don't tell them what you told me (don't even tell them that you know me)

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by astrodarlings

Summary

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>
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>
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or, things go a little bit differently, starting at the club. ilya has spent his whole life afraid, and he's tired of it.

or, this is not a love story, but a story about love. featuring crossword puzzles, phone calls, anger, joy, grief, hospitals, first dates, burning houses, ill-timed reveals, sunsets, christmas, birthdays, and excessive use of the word 'boring'. not specifically in that order.

Notes

DISCLAIMER: I have not read the books, I know absolutely nothing about hockey, and less about Russian speaking patterns, so if you are a purist, this fic is sadly not for you. If you can look past that, welcome in. I also fucked with the timeline, very significantly.

All Russian used here comes from google translate/the internet, and there is a key at the bottom for what they say. If you notice anything wrong, please let me know so that I can fix it! I know that the internet can be finnicky with these things.

Also, I made a companion playlist for this fic! Here's a link: https://open.spotify.com/playlist/1YA2F2LiFxyXlTHef6gr2J?si=pwaYK4SrSDGb_GUKE9aODw&pi=EtnjHACyTFyZx

title from "Merry Christmas, Please Don't Call" by the bleachers

See the end of the work for more notes

CIEL NIGHTCLUB, MONTREAL
NOVEMBER 2016

Montreal won, 1-0. *Shane* won.

Ilya would blame their loss that night on his exhaustion; insist that he hadn't been sleeping well, he must be coming down with something. It wouldn't even really be a lie, because the moment Ilya saw Shane skate up to the center, he'd thought he might vomit.

He'd barely slept the night before, tossing and turning until Connors had thrown a pillow at his face and told him to *just lay fucking still*. He'd given up after that, and gone out to the cramped excuse for a balcony for a smoke. He'd sat there in the cold until the sun finally came up above the city line.

Wondering if Shane would text.

Wondering if he should text first.

Ilya had typed out no less than a hundred messages to Shane in the past month. Sometimes they were pleading apologies. Some just said *hello*. *How are you? I miss you.* And of course, the one that he had written only once before immediately deleting it: *I love you.*

All of them went unsent, which meant that Ilya was stuck reading and re-reading their same old conversations. Five years of them.

Jane

Tuesday, October 25 at 3:15 PM
Ready to lose in like four days?
You wish
Saturday, October 29 at 12:46 PM
See you soon

Shane had barely even looked at him during the game; he hadn't said a word, so neither had Ilya. No playful jabs; no cocky smiles. And if Ilya had shoved the other man into the boards a little harder than necessary, it was just their rivalry. It had nothing to do with the bruises under his eyes or the shortness of his temper.

But now —

The game was over. Shane was gone. And Ilya needed a drink. Several, actually; he needed to get drunk enough that he stopped thinking about *him*. That he didn't feel every muscle in his body ache and the loud music ringing in his ears.

The strobing lights of the club burned his tired eyes, but at least they would hide the heavy bags beneath them. Ilya made a beeline for the bar, shoving his way through the people lined

up waiting for drinks.

It was never going to be a good night — that ship had sailed a month ago — but it could have been fine.

It could have been fine, if Ilya hadn't spent the last three weeks reading every tabloid about Rose Landry. If he hadn't looked at every Instagram post, read every comment, learned more about the woman than even Shane probably knew, Ilya could have come and gone without ever knowing Shane was there that night.

But Ilya was familiar enough with Rose Landry now to know for certain that the man standing across the bar was without a doubt Miles St. Clair, her friend and costar. He knew that this could only mean two things.

If Miles was here, so was she.

If she was here, so was *Shane*.

Ilya felt his stomach drop as he turned away, pressing his back against the bar counter while he scanned the club for the Звезда дня. He wasn't difficult to find. Ilya's eyes locked onto Shane with the same ease as they did on the ice, as if drawn by magnets. He'd had a lot of practice looking for the man after all; in the crowd at every awards ceremony and in the face of every woman he fucked.

There he was. Shane Hollander, looking almost the same as he had a month ago, the day he'd run out of Ilya's living room, mouth full of *I'm sorry*s and *I can't do this.* Almost.

Except everything was different. Ilya knew Shane. Shane didn't go to crowded bars. He didn't drink during the season. He didn't dance with girls and let them slide their hands up his shirt, drag their lips along his jaw. No; only Ilya got to do that.

Not anymore, he supposed. Only пиздец Rose Landry got to do that now.

It took two minutes too long for Ilya to get a beer in his hand, and five more to get the whiskey shots he wanted — because beer implied pacing and he didn't want to feel this gradually. So he drank, let the noise push against his ribs until he felt like he couldn't breathe, and wished that he had just gone back to the hotel.

A hand clapped his shoulder. Ilya turned to see Marleau saddle up beside him and snag the last shot. "Hey, thanks Cap," Marleau grinned, slamming the glass back down on the bar.

"да," Ilya rolled his eyes, "You're welcome."

Marleau didn't notice the tension in his shoulders, or the hard-set line of his lips. He hooked an arm around Ilya and dragged him onto the dancefloor. But at least this was familiar; drinking his feelings away and dancing with the first beautiful woman he saw and going home to fuck her with his eyes closed. He was good at this.

Ilya didn't sulk over breakups — or whatever it was that had happened with Shane. He didn't wait around for anyone to text him. He didn't get sick at the thought of his

conquests kissing someone else. He didn't chase.

Chasing was for people who needed to be wanted.

Ilya had never needed that. He had been wanted his whole life; scouts and coaches and women, hands reaching for him, eyes tracking him across rooms. Ilya had never needed to want. Wanting was uncomfortable. And wanting something bad enough to ask for it meant that he would have to face the consequences of not getting it.

And yet, despite himself, Ilya *wanted*.

He had never been in love before; it was uncharted territory. Ilya felt like he was skating on thin ice, knowing it would crack, but not knowing when he would fall through.

Maybe he already had, the moment Shane had walked out and Ilya hadn't followed. He certainly felt like he was drowning.

But just because Shane didn't want him didn't mean that Ilya wasn't wanted. It wasn't long before his teammates had drifted away, replaced by some blonde who pressed herself against his chest, pulling him close enough that he could smell the tequila on her breath.

She kissed him like she wanted him, and Ilya kissed her back because it was easy. But she tasted nothing like Shane, and hell, he wasn't drunk enough for this.

Ilya carefully turned the woman around under the guise of wanting to grind against her ass, which she enthusiastically complied with. Around them, bodies moved in time with the bass, and the lights strobed and fractured everything around him. He let himself dissociate, his body moved only by routine.

It could have been ten minutes that passed like this; it could have been an hour.

He only snapped back into reality when, through the wall of bodies, Ilya saw Shane standing rigid and alone in the middle of the dancefloor. He wasn't dancing, or smiling. He was just watching. Watching *Ilya.*

Something hot and angry flared in Ilya's chest.

Fine.

If Shane wanted a show, Ilya would give him one.

He tightened his grip on the blonde's hips, leaned down to murmur something filthy in her ear that made her laugh and press back harder against him. He tipped his head back, eyes half-lidded, made sure Shane could see the woman's hands grasping at his biceps, could see Ilya's mouth planting kisses on her neck.

It was all a performance. But Ilya had spent his whole life performing; he could make a show of liking this woman, even if she was too skinny and too blonde and too drunk and too *not Shane Hollander*.

Shane's jaw clenched, and even through the crowd, Ilya could tell that he was upset. *Good*, he thought, and he hated himself for it. If Ilya had to be miserable, he wasn't going to do it alone.

It was only a few seconds before Shane was turning, storming off.

And the Metros had the audacity to call Ilya an asshole; if only they could see their golden boy now. Their on-ice rivalry had devolved into a mean-spirited, petty pussy competition.

And Shane was winning. Not because Ilya couldn't get a girl. No, Shane was winning because even with a half-naked woman grinding her ass into his dick, Ilya could only think about *him*.

Shane had started this, the day he walked out and got a girlfriend just to prove something. Shane had started it, and he was winning it. So why had he looked at Ilya like it was *his* fault? Like *he* was the one who had stepped on Shane's heart.

He watched as Shane pushed his way through the crowd. If he had been a little less drunk, a little less hurt, he probably would have let it go. If he could think about anything that wasn't Shane. But he wasn't, and he couldn't.

Ilya pushed his conquest to the side with a muttered apology and followed after Shane, to the back of the club and through a back door that almost certainly for public use.

The door slammed shut behind Ilya as he stepped out into the alley. The cold air hit him with enough force to clear his head for half a second. He found Shane against the brick wall of the club's exterior, running his hands through his hair like he wanted to curl in on himself.

At the sound of the door, Shane turned sharply. The surprise on his face lasted a heartbeat before it settled into something else — anger, maybe sadness.

And Ilya already regretted coming out here.

Maybe it was the alcohol. Maybe it was the month of silence, of sleepless nights and unsaid words piling up inside him. Maybe it was the simple, terrifying certainty that if Shane walked away again, it could be for good. That if he didn't say something now, he never would.

Resolve settled heavy in Ilya's chest.

"Shane Hollander," he breathed unsteadily. "Running away from me again." He was used to this; chirps and sarcasm came easy. "Starting to hurt my feelings."

It came out sharper than he'd meant it, but only a little.

"What the hell are you doing here?" Shane demanded.

"Smoke break," Ilya said, because lying was easier than admitting that he couldn't bear to watch Shane leave again. He fished a cigarette from his pocket, then a lighter, showing them off. He knew it wasn't a convincing lie.

“Don’t be obtuse.”

The bitter wind moving through the alley made lighting the cigarette hard, but eventually, Ilya managed to get it done. He leaned back against the wall and took a drag, blowing smoke towards the ground. “I do not know this word. Obtuse.”

Shane just scoffed, his shoulders hitting the wall opposite Ilya’s. The alley was narrow, and yet the five feet between them might as well have been the 5000 miles from Moscow to Montreal.

For a long moment, neither of them spoke.

The silence pressed against Ilya’s throat. He took another drag, worried that if he didn’t, he might say something he shouldn’t. The dull music from inside the club and the faint buzz of drunk club-goers on their way home were the only sounds.

“I didn’t mean it as a suggestion,” Ilya said finally.

Shane frowned. “What?”

“When I said I never see you with women. I did not mean for you to go and stick your dick in a fucking movie star.”

At that, Shane laughed; it was short, cold and angry — nothing like the laughs Ilya was used to eliciting from him.

“Oh, fuck you.”

“I do not think your girlfriend would like that,” Ilya hummed, blowing smoke. “What is her name? Rose?”

And he felt like a coward.

“God, you’re such an asshole.”

Ilya felt himself falter, and what was supposed to be a laugh came out more like a sob as he looked up at the sky; looked anywhere but at *him*. “Oh, so *I* am an asshole?”

“Yeah, you are,” Shane snapped, stepping closer.

And Ilya flinched. He waited for Shane to touch him. Shove him, throw a punch, *something*. But Shane just stared at him.

“Look, whatever, you’re trying to prove — you did it. You win.” He gestured towards Ilya exasperatedly. “Are you happy?

“No.”

And this, this was different. Shane was taken aback by the answer; by the honest word that Ilya didn’t have the energy to stop from slipping out. This wasn’t how it was supposed to go.

Ilya was supposed to deflect, to insult, to laugh it off. Instead, he just took another puff of his cigarette.

“Are you happy?”

“*Yes*,” Shane insisted, too fast, too desperate, like he was still trying to convince himself.

Ilya pursed his lips and nodded once. “Ok.”

He dropped the half-smoked cigarette onto the concrete and crushed it beneath his heel, stepping past Shane like it didn’t matter. He could tell himself that it didn’t matter, and if he did it enough, he might actually start to believe it.

Coward.

He’d barely made it ten feet when—

“I’m sorry.”

Ilya stopped.

“I’m sorry for leaving,” Shane said with a wobbly voice.

Ilya turned back slowly.

“It was- it was shitty, okay? But I wasn’t- I’m not- *I can’t do thi*s.”

“Do what?” Ilya scoffed, retracing his steps, “Fuck?”

Coward.

“Stop it.”

“What?”

“Acting like- like you don’t care,” Shane shot back. “I know that you do, or you wouldn’t fucking be here.”

For as well as Ilya knew Shane, Shane knew him just the same. That was the worst part; the part Ilya tried not to think about. Shane knew him, and just like everyone else, didn’t want him.

“I’m sorry for the way I left. I really am. But I wasn’t lying, Roz. I can’t keep doing this.”

“But you can do with her?”

Shane looked away, crossing his arms. “It’s different. She-”

“Rose Landry makes a better sandwich than me?”

“It’s not about the fucking sandwich, Rozanov!” Shane snapped. He winced, then, and reached up to rub a hand over his face in a way that Ilya knew meant he knew what he wanted to say, but wasn’t brave enough to say it.

They had that in common.

“Okay, maybe it is,” Shane huffed, “But it’s- it’s you cooking for me, and asking me to stay, calling me fucking *Shane*.”

“It’s your name,” Ilya said stiffly. “Friends call each other by name.”

“Well we aren’t friends, okay? We’ve never been friends. This *thing*,” Shane paused, gesturing between them, “whatever it is between us, it has to stop, Ilya. It’s not real.”

The words hit Ilya hard, knocking the breath out of his lungs.

“It is real,” he said, and блять; if he were standing in front of anyone else, he would be ashamed of the tears that were pooling in his eyes. “To me.”

“Yeah,” Shane said bitterly, “when it’s *convenient* for *you*. And when it’s not, all you do is insult me, or tell me about the girls you fuck, or ignore my texts, and then you tell me to get on my fucking knees.”

Ilya swallowed. “I am sorry. I do not mean to give this impression.”

He watched as Shane’s eyes flicked up and down his body, and the man shook his head. “Well, you do. *God*, you’re fucking exhausting.”

Ilya barked out a laugh before he could stop himself. “Yes, you have told me this before.”

“This is exactly what I’m talking about. You push and you push, and you don’t know when to just fucking *stop*.”

“What do you want me to say, Shane?” Ilya asked, and he was almost yelling now. “Do you want me to tell you that I fucking miss you?” He stepped closer; close enough to see the flush of Shane’s cheeks and the freckles that he adored. “To get down on my knees and beg you for things to be like they were?”

Tomorrow, Ilya would regret this; even drunk, he knew it. But right now, he thought he might say anything if it would make Shane stay. He would rather have Shane like this — angry, fighting, arguing in the freezing Montreal winter — than not at all.

“I want you to say something real, for *once* in your fucking life.”

Ilya thought back to *that* night; to the first time he’d fucked Shane. It had been years since then, but he thought back to it often. Not the sex. To Shane, sitting in the stairwell and clutching Ilya’s jacket like if he didn’t let go, it might stop him from leaving. Like he might ask Ilya to stay.

He would have said no; he knows that he would have. Ilya had been just as afraid then as he was now. But now — he wished he could go back, do things differently. Kiss Shane again, stay. Make it mean something.

He'd spent his whole life afraid, and look at where it had gotten him.

He was successful. Respected. He'd been a star player of MLH before he was even drafted. And yet the only thing he really wanted was still out of his reach.

The words *I love you* sat lodged in Ilya's throat. He swallowed them down.

"I did," he said instead, and he hated the way his voice broke, hated that he couldn't hide it; that he was weak. "And you left. And I am tired of pretending."

"Then stop. We *aren't* anything, Ilya. You don't have to pretend anymore."

And this — *this* was the line. Ilya knew it in his bones. Cross it, and there would be no going back.

"No," Ilya shook his head. "I am *tired* of pretending that this is nothing. That it doesn't matter. It matters to me."

Shane Hollander should never take up poker; every thought he had could be read just by looking at him, if you really *looked*. Ilya had spent a lot of time looking over the course of the past eight years. Even through the tears, Ilya saw the way Shane's eyes widened, his shoulders twitched. He heard his breath catch in his throat.

"I-" Ilya stuttered, reaching up to wipe the tears from his eyes.

He knew what he wanted to say, but he was too drunk and too sad and too afraid of what Shane might say back. So he said nothing.

In front of him, Shane hadn't moved. Ilya watched the rise and fall of his shoulders as he breathed, and he took a step forward, closing the distance between them.

Shane let him.

Ilya reached out hesitantly, his hand cupping Shane's jaw. He waited for the man to shove him off, pull away; for the moment that it would end. That moment never came.

Shane leaned closer, and Ilya felt his hands tugging on the hem of his shirt. It was familiar; it was routine.

One hand still on Shane's cheek, Ilya pulled him closer, leaned in.

"I have a girlfriend, Ilya," Shane whispered, avoiding the kiss. He stepped back, out of Ilya's grasp.

And it stung. Ilya knew that the hurt showed on his face, with his eyes wide and wet, his mouth open; he knew that he should give up. To be rejected once by Shane had hurt enough.

Twice was сыпать соль на рану. He would be miserable enough without chancing a third.

He would hate himself even more for being too afraid to try. Не на этот раз. Not after all these years.

Ilya swallowed his pride and reached for Shane's hand. "Tell me one more time," he pleaded. "Tell me that you do not want this."

Shane didn't answer. His eyes glanced back and forth between Ilya and their interlocked hands. And then, finally:

"I'm sorry."

He pulled his hand away.

Ilya could only watch as Shane turned and walked out of the alley. As he ran away from him again, looking back only once before rounding the corner. No doubt going back inside the club; back to his girlfriend. Ilya felt like his feet were frozen to the ground.

He waited there for another minute. And then one minute turned into ten, until finally, he started the walk back to the hotel.

Jane
Missed call · 3:21 AM

Alexei
Missed call · 4:35 AM

Alexei
Missed call · 4:38 AM

Jane

Today at 3:57 AM
Rose and I are done.
I just thought you might want to know.
Sorry to bother you so late.

Alexei

Today at 4:42 AM
Ответь, блядь, на мои звонки. Папа умер.

MOSCOW, RUSSIA
FIVE DAYS LATER

The funeral was stiff and formal, exactly as his father would have wanted.

The eulogy Ilya gave was short and flat. They were kind words, dutiful ones; about service and honor and love. He tried to mean them when he said them. He really did. But they sat in his mouth like a language he could no longer speak fluently.

After him came Alexei. Then Grigori's fellow officers, their speeches short and reverent, punctuated by the sound of gunshots firing in the air.

When it was over, when the crowd began to thin, Ilya took his place beside the casket. As the snow began to fall, hands clasped his, one after another. Old friends. Distant relatives. Policemen who smelled faintly of cigarettes and starch.

They told him they knew he would make his father proud.

— Are you not ashamed?

— I am, Papa.

— Not enough.

The dinner was worse.

Despite the fact that Ilya had rented out the restaurant, chosen the flowers, ensured his father's burial wishes were followed perfectly, that he'd paid for every glass of vodka, every plate of food, every funeral suit that fit — despite everything, he felt like nothing more than an intruder.

Apart from Svetlana, no one around the table would look at him for long. When they did, he could feel the resentment burning into him, the hatred emanating from every gaze. It crawled under his skin, pressed tight in his chest.

Solemn conversations avoided him, leaving pockets of uncomfortable silence whenever he spoke. Forks scraped against plates. Glasses clinked. His name went unmentioned, like it would leave a bitter taste in the mouth.

And Ilya couldn't take it anymore.

He leaned to Svetlana's ear, whispering in Russian, *"I'm going to step out."*

"Do you want me to come with you?" she asked, searching his face.

Ilya shook his head. *"No, I'll just be a moment."*

He felt the weight of the stares as he stood from the table, as he quickly made his way to the back room of the eerily quiet restaurant.

Ilya braced his hands against the edge of the counter, breathing hard. His reflection stared back at him in the mirror — pale, hollow-eyed, jaw set tight. It was a familiar sight.

The beaded curtain rustled behind him, and Alexei appeared in the mirror. He stood there, one hand in his pocket, the other rubbing over his jaw. The silence was palpable. It didn't last long.

"Stop fucking avoiding me," Alexei said.

Ilya stared at him in the reflection. *"If only."*

"So?"

"So what?" Ilya asked, turning to face him.

Alexei surged forward without warning, grabbing him by the jacket and shoving him back into the mirror. The glass rattled behind his head.

“Don’t fucking touch me!”

His brother shushed him, gesturing to the beaded curtain that separated them from the rest of the party. *"Then tell me the fucking plan.”*

“Jesus Christ,” Ilya cursed, pushing the other man off him. *“I don’t know yet, Alexei. He just died! Can I get a minute to breathe?”*

His brother didn’t miss a beat.

“*And me? What about me? Do I get to breathe too? Or is that something reserved for rich faggots who abandon their families?”*

The word landed like a slap.

“Abandoned?” Ilya shot back. *“Whose money do you live on, you piece of shit? Who pays for your fucking suits, for Nastya’s schooling, and all of your fucking drugs?”*

“I have a child, Ilya. And a wife. And I have spent the last three months taking care of our dying father every fucking day!”

“You don’t think I wish that I had been here?”

Ilya braced himself, ready for whatever cruel words Alexei would fire off next. But before the man could speak, Svetlana was barging into the room. She crossed her arms, staring at Alexei with a cold resolve.

“I thought I heard singing.”

Alexei stepped back with a huff. *“Great,”* he scoffed. *“Now we have to listen to this whore run her mouth.”*

Before he had time to think, to hesitate, Ilya was rushing forward. He grasped at Alexei’s coat and slammed him back into the wall, fist connecting with his jaw. Once, then twice.

“Stop, Ilya. Stop!” Svetlana yelled after him. *“He’s not worth it. He’s not worth anything.”*

She was right.

The realization hit him all at once. Ilya froze; his chest heaved, fist clenched in mid-air. His hands were shaking. His entire body was shaking. And yet he couldn’t find it in himself to be angry anymore.

Ilya was *tired*.

Tired of fighting. Of being angry, being afraid, spending every waking moment trying and failing to earn love that probably had never existed. Trying and failing to keep the peace. It had been years since Russia had felt like anything but a cage.

This place — his *home*, Ilya recalled distantly — would never be anything else.

He backed away slowly as something like understanding crawled up his spine.

When he looked at Alexei again, he felt nothing but sadness.

"You can have my apartment," he finally muttered, voice flat, *"and everything in it."*

Alexei stilled.

"When I leave Russia this time, I am not coming back. There will be a trust for Nastya. She can have it when she turns 18."

He met Alexei's eyes. Held them.

"And you will never contact me again," Ilya said, voice dropping low.*"If you do, I will use every piece of the fame and the money that you want so badly to make sure that you can't show your face in this fucking city without someone wanting to break it open."*

He stepped forward, pressed an accusatory finger to his brother's chest. Alexei flinched at the touch.

"If you know what's good for you, and your family, you will take what I offer, shut your fucking mouth and walk away. It is more than you deserve."

Ilya dropped his hand, stepping back. He watched as Alexei swallowed. Straightened his tie. Smoothed his hair. He watched, face cold and jaw set, until Alexei had retreated back to the table.

It was only then that the tears came, pooling hot in his eyes. He sniffed, wiping his face with his sleeve. He should have been embarrassed, his father's words ringing in his mind.

— *Pull yourself together.*

He tried to school his face, but it was no use. He knew Svetlana could see right through him; she always could.

She was in front of him in an instant, a gentle smile on her lips as she pressed a hand to Ilya's cheek.

"Oh, Ilyusha," she breathed, pulling him into her arms.

Ilya buried his face into her hair, if only to mask the quiet sob that he could not stop from escaping. He grasped tightly at her dress. She held him tightly, one hand firm at his back and the other tangled in his hair.

"It's okay," Svetlana whispered into his neck, *"It's going to be okay."*

He nodded. *"I know."*

Svetlana pulled back just enough to wipe his stray tears with her thumb. Wordlessly, she went about smoothing his hair, straightening his collar like she had done a hundred times before.

“I do not deserve you.”

“Yes you do. But you do not want me.”

“You know that I love you,” Ilya said hoarsely.

She reached out, fingers clasping around Ilya’s hand and squeezing it tightly. She smiled up at him.

“I know.” As she pulled her hand away, she reached out to smooth the wrinkles in his shirt. *“I love you too. You should not be alone tonight; I will come to the house, after I change my clothes.”*

The house was dark when Ilya stepped into the foyer.

Of course it was. His father was dead. His stepmother had gone to stay with relatives. Even Alexei — cruel as he was — had a family.

Ilya was alone.

The silence pressed in on him immediately, filling his lungs, making his limbs feel heavy. He hated this house; he had for years. Since the day he opened the bathroom door and found his mother dead on the cold tile. He hated the way that his father hadn’t even cried. Hated that he hadn’t even raised his voice. Just stood there, face cold, and told Ilya to go to his room.

He hated that he hadn’t even given Ilya time to mourn before packing up his mother’s things. Hated how the house had swallowed her absence. The thick quiet that filled the hallways, broken only by the sound of Alexei slamming doors and pounding his fists on the walls.

Ilya moved through the house slowly, his footsteps echoing too loudly against the floors. He passed the sitting room. The dining table where no one had sat in years. The hallway mirror he avoided looking into.

He started up the stairs, one hand trailing along the banister, towards his childhood bedroom — towards the place where he’d spent so many sleepless nights.

He never made it to the second floor.

Halfway up the stairs, Ilya was turning around, walking back into the night on unsteady feet. He didn’t know where he was going, only that he needed to go, get out, be *anywhere else*.

Svetlana could let herself in; she always did.

The cold air hit Ilya hard when I stepped outside, sharp enough to burn. He started walking, fast at first, then aimless. He didn't think; just put one foot in front of the other. Ice crunched under his shoes. Distantly, Ilya thought that he should turn around, put on something warmer, take off his dress shoes. The mud and salt that clung to the soles would ruin them.

He kept walking.

The dull ache of home followed him — the all-encompassing quiet Ilya had spent his whole life trying to fill.

He walked until his hair was wet with snow, passing shuttered storefronts and dimly lit churches, until his thoughts grew too loud to ignore, thrumming beneath his skin.

Eventually, his feet stopped him beneath a flickering streetlamp at the edge of a park he knew too well.

Of course.

He wasn't surprised this was where his legs had brought him; it was where he and his mother had strolled every summer morning, stopping to buy ice cream at the shop on the corner and throwing away the wrappers in a public bin where his father wouldn't find them later. He'd followed the route exactly.

With numb hands, Ilya fished his phone from his pocket.

It was scary, how easily his thumbs found *Jane*'s contact. How he pressed the button to call without even having to think about it. How the lump in his throat grew a little bigger each time the phone rang and no one picked up. Once, then twice.

It was a stupid notion.

Ilya was already bracing himself to hang up, to pretend it had never happened. And then—

"Ilya?" Shane's voice was shaky, like he'd been running. "Are you okay?"

Ilya let out the breath he'd been holding. "I'm okay," he admitted, forcing himself to put one foot in front of the other. "Probably not good. Probably bad. I'm sorry I did not answer your texts."

"It's fine," Shane said quickly, "really. Where are you?"

"Home."

"Boston?"

"Moscow," Ilya breathed. "My father... he is dead."

There was a pause, then Shane's voice softened. "Ilya... I'm so sorry."

“It was... long time coming,” Ilya said, staring at the snow collecting in the grass as he passed. “And he was an asshole.”

Another pause. “It’s still your dad.”

“Yeah,” he agreed, swallowing hard.

“How’s your family?”

Ilya huffed out a short, humorless laugh. “At their worst. My brother is... scared. It makes him terrible. And it makes me terrible back.” He kicked a loose rock on the street.

“Where are you right now?” Shane asked.

“Just walking,” Ilya said as he ducked into a tunnel. It was a warmly lit reprieve from the cold wind. “I needed to get out. Too many memories in that house.”

“I’m sorry. Is there anything I can do to help?”

Ilya shook his head, even though he knew Shane couldn’t see it. “No, I just… wanted to hear your voice.”

The admission hung between them, like something fragile.

“Well,” Shane said carefully, “if you need to talk... about anything... I’m here.”

For a long moment, neither of them spoke. But for the first time that night, the silence didn’t feel like it was going to swallow him whole. It was just... quiet.

“What happened with Rose?” Ilya asked suddenly.

Shane inhaled sharply. “That’s what you want to talk about?”

“You said anything.”

“Nothing happened,” he said after a beat. “We just… weren’t compatible.”

“Not compatible?”

“Not compatible.”

Ilya frowned, leaning back against the grimy wall of the tunnel. “What is compatible? I think I know what it means, but I want to be sure.”

Shane laughed quietly. “We just... didn’t fit. It would never have worked.”

“Why not?”

“Who’s asking too many questions now?”

“Me, now answer them.”

The silence stretched. Ilya listened to Shane's breathing, uneven, like he was struggling to get the words out.

"I think," Shane started, slowly, "I'm gay."

At that, Ilya laughed; the first time he'd really laughed since he'd gotten off the plane. "Really?" he asked sarcastically. "How did you figure that?"

Shane groaned. "Shut up. I'm trying to say... Rose and I didn't work because I don't like girls." There was a pause, before he added: "At all."

"Oh. Congratulations."

"Congratulations?"

"I don't know," Ilya admitted honestly, "English is just... it's too hard right now. Everything is hard right now."

"I wish I spoke Russian."

Ilya hummed in acknowledgement. "Yeah, you could probably learn it in two weeks. No accent. Perfect. Bonjour."

"That's French, Ilya."

Even through the phone, Ilya could practically hear his smile.

"Yeah I know, Shane."

"Okay," Shane started, "well, what if you just… talk to me in Russian. Tell me what's on your mind. I won't understand, but maybe it would help. Just getting it off your chest."

"Maybe."

Ilya paused, trying to conjure up what he wanted to say. He had 25 years of things he wanted to say, jumbled up in his chest, trying to push through the skin.

He closed his eyes.

"I don't ever want to come back here," he said slowly, almost whispering. *"I fucking hate this place, and they fucking hate me too. All of them. I pay for everything. I make sure everyone has clothes they like. I make sure the food is perfect, that father is buried next to his parents that the tomb is perfect.*

"And the only fucking word I ever here is 'I want more, Ilya,' 'I need more, Ilya,' more, more, more, more, more, more. And I have nothing for these people. I give them everything, and they still hate me."

Ilya squatted down, rubbing a hand over his jaw. *"They always have. And there's nothing I can do that will ever be good enough; not for my father, or my brother, or anyone. And it kills*

me, because-"

His voice broke.

"Because I've spent my whole life trying to be good enough. Hating myself because I'm never good enough. And I hate myself for not being here, for not taking care of my father. But I couldn't. I wasn't here."

He closed his eyes.

"And even if my father could never be proud of me... I know that he loved me, as much as he could. And I loved him. All I ever wanted was for him to be proud of me."

Ilya paused, wiping his nose on his sleeve before continuing.

"And now it's too late," he said, breath shaking. *"And my brother... he will never forgive me; for being successful, for going to America. For existing. And it means... that I have no one now. Well, not no one. I have Svetlana, and she loves me. And I love her. But it's not..."*

Ilya trailed off, the low hum of police sirens sounding from somewhere nearby. He swallowed, letting the phone fall to his side and staring up at the graffiti on the tunnel ceiling. It was only when the flashing lights were gone, when the sirens faded, that he continued.

"But it's not the same as with you."

The words tasted strange in his mouth. It wasn't the first time Ilya had admitted it to himself; that was a long time ago. It wasn't even the first time he'd wanted to say it. It was always on the tip of his tongue when he was around Shane. He was always having to swallow it back down.

"That's the worst fucking part of all of this... all I want is you." Ilya choked on the words, tears brimming in his eyes. *"It's always you. I'm so in love with you, and it terrifies me, more than anything ever has.*

"And I don't think I even know how to be in love; every time I try, I just seem to chase you away. I'm scared to keep trying, because... maybe my brother is right," he whispered. *"I'm so afraid that one day you will realize what I really am, and you will hate me. The way they hate me. And I don't know what to do."*

Ilya stopped, reaching up to wipe the warm tears off his face. He tried to regain some semblance of composure. "Okay," he huffed out, "I am done."

"Do you feel better?"

"I don't know," Ilya admitted, standing slowly.

"Maybe you could teach me Russian someday."

"Yes, okay, but only useful phrases."

“Like what?”

“Harder, please, yes sir.”

Shane laughed. “Fuck you.”

“No, more like ‘fuck me please.’”

Ilya listened to Shane’s small huff, to his soft breath hitch in his throat. “How about... ‘I wish you were here right now?’”

A small smile broke on Ilya’s lips. “I wish I was too.”

Later that night, with some stupid American rom-com as the only light in the room, with Svetlana pressed against his side, hands stroking his hair, Ilya broke their comfortable silence.

“I meant it, you know. I cannot come back here.”

“I know.”

DECEMBER 2016

Jane

Today at 5:23 PM
Merry Christmas!
Wish you were here.
Tell your mother that I am sorry I cannot make it
Don’t want her to miss me too much
😘
Not funny.

I have a Christmas present for you
But stupid Canadian shipping companies are trying to ruin my great gift
It won't be there until the 28
Oh shit.
I didn't get you anything.
I'm sorry.
Is ok
Your ass can be my present
Send a pic?
I'm literally at my parents' house.
Pervert.
Is that a no 😕
Have fun at your Christmas party.
Make good choices.
Me?
Never
We can't both be boring
The world would explode

To call it a party would be an exaggeration.

Only eight members of the team had gathered at Marleau's gated home for the annual Christmas dinner. It was a tradition that Marleau had inherited from Kelce when he retired, only two years after Ilya was drafted. A celebration for the Raiders whose families were too far away or too dead for a three-day holiday visit.

Ilya had been in attendance every year as the former. After all, it would have taken two days just to fly to Russia and back, and his family wouldn't have been celebrating Christmas yet anyway. This year was different, though.

For the first time, Ilya had no home to go back to.

Marleau clearly enjoyed hosting, every year serving what he insisted was the "only acceptable Christmas dinner": ham with a honey glaze, mashed potatoes drowning in gravy, casseroles that Ilya was sure would be considered blasphemous, and whatever pie he'd been able to snag at the grocery store.

Ilya had turned up with a bottle of good vodka, like he did every year. Marleau had briefly pretended not to want it — *you weren't supposed to bring anything, Rozy* — before setting it on the counter with the wine and beer the others had brought.

The house was bright and full of laughter, wafting from room to room with the Christmas music coming from the television. Jackets were piled on

the backs of chairs. Someone was already slipping cheese cubes to Marleau's overweight bulldog Biff, ignoring his scolding.

The nine of them crowded around the dining room table, elbows bumping, plates passing from hand to hand; Biff whined from under the table, pawing at their feet. The conversation bounced chaotically; stories about road trips gone wrong, rookies who didn't know how to pack, refs with vendettas and games which should have been won.

Ilya filled his plate once, then twice, then a third time. He laughed along, chimed in with his own stories, smiled like he meant it. And he did.

And yet every time there was a lull, every time the conversation shifted or someone got up to refill a drink, his mind drifted.

He thought of his mother in the kitchen making сельдь под шубой and honey cake. Of his father yelling when the food wasn't ready soon enough. Of the stiff church services and silent dinners on hay-covered tables. Briefly, Ilya wondered what his father would have thought about *this* — celebrating Christmas on the wrong day, in the home of an American, far away from what was left of his family.

Grigori Rozanov was surely rolling in his grave. Ilya found that,
surprisingly, he didn't care anymore.

Dessert came and went, with all nine of them clearing the table quickly before Biff could jump up and help himself to their leftovers — an event which had ended in chaos last Christmas. Someone suggested a card game; someone else vetoed it loudly, but they played Bullshit anyway.

Eventually, they found themselves on Marleau's large back porch, drunk and happy around the firepit. The cold air sobered them just enough to keep the night stretching pleasantly onward.

Fraser was the first to leave, tapping out just after midnight, and by 1 am, it was just Ilya and Marleau sitting by the fire.

For the first time all night, it was quiet.

"Are you doing okay, man?" Marleau asked as he cracked open another beer, settling deeper into his chair.

Ilya shrugged, eyes fixed on the flames. "I'm fine."

Marleau didn't respond right away, didn't rush to fill the silence. Ilya could feel his gaze anyway.

"I remember my first Christmas after my mom died," the man said eventually.

Ilya lifted his glass, the vodka burning warm down his throat.

“I couldn’t even leave my apartment,” Marleau went on. “I just laid around eating Chinese takeout and watching old movies.” He paused, sipping at his drink. “I hope that this is... a better alternative.”

Ilya turned to his friend. Really looked at him. “It is.”

Marleau nodded, a satisfied smile on his face. They sat in companionable silence for a moment, watching the logs shift as the fire died slowly.

Ilya’s phone buzzed, and he pulled it from his pocket to see a text from Shane. It was just a youtube link; he didn’t open it, but knowing Shane, it was probably a compilation of “Ilya Rozanov’s Top 5 Worst Games”. As Ilya set his phone aside, he caught Marleau watching him out of the corner of his eye.

Marleau cleared his throat. “Maybe next year you can bring Jane."

Ilya turned sharply. “What?”

“You’re not still fighting, are you?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Ilya said, feigning ignorance. He reached for the bottle of vodka on the ground, topping off his glass.

“You were so pissy in Montreal I thought she dumped your sorry ass,” Marleau chuckled. “But I see you’re still talking.” He took a sip. “What’s she doing for Christmas?”

Ilya shrugged. “I don’t know. Probably with her family. And we were never *fighting*.” He leaned forward, elbows pressing into his thighs.

“So you played like shit for fun?”

Ilya would have protested, but his performance at their last game in Montreal was so abysmal he’d received no less than four strongly-worded texts from Svetlana.

“I’m just saying, you should bring her around sometime. I wanna meet this girl that’s got you so *besotted*.”

“She’s not a WAG, Marly,” Ilya huffed. “She’s just... a fuck.”

The words tasted wrong in Ilya’s mouth, even if he’d said them a million times before.

“A fuck that you spend all day texting."

“We don’t text all day.”

Marleau raised an eyebrow, taking another sip of his beer. “I’m just saying,” he huffed after a beat of silence, “she’s put up with you for a lot longer than I could. If I was you, I’d lock that down.”

Ilya flinched, gaze snapping to the crackling fire. “I can’t.”

“What’s stopping you? She’s not a Metros fan, is she?”

“It’s just... complicated,” Ilya said.

“She married?”

“No,” Ilya waved, “nothing like that.” He sat up straighter. “What makes you think she’s the problem? Maybe I have no interest in being with her.”

“Well,” Marleau prodded, leaning forward, “do you?”

Ilya just shrugged, noncommittal.

“It was a rhetorical question. Five years of watching you blush, I know the answer.”

“I told you, I don’t blush.”

“Bullshit,” Marleau laughed, shaking his head. “Okay but seriously, what is it about her? She’s gotta be a Metro’s fan, right?”

Ilya shrugged again.

“Does she make you wear Hollander’s jersey when you fuck? Is that why you’re so cagey about her?”

Ilya snorted despite himself. The image was absurd enough to break through the tension for half a second.

“Sure, Marly,” he said.

THREE DAYS LATER

Jane

Today at 1:21 PM
Dude.
How much ginger ale do you think I drink?
A lot probably
1:55 PM

Where am I supposed to keep 30 cases of ginger ale??
I have seen your closet
Youll find room

PITTSBURGH, PENNSYLVANIA
JANUARY 2017

If anyone asked why Ilya watched all of Shane's games — and they had — he would say that he was honing his craft, studying the enemy. Learning what moves worked, what didn't. Where his strengths and weaknesses were. And it wouldn't be a lie. Facing Shane Hollander without preparation would have been stupid. After all, he was one of few people in the league that could match Ilya.

But it didn't stop at games; Ilya watched every pre- and post-game interview, every Metros press conference, every late-night highlight reel uploaded to YouTube with a stupid clickbait title. When he was younger, he'd told himself it was professional diligence.

It had nothing to do with the way his heart fluttered when Shane smiled for the camera, the pit in his stomach when Shane dodged questions about Ilya like they were landmines.

So Ilya wasn't in a rush to turn off the television at the end of the Metros v. Avalanche game. He stayed sprawled across the hotel bed, one arm tucked behind his head, the other loose at his side. There would be sports reporters clamoring to have a word with Shane Hollander. There always were.

Sure enough, five minutes later, they had cornered Shane, shoving microphones in his face. He was still slick with sweat, gray compression shirt hugging his muscles in all the right places.

Ilya's dick twitched at the sight.

It had been too long since he'd had sex. Since November, he recalled distantly. It wasn't for lack of trying; he'd had Svetlana spend the night, gone out to bars to pick up on women, let their hands roam over his chest. And yet every time he found himself alone in the shower, hand around his dick, Shane's name on his lips.

On-screen, Shane rattled through his routine answers to all the usual questions — speculating vaguely on the Metro's playoff chances, their performance in the season, dancing around the questions the way he always did.

Then someone asked it.

"Mr Hollander," the pushy voice of one of the reports echoed loudly from the tv, "how do you feel about playing on the same team as your biggest competitor, Ilya Rozanov, at the All Stars game this year?"

Shane stilled. It was subtle, quick, but Ilya saw it anyway. The fraction of a second where his smile dropped, thoughts racing behind his eyes.

"Are you worried that the tension between the two of you will negatively impact your performance?"

Shane let out a soft laugh, brow creasing. He set his hands on his hips and leaned towards the microphone.

"The rivalry between Rozanov and I is definitely one of the MLH's worst kept secrets," Shane started slowly. "But, you know... I mean-" He hesitated, just barely. "We've been playing against each other for almost seven years now," he said finally. "We were drafted together, came up in the league together. And as fun as it can be to play into that," a gentle smile played on his lips, "there is no bad blood between Roz and I."

Ilya leaned forward, crossing his legs beneath him, eyes fixed on the television.

"We've been friends for a long time."

Friends.

The word settled somewhere deep in Ilya's chest. Friends was plausible. Friends was safe enough to say out loud. One word that could change everything. It meant that they could talk without spitting insults, smile without having to pretend it was meant for someone else. It meant they didn't have to stand in opposite corners of every room.

It meant Shane wasn't ashamed.

"And I think that we always push each other to be better," Shane continued. "I'm excited to see what it will be like to finally play on the same team, instead of against each other."

With a smile, Shane thanked the reporter and turned back towards the locker room, cutting her off before she could follow up. The camera lingered on his back before cutting to commercial.

Ilya grabbed the remote, turning off the tv. He stared at the blank space where Shane had been.

His throat felt tight. He dragged a hand down his face, then laughed — soft and breathless. It was simple.

But it was one step forward.

Jane

Today at 10:17 PM
so we are friends now?
is it common in Canada for friends to suck each others dick
Fuck off.
I think you mean “fuck me"
Only if you say please

(Un)Official Boston Raiders Fan Club
@notbostonraidersfanclub

No fucking way Hollander just confirmed that he and Rozanov are FRIENDS

10:23 PM ·Jan 9, 2017

12.1K Retweets **153** Quote Tweets **67.1K** Likes

Rachel R @@rachelreid1995 · Jan 9
Replying to @notbostonraidersfanclub

he really destroyed the MLHs biggest rivalry in 5 seconds 😂😂😂

2

2

2

ALL-STAR WEEKEND
TAMPA BAY, FLORIDA
TWO WEEKS LATER

Jane

Today at 8:17 AM
What time does your flight get in
10:54 AM
Just now.
I will be at hotel bar at noon

Ilya didn't have many 'beach' clothes, just athletic tank tops and basketball shorts in various shades of gray and black that were far too drab for a beach resort. They felt wrong for sunshine and salt air and the electric spirit of the weekend.

He did have one Hawaiian shirt, though; obnoxiously red and covered in white flowers. He'd bought it years ago for one of Svetlana's parties, worn it exactly once, then shoved it to the back of his closet, where it had stayed until it was time to pack for the trip.

He spent far too long preening in the mirror; adjusting the collar, fixing his curls, buttoning and unbuttoning his shirt. Too much, then not enough. It had to be perfect.

Ilya hadn't seen Shane since that night. Since Shane had run out of the club, since Ilya had followed him, begged him to stay. They were on good terms. Better than that, even. Texting. Flirting. Slipping back into old rhythms like muscle memory.

But words were easy. Distance was safe.

Nothing about Shane had ever been either.

The hotel was already crawling with hockey players. Members of different teams milled around the outdoor bar, clustered together — jerseys replaced with linen and sunglasses, laughing, clapping each other on the back, clearly enjoying the friendly atmosphere instead of the typical competitive one.

Ilya took a seat at the bar by himself and ordered a beer.

Part of him worried that Shane wouldn't come. He tried to shove the thought down. But as the bottle in front of him emptied, Ilya felt it getting harder and harder to breathe. His fingers worried at the label, foot tapping restlessly against the leg of his stool. He scanned the bar too often, to obviously, anxious for any sign of Shane.

It was embarrassing, being in love.

When Shane finally appeared, Ilya felt it everywhere at once.

His shoulders tightened. His spine straightened. He downed the rest of his beer, tried to make it look like he hadn't been waiting, watching, even if they both knew that he had.

Shane slid onto the stool next to him with a smile, and a server appeared behind them.

“Can I offer you something to drink?”

“I’ll have the same as my, uh, *teammate*,” Shane said, stressing the word, “please.”

Ilya nodded, signaling for another. As the bartender walked away, Shane propped his arms up on the bar. Ilya’s eyes were glued to the counter, his thumbs twiddling around the empty bottle in his hands. Neither of them spoke.

Ilya swallowed, cleared his throat. “So were they out of ginger ale, captain?”

Shane chuckled. “Believe it or not, I’ve had a lot of ginger ale lately,”
he said, glancing towards Ilya. “I’m getting a little tired of it.”

The corner of Ilya’s mouth twitched.

“Nice that it’s in Florida this year, right?” Shane asked. He leaned forward, eyes running up and down Ilya. “Did you buy that shirt at the airport?”

Ilya shook his head as the server returned, placing two fresh bottles on the counter in front of them.

“No, I bought it a few years ago for luau-themed party Svetlana threw.” He paused, bringing the cold bottle to his lips. “But I thought I should bring it; get in the spirit.”

“Well, you’re pulling it off.” His gaze lingered in a way that made Ilya's heart race.

Before he could respond, a heavy weight crashed down on both their shoulders. Vaughn shoved himself between them, cackling loudly. Ilya watched Shane look away, hand coming up to cover the grin on his lips.

“Cats and dogs!” Vaughn laughed. “I gotta say, it’s pretty weird seeing you two civil. Really had us all fooled with that rivalry thing. Never would’ve guessed you two were buddies.”

Ilya shrugged playfully. “Who says buddies can’t be rivals?”

Vaughn slapped a hand on Ilya’s back, still laughing. “That’s what I’m talking about, man!”

“One black coffee for this guy, please,” Ilya announced, gesturing vaguely.

“I’m just fucking with you Rozy. It’s gonna be a hell of a time. Let’s go East boys!” Vaughn whooped before disappearing, vanishing to go pester someone else.

Alone again, Shane laughed, taking a sip of his beer. “I-uh, I have a feeling we’re gonna get a lot of that this weekend.”

“It will give us a chance to show what good friends we are." He grinned.

Shane looked away.

“You’re looking very pretty today.”

He was desperate for Shane to look at him again; to *see* him.

Shane just hummed in response.

“Different,” Ilya added. “Someone take you shopping?”

Shane always looked beautiful, but this was different. Fresh white sports coat bright against his tan skin; it was polished and neat in the way Shane Hollander always carried himself. But there was a noticeable shift; the weight of expectation lifted from his shoulders.

“Rose, actually.”

Ilya blinked. “Rose Landry?” He leaned closer, voice dropping to a whisper. “Ex-girlfriend Rose who broke up with you because you are gay? This Rose?”

“I only know one Rose. She said it would be ‘*a crime against fashion’* for someone as attractive as me to only wear gym clothes.’”

“She has a point.”

Shane smiled then, really smiled, and met Ilya’s gaze. For just a moment too long, Ilya let himself stare, let his eyes flick down to Shane’s lips.

And then Shane was standing. “Well, I guess I should go do my rounds.”

“You have new clothes to show off."

“See you around?”

Shane held out his hand, because of course he did; he was Shane Hollander.

Ilya took it with a chuckle, squeezing just a little too tightly before letting go. “See you around,” he said, a beat of mischief in his voice, “*buddy*.”

And this time, watching Shane walk away wasn’t so terrible.

By three in the afternoon, it seemed like half of the league had made their way to the pool.

Every lounge chair on the deck was draped with damp towels, claiming them. Flip flops were scattered around the wet concrete. Players sprawled out in the sun beside wives and

girlfriends, laughing and sipping on brightly colored drinks. Kids shrieked and cannonballed with complete disregard for anyone else's personal space.

Ilya spotted Shane almost immediately.

He was stretched out on a chair near the edge of the pool, basking in the sun, a book balanced on his bare stomach with careful ease.

Ilya saddled up to him with a grin. "What are you reading?"

Shane peered up at him from behind his sunglasses. He shifted the book to show Ilya the bright yellow cover, block letters reading *Journeyman* over a man in a familiar helmet.

"Hollander," Ilya scoffed, swatting him with his towel. "You bring work on vacation?" He draped his towel over the back of Shane's chair before tugging his shirt over his head.

Though the dark glasses hid his eyes, Ilya knew Shane was watching.

"You should relax."

"I am relaxing. You should try it sometime."

Ilya sighed, dropping his shirt unceremoniously over Shane's head. "Have it your way."

Ilya took a step, quickly launching himself into the pool with a large splash. He surfaced with a grim, slicking his hair back and wiping the water from his eyes. On the deck, Shane was peeling the shirt off his head and tossing it to the concrete with an unimpressed shake of his head.

A swarm of children kicked their way past him then, water splashing in his eyes and mouth, and Ilya held up his hands, shouting. "Whoa, whoa, what are you doing?" They slowed down, as if worried they were going to get in trouble.

"Racing!" a little boy said.

Ilya scoffed. "Without me?"

He let them get a head start, arms flailing as he swam, dragging through the water like he was already tired. As the children glanced back, laughing triumphantly, he slowed down even more.

He touched the ladder last, dramatically collapsing against it, chest heaving like he may never recover.

The second race he lost due to a cramp, leaving him stranded in the middle of the pool.

"Okay, okay," he called, herding the children back to the shallow end. "This is not fair, you are all cheaters. I want a rematch. And I will *not* lose this time. But, if I lose, I will buy you all candy bars from machine inside, okay?" Ilya stood up straight, waving to get Shane's

attention across the pool. ”Hey Hollander! Hollander! Make sure none of these cheaters cheat, okay?”

Shane raised a thumb without looking up from his book. “Okay.”

Ilya turned back to the kids, lowering himself to their level. “You know that guy?” he asked, pointing at Shane. “Who’s this guy?”

“That’s Shane Hollander,” one of the girls said, eyes squinting in the sun.

“Ah, so you know this guy?”

“He’s the best player in the whole league.”

Ilya gasped, clutching his chest theatrically. “Oh no no, that’s not true. Splash her!” he commanded, and she laughed as the children swarmed around her. “Boo! No you get out of the pool. No who is your dad? Show me your dad. Okay I forgive you, you can stay.”

By the third loss — due to a shark attack — Ilya was willing to accept defeat. He pushed himself out of the pool and made his way to Shane’s chair, hands propped on his hips.

“Go away,” Shane hummed without looking up. “You’ll attract the sharks. They can smell ego.”

Ilya laughed, leaning down and shaking the water from his hair onto Shane.

“Hey!” Shane yelped, book dropping onto his stomach as his arms snapped up to block the spray.

“Hollander can you give these kids some money? I don’t have my wallet.”

Shane closed his book with a sigh and reached into his pocket. Ilya ducked just in time as Shane chucked the folded bills at his face. They bounced off his shoulder and landed on the deck.

Grinning, Ilya scooped them up.

“Everyone follow me!” he called, already herding the kids toward the hotel doors. “I got the money! Say thank you, Hollander!”

A chorus of high-pitched *thank-yous* rang out as they filed past Shane, who waved half-heartedly, shaking his head.

Jane

Today at 9:46 PM
3001

Ilya was already on his feet when he heard the knock. He'd been pacing; waiting.

At the sound on the door, he leapt forward, swinging it open. Shane smiled awkwardly, sauntering into the room and shutting it behind him with a click.

Neither of them moved. The dim lamplight cast a warm glow on Shane's face, on the familiar lines of his face that Ilya knew better than he knew most places on earth, on Shane's eyes as they nervously flicked to Ilya's, then away, then back.

"Um... hi," Shane huffed out finally.

"Hi," Ilya replied.

Then he was surging forward, hands on Shane's hips, pulling him close. Their lips met with a crash.

And this time, Shane kissed him back.

You can get away with a lot when people don't know that they should be looking for it. Even under the bright fluorescent lights of the rink, even with thousands of people watching.

To everyone else in the world, Ilya's kiss to the temple of Shane's helmet was nothing more than a show of good faith — a celebration by two friends caught up in the moment. Ilya being a playful asshole, like always. Even if he grinned when he pulled away, if Shane smiled back, it was only friendly. It wouldn't be anything else. Couldn't be.

"Great pass," Shane said.

Ilya patted him on the back. "Great goal."

It was a double-edged sword. No one would ever know. But *no one would ever know*.

Hockey players would drink, win or lose; Ilya was sure that this was one of the immutable laws of the universe.

The East team beat the West, because of course they did. The only time Shane Hollander and Ilya Rozanov played better than against each other was when they played together. Ilya had known that would be true without ever having to put on the same jersey. He had spent too much time with Shane to *not* know his next move, to not read his plan on his face.

Reading Shane was a skill that Ilya had long perfected, one that had nothing to do with hockey, really. But it translated.

And Ilya knew that as sure as hockey players would drink, Shane would leave the party early, win or lose.

Vaughn was ordering another round when Ilya approached him, downing the last of his own beer. He put the bottle down on the bar, leaning next to his teammate.

“Have you seen Hollander?”

“No,” Vaughn shook his head as he slid a few bills across the bar, “Not for a while, anyway. That man is the king of Irish goodbyes.”

“Irish goodbyes?”

“Y’know, leaving without saying goodbye.”

“I see,” Ilya said. The only Irishman Ilya had ever met was a woman at a pub in London, and she had been perfectly polite.

“Why are you looking for him?”

Ilya shrugged. “No reason. Needed to inform him that rivalry is back on, but I guess his mom can tell him for me.” He smiled mischievously.

Vaughn laughed, hand slapping Ilya’s shoulder. “Can I get you a drink, man?”

“No, I think I will turn in for the night.”

“It’s not even six yet."

Ilya just shrugged.

“Suit yourself, Roz, but I’m not gonna be this nice next time we meet.”

“Ah, so you are sore loser?”

Vaughn just laughed, shaking his head. “Have a good night, man,” he said as he sauntered back towards his table.

Jane

Today at 6:01 PM
Where are you?

It took Ilya another twenty minutes of roaming the hotel property before he found Shane on the beach. The ocean was calm, darkening as the sun sank lower and Ilya settle next to Shane in the sand. He could tell by the soft smile on Shane’s face that the man was not surprised to see him.

“Found you."

Shane glanced over, one eyebrow lifting. “You were looking for me?”

“Don’t get too excited,” Ilya said lightly. “Those guys are even more boring than you.”

“High bar,” Shane chuckled, turning his attention back to the water.

The sun was sinking fast, painting the shore with its violent orange. Ilya leaned back on his hands, feet digging into the cool sand. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d been to a beach like this; his off-time was always spent in Moscow, sitting at his father’s bedside, devoting his life to his father’s slow dying. Every spare moment was spent training.

He hadn’t felt this kind of peace in a long time.

It was nice.

“I texted you,” Ilya hummed.

“Sorry, I left my phone in my room. Last time I was at the beach I dropped it in the ocean.”

Ilya snorted. “Ah, so you are just as clumsy off the ice as you are on it.”

“Fuck off.”

“You did good today.”

Shane’s mouth curved up gently. “It felt good,” he said, glancing sideways. “Being on the same team.”

Ilya nodded. He could still feel it; the rhythm, the ease, the way they’d bounced off each other without thinking. “It did. But next time,” he met Shane’s gaze, “*you* play wing.”

Shane just laughed. “Deal. Next time we play on the same line, you can center.”

“Of course,” Ilya said, neck craning towards Shane, “you will have to learn how to play wing before then.”

Shane rolled his eyes, shoved him. Ilya let himself tip sideways at the push, laughing under his breath as he righted himself. When he looked back, Shane had already turned back to the water, smile lingering on his lips. Something warm settled in Ilya’s chest at the sight.

They sat like that for a while, shoulder to shoulder, almost touching. Ilya thought of moving closer, of wrapping his arm around Shane’s shoulders and pulling him close. But the simple fact weighed heavy on him — they weren’t allowed that tenderness. Not here. Only in the cover of night, in dark corners where no one could see, no one could suspect, could they exist.

The distant buzz of laughter drifted from the hotel behind them, mingling with the steady rhythm of the waves washing ashore. Ilya tried to focus on the sound, on the simple fact of being *here*. Being with Shane.

“I’m not ready to go back to the cold,” Shane said eventually. “I miss summer.”

Ilya rolled his eyes. “You Canadians are so weak,” he scoffed, though he shared the sentiment. “You can’t even handle a little snow.”

“I will have you know that I can handle *plenty* of snow. I’m just tired of it. I’m ready to go out on the lake, go kayaking.”

“Ah, yes, at your big fancy ‘cottage,’” Ilya said, lifting his hand to make air quotes.

Shane snorted. “Okay, maybe cottage is a bit of a misnomer,” he admitted, “but it’s nice. You should come sometime. We could go swimming, or hiking, or... play board games. Whatever Russians like to do.”

Ilya smiled. “Maybe. I will think about it. I think that I may be spending a lot more time in Canada.”

Shane turned towards him, confusion evident in the lines of his face. “What do you mean?”

“I am thinking…” Ilya breathed casually, digging his fingers deeper in the sand. “My contract in Boston expires next season. It might be time to do something different; try a new team. A Canadian one.”

Shane’s eyes widened, and Ilya shook his head.

“Not the Metros, of course. A good team.”

“What? Why?”

Ilya shrugged. “I’m ready for a change of scenery. And passports.”

“You want to apply for Canadian citizenship?”

“Yes,” Ilya sighed dramatically. “They do not deserve me, but I feel bad for them.”

“What about Russia?” Shane asked, ignoring Ilya’s attempt to soften the moment.

Ilya leaned forward, crossing his legs beneath him. “I’m not going back to Russia. Not this summer; maybe not ever.” His gaze focused on the sand, his fingers dragging small circles in front of him. “Now that my father is dead... there’s no reason for me to go back. There is nothing there for me anymore.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Canadians, always saying sorry. It is not your fault, Shane.”

Shane winced. “I kinda feel like it is though. I mean-”

“It’s not,” Ilya huffed, flicking sand in his direction. He stared out at the water, now dark against the last sliver of sunlight. “Russia will always be my home, but now it is more like... a house on fire. I don’t think that I belong there anymore; I don’t think that I have for a long time. I am safer here. Happier.”

With you went unspoken, but the silence stretched just long enough that he knew Shane heard it anyway.

“So you’re really not going back?"

Ilya shook his head.

“Don’t you think you’ll miss it?”

Ilya considered the question carefully.

“I will miss the vodka,” he said slowly, and Shane jabbed him with an elbow. “And Svetlana, when she is there. And I will miss the city, the people that I passed every day when I ran. Speaking my language.” He paused, swallowed. “But I will not miss the way I felt when I was there.”

“How did you feel?” Shane asked.

Ilya let out a breath. “Afraid.” He looked over, met Shane’s gaze. “Always afraid. And at a certain point it was like... I didn’t know how not to be anymore.” His shoulders shrugged gently. “It was exhausting. It still is. But being here... it feels different. I feel like I can be brave here.”

Shane was quiet for a moment.

“That night,” he said carefully, “in Montreal. You said that you were tired of pretending that there was nothing between us. Did you mean it?”

“Yes.”

“If I ask you a question,” Shane continued, “will you answer?”

Ilya rolled his eyes. “I answer *so many* questions with you, Shane Hollander,” he said, voice absent of any bite.

“I mean, honestly.”

“I am not a liar.”

“I know that we can’t be anything. But... would you have wanted to? If we could?”

Ilya leaned back, placing his hand flat in the sand. He looked back over his shoulder before inching it closer to Shane’s, until their pinkies were touching. “Yes,” he said slowly; he could feel Shane’s gaze, but he kept his eyes on the dark horizon where the sun had disappeared. “I would have liked that very much.”

Shane didn’t respond; he turned to face the ocean. But after a few seconds, Ilya felt Shane's finger cross over his own, curling around it.

“Me too.”

BOSTON, MASSACHUSSETTS
FEBRUARY 2017

“More wine?” Svetlana asked in Russian, picking up Ilya’s empty glass as she stood.

“Please,” Ilya answered, straightening two decks of cards to be shuffled.

On the television, the Metro’s game against the Admirals was buzzing in the background. Ilya mostly wasn’t paying attention — only when he heard Shane’s name.

He shuffled the decks three times each before calling out to Svetlana. *“Hurry it up in there! Come cut the cards!”*

“I’m coming, calm yourself,” Svetlana called back. She came back to the living room with two full glasses of wine, setting down on the coffee table and splitting each deck into uneven halves. *“I had to go the bathroom.”*

She returned to her position, sitting cross-legged on the carpet as Ilya reshuffled both decks, before sliding one across the table. As they set up their cards, Svetlana finished her rant about her latest date.

She went silent as she started her turn, and Ilya let his attention drift to the television.

“That’s two goals tonight scored by Shane Hollander,” the melodic voice of the television host said; a slo-motion replay of the goal played on the television as he spoke. “And we just started the second period. The question is: will it be enough to beat New York?”

Another voice chimed in. “Scott Hunter is on fire-”

“You are in love with him.”

Ilya felt every muscle in his body stiffen, and his gaze snapped to Svetlana. She continued playing the game, only briefly glancing up at him.

It wasn’t a question.

“Who?” Ilya asked; he refused to look up, eyes locked on the woman’s slender fingers as she took one of his cards, placing it with her own.

Svetlana’s lip quirked. *“Shane Hollander,”* she said, like it was obvious.

“How did you-”

“You aren’t as subtle as you think, Ilya Rozanov. Honestly, I can’t believe you thought you’d get away with it. I mean really? Jane*?”* she snorted. *“Did you even try?”*

And Ilya knew that he couldn’t deny it.

He licked his lips. *“How long have you known?”*

“Since the All-Star Game.” Svetlana shrugged. *“But I had suspicions before then.,”* she said, placing a card into her waste pile and finally looking up, eyes wide and steady. *“Your turn.”*

Ilya stared at the cards in front of him for longer than necessary before making his move. He began to sort through them tentatively.

“Have you told him?” Svetlana asked, sipping her wine. She looked up at Ilya patiently.

Ilya shook his head. *“No,”* he rasped, voice shaky. *“I can’t. You know that.”*

“Why not?”

She leaned back, crossing her legs and studying him the way she always did — careful, trying to decide how hard to push.

”You don’t think he loves you back?”

Ilya placed his final card, too distracted to think about playing properly, and gestured for Svetlana to take her next turn. He leaned back against the couch, staring at the ceiling.

"I... I don't know," he said.

Svetlana blinked at him. *"You don't know?"* she echoed, the corners of her mouth twitching in amusement. *"You've been fucking for ten years-"*

"Six."

"And you really don't know how he feels?"

Ilya swallowed tightly, letting out a slow breath. The truth felt dangerous now that it was so close to his mouth. *"He is good,"* he said quietly. *"He is... too good for me. I don't want to ruin what we have."* Whatever fragile, unnamed thing lived in hotel rooms and long glances and phone calls.

Svetlana paused. She set down her wine, leaned forward. Her gaze found his, unwavering. *"Ilya,"* her voice was soft, eyes wide. *"You deserve to be happy. And obviously..."* Her eyes flicked to the television screen, where Shane was laughing on the bench. *"Shane makes you happy."*

"What if I tell him," Ilya asked, voice low, *"and he does not feel the same?"*

Svetlana snorted sharply. *"Then Shane Hollander is the biggest idiot in the world. And we both know that he is not."* She stared at him for another beat, observing the way he turned away from her gaze before returning to the game. *"I just hope that he knows how lucky he is."*

Ilya's fingers twitched on the edge of the table. He wanted to tell her everything, to uncoil the tangled weight in his chest. But he didn't have to — Svetlana already understood. She always did. And that, somehow, made it bearable.

APRIL 2017

Jane 💞

Today, 2:27 PM 10:15 PM

We have never been on a date
Why not
You know why.
I will be in Montreal in one week
We will go on a date
To a fancy restaurant that sells fancy wine and expensive food
That’s a terrible idea.
People will see us.
We are friends now
Remember
Friends eat
What is good Montreal restaurant for a date
We're not going on a date, Ilya.
Fine
What is good Montreal restaurant for two friends to hang out
Preferably close to your apartment so i can fuck you after
As friends
Of course
🙄

MONTREAL, CANADA
ONE WEEK LATER

The restaurant Ilya picked was a small diner just a few blocks from Shane’s apartment. It was nice enough for a date, and casual enough to not raise suspicion. Loud enough that they could talk — really *talk* — without fear of being overheard, the air humming with conversation and clattering cutlery. And they even had boring bird food for Shane; Ilya checked the menu twice, just to be sure.

Shane beamed as he slid into the booth across from Ilya, shrugging out of his jacket to reveal his button-up shirt sleeves rolled up to elbows. “Hey."

“You are late.”

“By like, two minutes.”

“In Russia, this is a crime,” Ilya said seriously, before his lips broke into a soft smile.

Shane laughed, bright and unguarded, and Боже мой, Ilya thought he might be willing to do anything to hear it again.

The waitress appeared before Ilya could linger on the thought and took their drink orders — a coke for Ilya, and a ginger ale for Shane. They made small talk as they looked over the menu, putting in their orders when the waitress returned with drinks.

It meant that they wouldn't be interrupted again until she returned with the food.

"You look very pretty," Ilya hummed, leaning forward. "Did Rose Landry pick out this outfit too?"

Shane chuckled. "As a matter of fact, she did."

Ilya felt his face betray him, mouth curving downwards into a frown. His jaw tightened.

"When I told her I had a hot date," Shane continued, oblivious, "she made me facetime her so she could approve my clothes."

"So you two are... friends," Ilya said carefully.

"Yeah."

"What happened to 'not compatible?'"

Shane shrugged. "Just because we weren't compatible like *that* doesn't mean that we don't like each other."

Ilya nodded, eyes glued to the table in front of him. He took a long sip of his coke, trying to wet his suddenly dry throat.

Shane watched him for a moment, and laughed softly. "Are you jealous?"

"No," Ilya said immediately, setting the glass back on the table harder than he meant to, "of course not." He glowered.

"Ilya," Shane leaned across the table, voice low, "I'm *gay*."

Ilya snorted, fingers leaving streaks in the condensation of his glass. "You are not so gay you can't fuck Rose Landry," he hissed.

"I am actually," Shane responded, voice firm. He stared at Ilya intently, forcing him to meet his gaze. "Which is why we broke up."

"So she knows?"

"Yeah."

Ilya's lips pursed. "Do your parents know?"

Shane shook his head, sipping his ginger ale. "No. I haven't told them."

“But you told Rose?”

“I didn’t *tell* Rose,” Shane fired back with a small laugh. “It was more like Rose told me.”

“Would they be angry?”

“No,” Shane said, shaking his head again. He hesitated then, leaned back against the booth and crossing his arms. “I don’t know.” He went silent for a few seconds before confidently saying: “No, they wouldn’t.”

“So why not tell them?”

“I don’t know. I wouldn’t even know how to bring it up.” Shane shrugged. “Sometimes I think that I would have already of it weren’t for... you.”

Ilya leaned forward, bracing his arms on the table. “I think,” he said slowly, “you can tell your parents you’re gay without giving them a list of all the guys you’re fucking.”

Shane huffed, rolling his eyes. “Well, unlike you,” he dragged, gaze dropping to his lap, “I don’t have a list. It’s just you. And... they would have questions that I wouldn’t be able to answer.”

And that — *that* was the part that Ilya hated most. That after everything — after Boston, after Montreal, his father’s funeral, the All-Star weekend — after almost six years, Shane still didn’t understand how badly Ilya *wanted*.

He didn’t want to be with anyone but Shane. He hadn’t in months. He wanted to go to sleep beside him, wake up beside him. He wanted to bring Shane coffee in bed, kiss him half-awake and blow him in the shower before morning practice. He wanted grocery trips and shared closets and boring movies and folded laundry. He wanted to be the one to help Shane pick out clothes, and he wanted to be the one who took them off. He wanted to do it out of the shadows, love Shane out in the open.

He wanted it more than he had ever wanted anything.

“There’s no list, Hollander,” Ilya said instead.

Shane’s lips tugged into a half-hearted smile. “So what, then. A catalogue?”

“No.” Ilya shook his head. “I haven’t been with anyone else.”

He saw the surprise that passed over Shane’s face.

“Since when?”

Ilya shrugged, gaze travelling down to his coke. “A couple of months. November, maybe? I don’t know.”

“Why not?”

“Why not?” Ilya scoffed, incredulous. “What kind of question is that?”

“You’re Ilya fucking Rozanov,” Shane said, fingers fiddling with the fork in front of him. “Ladies' man of the league. Or have all the women in Boston finally figured out that you’re an asshole?”

Ilya hummed. “Of course not. There are plenty of women in Boston who would love to come home with me. Sexy ones.”

Shane raised an eyebrow, unimpressed.

“But,” Ilya continued, quieter now, “I’m having this problem.”

“They sell pills for that.”

Ilya kicked him under the table.

“Not that kind of problem.” He paused, then.

Ilya propped his elbows on the table and rested his chin against the heel of his hand. He let himself look at Shane properly. The gentle slope of his nose. The smattering of freckles across his cheeks, darker now than when Ilya last saw him. The soft pink of his lips. The crease worn between his eyebrows from worrying too much.

He let out a deep breath. “It’s just that... even with all of these beautiful, sexy women throwing themselves at me,” he said slowly, choosing each word like it mattered — because it did. “I can’t stop thinking about this slow fucking hockey player with beautiful freckles.”

Shane inhaled sharply. Ilya saw the way his shoulder’s tensed, the way his mouth parted and his eyes tore away from Ilya’s.

“And a weak backhand."

Shane scoffed. “A weak backhand?”

“Yes, very weak,” Ilya continued solemnly, a smile pulling at his lips. “But even though he has a weak backhand, and he can’t handle his liquor, and he eats like a pigeon... I am always wishing that these women were him.”

Silence followed. Ilya could feel his heart beating his chest, hear his pulse thrumming. Shane shifted in is seat awkwardly, gaze fixed somewhere over Ilya’s shoulder. The diner carried on around them, the gentle laughter from the other patrons filling the space carved out between them.

The sound of gentle laughter and chatter from the other patrons of the diner filled the space between them.

“Sounds like a pretty serious problem,” Shane said finally.

“Yes. Is terrible.”

“Do you want it to go away?”

Ilya met Shane’s eyes, held them. “I don’t ever want that problem to ever go away, Shane.”

Shane swallowed. Looked down. Looked back up again.

Ilya shifted back slightly, giving them both air. Giving Shane room to breathe.

“Do you want to tell them?” Ilya asked, changing the subject. “Your parents?”

Shane exhaled, dragging a hand along his jaw. “I don’t know,” he admitted slowly. “I mean, I’m tired of lying to them. Of hiding this huge part of myself. But my mom is nosy; she’d have to know everything. *When did I realize, why didn’t I tell her, do I have a boyfriend?”* He paused, looking up at Ilya. “And all those roads lead back to you.”

“You are lucky,” Ilya said, “to have parents who care so much. Who want to know you.”

“What about your parents?”’

Ilya sighed. His voice was flat when he spoke. “My father was police captain. He was... very old fashioned. Mean. Hard to impress.”

“And your mother?”

Ilya couldn’t help the small smile that crossed his face. “She was my whole world,” he said softly. “She was... so beautiful, and kind. Always there to hug me after school and ask about my day, take me to hockey practice.”

“How’d she die?”

“By accident,” Ilya whispered. He paused, then: “She accidentally swallowed a whole bottle of pills.”

Shane’s face fell. “How old were you?”

“Twelve. I found her.”

Shane reached forward instinctively, and for a moment, Ilya thought he would take his hand. But just as quickly, Shane hesitated, as if remembering where they were. His hand retreated back across the table.

“Ilya,” he breathed, “I’m so sorry.”

Ilya reached up to wipe the tears that were brimming in his eyes. “I don’t want you think she was weak,” he continued, voice wobbling. “She wasn’t. She was... strong.” He took a deep breath; inhale, exhale. “But she was sad. Always sad. And my father was not kind to her.”

He felt Shane’s eyes on him, warm and steady. “What was her name?”

“Irina.”

“I wish I could’ve met her.”

“She would have liked you,” Ilya said slowly. He paused, took a sip of his drink. “She was boring too. Always begging me and my brother to play card games. She loved card games.”

“Wow,” Shane chuckled, “So I remind you of your mom?”

“Sometimes.” The corner of Ilya’s mouth tugged into a small smile.

“You really know what a guy wants to hear.”

“It’s a good thing, Shane,” Ilya promised.

The waitress arrived then, breaking the moment. She smiled brightly as she set their food in front of them — some salad bowl full of chickpeas for Shane and a burger for Ilya — promising to return with refills for their dwindling sodas before disappearing back into the restaurant.

“This is weird,” Shane said between bites, poking at his salad. “Being out in public together, everybody seeing us. It feels wrong.”

Ilya smiled, but he could feel the worry pulling at his eyes. “You’re not going to run away from me again, are you?” he asked, only half teasing. “Because I cannot be seen running through the street chasing Shane Hollander.”

“No.” Shane’s reply was firm.

Ilya nodded, taking a bite of his burger. “Are you scared?”

Shane looked like he wanted to chastise him for talking with his mouth full. He didn’t.

“Terrified. Aren’t you?”

“Yes,” Ilya admitted, swallowing. “But you make me brave.”

They ate in silence for a few minutes, the diner’s hum filling the space between them. Ilya downed his burger quickly, watching Shane slowly work his way through the salad.

Ilya wiped his ketchup-covered fingers on his napkin before picking up a fry, popping it in his mouth. “You could tell them, you know,” he said as he chewed. “Your parents. About me.”

Shane looked up from his food abruptly. “You would be okay with that?”

“Yes,” Ilya hummed. “I think so.”

“My mom would probably invite you over to dinner just to poison you,” Shane chuckled. “Make sure the Raiders don’t win the Cup.”

“Would not work. Russians are immune to poison.”

Shane just shook his head. He opened his mouth as if to say something, then closed it again, pushing his food around the bowl with his fork. “I’ve been thinking,” he said finally, “about what you said... about being a free agent next year. What if you came to Ottawa?”

Ilya couldn’t help the snort that escaped him. “It’s a shit team.”

“So was Boston,” Shane countered. “But look, Ottawa needs a star center, and they’re not gonna turn down one of the best players in the league.”

“You mean *the* best player in the league.”

“I meant what I said. And they’re nowhere near their budget cap; they can afford to give you a raise that Boston can’t.”

Ilya crossed his arms, leaning back in his chair. “It’s a compelling reason,” he nodded.

“And it’s believable. No one would be suspicious after finding out they offered you millions more.” Shane paused, smiling. “And... it’s only two hours from here.”

“Still in the same division though. Still rivals.”

"Yes, but... look,” Shane leaned in, eyes locking onto his, “Boston and Montreal, that’s intense, everyone knows that. But Ottawa? Not so much. Everyone already knows we’re friends. Would it be so weird for us to hang out more, if you lived closer?”

“It’s a good plan.”

“It’s a *great* plan.”

Ilya felt Shane’s foot slide forward beneath the table, resting against his own.

“And then,” Shane continued slowly, “one day, when we retire... maybe we could actually be together. For real.”

With a smile, Ilya pressed his foot back.

“I like that idea.”

They fell into comfortable silence without even noticing.

Half an hour passed with them each absorbed by the glow of their phones, their legs tangled together beneath the twisted sheets. Most of Shane’s pillows had long been thrown to the ground, and there was enough space for them to sit apart. Neither of them moved.

At some point, Shane had slipped on a pair of glasses.

It shouldn't have mattered; they'd only just finished having sex. But the sight of Shane like this — relaxed and domestic and *beautiful* — made Ilya's dick grow hard again.

"What is a Russian word for 'grandmother or headscarf?'" Shane asked, out of the blue.

Ilya let his phone drop to his stomach. "Why?" He turned, propping himself up on his elbow to squint at Shane. "What are you doing?"

"Crossword puzzle."

Ilya made a face and scooted closer, until his chin rested on Shane's shoulder. He peered down at the half-finished puzzle on the screen. "Why?"

Shane smiled, one hand lazily finding its way to Ilya's hair, fingers combing through his curls with effortless familiarity. Like it belonged there. Like it had always belonged there.

"They're fun."

"Oh my God," Ilya groaned dramatically, "you are so boring." He pushed at Shane's shoulder, hard enough to dislodge him from his place in the mattress. "Go. Over there, I don't want you to infect me."

"Well are you gonna tell me or not?" Shane laughed, moving back into position.

"I can't tell you, that's cheating."

"It's not cheating. It'll be cheating if I have to google it because my dumbass-" Shane stopped short, cutting himself off mid-sentence. He frowned slightly, the way Ilya did when he struggled to recall an English word. "Because *you* won't tell me."

Ilya noticed. Wondered what he would have said. Boyfriend? Lover? Arch-rival? Something worse? Something better?

"Fine." Ilya said after a beat.

He settled back against Shane properly this time, head tucked into the hollow of his shoulder, one arm draped across his bare stomach. The rise and fall of Shane's breath steadied something within him.

"Babushka."

"Can you spell that?"

"Is spelled like it sounds."

Shane went quiet again after that. Ilya watched as he went through the puzzle, filling in and deleting; watched the way his brow creased in concentration, how he pushed his glasses

up his nose when they slipped. Ilya traced lazy patterns across Shane's stomach, basking in the silence.

Eventually, Shane leaned down just enough to press a soft kiss on Ilya's forehead, brushing his curls away from his face. It was absentminded, affectionate.

That's what did it.

Ilya found himself leaning forward, pressing a kiss to the soft skin of Shane's stomach, just below his ribs. He didn't think about it. If he did, he would have stopped himself.

"Я тебя люблю," he whispered into Shane's skin.

Shane hummed quietly in acknowledgement, glancing up from his phone.

"Я тебя так сильно люблю, черт возьми."

Ilya lifted his head, stared at the place where Shane's collarbone met his shoulder, anywhere but his face. He counted his breaths. Thought about Moscow. About fear. About walking away from burning houses.

"I love you," he said finally.

Shane's phone dropped from his hand and hit the mattress. Ilya saw the way his shoulders tightened, heard Shane's breath catch in his throat.

Panic flared, sharp and immediate. Ilya had done it again. He'd moved too quickly; assumed things he shouldn't. But he could fix this. He could tell Shane that he'd meant it differently, that English was confusing.

"I mean-"

Shane didn't let him finish. "I love you too."

He reached up, thumb gentle on Ilya's chin, tipping his face up. Tears spilled before Ilya could stop them, hot and humiliating.

"Fuck, Shane," Ilya breathed, voice raw. He buried his face in Shane's chest.

Shane's wrapped around him instantly, arms solid and sure. One hand cradled the back of Ilya's head as Shane buried his face in his hair.

"Does it fucking kill you too?" he asked quietly.

Ilya shook his head. "Not anymore."

He pushed himself up then, kissed Shane like he was air and Ilya had been drowning. It was desperate, hungry. Shane returned the kiss with equal vigor, one hand sliding up to tug the glasses off his face without breaking contact.

Ilya whined into his mouth, pulling away. “No, put them back on.”

“Why?”

“Because I said so.” Ilya grabbed the glasses from Shane’s hand with a grin, putting them on himself. Nothing really changed. “Wow,” he laughed, “I don’t think you need these.”

Shane rolled his eyes. “They’re really just for reading, looking at screens and stuff. So I don’t strain my eyes too hard.”

“Do I look pretty?” Ilya asked. He leaned down, close enough that their noses touched. The cross around his neck hung low enough to rest on Shane’s chest.

“Pretty isn’t the word I would use,” Shane said softly, his hands gently wrapping around Ilya’s biceps.

Ilya frowned, sitting up. “Ach. You wound me, Hollander.”

“You look very handsome,” Shane grinned. He dragged Ilya back down. “Glasses or no.”

The kiss that followed was softer. Gentle. Familiar in a way that made Ilya smile into it. When Shane pulled back, he reached up and slid the glasses off Ilya’s face, before leaning in for another kiss.

— *There’s no use swinging your fists once the fight is over.*

It was a proverb Ilya’s mother used to say when he was a boy. When he failed a maths test. When he lost a game he’d wanted too badly. When he shattered a glass on the kitchen floor and his father slapped him. She was always there to pick him back up, kiss his cheek, wipe the tears from his eyes.

— *What’s done is done. You can’t change it; you can only go forward.*

Now, standing frozen on the ice, Ilya felt the guilt creep in anyway.

There had to have been a moment — some small, stupid point of divergence — where this could have gone differently. If they hadn’t been so bold. If they hadn’t chirped each other during warmups. If they hadn’t been teasing one another the whole game. If Shane hadn’t looked back over his shoulder at Ilya, maybe he wouldn’t be lying still on the ice.

Shane had crumpled the moment Marleau hit him. There was no struggle, no scramble to get back up, no cries of pain. He just dropped.

The dull thud of his body hitting the ice knocked the air from Ilya's lungs. The rink tilted on its axis. Ilya was distantly aware of the crowd roaring, of Pike shouting as he was dragged away from Marleau. Ilya felt hands pushing at him, but he barely registered it.

All he could see was Shane, the medics pulling off his helmet.

"Go to your bench, Rozanov," the ref growled, stepping between Ilya and Shane.

"Is he okay?" The words tore out of him, raw and sharp.

"Get to your bench."

"No, I- Is he okay? Fucking tell me!"

"I'm not going to tell you again."

For one terrifying second, Ilya thought he might actually shove him. Thought he might take the penalty, take the suspension, take anything if it meant being closer. If it meant seeing Shane's chest rise, his eyes open.

But he couldn't.

The whole world was watching. It would raise eyebrows, even if they were friends, for Ilya to risk penalty to be at Shane's side.

He didn't have a choice.

Ilya moved slowly towards the bench, watching the medics put a brace around Shane's neck, load him onto a stretcher, rush him off the ice.

Yesterday. It was only yesterday that he had been in Shane's bed, in Shane's arms. That Shane had said the words he'd waited so long to hear.

— *I love you too.*

Now his blood was being scraped off the ice.

The rest of the game was a blur.

Ilya moved because his body knew how to navigate the ice better than anywhere else, muscles moving on instinct. Shifts blurred together. Faces passed hi without sticking. His legs burned, his lungs screamed, but none of it felt real. The only thing Ilya could register was the image of Shane on the ice, burned to the back of his eyes.

By the time the final buzzer sounded, Ilya was ready to collapse. He felt hollowed out, like his insides had been scooped clean from his chest and left behind a ringing ache.

The second it was over, he shoved his way down the tunnel toward the locker room, breath coming too fast. It was strangely quiet, even as the rest of the team filed in behind him. The events of the night — the image of Shane Hollander laying motionless on the ice — hung like a thick fog.

Ilya tore his gloves off, yanked his jersey over his head. Sweat cooled rapidly against his bare skin. He didn't bother to shower. Didn't sit. He dragged his clothes on with clumsy hands, fabric sticking to him. He moved sharp and fast, like if he paused for even a second, he might break.

He didn't notice Marleau until the man had a hand on his shoulder.

"Roz-"

Ilya flinched hard at the touch, jerking away.

Marleau stood there, hand hovering uselessly in the air now, his face tight. He looked at Ilya like he pitied him. His voice was low when he spoke, quiet enough for only Ilya to hear.

"Roz, I- I'm sorry, man," he whispered, softer this time.

Ilya refused to look at him, sitting down to lace up his shoes. "It's fine."

"I know you guys are... close."

The word landed heavy, dangerous.

Ilya's jaw clenched. His chest felt too tight, his mouth was too dry. He didn't have the energy to dwell on it; on what that word meant, what Marleau knew.

"It was a clean hit," Ilya managed, through gritted teeth.

Marleau sat down next to him, holding out a bottle of Gatorade. It was blue; Ilya's favorite. An olive branch.

"I didn't mean to hurt him."

Ilya nodded, eyes glued to the ground. He worried that if he let Marleau see him — if he let anything show — it would all come spilling out at once. The fear. The guilt. The unbearable *what ifs* clawing at the back of his throat.

He took the drink.

"I know."

Official Montreal Metros
@montrealmetrosmlh

UPDATE: Captain Shane Hollander has been taken to Montreal General following his injury during tonight's game. Though he is in stable condition, please keep him in your thoughts and prayers. ♥💙

10:34 PM · Apr 26, 2017

23.3K Retweets **255** Quote Tweets **113.1K** Likes

Jane 💞

Today at 9:17 PM
Are you ok???
10:37 PM
Please call me if you can
11:04 PM
Please text me as soon as you can

Ilya was at Montreal General's welcome desk at 9 am on the dot.

He'd managed only two hours of sleep — not consecutively. But at least this time Connors had the sympathy not to complain about his restlessness.

Ilya had spent all night refreshing his phone; checking Google, twitter, waiting for updates on Shane's condition. Putting his phone down only to pick it back up a minute later.

The Metros had tweeted once that he was stable, before the game was even over, and never again. *Stable.* Stable didn't mean awake. Stable didn't mean okay.

"Can I help you?" the all-too chipper receptionist asked.

Ilya leaned forward, elbows bracing on the cool laminate of the counter and forcing a polite smile. "I'm here to see a patient. Shane Hollander."

"Oh yes," the woman — Linda, her name tag read — grinned. She typed furiously as she spoke. "I thought I recognized you! You're Ilya Rozanov, right?"

"I am."

"You're not here to smother him with a pillow, are you?"

The joke barely registered.

"No, no. Just… here to represent the team. Apologize for the accident."

Linda handed over a clipboard with a sign-in sheet. Ilya wrote out his name with her seahorse-shaped pen, hands shaking.

"Can I see some ID?"

Ilya handed over his passport and watched her scan the pages, the seconds stretching thin and sharp. His fingers tapped restlessly on the counter. This was taking too long. He needed to see Shane; to see for himself that he was okay.

Until then, the image of Shane crumpling to the ice wouldn't stop replaying in his head.

"Alright," Linda hummed at last, sliding his passport and an adhesive nametag back across the counter. "Make sure you wear this badge, and you're good to go! Mr Hollander is in room 207. If you go up the elevator, it'll be down the hall and on your right."

"Thank you."

It was all Ilya could do not to bolt for the elevator. He forced himself to walk slowly, evenly.

The elevator doors took too long. Ilya stabbed the close button, then did it again, and again, until they finally shut. His reflection stared back at him from the brushed metal, pale and strung out. He'd tried to look presentable, like he hadn't been awake all night worrying. It had only worked a little.

The elevator dinged. Second floor.

The hallway smelled like disinifectant, a smell Ilya was far too familiar with.

He had hoped to be done with hospitals, now that his father was gone. No more waiting rooms with cold plastic chairs, or doctors with grim news, or giant orange bottles of medication. Ilya supposed he couldn't be so lucky.

Shane's room was at the end of the hall, and Ilya hesitated as he grabbed the handle. Slowly, the possibility entered his mind that Shane might not even want to see him. They were still pretending, after all. Friends. Rivals. And it was Ilya's own teammate who had put him in the hospital.

He swallowed his doubts and turned the handle anyway.

At the sound of the door, Shane glanced up immediately. He grinned brightly, trying — and failing — to sit up and greet Ilya.

"Ilyaaaaaaa."

At the sound of his voice, Ilya collapsed back against the door in relief.

Shane was okay. He was smiling. And he was doped up.

"I just... I needed to see you," Ilya said slowly. "Are you okay?"

His instincts told him to run to Shane's side, kiss his temple, hold him close. He didn't. If he did, Ilya wasn't sure he'd be able to leave.

"Concussion and a fractured collarbone. Out for the seasonnn." Shane frowned dramatically. "But..."

“Could have been worse.”

“Could’ve been worseeee,” Shane agreed, lips curving up into a smile. He squinted his eyes tightly, falling back against his mound of pillows.

Even in the hospital, Shane Hollander had far too many pillows.

“Marleau feels terrible,” Ilya said, easing closer. He took a careful seat at the foot of the bed, hand resting on Shane’s leg. “He did not mean to hurt you.”

“I knowww. Part of the game. We all get our bell rung eventually, righttttt?”

“Right.”

“Heyyyyyyy.” Shane lifted his hand, palm up, expectant.

Ilya lasted half a second before giving in. He slid futher down the bed, laced their fingers together,

“Yesss,” Shane hummed, closing his eyes. “Better.”

Ilya bent, pressing a gentle kiss to his knuckles. “You scared me.”

Shane’s eyes flew open. “Iiii scared youu?” he slurred. “I’mmm the one who got taken out on a stretcher.”

“Yes, and it fucking scared me, Shane.”

Shane snickered, lids drooping again. “You have a crush on meee.”

Ilya shushed him. He reached out to stroke Shane’s cheeks, bruised from the fall. “Something like that,” he whispered, kissing his hand again and squeezing it tight between his fingers.

“M’ sorry I didn’t text you last night."

“It’s fine. You should just worry about getting better. Are your parents here?”

“Nooo, they’re driving over this morning. I told them not to rush. I’m fineee.”

“Yuna and David, yes?”

“Mmhmmm.”

“They love you,” Ilya said quietly. “It is... probably very hard for them. To not be here when you need them.”

Ilya would have given anything for parents like that. For someone who would come running. He was certain that, unless he was dying, his father wouldn’t have so much as sent a card, even before he was sick.

Shane studied him, pupils blown wide. “You look like shit.”

Ilya huffed out a laugh in response. “I know.”

The door clicked, abruptly shattering the fragile calm.

Ilya jumped from the bed quickly, nearly knocking over the IV pole as he tore his hand away from Shane’s. There in the doorway stood Hayden Pike, holding a basket of gifts almost bigger than himself. The smile on his face dropped instantly as he saw Ilya, though the woman beside him seemed unphased.

“Haydennnn,” Shane smiled, not noticing the sudden tension.

Pike cleared his throat. “Rozanov.”

“Pike,” Ilya returned stiffly.

Pike stepped inside and dropped the basket down onto the small plastic sofa with more force than neccessary. The cellophane crinkled loudly. “What are you doing here?”

“I just, um, came to check on Sh- *Hollander*,” Ilya stuttered. He shoved his hands in his pockets. “On behalf of the team.”

“Right.” Pike said flatly, arms crossing over his chest. His gaze flicked between Shane and Ilya.

“I am captain. And he is my friend. It only seemed right.”

The woman beside Pike stepped forward, still beaming. “Hi, I’m Jackie. It’s *so* nice to finally meet you!” She held out her hand.

Her husband swatted it away before Ilya could take it.

He forced a small smile. “Ilya. Rozanov. But I guess you knew that.”

Jackie shrugged playfully, turning away and beginning to pull things out of the basket.

Pike stared at Ilya, mouth pressed into a hard line. “Okay,” he nodded. “Well, you can go. Jackie and I can take it from here.”

“Nooo Hayden,” Shane whined, looking pitiful. “I want Ilya to stayyyy.”

Ilya glanced down nervously. “It’s alright, Hollander-”

“S’ not my nameeee.”

Ilya swallowed. “*Shane*.”

“Don’t gooo. I’ll miss you.” Shane held out his hand again, fingers curling and uncurling uselessly in the air. When Ilya hesitated, he let out a small, wounded sound that went straight through him.

Ilya stepped closer and let Shane grab his hand, lacing their fingers together. If Ilya wasn't running on fumes, he might have sworn he heard Jackie giggle.

Pike did not. "Outside," he growled. "Now. Jackie, can you stay with Shane?"

"Roger that," Jackie said with a salute. She was already at Shane's side, presenting him with what looked to be a child's drawing — probably made by one of Pike's thirty children.

Shane frowned. "Nooo Ilya."

"It's okay, моя любовьm" Ilya murmured, squeezing Shane's hand one last time. "We'll be right back."

He shuffled into the hallway after Pike, pulling the door shut behind them. At the sound of the click, Pike turned immediately.

"Explain," he demanded. "Now."

"I think you already know."

"I want to hear you say it anyway."

Whatever adrenaline had been keeping Ilya going finally bled out of him. He took a step back and collapsed into one of the hard plastic chairs along the wall, hands resting uselessly in his lap. Pike loomed over him, glaring hard.

He didn't know what to say. What he could say. *Your best friend has been lying to you for years, we're in love, please don't tell anyone.* Ilya was too tired to lie.

"Shane and I," Ilya began, voice low, "we are... lovers."

Pike just sighed. He moved, slouching in the seat beside Ilya, arms still crossed.

"How long?" he asked tightly.

"It's not my place, Pike. Shane should tell you. All of this. This... isn't how he would have wanted you to find out."

"Yeah," Pike huffed, "no shit. So you're Lily, then?"

Ilya nodded.

"What's his name?"

"Jane."

That earned a short, dry laugh.

They both went quiet as a nurse rounded the corner. She fave them a small smile, which only Pike returned, before ducking into Shane's room. The muffled sounds of Shane's chipper greeting bled into the hallway.

“Looks like they got him on the good stuff,” Pike muttered.

They went back to silence.

Suddenly, Pike sat up straight. He turned to look at Ilya fully.

“Why didn’t he tell me? I mean I wouldn’t-” He faltered, frustration bleeding through. “I don’t- I don’t care that he’s gay.”

Ilya hummed. “It seems like you care a lot.”

“I care that it’s *you*,” Pike spat. “It was hard enough to believe you’re friends. Now this?” He shook his head. “I don’t know what the fuck he sees in you.”

“I don’t know either,” Ilya said honestly.

Pike stared at him for a long moment, chest heaving. “Can you just... tell me one thing? Tell me that- that he never threw a game for you.”

Ilya turned and looked at him, gaze hardening. “Do you honestly believe that?”

“I- I don’t know what to think anymore.”

The door to Shane’s room opened again, and Ilya heard Shane wishing the nurse farewell as she continued down the hallway. Pike hunched forward, rubbing a hand over his face.

“Okay,” he sighed quietly. “Okay.”

They sat in silence. The hospital hummed around them — distant footsteps, murmured voices. From behind the closed door, Shane’s voice drifted out again, animated and bright, probably telling Jackie a story that had started normal and wandered off into nonsense halfway through.

“I don’t like this,” Pike admitted. “I don’t like *you*. But I love Shane.” He looked up, meeting Ilya’s eyes. “And... I trust him. So if he trusts you...” He trailed off, not finishing the sentiment. “But that’s as far as I’m going to get.”

Ilya nodded. It was more than he’d expected; more than he’d hoped for.

“Then we are in the same boat.”

Pike looked at him then, really looked at him. He opened his mouth to say something, but before he could, the door cracked open, and Jackie poked her head out.

“Hey,” she whispered loudly, “he’s asking where his boyfriend went.”

Pike closed his eyes. “Jesus Christ.”

Ilya froze.

Jackie blinked. “Oh. Was that-” she waved a hand vaguely between them, “Have you not gotten that far?”

“Please, Jackie,” Pike pleaded, rubbing his face.

“Right. Yep. Leaving.” She vanished back into room.

Pike stood as the door shut. He cleared his throat, straightened his jacket. “You... should go back in. I’ll go grab coffee. Something strong. What do you drink?”

Ilya blinked. “Just black,” he said after a moment. He eased out of his chair.

Pike nodded. He took a few steps before stopping, turning back.

“For what it’s worth,” he started slowly, “Shane doesn’t let people in easy. But, Lily seems to make him happy. So... thank you.”

He didn’t wait for Ilya to respond before turning again, making his way back down the hall.

As Ilya pushed the door open, he saw Shane’s smile brighten.

“Ilyaaaaa,” he said, voice warm and sleepy, “You came back!”

TWO WEEKS LATER

Jane 💞

Today at 12:02 AM
Happy birthday
9:18 AM
Technically its not my birthday until like, noon.
🙄
12:00 PM
Happy Birthday
Thanks :)
Youre a leopard now
A leopard?????
What does that even mean?

Someone who dates younger men
Cougar.
Which I’m not.
You're one month younger than me.
No
You are old now
Cougar
Be careful standing up you might pull a muscle

THREE DAYS LATER

Jane 💞

Today at 4:12 PM
I told my parents.
About me.
About us.
And?
How did it go
All things considered...
Pretty good.
It took some time for them to process.
Maybe took a few years off my mom’s life.
But they want to meet you.
Ok
But I will not eat any food they make
I thought you were immune to poison?
I lied

BOSTON, MASSACHUSSETTS
TWO WEEKS LATER

Jane 💞

Today at 10:45 PM
Still 2-1
At least I made playoffs
Maybe if you worked on your backhand
I'm literally still in a sling.
What’s your excuse?
My mom thinks the admirals are going to win the cup.
No way
Scott Hunter is 100 000 years old
He beat you.
It was a fluke
Not my fault
It was all Marleau’s fault
Not very classy, blaming other players.
It’s your job as the captain to win.
No, it is captain’s job to be very sexy and good looking
That's why youre such a good one

Ilya watched the dots on his screen appear as Shane typed, before they disappeared, and his phone began to vibrate.

Jane 💞
Incoming call

"*Jane* calling to give her condolences?" Marleau asked, peering over Ilya's shoulder.

He shoved the man away, rolling his eyes. "Shut up, Marly." Ilya pulled a clean shirt over his head, making a beeline for the door.

"Why don't I get a heart by my name?" Marleau called after him.

"Because you are ugly."

By the time Ilya made it to the corridor outside the locker room, the line had gone dead. He opened the contact to call Shane again; he picked up before the first ring.

"Come to my cottage," Shane said immediately.

Ilya was taken aback. "What?"

"Come to my cottage," Shane repeated. "In June. We can watch the cup together. Celebrate your birthday, even."

Ilya pressed his shoulder to the wall, lowering his voice. "Shane, I am literally still at the rink."

Though the hallway wasn't packed, staff milled about with clipboards and lanyards. A few family members lingered, waiting eagerly to console their fathers and husbands.

"You're not allowed to say no."

"Says who?"

"Me. Right now. Please?"

Ilya wanted nothing more than to go to the cottage. To sit on Shane's sofa that probably had too many pillows and watch hockey with him. To be able to kiss him whenever he wanted.

After the incident at the hospital, their secret was decidedly less-so. Pike and his wife knew. Shane had told his parents. Svetlana knew. And Ilya had a creeping suspicion that Marleau knew *something*, though what, he couldn't be certain.

And while the other shoe had not dropped yet, that was only six people. To the rest of the world, Ilya and Shane were only friends — and even that was a recent announcement.

But friends went to each other's cottages, didn't they? If the public found out, it would be understandable that Ilya had chosen to visit Shane's summer home by the lake instead

of going to Russia or staying in the humid city.

“Ugh,” Ilya sighed dramatically, “fine, okay, if you insist.”

“Great goal, by the way.”

Ilya scoffed. “All of my goals are great, you will have to be more specific.”

Across the line, he could hear Shane laughing. “Big words for someone who just lost.”

“No, that is not funny. It’s too soon.”

“I love you.”

“Я тоже тебя люблю.”

OTTAWA, ONTARIO
FOUR DAYS LATER

“Is this a Jeep?”

“No,” Shane huffed, as if personally offended by the comment. “It’s British. Practical. Good in the snow.”

Ilya nodded, lips pursed. “Okay.”

End Notes

Translations, in order of use:

звезда дня - star of the day/man of the hour

пиздец - fuck (emphasis), such as “fucking idiot”

да - yes

блять - fuck/damn, expletive

Не на этот раз - not this time

сыпать соль на рану - to rub salt in the wound

Ответь, блядь, на мои звонки. Папа умер. - “Answer my calls, damn it! Dad is dead.”

сельдь под шубой - dressed herring/herring under a fur coat

Nastya – diminutive of the name Anastasia (which is the name I’ve given Ilya’s unnamed neice)

Ilyusha – diminutive, affectionate form of the name Ilya

Боже мой - my God

Да - yes

Я тебя люблю - I love you

Я тебя так сильно люблю, черт возьми. - I love you so fucking much.

моя любовь - my love

Я тоже тебя люблю - I love you too

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