The space between us

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at https://archiveofourown.org/works/77727791.

Rating:	Mature
Archive Warning:	Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings
Category:	M/M
Fandoms:	Heated Rivalry (TV), Game Changers Series - Rachel Reid
Relationships:	Shane Hollander/Ilya Rozanov, Shane Hollander/Rose Landry
Characters:	Shane Hollander, Ilya Rozanov, Rose Landry, Hayden Pike, Cliff Marlow, JJ Boiziau, Miles (Heated Rivalry)
Additional Tags:	Alternate Universe - Canon Divergence, Angst with a Happy Ending, Idiots in Love, Denial of Feelings, Not Beta Read, Kissing, Heartbreaking, Hook-Up
Language:	English
Stats:	Published: 2026-01-15 Words: 11,607 Chapters: 1/1

The space between us

by BorntoScore

Summary

It starts with Shane running out of Ilya's apartment after one too-intimate moment over a tuna melt. He tries to bury it by dating Rose Landry, but the Montreal club night blows everything open jealousy, staring, avoidance, all of it. Rose eventually breaks up with him gently, seeing the truth he can't say out loud.

At the All-Star Game, things shift from canon. Ilya avoids Shane completely, never realizing Shane and Rose are over. Then Shane's injury happens. As opposing captain, Ilya visits him in the hospital, only to have a pain-med-softened Shane ask him to come to his family cottage. Ilya says "maybe," assuming Shane won't remember, and ghosts him again.

Months later, on summer break in Spain, Ilya wanders into the Gaixample and finds himself surrounded by openly queer couples happy, unafraid, everything he's never let himself imagine. Something cracks open. He thinks of Shane. He texts him.

Does Shane remember the invitation?
And does Ilya go?

Notes

I hope you like it. I personally like to read quite a bit of angst, so I decided to take you guys with me. English isn't my native language, so if you see any mistakes, feel free to let me know. I follow both the book and the show.

See the end of the work for more notes

November 2016- Boston

The room felt too warm. Shane wasn't sure if it was the heating, or the closeness, or the way Ilya's breath brushed his cheek every time he exhaled. All he knew was that his pulse was racing, and he couldn't slow it down. They were tangled together in a way that felt reckless and stupid and so good it scared him. Ilya's forehead rested against his, their noses almost touching. Their breaths mixed in the narrow space between them, uneven and rushed. Shane's hands were somewhere on Ilya's shoulders, he didn't remember putting them there, but he didn't move them either.

He didn't want to. Ilya's eyes were half-closed, lashes trembling. His face was flushed, softened in a way Shane had never seen before. For a moment, Shane let himself look, really look, at him. At the curve of his mouth, the tension in his jaw, the way he seemed to be holding something back. Then Ilya whispered it.

""Fuck. Shane…"

Barely a breath. Soft. It hit Shane like a punch. He froze. His stomach dropped. His hands tightened without meaning to. He felt the word travel through him, warm and terrifying, settling somewhere deep in his chest where he didn't want anything to settle. Ilya's eyes snapped open, like he realized what he'd said at the exact same moment Shane did.

"Ilya…" Shane responded. Ilya looked happy and tried to kiss him. And that was enough to snap him out of whatever spell he'd been under. He pulled away fast, almost stumbling as he scrambled off the bed. His hands shook as he grabbed his shirt from the floor. He didn't look at Ilya. He couldn't. If he saw his face, the confusion, the softness, he'd fall apart.

"I should go." That was putting it lightly. Shane really needed to get the hell out of there. He fumbled to get his jeans back on while backing away from Ilya. Damn, where did I leave my underwear? "Go?" Ilya looked confused, in his eyes this moment was exactly what he dreamed off. "Yeah... I... uh, I shouldn't stick around. I can't. We can't. This is..." Ilya shifted on the couch, casually draping one arm over the back and resting his ankle on his knee. "This is nothing, Hollander."

Hollander. You didn't call me that a minute ago. "I know. I just... got a team meeting in the morning. Totally forgot." That made Ilya laugh in disbelieve. "You forgot team meeting?

Sure.” Shane was already at the door, slipping on his sneakers. Forget the underwear; he just needed to get out. “Thanks for the tuna melt. Um...” Ilya let out a loud sigh and got up from the couch. Shane stood frozen, eyes wide, as Ilya walked toward him. When he got close, he tugged down on the hem of Shane’s T-shirt, fixing it for him. “Goodnight, then.”

Shane locked eyes with Ilya. His gaze was challenging him to stay, and, man, Shane really wanted to take that chance. “Goodnight,” Shane murmured. Ilya’s expression shifted, his eyes losing their intensity and his brow furrowing like he just realized Shane was actually leaving. But just as quickly, he put on his usual cool mask again. The hallway outside Ilya’s apartment was cold compared to the heat of the room he’d just fled. Shane leaned against the wall, pressing the back of his head to the plaster, trying to breathe. His pulse was still racing. His hands were trembling.

He felt stupid. Weak. Like he’d lost control of something he’d never meant to let slip. He didn’t know how long he stood there. A minute. Five. Long enough for the panic to settle into a dull ache in his chest. When he finally pushed himself off the wall and walked toward the elevator, he felt hollow. He didn’t text Ilya. Didn’t call. Didn’t even check if Ilya had tried to reach out. He just went home. And pretended nothing had happened.

November 2016- Montreal

“Hollander,” JJ’s voice boomed the second Shane picked up. “What the hell are you doing right now?” Shane blinked at the wall. “Uh. Nothing.” “Wrong answer. Get your ass downtown. My buddy’s hosting an after-hours thing at his restaurant. And guess what? Half the cast of that superhero movie filming here is going to be there.” Shane rubbed his forehead. “JJ, I don’t”

“Nope. Don’t care. You’re coming.” Shane almost laughed at that. “Fine,” he said. “I’m coming.” The restaurant was warm and loud and smelled incredible. Music pulsed through the small space, and people were packed shoulder-to-shoulder, laughing and drinking like it wasn’t a Tuesday night. “Hollander!” JJ bellowed from across the room, towering over everyone like a lighthouse. “Yes! You made it!” Shane let himself be pulled into the chaos. JJ introduced him to people he barely heard the names of. A bartender with a bright smile handed him a beer “on the house,” and Shane tried not to blush at the attention.

He drifted through the crowd, letting the noise wash over him. It helped. A little. Eventually he found an empty booth in the corner and sat down, letting out a breath he didn’t realize he’d been holding. “Please tell me you’re hungry,” a woman’s voice said. Shane looked up.

Rose Landry slid into the booth beside him like she'd been invited. She set down a plate of golden fritters and smiled, warm, bright, effortless.

"I can't eat all of these," she said. "Help me." Shane blinked. "Uh. Sure." She laughed, covering her mouth too late, and something in Shane's chest loosened. She was easy to talk to. Funny. Confident without being intimidating. They talked about cottages and childhood summers, about hockey and movies, about Michigan winters and Montreal food. She asked questions, real ones, and didn't make him feel stupid for stumbling over a few answers. He liked her.

He liked talking to her. He liked how normal it felt. By the time they exchanged numbers, Shane felt lighter than he had in days. Maybe weeks. He walked back to his car with a small smile tugging at his mouth. He didn't think about Ilya. Not until he got home and the apartment felt too quiet again. But he pushed the thought away. He was good at that.

Shane woke up the next morning, the night with Rose had been good, better than good, actually. She was funny and warm and easy to talk to. She made him feel normal, like he wasn't a guy who had run out of another man's apartment because of one whispered name. He should have felt relieved.

Instead, he felt… unsettled. He pushed the thought away and got ready for practice. The rink was colder than usual, or maybe Shane was just too aware of everything. His skates felt too tight, his gloves too stiff, his helmet too heavy. He tried to focus on drills, on the rhythm of skating, on the familiar burn in his legs. But his mind kept drifting back to Ilya's voice, soft and unguarded, saying his name like it meant something. He hated that he remembered the exact tone.

He hated even more that he wanted to hear it again. He kept his head down during warm-ups, pretending he didn't notice the way the locker room felt slightly off. He didn't look toward the other side of the room where Ilya usually sat. He didn't let himself glance over even once. But he felt him there.

He always did. When practice finally ended, Shane was the first one off the ice. He showered quickly, dressed even faster, and left before anyone could stop him. He just needed space. He needed to breathe. He spent the afternoon trying to distract himself. He tried to read a book but nothing helped. His phone buzzed.

Rose: Dinner tonight? If you're free?

Shane stared at the message for a long moment. He liked her. He really did. And she liked him. And this, this was normal. This was what he was supposed to want. He typed back:

Shane: Yeah. I'd like that.

He hit send before he could overthink it. Dinner with Rose was easy. She talked about filming, about the chaos of working with stunt coordinators, about the ridiculous superhero costume she had to wear for half her scenes. Shane laughed more than he expected to. She asked him about hockey, about growing up in Ontario, about his family. She listened, really listened, and didn't make him feel like he had to perform.

She was good for him. He told himself that again and again. When she touched his arm across the table, he didn't flinch. When she leaned in a little closer, he didn't pull away. When she smiled at him like she already knew him, he felt something warm settle in his chest. This was right. This was safe. This was what he needed. So when she suggested they meet again later in the week, he said yes without hesitation. He didn't think about Ilya. Not until he got home and the apartment felt too quiet again.

December 2016 - Detroit

Ilya woke up alone in his hotel room. Detroit? Yeah, he was in Detroit. He looked over at his roommate's empty bed and checked the clock. Eight thirty. He sighed and rubbed his eyes before sitting up. Not surprising that Carmichael was already up and out. That guy was way too much of a morning person. Ilya threw on some sweats and headed to the Starbucks in the hotel lobby for coffee and a breakfast sandwich. His teammates, Cliff Marlow and Victor St-Simon, were sitting at a table.

"Roz! You've gotta see this. You'll freak out!" Cliff shouted. Ilya couldn't imagine what could be so interesting. He walked over to the table, and Victor held out his phone. The headline read, Is Rose Landry dating NHL star Shane Hollander? "No way," was Ilya's first reaction. He hoped it sounded more dismissive than shocked. "Right?" Cliff laughed. "She's, like, a mega movie star! How the hell did he even meet her during hockey season?"

“She’s been filming a movie in Montreal,” Victor said. “They met at a mutual friend’s party... apparently.” Ilya snorted. “There are pictures,” Victor said. “Check it out.” He held out his phone again, and Ilya took it. He scrolled through four paparazzi photos of Shane having dinner with the stunning, dark-haired actress. In one of them, Shane was laughing. Ilya frowned and handed the phone back to Victor. “Probably nothing,” he said.

January 2017 - Boston

It wasn’t nothing. As the weeks went on, more paparazzi shots of Shane and Rose Landry together popped up online. Photos of them walking together, smiling, leaving restaurants, and kissing just on the cheek. It could still be nothing. Ilya cranked up the resistance on his stationary bike. Why did he even care? Why shouldn’t Hollander be dating a gorgeous woman? Rozanov had been with a beautiful woman two nights ago and another the night before that.

But Hollander wasn’t that kind of guy. Ilya figured Hollander must hook up with people, but there wasn’t any proof. He didn’t want to think about it too much. He’d never known Hollander to go on back-to-back dates with anyone, let alone be seen with someone enough for the press to notice. Hollander had a girlfriend. Maybe he was in love. Ilya pushed himself harder on the bike until his thighs protested. He stopped and took a long swig from his water bottle.

He knew this weird thing between them wouldn’t last forever. It was just... convenient. So maybe it was over now. So what? Boston was playing in Montreal next week. The All-Star Game was the week after. Would Hollander just... ignore him? As Ilya was leaving the team gym, he stubbed his toe on one of the other bikes. He let out a string of Russian curses and threw his water bottle at the wall. He tried to calm his breathing as he watched the water seep into the black and gold carpet. “Jesus,” Cliff said, stepping off his treadmill. “What the hell’s wrong with you?”

“Nothing,” Ilya growled. “Stubbed my toe.” He hurried out, not bothering to pick up the water bottle. Hayley, he thought. He should text Hayley to see if she was free tonight. He liked her. She was fun and had dark hair. And freckles.

A week later – Montreal

Shane’s phone buzzed an hour after the game ended. For a moment, a stupid, hopeful moment, he thought it might be Ilya. It wasn’t. It was Rose.

Rose: Come out with us tonight. Ultraviolet.

Shane stared at the message. Relief washed through him first. Then anxiety. Then something he didn't want to name.

Shane: Okay. What time?

He told himself this was good. This was normal. This was what boyfriends did. He had a girlfriend now. Sort of. And she wanted him to go dancing with her. He hated clubs. He hated crowds. He hated the pressure to act like someone he wasn't. But Rose wanted him there. And he wanted to be the kind of guy who could do this.

Ilya was definitely not going to text Hollander. No way. Instead, he sulked around his hotel room and snapped at his roommate for no reason. "Hey!" Ryan Carmichael said after Ilya's latest unnecessary comment. "What's your problem?" Ilya sighed and plopped down on the edge of his bed. "Nothing. Screw this. I need to get laid. Let's go out." "Out where?"

Ilya waved toward the big window. "We're in Montreal! Let's find a club! Come on." Carmichael blinked, then grinned. "You got it, man! I'm texting Victor and Cliff."

Ultraviolet was packed. Music thumped through the floor. Shane found Rose in the VIP section, surrounded by her friends and co-stars. She kissed him hello. He tried not to look awkward. She looked stunning, her dress shimmered under the club lights, silky and expensive, slipping off one shoulder like it had been designed just for her and her boots had a heel that made her legs look endless. Her hair was down, glossy and dark, and her makeup was flawless in that effortless way that probably took an hour.

Shane had made an effort too, but it showed. He'd gone with a white shirt crisp, clean, tucked neatly into dark blue pants. It was the kind of shirt that looked good on him without trying, but also the kind that made him feel painfully aware of how simple he looked next to Rose's glittering friends. His sneakers were spotless and expensive, but understated. He looked good. He always looked good. But in this crowd, under violet lights and surrounded by movie stars, he looked like someone trying not to be noticed.

Miles was there too, one of Rose's co-stars. He looked like he'd stepped out of a fashion campaign. His sleeveless black shirt showed off toned arms and a tattoo Shane hadn't noticed before, and his slim grey pants moved like liquid when he walked. The knit hat perched on his head somehow made him look even more expensive. His eyes scanned the room like he was choosing his next scene partner. When he smiled at Shane, it felt like being cast in something dangerous.

Shane ordered a beer and sat down next to rose. Good game tonight," she said. "Oh, thanks. You watched?" She smiled apologetically. "I wish! We just wrapped filming a couple of hours ago. I was checking the score on my phone, though!" She took his hand and squeezed it, pulling it over to rest on her knee. It probably felt natural for her, but Shane felt like everyone was staring at their hands. What's wrong with me?

Everyone else drank vodka. He tried to smile at the right moments. He tried to ignore the way Miles kept giving him slow, appreciative looks. He tried not to think about Ilya. He failed. When Rose dragged him onto the dance floor, he followed. She moved beautifully, carefree and glowing. Shane tried to match her rhythm, but he felt stiff, out of place, like he was wearing someone else's skin. He wondered what Ilya was doing tonight. He wondered if Ilya cared. He wondered why he cared.

Most of the girls on the dance floor seemed more like... Ilya's type. Or at least what Shane thought Ilya was into, based on random photos he'd seen online, not that he ever searched for Ilya Rozanov. He could easily picture Ilya flirting with any of the blonde, tanned girls with dark eyelashes and shimmery lips.

Rose tossed her dark hair and laughed. "I love this song!" she yelled. Shane smiled back. No idea what song it was. He kept his fingers on Rose's waist, barely touching, as she closed her eyes and slid a hand down his chest. Shane knew what was supposed to happen here. He was meant to be... escalating things. Touching her, teasing her. Making her want him. Then they'd kiss and get closer and... So why wasn't he?

When Ilya arrived at the club with his teammates that decided to come along he went immediately to the bar while his teammates started searching for girls. While he was waiting for the server to bring his beer he looked around bobbing his head to the music, searching for a girl, or because he was actually bored, he didn't know. Suddenly his eyes landed on a man just coming at the bar, something was familiar, he knew that face from Rose Landry her Instagram, not like he had been checking or anything. That must mean that Rose was here to and probably Shane. Shane hates going out so he isn't here. His body turned away from the bar in search of Rose and Shane. His stomach filling with dread while scanning.

It was impossible not to spot Rose Landry on the dance floor. Even in a crowd, she stood out. And it took him just a second longer to realize that the guy she had her arms around, who had his hands on her waist, was Shane Hollander.

Screw this. Ilya moved purposefully to the other side of the dance floor. He found a girl in under a minute who was more than happy to press her body against his. By the next song, she had her tongue in his mouth. He wondered if Hollander saw him.

Miles joined them on the dance floor, and Shane dropped his hands from Rose's waist. Rose turned and smiled at Miles, dancing with him for a bit. Miles kept glancing over her shoulder at Shane, almost looking like he was inviting him. Shane looked away, feeling uncomfortable. He stood on the dance floor, barely swaying, arms hanging at his sides. Now that Miles was there, he could probably slip away. Head back to the VIP area. Maybe even go home.

His eyes landed on a guy he was pretty sure was Victor St-Simon, a player for Boston. Victor was smiling at a girl he was dancing with. Shane frowned and glanced around. He spotted Ryan Carmichael. And Cliff Marlow. And Ilya Rozanov. Ilya was dancing with a girl. His head and shoulders towered over most of the crowd. Shane moved through the sea of dancers toward him without even realizing it.

He got close enough to see how the heat of the room made Ilya's damp hair curl tighter, and how his skin glistened like it had during the game. But the games didn't have lighting like this; at the games, the music wasn't pounding, and Ilya wasn't moving like this. The whole room felt charged.

Ilya, he looked like a sin, and he knew it. His shirt was a cheetah-print button-down, the kind of loud, wild pattern only he could pull off. The fabric was thin enough that the heat of the club made it cling to him, catching the light in flashes that revealed the outline of his bear tattoo and the glint of his gold chain beneath. The top few buttons were undone, exposing a teasing line of chest hair and skin that gleamed under the strobes. His black jeans were low-slung and worn soft, and his boots looked like they'd been chosen for stomping hearts. His curls were damp from the heat of the room, tighter than usual, and his skin gleamed like he'd just come off the ice.

The girl he was dancing with had her back to Shane and seemed to be grinding against him. Ilya was watching her, eyes half-closed, lips parted. Shane watched as he bit down on his

lower lip and leaned in to kiss her neck. She turned and kissed him back. It was wild and messy. She had her hands up his shirt. And Shane felt sick. He needed to leave.

Suddenly, he realized he was standing alone in the middle of the dance floor... not dancing. Just... staring. At Ilya. He couldn't let Ilya notice him. Ilya pulled away from the kiss and smiled at his eager partner. She was a great kisser. She had a tongue piercing. He liked that. He glanced around the club, wondering where the best dark corner was to take this further. When his gaze landed on Shane Hollander, Shane's eyes went wide. Had Shane just been... watching him?

Ilya couldn't resist pushing it. He gave Shane what he thought was his sexiest smile and leaned down to whisper in the girl's ear. "Should we take this somewhere else?" He never took his eyes off Shane. "Sorry," she said, surprising him. "Not tonight, babe. I'm here with my boyfriend. He likes to watch me. It turns him on. But I'm leaving with him." What the hell? "Your... boyfriend?" He looked around nervously. She laughed. "Relax. He's not gonna hit you. He likes it, like I said." She kissed his cheek, turned, and left him.

And Shane was gone. Furious, and now even more desperate for release than before he'd left the hotel, Ilya stormed off the dance floor and grabbed Victor by the arm. "I'm out." "With that girl? Right on, man." Ilya didn't respond. Back at the hotel, Ilya jerked off in the shower before throwing himself angrily onto his bed. He couldn't sleep. He curled on his side, watching the minutes tick by on the alarm clock beside his bed.

Stupid Shane Hollander. Stupid Rose Landry. Oh god, what was wrong with him? Why did he care? Ilya had been ready to let that weird girl with the kinky boyfriend do whatever she wanted with him. What did it matter what Shane was doing when Ilya didn't need him? Except Shane had been watching him make out with that girl. And Shane had looked so damn good. Not that his clothes were impressive; Shane's wardrobe was as boring as he was. But something about seeing Shane Hollander in that setting had been... exhilarating.

What if Ilya had been able to get closer to him? Would Shane have danced with him in that packed Montreal nightclub? Would he have let Ilya lift that dumb polo and run his hands over his abs? Would he have tilted his head back and gasped when Ilya kissed his neck? No. That would never happen. Shane was with Rose now. And he and Ilya couldn't even seem friendly, let alone be caught grinding against each other in a club.

He pinched the cross around his neck and rubbed it with his thumb, scowling into the dark room. He'd never been angry about someone else sleeping with someone. He usually didn't care about much. Was it just that Ilya liked his sex with a side of danger, and Shane provided both? Or was he just being childish about having to share his favourite toy with a gorgeous movie star? Somewhere, deep in his mind, there was a third reason screaming for attention.

Ilya ignored it.

A week later- Montreal

Shane liked Rose. He really did. She was warm in a way that made people lean toward her without realizing it. She asked questions and actually listened to the answers. She remembered details he didn't even remember telling her. She handled fame like it was something she'd been born with, not something she'd earned. And she made him feel… normal. Like he was someone easy to understand.

They'd slept together a couple of times. It had been fine. Better than fine, honestly. She was patient and gentle and didn't make him feel stupid when he got nervous. But he could tell she wasn't dazzled by him. She wasn't the type to pretend something was good when it wasn't. And the second time, when he'd struggled again, he'd seen the flicker of surprise in her eyes. Not judgment. Just… realization.

Tonight, she'd invited him to a quiet wine bar in Old Montreal. No friends. No co-stars. Just her. "I thought it'd be nice to talk," she'd said, smiling softly. "Just us." "Totally," Shane nodded. "Yeah, you're right. It's nice." They chatted for a long while, sipping wine and munching on charcuterie. At one point, Rose laughed at a silly joke Shane cracked. "You're so cute," she said. "Has anyone told you how cute you are?"

Shane blushed. "Not recently." "Well, you are. And Miles is extremely jealous." "Of me?" Shane asks confused. She laughed. "No, silly! Of me!" "Oh." Shane let that sink in. "Oh!" Rose's eyes widened. "Wait... you didn't notice that Miles is gay?" "Um... I guess I hadn't really thought about it," Shane lied. "Well, he is. And he's low-key in love with you."

"Oh." Shane felt his face get warm. He hoped the dim lighting would hide it. "Are you... surprised that a young actor is gay, Shane?" "No-I mean... no." She leaned back in her chair. "Are there, like, gay hockey players?" she asked. "I mean, obviously, yes, right? But are there any openly gay hockey players?" "Ye-uh No," Shane said. "I mean, yes. There are gay

players. Bi players. Whatever. I'm sure there must be, but no one has ever... come out. Publicly." Why is she asking me this?

"Hm," she said. "What?" She gave him a small smile. He wasn't sure what it meant. "I'm sorry. I'm going about this the wrong way." "Going about what?" Suddenly, Shane felt like he was staring down a slap shot. He braced himself. She reached out and put her hand on his. "Shane. I really like you. But... I'm getting the vibe that maybe I'm not... doing it for you." "You are! You do! I like you a lot too!" "You like talking to me." "Yeah..." "Do you like... kissing me?" "Sure." She laughed. "Wow." Oh god. Shane was totally messing this up. "I mean... yes, of course I do!" "It's okay, Shane. I just... get the impression... that maybe you'd rather be kissing, just for example... Miles?"

Shane didn't know how to respond. He had never faced a direct question like this before. Except it wasn't really an accusation. Rose wasn't judging him. She was just trying to understand. He stared into his wineglass, realizing he had taken too long to reply. The jig was up. "It's okay," she said again, her voice soft and warm. Her fingers brushed over his hand reassuringly. "I like you," Shane said quietly. "I like being with you. I like talking to you. But the sex part... I know it's... a problem." "It's not a problem," she said. "A problem is something you can solve. We're like... a square peg and a round hole." She scrunched her nose. "Ew. No. Gross. Forget I said that."

She squeezed his hand. "We're not a problem, Shane. We're just not a match." He let out a breath he didn't realize he'd been holding. "For the record… I'm not sure I'm like Miles." "You don't have to figure it out tonight," she said. "But… have you ever been with a man?"

Shane stared at the table. Then nodded short, barely there. "And was it different?" "Of course." "I mean... was it better?" Shane's memory flashed with golden brown curls, sparkling hazel eyes, playful smiles, strong muscles, and hands holding him down as he was filled and... "Yeah," Shane said softly. "Yeah. It was better." He cleared his throat. "The thing is... I kind of prefer to be the hole. Than the peg." "Ha!" Rose threw her head back, laughing. Shane felt lighter all of a sudden.

Later, before they left the bar, Rose shot him a mischievous look over her wineglass and said, "So... should I give Miles your number?" "No. Thanks, but no. I need to... figure some stuff out." "I know. I was just joking. Mostly." They waited outside for her driver.

“Let’s be friends. And I don’t mean in an ‘I hope we can still be friends’ way. I mean it. Let’s be friends. Let’s be best friends. Because I really do care about you a lot, Shane. And I feel like you might not have anyone else to talk to about... certain things.” “I’d like that. You’re right. I don’t. And I care about you too. We’ll be friends. You have my number. Text me. Text me all the time. Please.” “Whenever we’re in the same city, we’ll hang out. I promise.” She hugged him as her driver pulled up. He hugged her back and kissed the top of her head, surprised to find tears in his eyes.

The same night in Boston

Svetlana was Ilya’s favourite. She sat on the edge of his bed now, naked and unbothered, flipping through channels until she found the hockey game she wanted. Her hair was so pale it almost glowed in the dim light, and her blue eyes were sharp with irritation. “Why is Matheson still on the power play?” she demanded in Russian. “He’s been terrible all season.”

Ilya smirked. “Why don’t you coach Colorado then?” “They would be lucky to have me.” He laughed. She was fun. Easy. She didn’t worship him. She didn’t expect anything from him. She liked hockey more than he did, sometimes. And she never asked questions he didn’t want to answer. But tonight, even with her pressed against him, even with her teasing him, even with her perfect body and perfect confidence…

His mind kept drifting. To Montreal. To the club. To Shane. To the way Shane had looked on the dance floor, white shirt glowing under the lights, hair damp, eyes wide when he’d seen Ilya kissing that girl. To the way Shane had disappeared.

Svetlana took a drag of his cigarette and handed it back. “Are we going to fuck again, or should I get dressed? I’m cold.” Ilya hesitated. Then shrugged. “I’m hungry. You should get dressed.” She blinked, surprised, then nodded and stood to gather her clothes. Ilya watched her, but his mind wasn’t on her. Would he have shrugged if it were Shane asking? Would he have turned down another chance to touch him, taste him, ruin him?

No. He wouldn’t have. He hated himself for that. He hated that no one, *no one*, set him on fire the way Shane Hollander did. All these women were beautiful, fun, sexy. But he didn’t think about them afterward. He didn’t ache for them. He didn’t replay their voices in his head. Shane was different. Shane was dangerous. Shane was impossible. And Shane was with Rose now.

Ilya lay back on the bed, staring at the ceiling, jaw tight. He hadn't texted Shane when they were in Montreal. He wasn't going to beg. He wasn't going to risk being ignored. He wasn't going to embarrass himself. But seeing Shane with his hands on Rose in that club… That had felt like a punch. A stupid, unexpected punch. He rubbed the cross around his neck, scowling. Would Rose be with Shane at the All-Star Game? Would she be everywhere Shane went now? Would they get married? For the first time in his life, Ilya wasn't looking forward to the All-Star Game. Not at all.

January 2017- Tampa bay

Shane Hollander had never been this nervous for an All-Star weekend in his life. Six and a half seasons of rivalry, six and a half seasons of pretending, six and a half seasons of stolen nights and unspoken rules and now, for the first time, he and Rozanov were going to be on the same team. No distance. No excuses. No hiding behind jerseys. He wasn't the only one excited about being Ilya's teammate. The press was going wild, writing about this big moment where Shane and Ilya would have to put aside their supposed rivalry and learn to work together. Could it even happen?

He wanted to talk to him. Really talk. He wanted to tell him the truth, about Rose, about himself, about everything he'd been too scared to say out loud. But he had no idea if Rozanov would even listen. He hung his suit in the hotel closet, checked his reflection, and tried to steady his breathing. The white linen shirt, the rolled sleeves, the slate-blue pants, he'd chosen them carefully. He wanted to look like someone who finally understood himself. He wasn't sure he did. But he wanted to try.

But honestly, if he only knew what Ilya was thinking these days. He wasn't sure if Ilya wanted to end things or take it further. He really had no clue what to expect from his temporary teammate this weekend. He checked his watch. The team meet-up downstairs was starting soon. Shane exhaled, then checked himself out in the mirror. Let's do this.

Ilya hadn't texted Hollander in over two months. Not that they'd ever been in regular contact, but this silence felt louder than usual. Recently, Ilya had the feeling that if he texted Shane, he wouldn't get a reply. Shane would probably show the text to his movie star girlfriend, and they'd laugh at how pathetic Ilya was. No, that wouldn't happen. Shane wouldn't do that. Maybe.

Ilya fished a piece of nicotine gum out of his pocket and popped it in his mouth. Did Shane bring his girlfriend to All-Star weekend? Would he introduce her to Ilya? Great. Ilya didn't

have time to worry about it, because at that moment, Hollander walked into the bar. Every head turned. Some guys even stood up.

Ilya leaned against the bar and watched Shane shake hands and clap backs. He saw him smiling and laughing with everyone. He looked relaxed and confident, like a guy who had his life together. Like a guy who didn't question himself anymore. He looked... damn, he looked so good. Like someone who'd stopped running from himself.

And Ilya hated it. He hated how much he wanted to stare. He hated how much he wanted to ask questions. He hated how much he wanted to grab Hollander by the wrist and drag him somewhere private. So he shut down. He leaned against the bar, jaw tight, eyes cold, and pretended he didn't care.

Shane spotted Rozanov the moment he walked into the hotel bar. He'd rehearsed what he wanted to say on the plane. He'd practiced it in the mirror. He'd imagined Rozanov's face softening, imagined the relief, imagined the way things could finally, finally be honest. But Rozanov didn't look at him. He stood at the bar in a stupid palm-tree shirt, shoulders tense, jaw locked, staring at the bottles like they'd personally offended him.

Shane approached slowly. "Hey, teammate," he said, voice soft. Rozanov didn't turn. "Hello, Captain." Hollander swallowed. "Rozanov, can we" starts but he was cut off. "No." Shane blinked. "You don't even know what I was going to say." "I don't need to know." Shane stepped closer. "Rozanov, please. I need to talk to you." Rozanov finally turned his head, just enough to look at him out of the corner of his eye. The look was ice.

"There is nothing to talk about." Shane's breath hitched. "Rozanov… I'm gay." Rozanov froze. For one impossible second, something flickered across his face: hope, fear, longing before he crushed it. "Oh," Rozanov said, voice dripping sarcasm. "Congratulations, Hollander. Want a medal? A rainbow sticker? Should I clap?" Shane flinched. Rozanov kept going, because hurting himself was easier than wanting something he couldn't have.

"Very brave. Truly. 'Hollander discovers he likes dick.' Inspiring stuff." Hollander's face crumpled. Rozanov saw it. And twisted the knife anyway. "Good for you," he added, flat and cruel. "Really. I'm thrilled." Hollander's voice was barely audible. "Rozanov… I broke up with Rose." Rozanov's jaw clenched so hard it hurt. "Not my business." "It is," Shane whispered. "It is your business." "No," Rozanov said, voice low and final. "It isn't." and then underneath his breath and Shane didn't hear it. "больше нет" *not anymore*

Shane took a shaky breath. “Rozanov, please” Before he could finish, Mike Brophy crashed into them, shouting about how iconic it was that Hollander and Rozanov were finally teammates. Shane forced a smile. Rozanov didn’t smile at all. When Brophy left, Hollander tried one last time. “Rozanov, can we talk later? After the team dinner? After anything?”

“No,” Rozanov said. “We’re teammates this weekend. That’s all.” Shane stepped back like he’d been punched. “Okay. Fine.” He walked away. Rozanov didn’t watch him go. He only listened to the sound of his footsteps fading, and told himself this was the only way to survive even if it meant hurting like he is dying. It's for both their benefit. He thinks in himself.

The Florida sun was warm, but Hollander felt cold. He sat on a lounge chair by the pool, sunglasses on, pretending to scroll through his phone. He wasn’t reading anything. He was watching Rozanov. Rozanov was in the pool with a couple of players and their kids, being loud and ridiculous and perfect. He splashed them, let them climb on him, pretended to lose races on purpose.

He looked happy. Shane hated how much that hurt. At one point, Rozanov looked up, directly at him. Hollander’s breath caught. Rozanov immediately looked away. Like Hollander was the sun and he couldn’t risk getting burned. Later, Rozanov climbed out of the pool, water dripping down his chest, swimsuit clinging to his thighs. He shook his head like a dog, spraying water everywhere. Some of it hit Shane.

“Rozanov,” Shane said, startled. Rozanov didn’t apologize. Didn’t tease. Didn’t smirk. He just said, “You’re in the splash zone, Hollander,” and walked past him. Hollander stared after him, throat tight. He missed the teasing. He missed the smirks. He missed the stupid jokes. He missed Rozanov. And Rozanov, walking away with his jaw clenched, missed him too.

The all- star game

The arena lights were blinding, the crowd loud enough to shake the boards, but Hollander barely noticed any of it. All he could feel was the rush of adrenaline and the electric awareness of Rozanov skating beside him. They’d never played on the same team before. Not once. And now that they were here now that they were actually doing it, it felt unreal. It felt right. Rozanov moved to right wing for him. For him. Hollander tried not to think too hard about that.

The puck dropped. The play unfolded. And suddenly they were flying, Rozanov streaking up the right side, Hollander matching him stride for stride. Their passes were effortless, instinctive, like they'd been doing this their whole lives. Shane felt something warm bloom in his chest. *We're good together. We've always been good together. Maybe… maybe after this, we can talk. Maybe he'll listen. Maybe everything will be okay.*

Rozanov took a pass from the defenseman and took off. Hollander was right there with him, reading him like a second language. Rozanov crossed the blue line, fired the puck over to him, Hollander knocked it back, and Rozanov returned it at the last second. Hollander shot it cleanly into the top corner. The crowd roared. Shane threw his arms up, grinning so hard his cheeks hurt. He turned and Rozanov was already there, grabbing him, pulling him in, holding him tight.

Shane's breath caught. Rozanov's arms were strong around him, his chest warm even through the gear, his breath hot against Hollander's neck. Hollander wrapped his arms around him too, laughing into his shoulder. For a moment, it felt like everything was going to be okay. Like this was the start of something. Like Tampa was the place everything finally changed. Then Rozanov leaned in and kissed him. Not on the cheek this time. Not on the face. But on the side of his helmet quick, hard, almost rough.

Playful enough to pass as a joke. Real enough to make Hollander's heart stutter. "What the hell, Rozanov?" Shane laughed, breathless. Rozanov didn't laugh. He forced a grin, cheeks flushed, eyes too bright. "Nice goal, Hollander." "Nice assist," Shane answered, shooting him a confused smile. Rozanov shrugged, thumped him on the back in an overly macho way, and skated toward the bench. Hollander watched him go, chest warm, hope blooming like something unstoppable. Okay, he thought. After the game. We'll talk. He'll listen. Everything will be fine.

Ilya didn't look back. He couldn't. His throat was tight, his chest aching, his hands still tingling from where he'd held Hollander. He'd kissed him. He'd actually kissed him. Not on the cheek. Not on the mouth. But close enough that it felt like a confession. Close enough that it felt like goodbye. He'd seen the opening Hollander smiling, flushed, happy and he'd taken it. One last moment. One last touch.

One last chance to pretend he could have this. He skated to the bench with his jaw clenched, blinking hard. Last time, he told himself. Last time holding him. Last time touching him. Last time kissing him. Last time letting himself want him. He sat down, gripping his stick so tightly his knuckles went white. He didn't dare look at Hollander again. Because if he did, he knew he'd break.

After the game at the beach, it was quiet, the waves rolling in soft and steady, the moonlight turning the water silver. Shane sat alone in the sand, replaying the game in his mind, the passes, the goal, the way Rozanov had grabbed him and kissed the side of his helmet like he couldn't help himself.

It had felt like hope. Someone sat beside him, close enough that their shoulders almost touched. He didn't need to look. "Found you," Rozanov said. Hollander's heart leapt. "You were looking for me?" "Of course not." But his voice was too soft. Too tired. Too full of something Hollander couldn't name. They sat in silence, the ocean whispering in front of them. Rozanov planted his hands in the sand, close enough that Hollander could feel the heat of him. Hollander swallowed. "Rozanov… about earlier." Rozanov didn't answer.

Shane tried again. "The game. The way we played together. The way you" "Kissed you?" Rozanov said, voice sharp. Hollander's breath caught. "Yeah." Rozanov let out a humourless laugh. "Don't read into it, Hollander. I was being an asshole. Like always." Hollander shook his head. "No. It felt" "It wasn't," Rozanov cut in. "Whatever you think it was, it wasn't." Hollander stared at him, confused and hurt. "Rozanov, I thought" "That's your problem," Rozanov said, voice cracking. "You think." Hollander flinched.

Rozanov dragged a hand through his hair, looking away toward the dark water. His jaw was tight, his shoulders tense, like he was holding himself together with both hands. "Rozanov," Hollander whispered. "Why are you doing this?" Rozanov didn't answer. Hollander reached out, hesitating, then let his hand fall into the sand between them. "I told you the truth. Doesn't that matter?" "No." "It does."

"No," Rozanov repeated, voice tight. "It doesn't. Not for me." Shane felt something inside him twist. "Rozanov" Rozanov moved his hand closer. Their thumbs brushed. Shane froze. Rozanov whispered, barely audible, voice breaking in a way Shane had never heard. "Я не могу тянуть тебя вниз только потому, что я был достаточно глуп, чтобы влюбиться в тебя." *I can't drag you down with me just because I was stupid enough to fall in love with you.*

Shane didn't understand the words but he understood the pain in them. It hit him like a wave. "Rozanov…" he breathed. Ilya pulled his hand away like he'd been burned. Then, in Russian again harsher, like he was forcing the words out. "Я не могу это делать. Не с тобой." *I can't do this. Not to you.*

Shane's voice cracked. "Rozanov… what are you saying?" Ilya stood abruptly, brushing sand from his hands. His face twisted grief, longing, fear, before he buried it under something colder. He forced a smirk. A cruel one. A lie.

"I don't need your mouth or your body to warm my dick anymore, Hollander." Shane went absolutely still. The words hit him like a punch sharp, humiliating, unexpected, the kind of pain that doesn't register at first because it's too deep, too sudden, too wrong. His breath stuttered. His throat closed. His eyes burned. And Ilya saw it.

He saw every flicker of hurt cross Shane's face the shock, the disbelief, the way his mouth parted like he'd been physically struck. Ilya hated himself for it. Hated the way the lie tasted like blood in his mouth. Hated that he'd said it. Hated that he meant the opposite with every cell in his body. But he didn't take it back. He couldn't. If he softened now, he'd fall apart. If he told the truth now, he'd ruin them both.

Shane stood too, chest heaving, sand clinging to his palms where he'd pushed himself up. "That's not true," he said, voice shaking but fierce. Rozanov didn't look at him. "It is." "No, it's not," Shane said, stepping closer, anger and heartbreak tangled in his voice. "You don't get to pretend I meant nothing." Rozanov's jaw clenched so hard it trembled. "I'm not pretending." "You are," Shane said, louder now, desperate. "You're lying to me. You're lying to yourself. And you're too scared to admit it."

Ilya flinched barely, but enough. Shane saw it. And it hurt even more, because it meant he was right. Shane's voice cracked. "You don't get to hurt me just because you're hurting." Rozanov looked away, breathing hard, shoulders rising and falling like he'd just skated a full shift. His hands curled into fists in the sand. Shane stepped even closer, close enough that their shadows touched. "You don't get to push me away and pretend you don't care." Rozanov's voice came out low, raw, almost broken. "I have to." "Why?" Shane demanded, the word ripping out of him.

Ilya didn't answer. Because the real answer was still echoing in Russian in his head: *I can't drag you down with me just because I was stupid enough to fall in love with you*. And he would rather choke on it than let Shane hear it. Shane's voice softened, cracked open. "Rozanov… please. Just tell me the truth." Ilya squeezed his eyes shut. If he looked at Shane now at the hurt, at the hope, at the stupid, impossible tenderness he would break. He would reach for him. He would ruin everything.

So he didn’t look. He turned away, voice barely holding together. “Goodnight, Hollander.” He didn’t wait for a response. He walked back toward the hotel, shoulders rigid, fists clenched, every step looking like it cost him something. Like he was walking away from oxygen. Like he was walking away from the only thing he’d ever wanted. Shane stayed on the beach long after he was gone. He didn’t cry. He didn’t move. He didn’t breathe for a long moment.

He just stood there, staring at the place where Ilya had been, feeling like someone had reached inside him and scooped out everything that mattered. He felt hollow. He felt stupid. He felt abandoned. And Ilya, walking away with his jaw clenched and his eyes burning, felt the same and hated that he couldn’t turn back. He hated that he’d hurt Shane. He hated that he’d lied. He hated that he’d told the truth in Russian where Shane couldn’t understand it. He hated that he loved him. And he hated that love wasn’t enough.

After Tampa, Shane and Ilya fall into a silence that feels like punishment. They don’t text. They don’t call. They don’t even look at each other during games unless they have to. Shane tries to bury himself in hockey, but every time he sees Ilya on the highlight reels, something in his chest twists. He keeps telling himself they’ll talk eventually. That the beach wasn’t the end. That Ilya didn’t mean what he said.

Ilya, meanwhile, throws himself into the season with a kind of desperation that worries his teammates. He plays harder, hits harder, scores more anything to drown out the memory of Shane’s face on the beach. Anything to forget the Russian words he let slip. Anything to forget that he meant them. They avoid each other like it’s life or death. And then Ilya disappears.

One morning, Shane hears whispers in the Montreal locker room: Rozanov didn’t travel with Boston. Rozanov isn’t in Nashville. Rozanov is just… gone. Shane’s stomach drops. He plays one of the worst games of his season because he can’t stop thinking about it. The second the final buzzer sounds, he checks his phone again. Still nothing. He finally breaks and calls Ilya, something he’s never done before.

Ilya answers. His voice is flat, exhausted, older somehow. He tells Shane he’s in Moscow. His father is dead. Shane’s heart cracks open. He wants to say a thousand things. He wants to fly to Moscow. He wants to hold him. But Ilya keeps the call short. He sounds like he’s trying not to fall apart. Shane offers help. Ilya refuses. Shane offers comfort. Ilya deflects.

Before hanging up, Ilya says, quietly, “Goodbye, Hollander.” Shane doesn’t sleep that night. Two days later, Ilya calls again, late, drunk, lonely. He doesn’t say much. He doesn’t have to. Shane listens to him breathe. Listens to him try not to cry. Listens to him pretend he’s fine. It’s the closest they’ve been since Tampa. And it hurts. When the call ends, Shane sits alone in the dark, phone still in his hand, wishing he could do something anything to make Ilya’s voice sound normal.

But he can’t. Not when Ilya won’t let him in. Not when Ilya is already pulling away. And Ilya, thousands of miles away in Moscow, stares at his ceiling and tells himself this distance is necessary. That he can’t drag Shane down with him. That he can’t want him. That he can’t love him. But he does. And it’s killing him.

April 2017 - Montreal

Shane saw Ilya before he even stepped onto the ice. He was standing near the centreline, helmet off, hair still soft and dry around his face, talking to a teammate with that effortless confidence Shane knew too well. The sight of him hit like a punch, familiar and foreign at the same time. They hadn’t spoken since the last drunken phone call. Not a word. Not a text. Not even a nod. Just silence. And now, here he was. Close enough to touch. Far enough to feel unreachable.

Shane skated a slow loop around his half of the ice, pretending to warm up, pretending not to stare. But his eyes kept drifting back to the centreline to Ilya’s skate, the toe of it drifting over the red stripe like a dare. Or an invitation. Or nothing at all. Shane couldn’t tell anymore. He circled again, heart pounding, and when he reached the line he slowed not stopping, not approaching, just hovering there, like gravity had shifted. Ilya didn’t look at him.

Not directly. But Shane saw the tiny flicker the way Ilya’s jaw tightened, the way his fingers flexed on his stick, the way his eyes darted toward him for half a second before snapping away. It was the closest thing to acknowledgment he’d gotten in months. Shane’s throat tightened. He wanted to say something. Anything. But they weren’t speaking. Not anymore. Not after the beach. Not after the Russian words he didn’t understand. Not after the lie Ilya had thrown at him like a blade. So Shane skated past him, pretending to check the tape on his stick, pretending he wasn’t falling apart inside.

Hayden bumped his elbow. “Rozanov staring you down again?” Shane forced a shrug. “He’s just… Rozanov.” “Guy’s a menace,” Hayden muttered. “Hope he doesn’t try anything

tonight.” Shane didn’t answer. He kept skating, but his eyes kept drifting back to the place where Ilya had stood, where they’d almost spoken, where something had almost happened. He didn’t know it yet, but this would be the last moment before everything shattered. The game had that sharp, electric edge that always came when Shane and Ilya were on the ice together. They weren’t speaking not anymore but their bodies still knew each other’s rhythms, their instincts still tangled like muscle memory. Shane won a puck battle in the corner and burst free, skating backward for a second just to throw Ilya a look over his shoulder.

A look that was half challenge, half flirtation, all trouble. Ilya felt it like a spark to dry tinder. He grinned couldn’t help it and launched himself after him. But Shane was flying tonight. Faster than usual. Faster than Ilya expected. Faster than Ilya could close the gap. And then. Oh god. It happened too fast. One moment Shane was streaking down the boards, the next he collided at full speed with Cliff Marlow. The impact was brutal, the sound sickening. Shane’s body snapped against the glass and then crumpled to the ice, motionless.

Ilya’s heart stopped. “Shane?” He didn’t even realize he’d said it out loud. The arena noise warped into a high, screeching ring. Bright lights blurred. Shapes moved around Shane’s body trainers, medics, teammates but all Ilya could see was the stillness. “Don’t move, all right? Stay still. We’re going to take you off the ice.” Shane blinked, confused. “Ice?” “Hollander?” another voice said. Shane’s lips parted. “Ilya?” He didn’t know if he’d spoken or only thought it.

Ilya pushed forward instinctively, but a medic blocked him. “Is he all right?” Ilya demanded. His voice sounded wrong thin, unsteady, terrified. Shane forced a sound. “Mmokay.” He wasn’t. But he didn’t want to hear Ilya sound like that. “We’re moving you onto the spinal board, Shane. Keep your head still.” Spinal board? Ilya surged forward again, but the medic’s tone sharpened. “Rozanov, step back.” The dark blur of Ilya’s body retreated a few inches but not far. Never far. Shane slurred, “We’re not alone. Ilya… they can see us.”

Hands lifted him. Straps tightened around his arms, his legs, his chest. “Is he all right?” Ilya asked again, voice cracking. No one answered him. Shane swallowed. “Tell him… tell him I’m fine.” He wanted to turn his head, to see Ilya’s face, but he couldn’t move. Suddenly he was in the air, carried toward the tunnel. The rafters and banners drifted past above him. The crowd applauded, a low roar that made his skull throb. Oh god. What if I’m not okay? What if I never walk again? “What happened?” Shane forced out. “You took a blow to the head. You went into the boards.” Fuck. “There’s an ambulance waiting.”

Shane's eyes stung. He was scared. Really scared. "My parents," he whispered. "They're here." "We'll make sure they know where you're going." He closed his eyes too heavy to keep open. "Stay awake, Shane. Come on." "Yeah. Sure. He blinked hard, trying to stay awake, trying to stay present, trying not to think about the look on Ilya's face when he'd gone down. The look he'd never forget.

The hospital

Ilya didn't sleep. He lay awake in the dark hotel room, replaying the hit over and over the sound of Shane's body hitting the boards, the way he'd gone limp, the way his helmet had bounced off the ice. Every time Ilya closed his eyes, he saw Shane lying there, still and wrong and terrifying. By morning, he couldn't take it anymore. He told the team he was going to the hospital as captain. That was the excuse. The truth was simpler: he needed to see Shane breathing.

The woman at the front desk recognized him immediately and gave him the room number with a smile that made his stomach twist. He didn't want to be impressive. He wanted to not feel like he was going to throw up. The door was cracked open. He pushed it gently. Shane was propped up in the bed, pale and bruised, left arm in a sling, eyes heavy with pain meds. The room was empty except for him.

Shane looked up and lit up. "Ilyaaaaaa," he breathed, like it was a relief. Ilya's chest clenched. "Hollander." He stepped inside, awkward, unsure, terrified of what he'd see up close. Shane gave a small, shy smile. "I'm okay. Mostly. Concussion. Broken collarbone. Out for the playoffs." Ilya swallowed. "Could have been worse." "Yeah." Silence stretched between them thick, fragile, full of everything they hadn't said for months.

"Marlow feels bad," Ilya muttered. "He didn't mean" "I know," Shane said, cutting him off with a soft laugh. "It's hockey. We all get our bell rung eventually." He was smiling. Actually smiling. High as hell, probably. But alive. Ilya's knees almost gave out. Shane must have seen something in his face, because he lifted his good hand and whispered, "Hey. Heeeey" That was all it took.

Ilya closed the door behind him and crossed the room in three long strides. He reached out, hesitating for a fraction of a second, then brushed his fingers over Shane's cheek. Shane leaned into it like it was instinct. "You scared me," Ilya said, voice low and raw. "Scared myself," Shane murmured. "But you will be okay?" "Yeah. I'll be okay." Shane blinked slowly, pupils blown. "I wanted to tell you last night. I wish I could've texted you. I was" "Shhh."

Ilya's fingers slid into Shane's hair, and Shane's eyes fluttered shut, his breath catching like the touch meant something. "I was looking forward to beating you last night," Shane whispered. Ilya's heart twisted. "Yes." "I'm mostly mad at Marlow for ruining it." Ilya actually laughed, a small, broken sound. Shane opened his eyes again, soft and unfocused. "When will we get a chance again?" And that was the moment Ilya almost said it. Almost said I'll stay. Almost said I'll take care of you. Almost said I love you. But he couldn't. He couldn't survive wanting Shane any more than he already did.

"I will be busy," Ilya said, forcing a smirk that felt like it cracked something inside him. "Winning the Stanley Cup." Shane grimaced. "Right. Yeah." "I'm sorry," Ilya said quietly. "It sucks," Shane whispered. "I know."

Shane blinked slowly, pupils blown, his voice soft and unfocused. "Ilya… I wanted to ask you something. I kept meaning to text you but… I never had the courage." Ilya's breath caught. Shane wasn't fully present that much was obvious. His words were loose around the edges, drifting, unguarded. The kind of honesty he would never allow himself sober. Shane squeezed Ilya's fingers, clumsy and warm. "I just… I wanted you. I wanted you to come with me." Ilya's chest tightened painfully. "Hollander…"

Shane kept going, unaware of how much he was revealing. "I kept typing it out. 'Come to the cottage with me.' And then I'd delete it. Because I didn't want to bother you. Or scare you. Or make you think I was… using you." Ilya swallowed hard. Shane was reaching for comfort, for familiarity, for the one person he trusted in this moment of fear and pain. And Ilya let him. Because he couldn't not.

Shane's voice dropped to a whisper. "I just… I want you there. With me. Please." Ilya knew Shane didn't fully understand what he was asking. Didn't understand the weight of it. Didn't understand how much it cost Ilya to hear it. He should say no. He should protect them both. He should step back. But Shane looked at him like he was the only solid thing in a spinning world. So Ilya lied.

Ilya reached out, unable to stop himself, and brushed his thumb gently over the freckles scattered across Shane's cheek. "Of course," he said. Shane's face softened into a dreamy, relieved smile the kind he only ever gave when the pain meds stripped away all his defences. "Then come," he whispered. "Come with me." Ilya's voice cracked. "Maybe."

Shane beamed, blissfully unaware that *maybe* meant *no*, unaware that Ilya was only saying it because he was fragile and hurting and half-conscious, unaware that Ilya would have said anything in that moment just to keep him calm. Unaware that Ilya was breaking.

May 2017- Ottawa

Shane spends the first weeks of May recovering at his parents' house in Ottawa. His concussion slowly improves, his collarbone heals, but the emotional part doesn't. Montreal is knocked out in the first round without him, and he blames himself more than he admits. He watches Boston's playoff run on TV with his parents. He sees Ilya playing hurt protecting his ribs, turning away from hits, skating like every breath hurts. He sees the frustration in Ilya's face, the exhaustion, the way he pushes through it anyway.

And he sees it all from a distance. Because they aren't talking. Not since the hospital. Not since the beach. Not since everything got too complicated to pretend it was casual. Shane keeps checking his phone anyway. He keeps imagining a message that never comes. He keeps replaying the hospital room in his head the warmth of Ilya's hand, the softness in his eyes and he hates himself for wanting more. He almost tells his parents the truth. He almost says I'm in love with someone I can't have. But he swallows it down, the way he always does.

Meanwhile, Ilya's season ends in the second round. He's bruised, exhausted, and furious with himself. He watches the rest of the playoffs alone in his Boston penthouse, surrounded by cars he doesn't care about and silence he can't escape. He doesn't text Shane. He doesn't call. He doesn't answer the cottage invitation that still sits unread in his messages. He tells himself it's better this way. Cleaner. Safer. When Scott Hunter kisses a man on live TV after winning the Cup, the entire hockey world explodes. Shane watches with his parents, stunned. Ilya watches alone, stunned for different reasons because the world didn't end, because someone else got to be brave, because it wasn't him.

But he doesn't reach out to Shane. Not even then. Instead, he packs a suitcase. He leaves Boston quietly, without telling anyone. He books a flight to Barcelona a place where no one knows him, where no one expects anything from him, where he can disappear for a while.

Barcelona is loud and warm and alive in a way Ilya hasn't felt in years. He walks for hours every day, letting the sun burn the edges of his thoughts away. He eats alone. Drinks alone. Sleeps alone. At first. One afternoon, he wanders off a main street and finds himself in a neighbourhood full of rainbow flags, open terraces, men holding hands, laughing, kissing in broad daylight. Gaixample. He doesn't know the name yet. He just knows it feels like stepping into a world he was never allowed to imagine.

No one recognizes him. No one stares. No one whispers his name. It's intoxicating. He lets himself be pulled into bars, into conversations, into the orbit of men who smile at him without knowing who he is. The first is Mateo, an architect with soft curls and a gentle voice. Mateo asks him questions he doesn't answer, touches him with a kind of careful warmth that should feel comforting. But Ilya feels distant, like he's underwater, watching himself from far away. Mateo's kindness only makes the emptiness sharper.

Another night, there's Lucas, a tourist, loud and charming and drunk on vacation freedom. Lucas laughs too easily, kisses too quickly, and talks like he's trying to forget someone too. They're both pretending. Lucas calls him handsome, and Ilya feels nothing but a hollow ache. Then there's Adrián, a dancer with a body that moves like music and eyes that draw attention wherever he goes. Adrián touches him like he expects Ilya to melt. Ilya doesn't. He feels the shape of Shane's freckles under his thumb instead. He hears Shane's voice in the hospital room. He remembers the cottage invitation he never answered.

He leaves before anything can happen. Adrián watches him go with a puzzled frown, unable to understand how someone could walk away from him. Ilya can't understand it either. Night after night, he keeps trying. Bar after bar. Body after body. Not for pleasure, not for distraction just because it's easier than sitting alone with the truth. But every time someone leans in close, every time a stranger's hand slides over his arm, every time he lets himself be pulled into a dark corner, he's aware of one thing: It isn't Shane.

And that knowledge sits in him like a stone. One Sunday, he sits at an outdoor café in Gaixample, sunglasses on, pretending to read a menu he can't understand. Around him, couples laugh, share pastries, lean into each other like it's the easiest thing in the world. Two men walk past holding hands. Another pair kisses across a tiny table. Someone feeds his boyfriend a piece of cake. Something inside him cracks.

He realizes he doesn't want strangers. He doesn't want Barcelona. He doesn't want freedom. He wants Shane the freckles under his thumb, the soft voice saying his name, the cottage he pretended not to hear about. Before he can stop himself, he pulls out his phone. His hands shake as he types.

Ilya: *Do you remember asking me to your cottage*

He stares at the message, chest tight, pulse loud in his ears. He doesn't add anything else. He doesn't soften it. He doesn't explain.He hits send. For a few seconds, nothing happens. Then

his phone buzzes. Once. Twice. A third time. Shane is awake. Shane is reading. Shane is answering. The screen lights up.

Shane: *Yeah. I remember.*

Another bubble appears almost immediately, like Shane didn't even stop to breathe.

Shane: *I didn't think you did.*

Shane: *The offer's still there.*

Shane: *If you want to come… you can.*

And then, after a beat that feels like a held breath:

Shane: *I'd like you to.*

Ilya closes his eyes. It's not a confession. It's not a demand. It's not even forgiveness.

Ilya: *I'm coming to the cottage.*

And he immediately books a flight for that night. On the plane, he spirals. He imagines every possible disaster: Shane turning him away, Shane regretting the invitation, Shane realizing this is a mistake. But beneath all the fear, there's a quiet, trembling happiness he can't shake. He presses his forehead to the window and watches the sky turn gold around the wing. He's going to see Shane. He's going to the cottage. And for once, he isn't running away.

Shane spends the entire day pacing the cottage. He cleans the kitchen twice, rearranges the books on the coffee table, stands at the window until he's memorized every tree outside. His heart is a mess terrified, hopeful, aching. He keeps replaying the text in his head, the one he never thought he'd get. He doesn't know what Ilya wants. He doesn't know what he wants, except that he wants Ilya here.

When he finally hears tires on gravel, he goes still. Completely still. He doesn't breathe. He doesn't move. He just listens. A car door shuts. Footsteps. A pause. Then a soft knock on the cottage door. Shane opens it before he can lose his nerve. Ilya stands on the porch, duffel bag slung over his shoulder, hair messy from travel, eyes wide and uncertain in a way Shane has never seen. For a moment, neither of them speaks. The silence between them is thick, electric, full of everything they've avoided for months.

Shane steps forward first. Just one step. Ilya mirrors him. Another step. They're close now close enough that Shane can see the faint stubble on Ilya's jaw, close enough that Ilya can see the freckles he touched in the hospital. "You came," Shane whispers. "You asked," Ilya breathes. Something breaks open between them. Shane reaches up, fingers trembling, and

touches Ilya's cheek the same place Ilya touched him in the hospital. Ilya closes his eyes like the touch hurts. When he opens them again, they're shining.

Shane leans in first. Ilya meets him halfway. The kiss is soft at the start hesitant, trembling, like they're both afraid the other will pull away. Then Ilya's hand slides to the back of Shane's neck, and Shane's fingers curl into Ilya's shirt, and the kiss deepens, still gentle, still careful, but full of months of longing and fear and everything they never said. When they finally pull apart, foreheads touching, both of them breathing hard, Shane whispers, "Ilya… what are we doing?" "I don't know," Ilya says, voice rough, thumb brushing over Shane's freckles like he's memorizing them. "But I want to find out."

End Notes

I used Deepl for the Russian, so I don't know if it's good. I can write a second chapter like in the show and in the book when they are at the cottage. I am also very bad at tagging, so if you guys have more suggestions for tags, feel free to let me know. English isn't my native language, so if you see any mistakes, don't hesitate to write the good version in the comments.

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!