

Bad Thing I: Saddle Up, Cowboy

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](https://archiveofourown.org/works/77188526) at <https://archiveofourown.org/works/77188526>.

Rating:	Explicit
Archive Warning:	No Archive Warnings Apply
Category:	M/M
Fandom:	Heated Rivalry (TV)
Relationships:	Shane Hollander/Ilya Rozanov , Svetlana - Relationship
Characters:	Ilya Rozanov , Shane Hollander , Yuna Hollander , Svetlana Vetrova , Sasha Ilya Rozanov's Coach's Son
Additional Tags:	Canon Compliant , Episode: s01e01 Rookies (Heated Rivalry) , POV Ilya Rozanov , Novelization , Missing Scene , First Kiss , First Time , First Meetings , POV Third Person Limited , Blow Jobs , First Time Blow Jobs , Rimming , Top Ilya Rozanov , Ilya Rozanov is a Menace , Anxious Shane Hollander , Second Kiss , Secret Relationship , Ilya Rozanov & Svetlana Vetrova Friendship , Good Friend Svetlana Vetrova , Past Ilya Rozanov/Svetlana Vetrova , Good Parent Yuna Hollander , Mentioned Yuna Hollander , 2011 MLH Awards in Las Vegas (Game Changers)
Language:	English
Series:	Part 1 of Bad Thing
Stats:	Published: 2026-01-06 Words: 10,838 Chapters: 1/1

Bad Thing I: Saddle Up, Cowboy

by [synchronik](#)

Summary

Ilya Rozanov has seen the tape on Hollander, seen his blazing speed and his quick hands, his almost psychic ability to know where the puck will be. Hollander is a magician on the ice, the best prospect in the world except for Ilya himself.

But up close, Hollander looks young. Soft. Western. He has big eyes and freckles across his nose like a little kid. He is attractive in the way that many young men are attractive, his face not yet hardened by the work of the real world, and he seems nervous to be out here, nervous to be seen with Ilya. Because Ilya has been forced to learn everything about Hollander, Ilya knows that Hollander is older than him, not much, a few weeks. But looking at him, Ilya feels weary and old. He hates that.

Notes

The best way to describe this work, I think, is as a novelization of the television series told from Ilya Rozanov's point of view. What happens in the series will happen, more or less, in this work. This is the first of five parts, each of which will cover an episode of the show.

Please note, I did read both *Heated Rivalry* and *The Long Game* by Rachel Reid, but that was some time ago and my recollection of them is spotty at best. Because they are novels and this is a written story, I did NOT consult the books in order to reduce the chance that I would inadvertently plagiarize them. That means that where the television series leaves a gap in the narrative, I may fill it with something very different than what happens in the books. We will all end up at the cottage, but some of us are taking a slightly different path to get there.

This novelization means that potentially triggering things that happen in the series (like mental health issues) will happen in this work. NOTE, HOWEVER, no new issues will be added in this work. No one dies. No one is outed. No one is assaulted. This is just the story of the show as if it were from Ilya's point of view.

1. Winter, 2008 – The Prospect Cup

At least the cold is familiar, Ilya thinks, dragging his lighter out of his pocket. This is his first time in Canada, his first time anywhere outside of Russia, and there is something reassuring about the gray sky. He is on his own here, without family, without friends, only a mediocre grasp of English and a team of strangers to rely on, but the weather, this he understands.

As he tries to light his cigarette, he hears his name.

It is that one. Hollander. The one he has come to beat. He holds out his hand like a business man.

Ilya, wondering what the point of this is, shakes it and goes back to his lighter.

Hollander says something else, something about the cigarette, but he's not asking for one. The Canadians and the Americans, mostly they do not smoke.

Ilya watches Hollander for a second, eyes narrow. He has seen the tape on Hollander, seen his blazing speed and his quick hands, his almost psychic ability to know where the puck will be. Hollander is a magician on the ice, the best prospect in the world except for Ilya himself.

But up close, he looks young. Soft. Western. He has big eyes and freckles across his nose like a little kid. He is attractive in the way that many young men are attractive, his face not yet hardened by the work of the real world, and he seems nervous to be out here, nervous to be seen with Ilya. Because Ilya has been forced to learn everything about Hollander, part of his training to beat him, to be the best, to be taken first in the draft, Ilya knows that Hollander is older than him, not much, a few weeks. But looking at him, Ilya feels weary and old. He hates that.

"Okay," he says, and takes a drag.

"You're an awesome player to watch," Hollander says.

This Ilya understands. Compliments. He nods, acknowledging his due. "Yes."

Hollander smiles awkwardly and Ilya expects him to go, his Western idea of sportsmanship satisfied, but Hollander makes to lean back against the wall for a second before he thinks better of it. He makes an excuse: people are waiting for him. This amuses Ilya. People are waiting for *both* of them. Hollander holds out his hand again.

This time, Ilya holds the handshake for a beat longer, eyes on Hollander's face. Is it unusual, he wonders, for an Asian person to have freckles? He does not know, but they are charming. More charming than Hollander himself, who pulls away awkwardly.

"You will not be so nice when we beat you," Ilya says to Hollander's back.

Hollander turns. Ilya expects a chirp back, or an insult—"asshole" is the one he gets most in English—but Hollander just smiles, his awkward politeness disappearing into confidence in

his talent. "Not gonna happen," he says and walks away, waving off Ilya's final taunt—"see you in final"—without looking back.

Ilya, impressed despite himself, watches him go.

Before he sees Hollander in the final, though, he sees him in the hallway, head phones on, heading for the gym, and he sees him on the ice with his team, his skates flashing, stick tapping for the puck, and he sees him in the stands with his fierce and beautiful mother, watching as the Russian team practices. What is that like, Ilya wonders, to have someone to come with you, sit beside you, murmur in your ear about the game while you watch?

He doesn't know. He had watched the Canadians earlier in the week, of course, observing their practice, noting their strengths and weaknesses, because this year of course it will be the Canadians and the Russians in the finals, because of him and because of Hollander. But he had been alone.

They are good, the Canadians, but not good enough. Too inexperienced, too raw. Not Hollander, he is exceptional, but much of the rest of the team just does not have enough seasoning to play together. Unless there is some miracle, the Russians will win, maybe not easily, but ultimately.

But despite knowing this, he still feels a pang in his stomach when he looks up into the seats and sees Hollander and his mother, their matching dark eyes. Is Hollander nervous about the finals? Is he seeing some weakness in the Russian team that Ilya does not see? Does his mother make him a special meal before or after the game to celebrate or console him? Her attention is on the defensive drills at the other end of the ice, but Hollander is watching him. Maybe.

The Russians win, because of course. It was a good game, a closer game than it should have been because of Hollander—he is so fast and light, like a deer on the ice—but he was not enough on his own.

Flush with victory, flush with the knowledge that he has secured himself a place in MLH and out of Russia for now, Ilya cannot resist the urge to remind Hollander that he has beat him, and that he will beat him again and again, every chance he gets. He plans his words, his English, before the handshake line even starts. When he gets to Hollander he leans in, holds his grip for an extra moment. He doesn't know if Hollander's cheeks are flushed from the game or from the loss, but the blush makes his freckles stand out even under the visor of his helmet. Ilya has a sudden urge to lick them.

"See you in the draft," Ilya purrs, a reminder that there will be another opportunity for them to face each other in just a few months, another opportunity for Ilya to win.

2. Summer 2009 – The MLH Draft

Ilya stands in front of the cameras, the Boston jersey in his hands, his face about to split in two from the breadth of his smile. Number one. The first step in a long career of number ones, he is sure of it. His father had beamed when they announced it, accepted the claps on the back from the others in the audience like he is the one who had made Ilya into the warrior that he is. In a way, he is not wrong.

The flashes go off like lightning, over and over, the photographers shouting to turn this way and that, to lift their heads, to show their draft numbers with their fingers, and Ilya does all of it gleefully, the bright lights like the glow of sunshine on his skin.

Hollander, next to him, has to be reminded to smile.

It is not so much fun later, talking to the owners, his father making a big show about how Ilya needs supervision, needs to be kept in line. Ilya has been chosen as the best in the world at this moment, and it is embarrassing to be talked about like he is still an undisciplined kid. The owners feel it, too, sharing glances with each other as his father speaks, trying to silence him with flattery about Ilya's skills, his bright future. Ilya should tell them not to bother: his father cannot be silenced on the issue of Ilya's inadequacy.

They are on the second floor of the reception hall, and when Ilya glances over the railing to distract himself from his father's monologue of his faults, he sees Hollander at a table below him, with his own new owners, his ever-present mother beside him. She is the one talking, smiling, her hand proud on Hollander's arm, but despite this, Hollander looks miserable. Ilya has a twinge of sympathy. He would not like to have been number two, either. Number two is first loser.

Hollander glances up and their eyes meet, and Ilya cannot look away. He is captured by how devastated Hollander looks, and how attractive, his eyes up and his mouth down, disappointment making him tragic and beautiful.

Hollander looks away first, just in time, because Ilya's father is telling the Boston president how Ilya is lazy. Ilya summons up what he hopes is a reassuring response—"I promise to work very hard for you." The president is pleased, but his father tells him in Russian to shut up, so Ilya does, and spends the next two hours smiling and nodding and pretending that his father's words don't feel like a stone on his back dragging him under the water. When he looks back over the railing, Hollander and his parents are no longer there.

Afterwards, alone in his hotel room, Ilya cannot sleep. Is not a surprise, between the travel and the excitement of the day and the swirl of his father's opinion fresh in his head. If he were back home, he would call one of the many women who liked him and have her come over so he could wear them both out, but the only woman he knows on this side of the ocean is Svetlana and she lives in New York, not here.

So, gym then.

He is not surprised when he sees that Hollander is already there, pedaling away, working off his own terrible night. They are not so different, he and Hollander, in their wanting to be the best. He takes the bike next to Hollander, another small dig, and starts his ride.

They do not speak, do not look at each other except for glances at the other's screen, until both of them are dripping with sweat and gasping for air, the hardest that Ilya has been pushed physically for days. He wants to laugh out loud, it feels so good. This is what he wants, someone at his level, someone who competes the same way that he does, not with words, but with his body. They slow down together, by mutual unspoken agreement, horses in harness, and collapse across from each other on the gym floor.

"What a fucking day, huh?" Ilya says. Hollander looks upset, maybe because he didn't win the bike race, either, but Ilya wants to keep the good feeling going. He will be in competition with Shane Hollander for years to come and he wants that to be fun. He wants Hollander to like him, maybe, a little bit. "Is everything you dreamed of?"

"Almost." Hollander is flushed, sweaty from the workout (*his freckles, fucking freckles*, Ilya thinks, amused), still unhappy.

"mm, sorry," Ilya pretends to apologize and smiles around the nozzle of his water bottle.

That works, finally, and Hollander smiles back. Good. Ilya has been a competitor for too long to take a loss too hard, and he is glad to see that Hollander is like him in this, too. It means that maybe they can be useful to one another, push each other, without hating each other.

"Montreal is nice, yes?" Ilya asks.

Hollander agrees. He is from Canada, so of course he is happy to be on the Metros, which have a good reputation, even if they are struggling now.

"Boston is nice, too?" Ilya's never been to the United States, to Boston. It will be his whole life, soon, and he would like the opinion of someone who doesn't own him if that will be good or bad. He doesn't know Hollander, but he is hockey player, and same age, and would know better than the men who spoke to his father. But Hollander doesn't seem to have been there, either.

"We will be seeing each other a lot." It's not a question, Ilya knows the teams in his new division, but Hollander agrees. He's not smiling anymore, Ilya notices, but he's still watching him, his eyes roaming from Ilya's face to his feet to . . .

Oh.

Ilya takes another sip from his bottle, spreading his knees, making sure. Hollander stares for a second then looks away like he is ashamed. Ilya wants to laugh. Of all the things he thought he and Hollander would have in common, an appreciation for cock was not one of them. This pretty Canadian with his nice suits and his nice parents and his freckles!

Ilya holds out his water bottle, like that is what he is offering. Hollander shrugs it away. But he is still staring, so Ilya waves the bottle in front of him, teasing him, daring him to take it.

Hollander relents and reaches for it.

When he takes it, Ilya folds his fingers over Hollander's, then sits back with his hands on his thighs, knees wide, letting Hollander look. Hollander squirts water into his mouth without touching the nozzle (*polite*, Ilya thinks, *so polite*) and without breaking his gaze. When he moves to hand it back, Ilya flicks a hand at him and murmurs "more." Hollander can have the rest of the bottle. The longer he drinks the longer his eyes drink Ilya in, and Ilya loves to be admired.

After the second sip, Hollander offers the bottle back. Ilya scoots forward to take it, his hand closing over Hollander's. If this is going to happen, this will be the moment when Hollander allows himself to be drawn in.

Hollander pulls back. Not a lot, not fast, just . . . back.

Is too bad. Hollander is very cute, and Ilya is very horny. Hollander is interested, but maybe not interested enough, on the evening when he was chosen second. Maybe he will be interested in doing more than looking on a night when he wins. Ilya puts the bottle in his mouth and sucks, watching Hollander while he does. When Hollander can't look away, Ilya winks.

But the next time Hollander wins, it is because Ilya has lost and he cannot deal with the scrutiny of his father and this fucking Canadian on the same day, not even after Hollander has squeezed his hand in the handshake line and told him he would see him in October. His face in the mirror of his hotel room does not look like anything worth looking at.

3. Summer, 2010

The commercial is not his idea, but bringing Hollander in is. Ilya sits in the conference room with his agent and the MLH people and listens to the proposal, a promo shoot, painting him as the bad boy of the league, aggressive, dangerous, sexy. It is good idea, one that will make Ilya more of a star than just playing. Maybe it will get him an endorsement deal, shoes or video games or a violently colored sports drink. Kids will want to be cool like him.

But he has a better idea. He murmurs in his agent's ear in Russian.

"Is risk," his agent answers, also in Russian. "He's big star, bigger than you. Right now," he adds when Ilya scowls.

"This will make us equals," Ilya asserts. "Me and him. Tell them." He gestures at the MLH representatives in the room.

When they hear the suggestion, they practically leap out of their shoes with excitement. The league's two biggest stars, biggest rivals, together. They had been going to suggest it, the younger one says, but they didn't know how Mr. Rozanov would feel sharing the spotlight.

When he understands what they mean, he thinks they may be right. Maybe he shouldn't be so quick to share the public's attention, to hand away part of the press and promotion that is due to him as the number one draft pick.

But he cannot stop thinking about Hollander in the gym, sweaty and flushed. He had been a fool to let the opportunity pass him by at the last Prospect Cup and an advertisement is not a game. No one would have to lose.

"Make it happen," he says in English.

They start the day as strangers again, all of Hollander's warmth from the hotel gym, from the handshake line those months ago locked back behind his freckles, hidden behind politeness. By now, though, Ilya knows the quickest way to Hollander's personality is through his pride.

"You look pretty," he says, once they've gone through the blocking.

Hollander rises to the occasion. "You're wearing make-up, too."

"Yeah, but I don't look pretty," Ilya answers. It's not entirely true. He knows how his mouth looks, slick with gloss. He licks his lips, once he's sure Hollander is watching.

The director of the commercial is shit, though, and so they have to skate at each other a hundred fucking times, stopping at the perfect point, sticks hitting the ice together. They get it right at first, but something's wrong with the camera, so they have to do it again and again, and Ilya can't help but think how stupid this is, the pretend rivalry, the fake aggression. Their opposition is real, but it requires the structure of a game to raise it. Otherwise, it's just macho bullshit.

And Hollander's face across from him, so earnest, intent on doing a good job, even as his eyes shift to Ilya's lips every time they are close. By the fifth take, Ilya is smirking every time they approach each other, and by the tenth he is openly laughing. Fortunately, Hollander is laughing, too.

The director gives up, muttering something about edits, and calls for the next shots.

Ilya sits in the box while they wait. He'd thought maybe Hollander would sit next to him, now that the so-called ice has been broken. Ilya had planned on leaning into him, murmuring something in his ear, something maybe about the stupid director, so that Hollander would feel his breath, his heat. Ilya does not know if Hollander will do anything besides this eye fucking they are doing, but he means to push until he finds out.

But Hollander stays on the ice, leaning against the rail. Ilya sighs, frustrated. He will have to use words. English.

"When did they tell you about this?" he asks.

Hollander glances at him. "Oh. Um. A couple days ago. Why?" His eyes narrow, suspicious that Ilya knows more than him. He is right. "When did they tell you?"

Ilya shrugs, sips from his water bottle. "They tell me nothing," he says. "It was my idea."

Hollander gapes at him, shocked. Ilya says nothing, holding his gaze, making sure Hollander feels the weight of it on top of his words. *Yes, Ilya thinks. I did this. If you want me to stop, you will have to make me.*

He is about to say it out loud when the director finally does one thing right and calls Ilya out of the box for his next set up. He does not look back, but he knows Hollander is watching him.

Over the course of his hockey career, Ilya has seen hundreds of naked men, maybe thousands in the showers. It is part of the sport and mostly he does not even notice, except for the occasional second glance at someone who is particularly hot. The showers are not a place for that. Ilya does not mind danger, but he is not stupid.

Shane Hollander, naked and wet, oblivious to him, makes Ilya feel a little stupid. *This is it,* Ilya decides turning on the water. He will push Hollander to a yes or a no, now, today. He is done with the back-and-forth, with Hollander's longing eyes and polite manners.

He turns on the water and leans into it, arching his back a little, checking for Hollander's attention. Once he has it, Ilya rubs soap over his body, his chest, his ribs, the planes of his stomach, making sure his cock is never hidden. It's a dance, subtle enough to be disguised if someone else comes in, provocative enough to make Shane Hollander stare.

And he stares, one arm going around his own shoulders as if he is cold. When Hollander looks away like a shy schoolgirl, Ilya takes the opportunity to scrutinize him: strong legs, of course, and excellent ass, better arms and chest naked than in clothes. Ilya's dick twitches. All that wet skin, smooth, pale, and his dark hair, head and crotch, and Hollander's own dick also smooth, but not so pale, not as big as Ilya's but still very good, circumcised like almost all Western men, starting to stiffen, bobbing under the shower spray.

When Hollander glances up again, Ilya raises his eyebrows. *Admit it,* he wants to say. *Your cock already knows what you want.*

"Fuck off!" Hollander turns away.

Ilya does not fuck off. Instead, he reaches down and grabs his own half-hard dick and begins stroking, and when Hollander shoots a glance his way, Ilya turns and faces him, full on, still rubbing his cock, his feet wide, shoulders back, an invitation.

Hollander's mouth is open, his eyes glazed like he's in a trance, flicking from Ilya's cock to his face and back again, cock, face, cock, face. Ilya feels himself rocking side to side in time with his hand on his erection, almost like he is hypnotizing Hollander. If he could, he would.

Hollander blinks, wakes up. "Not here," he mumbles. Fair. Ilya relents, releases his cock, and goes back to washing. His erection subsides gradually, but he notices in the few minutes that

Hollander remains in the shower with him before hurrying out, his shower shoes slapping on the floor, that Hollander's erection does not.

Ilya does not rush the rest of his shower. If he is right, and he thinks he is, Hollander will still be in the locker room when he gets out.

And there he is, fumbling with his shoe like a kid. He tries to tell Ilya to forget the shower, the casual tone in his voice barely hiding the fear.

"Is what you want?" Ilya asks.

"Sure. Of course." Hollander's voice is casual, but he cannot figure out how to put on his shoes.

Ilya chuckles. "You are a really bad liar."

Hollander says nothing, bent over his shoelace like he's never seen one before, his face flush with effort.

Ilya comes closer, close enough that his dick beneath the thick towel is maybe only twenty centimeters from Hollander's face. "What is your room number?"

Hollander sits up and tells him, his eyes on Ilya's groin. He says these things, like "fuck off" and "forget that happened," but when Ilya asks him questions, he answers them.

Ilya adjusts his towel, slowly. "If I come to 1410 at, say, nine o'clock?"

"I might open." It sounds like a question, like Hollander doesn't know the answer himself.

"I might knock."

Once Hollander has scrambled out of the locker room, practically running back to the safety of his parents and his managers, Ilya dresses. Will Hollander open the door? Ilya does not know. He thinks right now it is fifty/fifty. Either way, it is a win. If Hollander does not, then Ilya will have something to lord over him at the next face-off and the next and the next, Hollander's cowardice in the face of a dare. Ilya smirks thinking about how Hollander will blush when he makes the chicken noises across the line.

But if he opens the door, well . . . Ilya's smirk transforms into a smile in the empty locker room. If Hollander opens the door, then they can have some real fun.

Ilya is in the elevator at 9:03pm. He wants to be late enough that Hollander worries that he may not show, but not so late to make him mad. He has showered again, with real soap, and chosen his outfit carefully and as he watches the numbers rise from the third floor where his room is, he admits to himself that he hopes Hollander does open the door. He cannot forget Hollander's body in the shower, his flushed cheeks, the eager curve of his dick.

But the elevator door slides open on the sixth floor and Ilya is suddenly face-to-face with Hollander's mother. She is taller than he expected, and more beautiful close up. She almost steps in before noticing him, and the red arrow on the doorway. "Oh, I'm trying to go down."

"This is going up." Ilya points to the ceiling.

He has never met her, but of course she knows who he is, the only other hockey player as good as Hollander. She extends her hand. What is with these people and their handshakes?

"I'm—" she begins, but the elevator doors close on her and Ilya lets them, heart pounding in his chest. Thank God he does not have to have conversation with Hollander's mother. He does not know what he would say to her. He does not talk to mothers much, anymore.

Hollander lets him in at the first knock, so quick he might have been waiting on the other side of the door. "I thought you might chicken out," Ilya tells him.

"I'm not a chicken, but I think we should talk."

Maybe I will tell you about your mother in the elevator, Ilya thinks, surveying the hotel room. It's nice, a little bigger than his, but not much.

Hollander tries to usher him to a chair, but Ilya puts a hand on his waist instead, and backs him gently into the wall. Hollander is nervous, yes, but Hollander let him in. He wants this, but he is scared of it, too.

Go slow, Ilya thinks to himself. *He is like a nervous horse.*

Hollander's hands are at his sides, his head down. "This is such a bad idea," he mutters.

"What is?" Ilya asks, and when Hollander does not answer, he lifts his fingers to Hollander's face, angles his mouth upward, and kisses him once, softly, then once again.

Hollander kisses back, sweet, slow, his hands coming up to brush at Ilya's jacket, and as Ilya takes it off, Hollander leans in toward his mouth again. Ilya slides a hand into Hollander's hair to hold him close, his other arm on Hollander's muscled shoulder, and is surprised by Hollander's hands on the fly of his jeans.

Maybe not so slow, Ilya thinks.

He pulls Hollander's shirt over his head, and then his own, as Hollander slides a hand down the front of his pants and squeezes around his cock. "Fuck, Hollander," he murmurs as skin touches hot skin.

He puts a hand on Hollander's cheek and is shocked again when Hollander sucks Ilya's thumb into his mouth for a moment, pulling hard, before dropping to his knees and dragging Ilya's pants and briefs down, and dragging Ilya's erection into his wet mouth.

Ilya is stunned. He has to brace himself on the wall with one hand to keep from tipping over at first, the feel of Hollander sucking him overwhelming his balance. It's clear Hollander doesn't have much experience, but he is eager, like Ilya's cock is water in a desert to him. Ilya slides his hands into Hollander's hair. It only takes a minute before Shane Hollander on his knees, eyes closed, mouth open, is too much, too soon, and Ilya has to stop him.

"Was that bad?" Hollander asks as he stands up, nervous again.

"No! Opposite." Ilya brushes his hand against Hollander's mouth, kisses him again. Maybe slow is not the right word for how Hollander needs to be treated. Maybe the word is more like . . . careful. "Is your first time with a man?" he asks.

Hollander nods, quick, embarrassed. "You?"

"Ahh, no."

"Really?" Hollander smiles like he's relieved. "Another player?"

"Ahh, no," Ilya says again. "My coach's son back in Russia." He stops there, even though Sasha is not the only man Ilya has been with. Ilya does not want to explain to Hollander about the boys in the clubs in Moscow, the late night house parties, the times when a woman would bring her boyfriend along. They were all just for fun, though. Not important. Sasha had been the only real one. "I like trouble."

"Weren't you scared of getting caught?" Hollander asks, and Ilya realizes this is the core question for Hollander. Getting caught. It's why he has been so hot and cold, why he drank Ilya's water and then made an excuse about getting to bed, why he looked at Ilya in the shower, then turned away.

"Maybe. Was nothing serious and we have same secret, so." He shrugs. He doesn't tell Hollander that really it was Sasha who was more at risk if someone had found out. Ilya was an uber-talented hockey player, but Sasha was just the coach's son, without gifts or talents to protect him if they were discovered. But they never were. "It was just—" He's about to say "fucking around," but Hollander says

"Curious?"

Ilya runs his hand up Hollander's arm, nodding. "Curious. And you make me curious." He leans in, kisses the corner of Hollander's mouth, his throat. "Do I make you curious?"

Hollander tips his head back against the wall. "Obviously."

"Did you like sucking my cock?" Ilya purrs in his ear. He knows the answer, but he wants to hear it. He wants Hollander to say it.

"Wow. Those English words just roll off your tongue."

Cute, but not an answer. Ilya presses him. "Yes?"

"Yes." Hollander breathes.

"You want me to lie on the bed and let you do it some more?"

"Let me?" Hollander takes the challenge, and pushes him, palms flat on his chest, until he falls backward onto the bed.

"No fair," Ilya says when he notices, as he peels off his pants and shoes, that Hollander is making no attempt to get undressed. "I want to see you."

"You saw me in the showers."

"Yeah, I want more." This is Hollander's first time, and Ilya wants him to be in it. Not performing the acts, providing the service to Ilya, but to be *having sex* with him, to be an equal with him.

Hollander steps away from the bed and gets undressed, stepping out of his clothes and folding them like he's in a locker room. "Okay?" he says.

Hollander naked is more than okay. Ilya wants to lick every inch of him. *I am going to spend hours on you*, he thinks. "Come here."

But when Hollander gets to the bed, he lies down next to Ilya, his hands at his sides, once again uncertain. Ilya rolls onto his side, touches Hollander's cock, covers it with his hand, circles it. "This okay?"

Hollander nods, mute. When Ilya leans up to kiss him, his hand still stroking over the leaking head of Hollander's cock, Hollander finds himself again and nudges Ilya onto his back, sliding down between his thighs. He is a little more controlled this time, maybe because the angle is better, or because he's had a chance to think, and his fingers stroke Ilya's balls and his tongue glides over the head of Ilya's cock each time his head bobs. Ilya is captivated. Hollander's eyes are closed, concentrating, his mouth taking more and more of Ilya's cock each stroke, his breath hot along Ilya's shaft. It's only a few minutes before Ilya has to pull Hollander away and cum spurts across the ridges of his stomach. He drags Hollander in for a kiss, tasting himself.

"Not bad for first time," he says, teasing.

Hollander snorts. "Fuck you, Rozanov."

"Okay, was fun." He rolls over, grabs a tissue from the box on the nightstand.

"Are you serious?" Hollander asks.

"What? You need something?" It was supposed to be a joke, a continuation of the teasing, but Hollander is staring up at the ceiling in disbelief, jaw set. *Oh, right*, Ilya thinks. *Careful*.

He rolls on top of Hollander, in between his thighs. He can feel Hollander's stiff cock pressing into his belly. "You think I am asshole."

"I know you're an asshole," Hollander answers, but he is already relaxing, softening, smiling up at him.

"I would not leave you like that." It's such a minor thing, a minor promise, but Hollander seems almost surprised.

"No?"

"No. Let me show you how to do this." Ilya kisses Hollander's chest, his stomach, his still hard and already wet cock. He wraps one arm around Hollander's thigh and holds him close, the other hand squeezing Hollander's chest, and slides his mouth down Hollander's erection.

It has been a while since he's done this, but his muscle memory is strong, and Hollander's response is astounding. His hips pulse in time and his back arches as he calls for God, and then only a moment later he's barking out a warning, desperate, trying to force Ilya off his cock, every muscle in his arms flexing. But Ilya is bigger, stronger, and will not go until Hollander climaxes in his mouth, cum shooting hot and salty down Ilya's throat, Hollander's "fuck, fuck, fuck" in his ears.

Once Hollander's finished, Ilya slaps his stomach and flops down next to him, panting. Hollander tries to apologize, tells him he didn't have to, but of course he didn't have to; that is why he did it. Ilya laughs. "I don't mind."

This would be the time when he would sit up in bed against the headboard and light a cigarette, have a glass of vodka, an intermission before they go again, but of course neither cigarettes or vodka exist in Hollander's universe. Except for cock sucking, Hollander is without vices. "God, I want a cigarette."

"Smoking's bad for you," Hollander says automatically.

"Oh, is it?" Ilya rolls his eyes. He prefers it when Hollander is using his mouth for other things besides public service announcements. He thinks about kissing him again, so he'll be quiet.

"You're not going to tell anyone else about this, are you?" He is sitting up, his back to Ilya, hiding.

"Me?" Ahh, here it is again. The fear. Only held back temporarily by Hollander's hard dick. "Yes, Hollander. I'm going to tell everyone."

"Cause no one can know."

"No shit," Ilya says in Russian. "Hollander, look, I'm not going to tell anyone. Okay?"

"Okay." Hollander nods, but he doesn't seem convinced. He is fully back in the real world, worried about the consequences of his actions, which reminds Ilya of his own real world and the problems that wait there. Is too bad; he had hoped to stay in this private corner with Hollander a little longer.

"I have an early flight tomorrow," Ilya says, and Hollander jumps at the excuse. He stays on the bed while Ilya gets dressed. Ilya had been hoping for another kiss, maybe on the bed,

maybe by the door, a kiss saying "thank you for the blow job" or even just "good bye," but Hollander has his arms crossed and his head down. He is, Ilya notices, still wearing his socks.

"Good night," Ilya says.

Hollander answers, because he is polite Canadian, but Ilya still leaves the room feeling like maybe it was a mistake to show up. Maybe he should have ended it with Hollander gaping at his cock in the shower and taunted him across the line of scrimmage with sexy comments for years. Maybe he should not have learned about how Hollander looks when he sucks cock, or how he tastes when he kisses. Ilya sighs, leaning against the back wall of the elevator, watching the numbers tick down.

He does not run into Hollander's mother.

4. Boston vs. Montreal

Ilya watches the press conference after the game, because he has to, he owes it to the team, to his father, to take responsibility for the loss.

His father hasn't called him yet, today, to berate him for losing. He is surprised, but not really: yesterday, he had called and asked Ilya to make sure he brought home bread, so he may be still in what Ilya has labelled to himself an "episode." His father has had them from time to time in recent years, moments when he forgets that Ilya is his son, not his brother, or that Ilya lives in America now, or that Ilya's mother is dead. Ilya is worried about these episodes, but also grateful that this one means he doesn't have to hear about losing the face-off to Shane Hollander, who is on his television screen right now, being interviewed by some female reporter.

Ilya has heard from his brother, though. Almost the moment he got off the ice, his phone was ringing, his brother demanding more money. Always. Ilya wouldn't mind as much if he could count on Alexei to actually take care of his father, but Alexei won't answer questions about their father's condition, refuses to share the doctor's advice with him, doesn't provide the updates Ilya has asked for over and over again. Talking to Alexei makes him want to scream. They have never been close, their father saw to that, but they used to be brothers. Now all Alexei wants is money. He will have to go to the bank tomorrow morning or Alexei will never stop calling.

On the television, Shane Hollander is *still* being interviewed.

"It was *one game!*" Ilya shouts at the screen. "Not even playoffs!"

He doesn't speak French, so he's not sure what Hollander is saying, but it all sounds polite and professional, humble and modest. Ilya wants to throw a shoe at the television. And he wants to lick Hollander's freckles.

Maybe he should have waited to blow him, after all.

5. Winter, 2010 – All-Star Game

Ilya doesn't mind doing the pressers after the games, especially in Boston, because those reporters know the team, know him, and know what kinds of questions to ask him. He has even learned some of their names, especially the women, and asks them polite questions about their families when they talk to him. Is mutually beneficial.

But these giant press conferences, with rooms full of people he has never spoken to, these he does not like.

Having Shane Hollander there makes it a little more interesting, though. They haven't seen each other, haven't spoken, since the last face off (*the one you lost*, Ilya thinks), so he wonders what Hollander he will get today. Professional Hollander, who will act like they barely know each other? Or emotional, desperate Hollander, who will look over and over again at Ilya's mouth? It's an official event, so Ilya's pretty sure of the answer.

The first question is to Ilya, about his fifty goals. He's going to make it, of course, but it had been stupid to say such a thing out loud. "You had better make it," his father had said when he saw the interview. Ilya had made the mistake of sending the link to him. "You cannot fail a promise like that and hold your head up in my house." Now the reporter is asking the same question: will he reach fifty goals?

Ilya knocks his foot against Hollander's under the table. *Watch this*, he thinks.

"Yes." The crowd chuckles, and then chuckles again when Hollander refuses to take the bait.

The next question is also to Ilya, but the reporter keeps talking and talking, something about Boston, then the playoffs, then there are words about the fans, and a question about his personal life? Ilya has no idea what is being asked of him. His English is okay, but this is beyond him and he is about to look stupid at his first All-Star game press conference.

Hollander starts to speak and Ilya feels the tap of Hollander's shoe against his. He can barely hear what Hollander is saying, but the meaning is clear: let me handle this.

Ilya nods.

Hollander's answer isn't any more clear to Ilya than the question had been at first, something about his mother, and the fans, but by the end, Ilya gets the idea: Hollander's job, and Ilya's, too, is to help their teams win. Win games, win Cups. He understands that. And he understands that Shane Hollander just came to his rescue in front of a whole room full of people. If he could do more than press his foot against Hollander's under the table, he would.

He feels less charitable toward Hollander when Hollander beats him by a whole second in the shot accuracy competition. He throws his room number at Hollander like a dart.

There is no plan, not even a time, so Ilya is pleasantly surprised when there's a knock at his door. Hollander is not so pleased when Ilya opens it, shoving through like is trying to escape

from the law.

"Someone is chasing you?" Ilya asks, amused.

"I'm standing in the hallway like an idiot. Scott Hunter is right next door."

Ilya chuckles. He doesn't mean to, but Hollander is so worked up, so angry. He doesn't know that Scott Hunter has been dragged to dinner by some American teammates thirty, maybe forty minutes ago.

Hollander glares at him, furious, then lunges at him, pushing him up against the wall, pressing his mouth to Ilya's with urgent need. So maybe last time did not end as badly as he thought.

When Hollander realizes that he's being kissed back, he slows just a bit, and Ilya takes the opportunity. "Get on your knees."

Hollander drops, dragging Ilya's pants with him, and gulps at Ilya's semi-erect cock, a starving man. He's so intent tonight, not hesitant or awkward at all, like something has been set loose in him, like he has left all his worry on the doorstep. Ilya pulls off his shirt and then Hollander is back at his mouth, devouring him.

Unable to wait even to take his pants all the way off, Ilya scoops Hollander up by the thighs and carries him to the bed, yanking off his clothes in one smooth motion. Kicking off his pants, Ilya falls on top of Hollander and then it's Hollander's turn to be devoured, his arms over his head like he can't bear to look and can't bear not to. "Oh, yeah," he moans. "Oh fuck. Fuck, Rozanov."

But Ilya cannot let Hollander come, not yet, not so soon, because if he comes he might remember that he's not supposed to be here, that this isn't supposed to happen. He crawls up Hollander's body. "Your stomach," he says, slapping Hollander's belly. "Get on your stomach."

Hollander rolls over, braced on one arm, and Ilya stretches out on top of him, kissing his shoulder, rubbing his firm ass. "Have you ever?" he murmurs. Hollander shakes his head. "Do you want to?"

He expects a yes or a no, and hopes for a yes, but Hollander sort of shudders, a strange non-answer. Ilya pauses, scrutinizes his face. Ahh. Of course.

"You are scared," he says. It's not a question.

"I'm not scared!" Hollander protests, sounding terrified.

Ilya squeezes him. "No, is okay." It's a little scary, when you haven't done it before. He and Sasha had done it for each other the first time and they had both been a little scared, and they had known each other for years when it happened.

"I'm not scared," Hollander repeats.

Ilya kisses Hollander's shoulder and gets off of him, his hand wandering to the ripe curve of Hollander's ass. He slides his hand between Hollander's muscled ass and brushes his fingers across his asshole, asking "you ever touch yourself here?"

"Jesus Christ," Hollander gasps. His breath is coming in quick pants.

Ilya touches him again, a little firmer, more insistent. "What? Does touching your ass make you gay?"

"Rozanov," Hollander mutters.

"'Cause you know what else makes you gay is sucking my dick." He kisses the back of Hollander's neck.

"Shut up! Fuck!" Hollander snaps. "I'm trying to say I have a thing. Okay?"

"A thing?" Ilya is confused. What could Hollander mean? A fetish? A hemorrhoid? A venereal disease?

"A dildo."

Ilya is a little surprised and a lot turned on. The idea of Hollander with his legs spread, fingers searching . . .

"What. Color?" he asks. For some reason, Ilya imagines Hollander's dildo is purple, but he bets it's some natural color, beige or black. Hollander can be so boring.

"Fuck you."

"is big?"

"I'm leaving." Hollander moves to pull himself off the bed, but Ilya gets on top of him again, holding him down, kissing his shoulder.

"No, no, Hollander," he whines. "I want to fuck you."

Hollander relents and rolls back onto his back. "Not here," he says, the second time he has said that to Ilya. It may mean no, but it didn't the last time. "Not with fucking Scott Hunter next door," Hollander says.

"He is hot. We should let him listen like mating call." He kisses Hollander, briefly.

"You'd like that wouldn't you?"

Ilya glances down to where Hollander's stiff dick is poking at his thigh. "You probably would, too. Okay, so next time." Matter resolved, he leans down to kiss Hollander again, but Hollander dodges him.

"Next time?" Hollander looks worried. Again.

"Yeah, we play Montreal in two weeks."

"Yeah, but um, where would we—"

"Where would we what?" Ilya is not sure what's going on, exactly. He thought he was being clear. In two weeks, they will meet up, and maybe Shane Hollander will let him fuck him. Something to look forward to, after Ilya beats him in a hockey game.

"Meet."

Ilya is lost. Doesn't Hollander have a place? "You are homeless?"

"No."

"Then we meet at your house." This is obvious, but Ilya feels like he is missing something key.

"It's an apartment."

What difference does that make? Ilya wants to shout, but for some reason, to Hollander, it does make a difference. Hollander wants to fuck him, or wants to consider it anyway, but somehow the idea of having Ilya in his apartment is an issue. This makes no sense. Ilya doesn't care where they do it, his hotel, Hollander's mystery apartment, a motel where the doors open right onto the street. All of these are details that can be worked out later. "Hollander," he says. "You are having panic attack! It's just a plan to fuck."

For a second it looks like maybe Hollander is going to say something else, but he thinks better of it, tries to smile, nods. Ilya kisses him on the corner of the mouth, then on the lips, then Hollander is kissing him back, thoughts about his apartment seemingly shoved away. Ilya kisses his mouth, his throat, his chest, his hands wandering over Hollander's skin until he is certain he's driven all thoughts of the apartment from Hollander's mind. Maybe even his address.

Then Ilya plants kisses down Hollander's body, soft kisses interspersed with nipping bites that make Hollander convulse. "Don't!" he says, not meaning it. "I'm ticklish."

He stops wiggling when Ilya reaches his cock and kisses that, too, first the shaft and then the smooth head, wet kisses full of tongue and suction. "Oh, Rozanov," Hollander breathes, and then "*oh my god*" when Ilya sucks one of Hollander's testicles into his mouth, then the other, flicking them with his tongue. His hand is on Hollander's chest, squeezing his firm pectoral while he does this, and Hollander clutches his wrist with one hand, holding it there as if to steady himself.

When Ilya's tongue slips to the smooth skin underneath Hollander's balls, Hollander's whole body tenses up, his hand on Ilya's wrist tight.

"No." Ilya lifts his head, meets Hollander's big eyes. "Don't worry. Nothing that you do not want, okay?"

Hollander hesitates, then gives a little nod, his hand relaxing. Ilya lowers his head again. He moves slowly, his tongue firm and gradual, back to Hollander's balls, then the delicate skin beneath them, listening to Hollander's breath, waiting for the grip on his wrist to tense again. When it doesn't, Ilya slides his tongue lower still, to the ridged flesh of Hollander's hole, licking it deliberately, no teasing, making sure Hollander knows what is happening.

Hollander's knees go slack, wide. "oh my god," he breathes, and lifts his hips.

God, indeed. Some men, even men who will take a cock up the ass, don't like this, Ilya knows. He himself does not mind; although is not his favorite thing, it can be fun. But Hollander, Hollander loves this. His breath shudders as Ilya strokes a flat tongue over his opening. He's released Ilya's wrist to grope helplessly at the headboard, both hands over his head. "*fuck*," he moans when Ilya undulates his tongue like a wave crashing into Hollander's shore. "*fuck, fuck, FUCK!*"

The last one is because Ilya has pulled back. He has to, or he will come right here on this hotel bedspread with Hollander's thighs in his hands. But Hollander is worried, always worried.

"Was that—"

"Beautiful." Ilya kisses Hollander's inner thigh once, twice, then pushes himself up until his cock is aligned with Hollander's, rubbing through the silky precum dripping from it. "Too beautiful. I need a break."

Hollander snorts, watching their dicks slide together. "This is a break?"

"Mmm, for now." He leans down and Hollander does not hesitate but surges up for the kiss, one hand on Ilya's face, one his shoulder. Their bodies press together, grinding, and Ilya knows he could come like this, too, Hollander rolling beneath him, but it is not so urgent, not yet.

After a moment, Hollander pushes on him, urging him onto his back. Oh, *yes*. Ilya folds his hands behind his head, determined not to push, but the minute Hollander's lips glide over the shaft of his cock he is helpless to not reach for him, to not feel the muscles of Hollander's cheeks flex as he works. Hollander gazes up at him, freckles dark on his flushed face, and Ilya cannot look away.

It's that gaze, even more than the hot, wet cavern of Hollander's mouth that has him coming in minutes, too overwhelmed to do more than gasp a warning that Hollander ignores before Ilya is arching up off the bed into Hollander's mouth.

Ilya collapses, panting. Hollander flops down next to him, wiping his mouth with the back of one hand. "Have you been practicing?" Ilya reaches out, runs his thumb over Hollander's lower lip. It is swollen and red and beautiful.

"What do you mean?" Hollander asks.

"You have been sucking dicks to learn this?" He gestures to himself.

"No! Fuck off!" Hollander sits up, legitimately annoyed, but Ilya rolls on top of him, bodies him back down to the bed, kissing his throat, his chest, until he settles.

"So it is natural ability, then," he murmurs.

Hollander, placated, allows himself to be kissed on the mouth. "I'm a fast learner," he mumbles in between kisses.

Ilya smiles against his mouth. "Among other things." He reaches down and runs his palm over Hollander's erection, circles it, strokes it.

"I was surprised last time," Hollander protests weakly, his eyes already closing, his head tipping back on the pillows. "Oh, Rozanov."

"Hollander," Ilya murmurs against Hollander's throat.

He meant to suck Hollander's dick, but it's too sexy watching him, his chest flushing, his eyes fluttering closed. He responds to every little movement Ilya makes, gasping, or moaning, or panting "*oh my god*" like he's in a dream he doesn't want to wake up from. His cock is so slippery that Ilya doesn't even need to spit for lubrication; every time he pauses his hand, even for a second, another drop of precum surges from Hollander, like he's begging for it.

By the end, he *is* begging for it, his hips thrusting up into Ilya's closed fist, his hand clenched on Ilya's bicep, his lips against Ilya's moaning "Rozanov Rozanov Rozanov" like a song.

For all his worry about Scott Hunter, Ilya thinks, Hollander does not seem to make much effort to be quiet.

"Come for me, Hollander," he whispers in Hollander's ear, and Hollander comes with a shout, like he was waiting for permission, his hips pistoning, cum drenching Ilya's fist, splattering onto Hollander's stomach.

Ilya watches as Hollander comes down, catching his breath, one arm thrown over his face. He is so pretty like this, flushed, relaxed, unembarrassed. After a minute, Hollander turns and kisses him. "That was incredible."

"Mmm." Ilya kisses him back, holding him in place with a finger under his chin. It *was* incredible. He could watch Shane Hollander come for hours. He hopes he will get the chance.

Ilya showers fast, afraid that Hollander will have left before he is done. He is not sure why that would be bad—sometimes it is preferable if the other person is gone without a word—but he knows it would be. He does not want Hollander to sneak out like he is . . . something he is not.

He was right to hurry, because Hollander is dressing when Ilya comes back into the bedroom still knotting the towel around his waist.

"I know we talked about Montreal in two weeks," Hollander says. His hands are shoved into his pockets, his shoulders down. He is doubting again, what he wants, what Ilya says. "But —"

Ilya sighs. "Oh my God, Hollander you are so boring. Give me your phone."

Hollander pauses, his face blank, like he doesn't understand the words.

Ilya holds out his hand, demanding. "You have phone. Give."

He types his number in, under the name "Lily," a name his teammates used to use to tease him. They had meant it to be mean at first, but by the time he left them for the United States, it was an affectionate nickname, a sign that they truly knew him.

Hollander looks at the contact card and smiles. "What's my name going to be?"

"Jane." Ilya texts him. The message is short, sweet, with a smiley face.

"Jane," Hollander repeats, smiling at the phone. Ilya is almost overcome with the desire to kiss him again.

Instead, he asks "you want shower?" hooking his thumb over his shoulder toward the bathroom. If Hollander says yes, Ilya is sure he can convince him to stay another hour.

But Hollander shakes his head. "I can't leave wet."

"Mmm." Ilya noses into Hollander's space, kisses his neck, the corner of his mouth. "Is too late for that, I think."

"Fuck off," Hollander says, but it sounds sweet, like a pet name.

"In two weeks." Ilya grabs Hollander's hips, pulls him in close, kisses him again, until Hollander sighs against his lips, presses his forehead to Ilya's, his hand on Ilya's neck.

"I have to go," he murmurs.

Ilya raises both hands up, relinquishing Hollander. "Okay."

"Okay." Hollander hesitates a moment, then leans in and kisses Ilya one more time on the mouth. Ilya keeps his hands up until Hollander is safely to the door. "See you later."

"Later."

Ilya stands in the middle of his hotel room for a moment after the door closes, waiting for something he cannot name.

6. Winter, 2010 – Boston

The game in Montreal is cancelled. Weather. Ilya drives home too fast through the snow, the rear wheels of his Porsche slipping out from under him when he corners, and one old guy

flips him off when Ilya's car comes too close to his SUV. Ilya flips him off right back and keeps going. It is cold out, but his skin feels overheated, itchy, too tight. He wants to punch something or fuck something.

Shane Hollander.

Tonight was supposed to be that night. But that cannot be why Ilya feels like this, this rage and frustration. Hollander is nothing besides a hockey player, just some guy he has fooled around with twice who has not texted him back. Ilya punches the code to his door and enters, stripping off his coat and is staring at his phone wondering if he should text Hollander and if he does, what he should say, when a figure jumps out at him from the dark kitchen.

Svetlana, his guardian angel, come to visit him from New York when she heard his game was cancelled.

Once he is over the initial terror, it is a relief to see her. A relief to speak in Russian, a relief to talk to someone who gets his jokes, a relief to be with someone who understands him in so many ways.

And Svetlana is joy. She is beautiful, funny, knows everything about hockey, and is excellent in bed. He loves her. Once, when they were younger, they had tried to be together romantically. A couple. It was strongly encouraged by his father and hers, the idea of the hockey prodigy and the daughter of the Olympic goalie, a match made in heaven.

It had been hell.

Things that could be overlooked in a friend could not be overlooked in a boyfriend or girlfriend. Ilya had loved Svetlana's passion and temper when she was his friend, but when it came out at him it reminded him too much of his feelings when he was at home, trapped under the anger and expectations of someone else. And Svetlana had been equally dismayed by Ilya's playboy nature, his inability to stop flirting with women and men alike, and his refusal to commit to anything besides hockey, including her.

Svetlana had been the one to break it off. "I cannot," she'd said, after a very public fight on the sidewalk in front of a club. "This is no good. It is ruining all of the love I have for you."

"Yes." Ilya had taken a last drag of his cigarette and thrown it on the cement, crushing it with his boot. He felt like his heart was under there, too. No one would stay, not when they got to know him. "We were better as friends."

"We were," Svetlana admitted. "So we should go back to that. Friends."

"Okay," he'd said, fully expecting to never see her again, except for those times when her presence was demanded as a princess of hockey. His father would be so disappointed.

But she'd texted him two days later, not to make up, but to go out with her and her friends, and joyfully set him up with another girl, a model who loved hockey players, and called him the next morning for lunch, and confided in him that she was leaving Russia for New York, to

work at a high-end car dealership, and that was that. They were friends. Sometimes they would fuck and sometimes they would not, whichever, but they were always friends.

And tonight, he is so happy to see her.

Svetlana is so talented as sucking cock. The English word "professional" comes to mind, but that makes her sound like a whore, which she isn't. Her tongue on his balls and her hand on his dick is . . . practiced. Yes. She has practice. She knows what he likes and pays attention to his reactions, speeding up or slowing down, teasing him, drawing out.

And somehow, in the middle of one of her excellent blowjobs, Ilya finds himself remembering Shane Hollander's slightly rough hands grabbing for Ilya's dick, his amateur mouth sucking him in, choking on him. His eyes. His freckles.

"Wait! Wait." He stills Svetlana with a hand on her cheek. "Too much."

She props herself up on her hands, her slim naked body poised like a gazelle above him, and smiles. "It has been too long for you," she says. "Maybe Jane does not put out."

Ilya laughs at the accuracy, and cups her face again, smiling at her. Svetlana has always known him too well. "Maybe you are just too talented."

She leans down to kiss him, a sweet kiss, a friend kiss. He tips her over onto her back and turns the friend kiss back into sex.

Afterwards, when she is in the shower he sits in bed, resisting the urge for a cigarette and looking at his phone. The message reads "next time, I guess?" With a fucking question mark. Ilya sighs. *Shane Hollander*, he thinks. *I am in big trouble*.

7. Summer, 2011 MLH Awards

On nights like this, Ilya understands his mother. It is not just the losing, which is bad enough, but the fucking *weight* of what is to come, the days and nights of critique and commentary, the years of reminders of how he is not good enough.

Not that Ilya is foolish enough to think that winning Rookie of the Year would satisfy his father. Nothing will ever satisfy him. How many times did his mother try, changing her clothes, her way of walking, her cooking, her accent, and nothing was ever enough. But if the award had at least gone to Lemaire, Ilya could have played it off to his family as a pity vote, irrelevant, not failure.

But of course it had gone to Hollander.

Now, standing on the roof of the hotel, looking out over the sparkling jewel of Las Vegas, Ilya hears his father in his head. "What good is fifty-one goals if you are not the winner?"

"How could you lose to a Canadian?" "We have sacrificed all that we have for you and you come back with nothing." "You were supposed to be the best."

The recrimination is so loud he does not notice that he has company until he hears Hollander's voice, light, teasing.

"I don't know if it's worth jumping over." Hollander leans over the railing, breathing with his mouth open like he just walked up the stairs to the roof. They haven't seen each other since the All-Star Game, haven't texted since the night their game was cancelled. What was supposed to be two weeks has been months and months and now the silence hangs between them like a curtain.

"Party all done?" Ilya asks. He hopes so; he doesn't want to speak to anyone at the moment.

"No, I just need some air," Hollander says, his words slurring, his head too heavy for his body.

"You are drunk," Ilya realizes. Hollander drunk.

"I'm not." Hollander lies.

"Good for you. Big night for you." He's trying to be polite, gracious. Not take out on Hollander the pain that losing Rookie of the year will cause him. Is not Hollander's fault.

"Yeah, well, it could have gone to either one of us," Hollander says.

Hollander is right, but Ilya is in no mood for Hollander's honorable bullshit. "It went to you."

For some reason, this pisses Hollander off. "So what?" He stands up straight. "So you're just up here sulking because what? You couldn't take another victory lap around me? All you *do* is beat me. I win one stupid fucking thing and you couldn't even show your face down there!"

Jesus Christ, Ilya thinks. This is what Hollander thinks? That he is too *jealous* to go to a party? That he *cares* about some stupid award given by *reporters*? "Not everything is about you, Hollander!"

"So, what is it then?" Hollander snaps.

"What the fuck do you want?"

"Nothing! I just wanted to see the view and get some air, and—"

"And what? Here is fucking view Hollander, check it out! Fuck!" Almost immediately, Ilya feels bad for yelling. It is not Hollander's fault that he has been gifted a perfect fucking life and a perfect fucking family and a perfect fucking face. He cannot be blamed for not being fucked up like Ilya is. "I go home in three days," he mutters.

"Okay. Must be nice."

Ilya glares at him. How could he possibly tell this, this *Rookie of the Year* how it feels to be going back to Russia at this moment.

Hollander continues: "I guess I thought maybe we . . ."

Fuck, Ilya thinks. Because maybe he thought that too, a little bit, in the back of his mind, before reality had set in.

"Never mind. Kay. I'm gonna . . ." Hollander heads down the steps to the door. "I guess I'll, umm, see you next season." He holds out his hand, another fucking handshake, but this time Hollander's lips are pressed together, and his eyes sparkle with emotion.

Ilya stalks down the stairs and backs him into the wall and for a moment, everything is forgotten because of Hollander's lips and his body and his hands in Ilya's hair.

But it only lasts a moment.

Hollander breaks the kiss. "What the fuck are you doing?" he demands. "We're both in tuxedos out in public."

Ilya smiles a little. "No one is looking."

"You don't know that," Hollander snaps.

Ilya does know that—who could see them on the roof?—but when he tries to kiss Hollander again, Hollander spins Ilya around and pins him against the wall. For a moment, Ilya thinks Hollander may still kiss him, be drawn in by the power of whatever this is between them, whatever force keeps bringing them back together, but he doesn't. He lets go of Ilya's jacket and walks away.

"See you next season," Ilya calls after him, but there's no answer, not even a polite Canadian one. Ilya tries one more time— "Hollander" —but all he gets is a door slamming shut. Ah, well. He knows better than anyone that sometimes the fear wins.

Ilya goes back to the railing. Below him the lights of Las Vegas twinkle, the illusion of something beautiful that vanishes when you try to get close.

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