound directly next to the goal and shot it in behind the goalie's back. LaPointe was on at least his third beer. "We might have a chance to get into the playoffs next year."

"I asked the owners if we could trade for Wyatt Hayes," Ilya remarked, also sprawled loosely beside Shane, a can of coke in his other hand. "He is good, underutilized in Toronto."

Underutilized. God, Shane definitely needed to spend more time learning Russian. Ilya's English had gotten so good over the years.

Boyle snorted. "Roz, have you been scouting goalies all year?" he asked. Ilya shrugged.

"I am very bored when I cannot play hockey. What else should I do?"

"Not look at screens," Shane protested half-heartedly, even though they were all currently staring at a huge screen with Shane's own face on it.

"I look at screens only when the doctor says it is okay," Ilya argued back, obviously just for the sake of it. Shane watched himself execute a perfect backhand pass to Hayden for an assist. God, he hoped the Voyageurs didn't treat Hayden like shit for being Shane's friend. Maybe Hayden could get traded to Ottawa, too. That was probably a drunk thought.

"We still need someone better than me to play on the first line," Tanner Dillon said sheepishly. He was sort of half sitting on the floor, half lying on top of an ottoman in a way that absolutely could *not* be comfortable, but he could reach the demolished remains of Nick Chouinard's charcuterie board from there, since Boodram and Dykstra had moved the coffee table so they could lie on the floor.

"*You* need to learn better skating skills," Ilya said, pointing at Dillon with the hand that held the coke. "Practice with figure skaters during offseason. You will come back faster next season, yes? And with better edges. And you will practice not holding your stick like an idiot."

Shane snorted. "Inspiring, alternate captain," he said. It was still weird that they'd designated him an alternate captain when he hadn't even been playing, but the Centaurs were a weird fucking team. And Shane knew that Ilya had secretly been pleased about it, even when he'd complained about how stupid it was. "Keep it up and they'll vote you captain next year."

Zane Boodram rolled over and sat up so that he could look Shane in the eye, and there was a seriousness in his expression that Shane hadn't seen from the man yet. He abruptly remembered that Zane Boodram was the Centaurs' captain—*his* captain now. Shane had been captain for long enough that he'd forgotten what it was like not to be, even if he hadn't been much of a captain this season.

"I know you're joking," Boodram said, "but if we have a winning team next year, Roz is captain. No question."

The seriousness in Boodram's voice made Shane's chest hurt a little, but in a good way. He loved that this team loved Ilya so much, loved the way that Boodram seemed to want to defend Ilya even from one of Shane's most innocuous jokes. He wondered what they'd think when they heard more of the shit that he and Ilya said to each other on a regular basis. He wondered if the team would think they were crazy, or that they were on the verge of breaking up. He wondered how long it would take them to learn that Shane and Ilya teasing each other and pushing each other's buttons was another way that they said *I love you*.

"You all are stupid," Ilya protested. "All I have done is have sex with most talented player in the NHL and convince him to play here."

Shane felt his cheeks heating, both at the praise and at the fact that Ilya referenced them having sex. Shane was sure everyone *knew* they had sex, but Ilya announcing it definitely still felt weird. Zane Boodram groaned.

"Don't make us do this again, Roz, I swear," he protested.

"Do not indulge him," Chouinard said. "He only wants us to tell him how great he is, over and over. It is a trick, a scam."

"Nah, bro, maybe he needs to hear it a thousand times before he believes it," Evan Dykstra protested. "You know, my therapist said that sometimes people..."

Shane looked at Ilya. Ilya looked back at Shane, eyes sparkling with mischievous joy, and Shane understood why Ilya loved this team. The Voyageurs had never been like this, even in Shane's earliest years, even when they'd been winning cups. Shane could not wait to play with this team, to make them as great on the ice as they were off of it.

And maybe one day they could win cups, too.

Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

I've stolen a couple of lines from canon. You'll probably recognize them.

February 2018—Ottawa

Ilya waved happily at Tanner Dillon as the last of the Ottawa Centaurs left his house, probably way later than was advisable considering that they had a game the next day. A home game, at least, but even so. Shane was technically supposed to be there, too, and he thought they might even play him, though he hadn't had a single practice with the team yet. If they were angling toward a playoff spot, maybe they wouldn't take a chance of putting him out on the ice in those circumstances, but they didn't have anything to lose.

Also, he was Shane Hollander, which meant an awful lot. Some of their unsold tickets would go as soon as they announced the trade in the morning, and the rest of them, too, if they announced Shane was playing.

"Your teammates are weird," Shane said as Ilya kept waving like he was a parent seeing his kids off to school. Maybe he kind of was. Ilya closed the door and turned to Shane.

"*Our* teammates now," Ilya pointed out with a crooked smile, and Shane kissed him. He almost didn't even think about it, like his body got the impulse before his brain even realized it, and he was pressing Ilya's body back against the closed door. Ilya released a soft *oomph* of surprise against Shane's lips, then sighed and relaxed into Shane's arms.

God, Shane could not believe that this was real—that he was really here in Ottawa for good, that the owners and half the team knew about him and Ilya, that soon all of them would know, and it was...okay. That he could see Ilya all the time now, play on the same team as he did, work toward the same goal. Shane had always loved playing against Ilya, but now it was no longer a zero-sum game. If one of them won the cup, it would mean they'd *both* won it, together.

Well, winning cups was far, far down the line for them, probably. Maybe never, like Ilya had said before. But in that moment, Shane didn't care. He felt drunk on it—and maybe it was that he was a lightweight who was helpless after two beers, or maybe it was this house, this team, the future that was laid out before them.

Ilya spun them around and pinned Shane to the door instead, and that felt good, better than before. Ilya's hand was on Shane's jaw, tilting his head at just the right angle that Ilya could plunder Shane's mouth, and Shane was happy to let him for a little while. Shane loved kissing Ilya, loved being pressed against him like this, feeling Ilya's dick hard against him.

Except Shane couldn't be patient now, wanted Ilya's dick in him—in his mouth, in his ass, he really didn't care at that moment. He broke the kiss with a soft gasp and then sank to his knees. Ilya made a contented little sound, rested his hands lazily against the door and let Shane do the work of releasing him from his pants and underwear, until his dick was right in front of Shane's face and Shane felt *ravenous* for it. He leaned forward and wrapped his mouth around Ilya's dick, his own twitching at the soft groan Ilya released in response.

Shane really loved sucking Ilya's dick. Maybe he should be embarrassed by how much he loved it, but he wasn't, not even a little, not here and now. And he could do it every day now if he wanted, if Ilya felt up to it, and Ilya almost always felt up to it. Even if he had a headache, he'd probably try to argue that blowjobs cured headaches, and maybe they did. But right now, Ilya seemed to be feeling good, and Shane was feeling fucking *great* as he swirled his tongue around the head of Ilya's dick.

Except Shane's head was still up against the door and he couldn't quite get the space he needed to move his head to suck Ilya properly, and Shane didn't want to move an inch from where he was. He looked up to see Ilya gazing down at him with hooded eyes, and he wrapped his hand around Ilya's body to dig his fingers in the meat of Ilya's ass, hoping he could somehow communicate what he wanted with his eyes. He really hoped that what his gaze was saying was *fuck my mouth*.

Ilya seemed to understand, because he made one shallow, experimental thrust between Shane's lips, and Shane groaned around Ilya's girth and relaxed back against the door, and that was something Ilya *definitely* understood. Ilya reached down and took Shane's jaw in hand again, tilting his head to get the best angle, but he kept his thrusts shallow, clearly not wanting to choke Shane on his dick. Shane kind of wanted to choke on his dick.

Shane reached beneath the jersey he was wearing—Ilya's goddamn Ottawa Centaurs jersey, which was so fucking hot—and unfastened his pants, pulling out his own dick. Shane was rock hard, too, just from thinking about this, just from Ilya thrusting his dick between Shane's lips, fucking his mouth. Shane's dick was leaking precome like a faucet, and he used the slickness to ease his way as he stroked his own dick, hard and fast. He knew he wouldn't last long, and maybe from all the pent-up *everything*, all his worries that were no longer worries, but he felt amazing, flying high and so desperate to make Ilya feel as good as Shane felt in that moment.

Shane hollowed his cheeks as much as he could, gripped Ilya's ass more tightly, trying to wordlessly urge him to let go of some of that carefulness, that tight control of his thrusts. Ilya released a soft, almost pained sound and obeyed the direction, thrusting a little deeper into Shane's mouth, and Shane didn't even choke when Ilya's dick brushed against the back of his throat. Shane might not be an expert at sucking dick, but he felt like he might be an expert at sucking *Ilya's dick*, at least.

Ilya seemed encouraged by that, seemed willing to let go of the carefulness that had held him back, and he started to fuck Shane's mouth in earnest, and that made everything hotter, brighter and more urgent. Ilya groaned, murmured something in Russian that sounded barely coherent, and just the sound of it made Shane feel ready to explode, like *he* was the one getting his dick sucked. He stroked himself harder, faster, just on the right side of too much

friction, and Ilya thrust into Shane's mouth deep enough that Shane *did* choke this time, Ilya groaning as he came in Shane's mouth. Shane barely lasted a few seconds longer, squirming against the front door as the world whited out and he came with his mouth still around Ilya's dick.

Reality came back a minute later, when Ilya gently eased his dick out from between Shane's lips, and Shane sagged back against the door, feeling loose and sated. He laughed raggedly.

"At least we have wood floors," Shane said as he looked at the mess he had made. They would definitely be easier to clean than carpet, although now that Shane thought about it, his knees kind of hurt. So that was the trade-off, apparently.

Ilya smiled down at him fondly, brushing Shane's hair back from his forehead with a gentleness that should have been out of place with Shane crumpled on the floor against the front door after Ilya had just fucked his mouth. Except it didn't feel out of place at all.

"I will clean up," Ilya offered. "Move your car into the garage. I don't know why you parked outside. It will snow tonight. Idiot."

Except Ilya said the word *idiot* the same way he usually said the word *sweetheart*.

Ilya stood at the bathroom counter, watching Shane fondly as he stood in front of the second sink brushing his teeth. Ilya had already finished brushing his teeth, but of course Shane had one of those fancy electric toothbrushes that alerted him when to change to a different part of his mouth. And Shane always spent an equal amount of time in each section. It was adorable and so very *Shane*.

Ilya didn't bother with that degree of precision, obviously. Most of his front teeth were fake anyway, so he really only had to worry about cavities in the rest of his mouth. He hadn't had one in a few years, anyway, no matter how much Shane bitched at him about smoking or eating awful food. He'd probably have to eat more kale and grilled fish and whatever Shane deemed acceptable, now, but Ilya was far from upset about it.

Ilya watched as Shane finally rinsed his mouth out, then rinsed his toothbrush, then dried off the base of it before setting it on the charger. He watched as Shane used one of those strange water flossers and realized they'd be able to do this every day forever. Or, well, not quite every day. Ilya probably wouldn't be going on road trips with the team for the remainder of the season, and Shane would be playing. But nearly every day.

Normal people probably didn't get emotional watching their partner floss. But maybe normal people were idiots. Maybe they just didn't love their partners the way Ilya loved Shane.

"Why are you standing there staring at me?" Shane paused to ask, but Ilya just smiled and shook his head.

"Я тебя люблю," Ilya said instead of answering the question Shane had actually asked, which obviously wasn't important anyway. He watched the soft expression of pleasure pass across Shane's face and knew that Shane had understood.

“I love you, too,” Shane answered fondly, in English. It didn’t bother Ilya at all that Shane preferred to answer in English sometimes, even though he knew Shane knew how to say it in Russian. He loved that he could say things to Shane in Russian now, and that Shane would understand, even if it was just the small things for now. Eventually it would be bigger things, more complicated things. Ilya knew it. Because Shane Hollander didn’t give up on things just because they were hard. The fact that they were here was proof enough of that.

But anyway, Ilya figured that Shane was maybe getting tired of being stared at, though Ilya would never be tired of staring. He was sure of that. Even if Shane was just brushing his teeth and flossing—though he *was* doing it in Ilya’s Centaurs jersey still, which sweetened the image quite a lot. So Ilya went back into the bedroom and stripped down to his boxer briefs. He briefly considered leaving his clothes on the floor to irritate Shane, then threw them in the hamper. He would have a lifetime to irritate Shane, after all.

When Shane finally left the bathroom, Ilya was already under the covers, looking at his phone. He’d probably looked at screens too much today, but whatever. He didn’t know how he was supposed to resist watching Shane’s career highlights over and over. He was only human. Ilya looked up when Shane walked over to pull his pajamas out of the drawer and change, except Shane was being all stiff and weird and not even scolding Ilya to put down his phone.

Suspicious, Ilya put down his phone and watched Shane more closely as he changed and put his dirty clothes in the hamper. Shane stood there for a long minute facing away before he finally turned. He was biting his lip, but maybe he was about to ask about a weird sex thing that he was nervous about. They’d both recently come, but Ilya figured he could get into it, whatever it was. If Shane was curious, Ilya was happy to try almost any weird sex thing.

“Uh...about what the guys said earlier,” Shane began, shifting awkwardly where he stood. “Were you serious?”

Oh, that was what this was about. It was not a thing they’d really talked about, because Shane had told them the truth. It had seemed impossible, or maybe a question for their very distant future. And now Shane was stressing about it, even though he definitely didn’t have to, not right now. Later, he would stress constantly, Ilya was sure, would worry so much about whether his child was happy and healthy and safe. But for now, Ilya knew exactly how to calm him down.

“About hiring expensive Russian nanny? Of course,” Ilya said, purposely obtuse. As he expected, Shane rolled his eyes, but some of the tension left his body.

“About wanting kids,” Shane said patiently, like he was talking to a kid.

“With you? Yes, of course,” Ilya answered without hesitation. Then he grinned. “We live in same city now, like the guys said, so you want them now?”

Ilya knew that Shane didn’t mean that, but it was very satisfying the way that Shane’s eyes bulged out and he looked totally flustered. He was so easy to rile up, and Ilya wouldn’t want him to be any other way.

“We’re not even married!” Shane protested. This time, *Ilya* rolled his eyes.

“You are so proper sometimes, Hollander. Yes, first we must get married, obviously, or else something very bad will happen.”

“You want to get married? Now?”

Okay, maybe *Ilya* was teasing Shane a little bit too much, and maybe Shane would go all the way from relaxing to being stressed about a different thing. That wasn’t what *Ilya* wanted at all.

“Yes, now if you want,” *Ilya* agreed. He meant it, too. If Shane wanted, they could get married tomorrow. “But maybe in a year or two is better for you. Not too many changes at once, give us time to settle.”

It was not the most romantic of proposals—wasn’t even a proposal, really—but *Ilya* didn’t think proposals were meant to be surprises. He’d watched dozens of them happen at hockey games, men getting down on one knee in front of thousands of people, and he always hoped that the woman had known the proposal was coming, because that was a lot of pressure to be put under in front of a crowd. If Shane was going to be proposed to, he’d definitely want to know in advance, even if it wasn’t in front of thousands of people. He’d want to be prepared, to have time to get used to the idea.

“Yeah, you’re right,” Shane agreed with a long exhale. His expression had softened a little, and he finally came to bed, sitting down on the edge and looking at *Ilya*. Then he shook his head. “Christ, we can’t get married if the world doesn’t even know we’re together.”

Ilya felt impossibly fond. He loved this man so much.

“Yes, we must do things in the proper order,” he agreed very seriously. “Some time in the future, when you are ready, we will tell the world we are in a relationship. Then we will get married. Then we will adopt a child, or...oh, what is it that they call it, when you borrow a woman’s womb?”

Shane’s face screwed up in horror. “Oh my God, do *not* say it like that,” Shane protested, but really, *Ilya* did not know the word in English. Shane definitely knew what he meant, which was the most important part.

“Yes, you are right. Is not accurate,” *Ilya* conceded. “Of course we pay her for the trouble. So we *rent* a woman’s womb—”

“*Ilya*, Jesus Christ,” Shane exclaimed, “the woman who carries the baby is called a *surrogate* —”

Ah, yes, there was the word. *Ilya* wasn’t going to use it, obviously. Well, with everyone else he would, to be respectful. Not with Shane, of course, because it was funny to see Shane squirm.

“And then maybe we use Shane Hollander’s sperm, and the baby maybe will have Shane Hollander’s pretty eyes and cute little freckles.”

Shane made a face that was halfway between tenderness and embarrassment. “Babies aren’t born with freckles, Ilya,” Shane told him very earnestly. “They come from sun exposure.”

Of course that was what Shane would focus on. “Well, there is sun here in Ottawa, yes? Or where did yours come from?”

Shane squirmed under Ilya’s attention, and the soft flush on his cheeks made his freckles stand out even more starkly. It was one of his favorite things, to make Shane Hollander blush.

“Well, what if I wanted one with your pretty curly hair?” Shane challenged instead of answering.

Ilya shrugged. “Then we rent a woman’s womb twice.”

Shane groaned. “Ilya, *please* stop saying it like that. ”

Ilya considered for a minute. Not stopping saying things that Shane found gross or weird, because he would do that forever. But something else.

“Or maybe we adopt and it doesn’t matter who they look like, because they will be ours and we will love them anyway.”

It was not that he thought Shane wouldn’t love such a child, but he needed to say it, needed it to be clear that any child they had would be loved no matter what, even if they weren’t what either of them expected.

Shane looked like he was going to cry, but in a good way. He scooted closer to Ilya on the bed and grabbed his hand. “That sounds fucking amazing,” Shane affirmed, eyes shining. Ilya was feeling very pleased with himself.

“And of course, we have two of the best players in the whole NHL, so we will go to the playoffs next season,” Ilya declared. He really believed they could, with a few roster moves, with him back to form and working together with Shane. “And then we will win the Stanley Cup every year for the next ten years.”

That one, obviously, was more farfetched. But as he’d hoped, Shane laughed. “Well *that* seems unlikely,” Shane answered. Ilya ignored his protest.

“And then we will both retire and spend so much time with our children they will be sick of us,” Ilya continued. “And we will be in the Hall of Fame, and we will tell our grandchildren about how stupid it was that anyone ever cared if a hockey player was gay or bisexual.”

The tears were in Shane’s eyes again, threatening to fall. Ilya felt a little misty, too.

“You really think that far ahead?” Shane asked wetly, though there was a soft smile on his face. Ilya squeezed Shane’s hand.

“I do about this,” Ilya answered.

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