

The Things We Almost Say

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The Things We Almost Say

by [xogaby](#)

Summary

When Shane Hollander is taken off the ice and into the hospital, Ilya Rozanov goes somewhere he's never had to be alone before.

Hayden Pike has always believed Shane Hollander's personal life is none of his business. Until an injury, a hospital room, and a contact saved under the wrong name prove him wrong.

Some things are learned quietly.

Some things are never the same afterward.

Notes

I'm in a cult now and I have no plans on seeing myself out, so... have fun!

(P.S. This is not beta read, all mistakes are my own.)

As captain of the Boston Bears, Ilya Rozanov wasn't keen on drinking until he was drunk outside of the appropriate team bonding functions. This was, of course, not limited to team dinners, parties at a teammate's house, or going to clubs in hopes it would help him find someone decent to fuck. Perhaps that's why, after a listless effort from him to secure a victory against the Montreal Metros, he hightailed it out of the arena and caught a cab as fast as he possibly could.

He was in no mood to celebrate tonight.

The cab he'd called before taking the fastest post-game shower of his life was already waiting, meter running. Shane Hollander's address was punched into the GPS, one additional stop requested, as Ilya slid into the backseat. Now, with a bagged bottle of the best vodka Ilya could find at the last minute, he used the fingers on his other hand to type in the code Shane mumbled to him during warmups mere hours ago. The device emits a few whirs and clicks before the lock disengages, allowing Ilya to shove the door open.

Fumbling it shut behind him, the lock clicks a little louder than he anticipates as it resets, echoing down the hallway. The apartment is dark in a way that feels... wrong. Every other time he's been here, Shane has been the light source, with the lamps already on, music playing low, and Shane halfway through telling him something he doesn't get to finish before Ilya's greed for attention takes control. This version of the apartment is incomplete. It is, quite frankly, too empty.

With one hand braced against the door, Ilya's other hand reaches out blindly until his fingers find the wall. He drags them along it, slow and careful, until they catch on the switch. The lights come on all at once, bright enough that he has to blink a few times, his eyes stinging as the space reveals itself to him.

Nothing is physically different compared to the last time he'd been here, and that is somehow worse. *Does Shane even live here, or is Mr. Landlord using it as a showroom?*

He toes off his shoes and leaves them where they fall, moving toward the kitchen on instinct. *If I were Shane Hollander, where would glasses go?* Ilya wonders, opening several cabinets before locating them. He pulls one down, sets it on the counter, and reaches into the bag, pulling the vodka free. He pours without bothering to measure, the glass clinking softly against the counter when he sets the bottle back down, his hand just a little unsteady. The first gulp burns a path down his throat, familiar and grounding, settling heavy in his stomach.

It'd been a clean hit. That was the worst part, in Ilya's opinion.

Completely legal, textbook, and unavoidable, Shane had glanced back over his shoulder, instinctively but purposely, eyes flicking to Ilya for half a second too long, missing Marleau bearing down on him entirely.

The way Shane's body crumpled, folding as he hit the ice and stayed there, made Ilya's heart drop. His skate blades had screeched as he stopped too fast, the sound of Hayden Pike's voice

cutting through — “*Marleau, you motherfucker!*” — raw and furious as Ilya hovered uselessly at the edge of the right circle in Boston’s end.

“Is he okay? Fucking tell me!” Ilya exclaimed at the officials.

“Go back to your bench, Rozanov. I’m not going to ask you again.” A referee’s hand pressed firmly between Ilya’s shoulder blades, steering him back toward the bench while Shane was strapped down to a backboard by the medics, then lifted onto a gurney and rolled out of sight.

Marleau, you motherfucker indeed, Ilya agrees silently and throws back the remaining liquid in his glass before filling it again.

Moving into the living room, the couch creaks when he drops onto it, the leather cold even through his sweatpants and Boston hockey sweatshirt. He kicks at the decorative pillows without looking, sending two of them tumbling to the floor. Shane really had too many, and he knew this. The interior decorator he’d hired should quit and find a new calling, honestly. Ilya lets out something that might have been a laugh if it didn’t die in his throat instead, recalling words they’d shared the first time Ilya had been here.

They fade quickly as he reaches for the remote on the coffee table, left where it always is. He picks it up, thumb hovering for half a second before he turns the television on. The room fills with sound immediately, already tuned in to a sports channel, post-game coverage from tonight’s game already looping. Ilya doesn’t change it.

The angle of the highlight reel is wide and clinical. Ilya watches himself on the ice, chasing Shane as he cuts across the blue line, head twisting to look back at him over his shoulder. His mind supplies the image that the cameras couldn’t see: one of pure joy and a cheesy grin, happy to finally be back on the ice playing against the man that the world believes he hates the most. But in a blink, that picture-perfect image becomes a nightmare. Shane goes down on the screen, and just like before, Ilya doesn’t flinch.

He just keeps his eyes locked on what’s unfolding in front of him, watching a version of himself demand the ref tell him if a clearly unresponsive Shane is okay or not. Except now, he can also listen to the announcers as they speak over the low hush from the stunned Montreal crowd.

“Say what you will about this rivalry, but even Rozanov doesn’t want to see somebody go down like that.” The announcer sighs.

With a heavy sigh, Ilya lifts his glass to his mouth to take another hearty gulp. “As blind as the refs are, hmm?” Ilya mutters, though he’s secretly thankful that they are oblivious.

When it cuts to a commercial, his phone buzzes in his pants pocket. He digs it out, half expecting it to be Marleau wanting to know if he plans on making an appearance in their shared hotel room tonight. Because, of course, this is the road trip that they would get bunked together. The answer is a hard no, though. Not when there is a distinct possibility he’d sucker punch Marleau in the jaw.

His teammate in question had seemed concerned enough about inflicting such an injury on another player, especially when it wasn't intentional. But he'd gotten over it rather quickly when he realized he wouldn't have to serve more than a two-minute roughing penalty for his run-in with Hayden Pike after the fact. While injuries like this are a risk you take in a professional hockey career, Ilya would have liked to see a bit more remorse or feeling in a guy he thought he knew pretty damn well.

Was that just because he was officially and quite astoundingly in love with Shane Hollander? Maybe. But Ilya was still coming to terms with admitting that out loud.

The name that lights up his phone screen succeeds in being a distraction, his chest tightening reflexively.

Jane

For half a heartbeat, relief floods him. It's sharp, stupid, and immediate, but *fuck*. Shane was awake. Shane had his phone. Shane was—

Ilya swipes at the screen, opening the iMessage app.

Jane: *Hey. It's Hayden Pike, a teammate of Shane's. I don't know if you saw, but Shane got hurt tonight. He's stable. Just thought you'd like to know.*

Ilya stares at the words, his thumb frozen above the screen. The realization that Shane may still be very unconscious settles slowly, along with the knowledge that Hayden Pike has Shane's phone, heavy in his chest as he once again drains the contents of his glass.

Ilya exhales through his nose, long and controlled.

Fuck.

Ilya stands so suddenly, the glass rattles when he deposits it on the coffee table in front of him. He crosses the apartment once, then again, steps measured and pointless, his shoulder brushing the wall where he can picture Shane leaning to tie his shoes before a run. He stops there, picturing the domestic image with his eyes closed to encourage a peaceful state of mind, hand splayed against the paint.

Breathe in. Breathe out.

It shouldn't come as a surprise that Hayden Pike would know how to access Shane's phone. For all intents and purposes, they were best friends, even if Ilya didn't understand the how or why. Hayden Pike is far too boisterous, overly cheerful, and acts like everyone's buddy. So how is it that someone as emotionally complex and shy as Shane is such great friends with him? That wasn't a question that Ilya needed to answer right now.

It simply wasn't his biggest problem.

The bigger problem was Hayden Pike having access to Shane's phone. Vis-à-vis the messages sent without thinking, the names used in recent weeks without care. Photos that

were not meant for anyone else. All it would take was one moment of curiosity, one idle scroll now that Shane couldn't guard his own fucking phone.

Ilya paces back over to the couch, reaching for his glass out of habit before setting it back down untouched. No amount of alcohol will calm his wired heart from beating out of his chest. It never does anymore.

The television loops back to the highlight reel of Shane's injury, recapturing Ilya's attention. With his jaw clenched, his eyes track Shane's every movement with a ruthless focus. When it ends, he doesn't turn the TV off. He lets it keep playing, meaningless motion filling the room, but mutes the sound.

He feels a phantom vibration from his phone, quickly checking it to find no updates on Shane's condition. Of course not, it's not like he'd sent a reply. Hayden probably thinks Lily is an asshole.

I am an asshole, Ilya admits, but only because Shane can't hear him.

Ilya takes a seat, nibbling on the tip of his thumb as he stares at his keyboard in contemplation. It's possible Hayden sent the text, locked Shane's phone, and stashed it away. He may not even expect Lily to respond; he just wanted to be a decent guy who, for whatever reason, updated another friend.

How much does Hayden Pike even know about Lily? He probably thinks Lily is some fuck buddy Shane hooks up with each time they're in Boston, but after so many years, she might care enough to know if her consistent source for sex is permanently out of commission.

Ilya sighs and types out a generic response, only to erase it and try again.

Lily: Thank you for telling me.

Delete.

Lily: Is he awake?

Delete.

Finally, he settles on:

Lily: Thank you for the update. Please let me know if anything changes.

He stares at it for a long second before hitting send. The reply comes a few painstaking minutes later.

Jane: Of course. I'll stay with him.

Ilya lets his head fall back against the couch, his eyes closing as his grip tightens around the phone until his knuckles ache. *Good*, he thinks fiercely. *Don't leave him alone.*

The last update comes just after 2 a.m.

Jane: He's sleeping now. They're keeping him comfortable.

Ilya reads it twice. Then, a third time, slower, as if he reads carefully enough, the words might change. A few hours ago, Shane had been in and out of consciousness while doctors ran him through an MRI and a CT scan, plus a few other tests, before administering some morphine for the pain.

Thank you, he types back. He stares at the screen for a long moment before adding, *Please tell him I checked in*, only to delete it. Hayden doesn't need to tell him that. Shane doesn't need to focus on that.

The apartment feels too big again once the phone permanently goes quiet, even with the television still on. Ilya switched it to reruns of some sitcom hours ago, tired of watching game footage and in desperate need of some sound. However, the volume has since been turned so low that it's more of a vibration anyway. Finally, he turns it off, letting the silence ring in his ears.

He sits there for a moment, undecided, before standing and heading for the stairs.

Shane's bedroom is dark, the curtains pulled the way he likes them so that just enough city light slips in to outline the bed. Ilya silently removes his sweats and hoodie, then his socks, before slipping under the covers, the bed warm in a way that surprises him.

The scent hits him all at once. Shane's body wash is clean and sharp, his shampoo containing a faint sweetness beneath it all on the pillow. Ilya turns his face into it without thinking, his chest tightening painfully as he inhales deeply. He reaches for a second pillow and pulls it close, his arm curling around it to press it to his sternum. It's an awful substitute. The pillow is not only too light but much too still.

"Terrible," he grumbles under his breath, the word disappearing into the fabric of the pillowcase. Still, he doesn't let go.

Sleep comes in fragments. Restless, shallow, punctuated by the buzz of his phone when the alarm sounds far too soon, a few hours later. Ilya groans softly and rolls onto his back, blinking up at the ceiling as reality settles back into place.

Shane is still in the hospital.

The Boston Bears are in the middle of a road trip.

The plane would leave with or without him.

Ilya sits up slowly, hands dragging over his face. He could use a cigarette, but Shane might actually kill him for smoking inside his apartment. So instead, he sits up, reaching for his phone, his thumb hovering over the screen.

A message from Marleau awaits after all, reminding him to wrap it up with his Montreal hottie so he can catch their flight to Ottawa at one.

Swinging his legs off the bed to stand, the decision crystallizes with a clarity that feels almost like relief. He's not getting on that fucking plane without seeing Shane.

~ ~ ~

The hospital doors are heavier than Ilya expected.

They slide apart with a resistance that feels intentional, like the building itself is trying to slow him down and force him to consider what he's walking into. The smell of antiseptic hits him immediately, along with something that's faintly metallic. It's sharp enough to sting the back of his throat. It clings to his clothes, his hair, and settles into his lungs. Fluorescent lights hum overhead, so bright that they wash the color out of everything they touch. It feels like stepping under interrogation lamps.

He shoves his hands into the front pocket of his hoodie and keeps moving, concentrated on placing one foot in front of the other.

The desk is staffed by a woman who looks like she's been awake for days.

"Shane Hollander," Ilya mumbles, only loud enough for her to hear him. His voice is steady, by the grace of God.

She glances at the screen of her computer, dark eyes flicking up at him just long enough to catalog him before moving back down.

"Room four-twelve," she says, uncapping a black Sharpie to scribble *Hollander* and *Guest 2* on a sticky badge before handing it across the desk to Ilya. "He's resting."

Of course he is, Ilya thinks, but forces himself to smile and thanks her anyway.

The elevator ride is too short and far too long all at once, the numbers ticking upward with an almost mocking patience. His fingers tap against the handrail, jaw tightening. Finally, the doors open on the fourth floor, and he steps out into another corridor of white and quiet, broken only by the distant beep of monitors and the murmur of voices behind closed doors.

Each step that he takes is measured and controlled. This is not the place for losing his head.

Room four-twelve is exactly halfway down the hall, the door cracked open.

Ilya pauses with his hand hovering inches from the handle, breath catching before he can stop it as he looks through the glass window on the door. For one irrational moment, he considers turning around. Going back. Pretending he hadn't come, hadn't crossed this line.

Then he grows a fucking pair.

The room is dimmer than the hallway, curtains drawn against the morning light. Machines stand sentinel beside the bed, their steady rhythms oddly comforting. Shane lies there, propped up slightly, dark hair a mess as it lies flat against his forehead, his skin pale against the white of the sheets. His right arm is hooked in a sling. But he's alive. He's breathing.

Ilya's chest loosens by a fraction as the door softly clicks shut behind him.

"*Ilya*," Shane sing-songs on a blissful sigh, a dopey smile pulling at the corners of his mouth.

Ilya has to fight the smile that threatens to break out on his face, clearing his throat. "Are you, um... Are you okay?" he asks quietly, not daring to move even an inch. His fingers flex at his sides, though. He would give anything to feel Shane and ensure this version of him isn't some figment of his imagination.

Shane's eyes blink slowly, working hard to bring Ilya into proper focus, then sharpen just enough. His mouth keeps that lazy, crooked smile.

"Pretty serious concussion, fractured collarbone, out for the playoffs but..."

"It could have been worse." Ilya finishes.

"It could have been worse," Shane agrees, punctuating his words with a nod.

Ilya's eyes move over Shane again instinctively, a rough sigh rattling through his lungs.

"Hey," Shane says. A pause. Then, softer, stretched out. "Heeeyyyy."

Ilya winces, quickly taking steps closer to the bed and immediately leaning in, placing his hand in Shane's outstretched one. "Shh."

"Yessss," Shane sighs contentedly. "Better."

Shane's gaze slides past him, toward the other side of the room. "Hayden's—"

"I know," Ilya murmurs, reaching his other hand up to trace his knuckles along the freckles dotting Shane's cheeks. God, he loves those freckles. "Pike is asleep, Shane. Is okay."

Ilya couldn't be certain of that. He hadn't looked nearly close enough at Hayden Pike when he'd stepped into the room, Shane stealing all of his focus. Go figure. But his words work, and Shane's attention snaps back to him instead, movements clumsy as he laces their fingers together properly.

Shane relaxes instantly.

The chair beside the bed shifts slightly.

From the corner of the room, Hayden Pike doesn't move.

He keeps his eyes shut, his posture slack, the careful stillness of someone who's been camped out in a hospital chair for too many hours to bother performing sleep convincingly. The room settles around him again, machines humming, curtains whispering faintly as the air conditioning unit turns on.

He hadn't expected this.

Ilya Rozanov, still here, in Montreal. Not at the airport, or already in the air, headed to Ottawa with the rest of Boston's road trip. Hayden had assumed (reasonably) that whatever concern Ilya felt had been handled last night from a distance, the way most players did when the injury wasn't their teammate's to deal with. But Ilya hadn't hovered in the doorway, and he hadn't hesitated. He'd crossed the room as if he belonged in it. That much Hayden could see from the short look he'd granted himself.

"Does it hurt?" Ilya asked quietly.

Shane made a vague noise in response, something between a hum and a shrug, as Hayden could hear the sound of friction between his hospital gown and the bed. "Not bad. They gave me the good stuff."

Ilya chuckles. "Yes. I can tell."

Shane shifts again, restless this time. "You came."

It wasn't a question.

Hayden focuses on the rhythm of the monitors, reflecting the rise and fall of Shane's chest. He catalogues the words without assigning meaning to them yet, the same way he does on the ice: input first, reaction later.

"Of course I did," Ilya says.

There was the sound of fabric moving, a chair scraping softly. Shane's voice drops, words blurring at the edges.

"Thought you'd be gone."

"My plane doesn't leave until one but," Ilya starts, pausing. "I couldn't leave until I saw that you were okay. I knew you were. But I had to see it for myself. With my own eyes."

Hayden stays still.

This is just an unexpected kindness. An extended courtesy. A captain checking in on a player he'd accidentally helped send to the hospital. Rare, sure, but not entirely unheard of.

Still, he'd seen players visit injured opponents before. They were always brief and awkward. Public, for the sake of damage control when the situation called for it, or when you were in as much of a heated rivalry as these two.

"Were you okay last night?" Shane asks.

"Yes. I... did not stay at the hotel, though." Ilya responds.

"Why not?"

Rozanov sighs heavily, as if what he'll say next is taxing or annoys him. "Rooming with Marleau this trip. I couldn't be sure he'd leave Montreal intact without a ref there to play

peacemaker.”

Shane chuckles without humor. “We all get our bell rung eventually. But I am mad at Marleau for fucking that up for us last night. I had a whole plan to ask you something.”

“Maybe you should just rest, Shane.” Rozanov sounds nervous, now.

“Will you come to my cottage this summer?” Shane rushes out. Everything in the room freezes, including Hayden, who holds his breath as much as he imagines Ilya does. “Don’t go to Russia. Come to my house. We’ll have so much fun. It’s so private. No one will know.”

“Hollander, you know I can’t—”

Hayden doesn’t want to hear this. This is not meant for his ears. *Exactly how high is Shane right now?*

Shane groans in disapproval of Rozanov’s initial response. “We could have a week, or even two. We’d be completely alone...” he trails off. Then, on a whisper, “Together.”

Hayden hears some light shuffling. He allows himself to steal a peek through nearly shut eyes, still feeling the tips of his eyelashes brush his cheekbones. Ilya has turned to look at where Hayden continues to sit, all too still while feigning sleep. For a few seconds, Hayden worries the jig is up. But then Ilya turns to face Shane again, and he sighs.

“Maybe,” he finally agrees. “Maybe.”

The room feels suspended, like the air itself is holding its breath along with Hayden. His heart is suddenly loud in his ears, distracting just enough not to chase the thought forming at the edge of his mind, pressing insistently for attention.

Hayden doesn’t let himself react. He doesn’t tense, doesn’t shift, doesn’t do anything that might give him away. He files it where he’s been filing everything else this morning: in the growing space between what he knows and what he’s willing to admit.

This is still... explainable. Shane is concussed, drugged, and emotional. Rozanov is (apparently) unexpectedly kind when he wants to be.

Shane exhales like he’s been holding something in his chest all night. And that’s when the door opens.

“Alright,” a voice says, brisk and unapologetic. “Which one of you is Rozanov?”

Hayden doesn’t move yet. He lets the interruption wash over him, grateful for it in a way he doesn’t fully understand. But he hears a jumble of noises all at once, and a soft, “Oh no,” comes from Shane as he assumes the two men separate by more than a few inches.

“I was told there might be a rivalry situation,” the nurse says dryly. “You here to check on him, or are you planning to suffocate him with a pillow while he’s drugged?”

“No,” Rozanov says, a little too quickly. Then, after a beat, “I mean, no. But good thinking. I was just leaving.”

“Sounds good,” the nurse replies. “I’d rather not have to separate you two like it’s a playground dispute.”

Hayden takes his cue.

He shifts in the chair, rolling his neck, letting out a low, sleep-rough sound as he blinks his eyes open. He squints at the light, disoriented enough to sell it.

“What’d I miss?” he asks, voice hoarse.

Ilya turns his head to look at him. For half a second, Hayden wonders if he’s been clocked. That somehow Rozanov *knows*, and that this is the moment the secret detonates. But Ilya’s expression stays carefully neutral, polite in the way captains are trained to be.

“Nothing,” Rozanov says. “I was just checking in.”

“Yeah?” Hayden glances at Shane, who’s already drifting again, eyelids heavy. “Appreciate it.”

The nurse nods, satisfied. “Five minutes,” she tells Ilya. “Then I need you out.”

Rozanov doesn’t argue. He smooths a hand over the blanket near Shane’s shoulder, but doesn’t touch him again, though the intent is there. Then he straightens and turns toward the door.

He pauses, his hand on the handle, and turns back to look at Shane.

“Get some rest,” he says quietly, though Hayden hears it more clearly than Shane.

Shane hums an incoherent response. Rozanov leaves without another word, the door clicking shut behind him.

The room settles again after the nurse does her mandatory checks. Machines humming, curtains whispering faintly as the air conditioning cycles. Hayden sits there, staring at the space Ilya just vacated, heart still racing despite the calm he’s projecting. He rubs a hand over his face, exhaling slowly.

Okay, he thinks, looking back at his best friend.

Shane is out again, mouth slightly open, his lashes resting against his cheeks. His hand lies loose on the blanket where Rozanov’s had been, his fingers curled like they’re still expecting something to be there.

Hayden swallows.

He tells himself to stop. This is not a puzzle, and none of his business. Shane is hurt. As the captain of the opposing team, Rozanov showed up. End of story. Except...

"You came."

"Of course I did," Ilya says.

"Thought you'd be gone."

"My plane doesn't leave until one but," Ilya starts, pausing. "I couldn't leave until I saw that you were okay. I knew you were. But I had to see it for myself. With my own eyes."

Hayden had checked the clock when the nurse came in. It was only half past nine, which meant Rozanov had woken up this morning knowing he wasn't going straight to the airport. This hadn't been a spontaneous detour.

Hayden scrubs a hand through his hair. He lets his gaze drift around the room, settling on the bag of Shane's things by the wall. Then the half-drunk cup of water on the tray. He needs to take a walk.

He stands carefully, testing the floorboards as if they might betray him, and steps into the hallway, easing the door shut behind him with deliberate quiet. The corridor is brighter than the room, the noise sharper with footsteps, distant voices, and the squeak of a cart rolling past. He leans back against the wall and exhales.

Out in the hallway, the air feels colder, waking up all of his senses. This is how Hayden Pike has always done his best thinking: away from the person he's protecting.

Hayden reaches into his pocket for his phone. He just needs to text Yuna. Let her know Shane's stable, that he's resting. That nothing looks worse than it already is. Does he share that Rozanov came to visit her son? He frowns, pulling it out as he contemplates the idea, and freezes.

Shane's phone lights up in his hand, the lock screen familiar enough that it takes half a second for the mismatch to register. Right. He'd slipped it into his pocket early this morning, before the sun had come up, and shortly after Shane's mystery woman in Boston stopped texting back, looking for updates on Shane's condition.

He should put it back. Walk it into the room, leave it on the tray table, and be done with it. He'd done his job as a good, loyal best friend and only maybe overstepped by reaching out to a casual fuckbuddy. No, Lily couldn't be a casual fuckbuddy. Shane disappeared every time they were in Boston, and he had been doing so for years now. There was nothing casual about whatever relationship they had anymore. Which, admittedly, is what piques Hayden's interest further.

He shifts his grip, unlocking the screen by punching in the same four-digit code that Shane uses for everything. The last text thread open is still Lily's.

Hayden stares at the name, then at the stack of messages beneath it. His own updates from the night before still sit there like evidence of a conversation he hadn't realized he was having alone in the dark.

He scrolls once. Just enough to reorient himself.

Shane: Of course. I'll stay with him.

The reply underneath it is clipped, but unmistakably relieved.

Lily: Thank you. I owe you.

Hayden swallows. He hears a voice in his head as he reads it. Low. Measured. A familiar Russian accent in a way that makes his stomach tighten.

His own phone buzzes in his pocket, vibrating uselessly against his thigh. He ignores it. Instead, he taps Lily's name at the top of the screen, bringing Shane's phone up to his ear.

The call rings once. Twice.

Then it goes to voicemail.

"Hi, you've reached Ilya. I'm not going to listen to your boring message." *Beep.*

The world seems to tilt.

Hayden ends the call without leaving a message, his thumb moving on instinct alone. He lowers the phone, staring at it like the letters on the screen might rearrange themselves if he gives them enough time.

Ilya.

Not Lily.

Ilya *fucking* Rozanov.

Hayden exhales slowly, pressing the back of his head to the wall, closing his eyes.

Okay, he thinks. This time, it's not a placeholder. It's an answer.

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