

so good

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by [belovedandfitz](#)

Summary

Shane Hollander is everything the NHL wants him to be: a Golden Boy, a captain, a rivalry-ready face of the league.

Ilya Rozanov is everything Shane isn't allowed to want: sharp-tongued, unapologetic, and devastatingly magnetic.

From a charged first collision to a decade of stolen nights, staged girlfriends, and a rivalry that burns hotter than hate ever could, Shane and Ilya build a love that survives only in hallways, hotel rooms, and the spaces where cameras can't reach.

But some ghosts don't fade quietly—and some loves refuse to stay secret forever.

A story about ambition, fear, glass walls, and choosing each other even when the world says it's a disaster.

Notes

See the end of the work for [notes](#)

“Lookin’ right, lookin’ like, all the stars are fated.”

The air in the center was thick with the scent of expensive wool, hairspray, and the desperate, electric hum of teenage ambition. Shane Hollander tugged at his collar for the tenth time in as many minutes. The tie -the silk one his mother picked out because it “brought out his eyes” for the cameras- felt less like a fashion choice and more like a noose.

He was supposed to be the prize. The Golden Boy. The kid from Ottawa who played the game the right way, with a clean smile and a cleaner stat sheet. But sitting there in the stands, surrounded by scouts and cameras that tracked his every blink, Shane felt like he was vibrating out of his skin. He didn’t want to be a brand. He didn’t want to be a draft pick. He wanted to be on the ice, where the only thing that mattered was the weight of the puck on his blade.

Then, the name was called. “Ilya Rozanov.”

Shane’s head snapped towards the stage before he could stop himself.

Ilya didn’t walk across the stage; he conquered it. He was wearing a suit that looked like it cost more than Shane’s car, and he moved with a fluid, arrogant grace that made everyone else in the room look like they were standing still. When he pulled the jersey over his head, he didn’t look grateful or humbled. He looked like he was doing the league a favor by joining it.

As Ilya turned to the cameras, he leaned into the microphone, a sharp, jagged smirk cutting across his face. It was a look that said *I’m much better than you, and I know it*. In that moment, Shane felt a strange, violent lurch in his stomach. It wasn’t just the rivalry everyone had been grooming them for. It was something deeper- a physical reaction to the sheer presence of the boy on the stage.

Ilya’s eyes swept across the crowd, and for a split second, Shane felt the gaze land on him. Cold, blue, and impossibly piercing. It felt like a collision he’d been driving towards since the first time he’d laced up his skates.

The stars weren’t just aligned. They were crashing.

Shane realized then, with a terrifying certainty, that his life was no longer just his own. It was tethered to the Russian boy with the lethal smirk. He didn’t know if he wanted to beat him or be near him, but he knew he would never be able to look away.

“I remember the night, I was so frustrated.”

The shadows of the ceiling fan in the hotel room rotated in a steady, rhythmic cycle, but Shane’s brain was anything but steady. He was lying flat on his back, the sheets kicked to the foot of the bed, his skin still humming with the post-game adrenaline that refused to go away.

They had lost. 1-0. And the “1” had come from a breakaway goal by Ilya Rozanov in the dying minutes of the third period.

Shane let out a long, jagged breath and closed his eyes, but that only made it worse. Behind his eyelids, the game replayed on a loop. He saw the way Ilya had stripped the puck from him at the blue line, a move so clean and arrogant that it felt like a personal insult. He heard the sharp, metallic clink of the puck hitting the back of the net.

But mostly, he heard Ilya’s voice.

“Is okay, Hollander.” Ilya had whispered as they lined up for a face-off later. He’d leaned in close, the scent of sweat and cold air rolling off him. “Maybe if you stop trying to be such a good boy for cameras, you play better hockey. You are... how do you say? Tight. Like a doll.”

Shane had snapped. He’d shoved Ilya hard, too hard, and ended up in the penalty box for two minutes while Ilya skated away, laughing. That laugh was the most frustrating sound Shane had ever heard. It wasn’t just a laugh; it was a dismissal. It was Ilya telling the world that Shane Hollander was a fraud.

That was the problem. Everyone else looked at Shane and saw the “Golden Boy,” the future of this sport, the perfect Canadian captain. But when Ilya looked at him through the bars of his cage, he didn’t see the persona. He saw the fear. He saw the rigidity. He saw the boy who was terrified of making a mistake.

Those eyes. They were a bright, piercing blue that felt like they were peeling back Shane’s skin, looking right at the messy, frustrated, angry parts of him that he kept hidden from the rest of the world.

Shane rolled onto his side, clutching a pillow to his chest. He hated Rozanov. He hated his talent, his mouth, and the way he didn’t seem to care about anything but winning. But most of all, Shane hated that even here, in the dark of a quiet hotel room, he couldn’t stop wondering what it would feel like to earn a look of respect from those eyes instead of mockery.

He was supposed to be the best. But tonight, Ilya Rozanov had made him feel like he was barely even there.

“I touch your hand for the first time, I see it on your face, then.”

The hotel hallway was aggressively beige, smelling faintly of industrial carpet cleaner and silence. It was late. The kind of late where the only sounds were the hum of the vending machine down the hall and the blood rushing in Shane’s ears.

He’d seen Ilya turn the corner ahead of him, carry-on bag slung over his shoulder, looking infuriatingly relaxed after spending three hours making Shane’s life miserable on national television. The anger simmered down from the game, boiled over again instantly. Shane was done with the smirks, done with the whispers during face-off, done with being treated like a joke.

“Rozanov!” Shane barked.

Ilya stopped, turning slowly on his heel. That familiar, lazy grin was already in place. “Hollander. You came to ask for an autograph? Or maybe apologize for tripping over my feet in the second period?”

“Shut up.” Shane snapped, closing the distance between them. He didn’t have a plan; he just needed to wipe that look off Ilya’s face. “I’m sick of your garbage, Ilya. You think you’re untouchable-“

Ilya just laughed, a low, dismissive sound in his throat, and started to turn away. “Is late, zajchik. Go to bed.”

The dismissal was the final straw. Shane lunged.

He meant to grab Ilya by the shoulder, to physically spin him back around and force him to listen. But Ilya was moving faster than he anticipated. Shane’s hand slapped against Ilya’s upper arm, lost its purchase on the slick material of his track jacket, and slid down. It dragged past his elbow, over the bony ridge of his wrist, and then, in a clumsy reflex to catch his balance, Shane’s fingers curled tight around Ilya’s palm.

The world seemed to stop.

It was like grabbing a live wire. The heat of Ilya’s skin was shocking against Shane’s colder hand. They both froze, trapped in a bizarre, intimate moment in the middle of a generic Marriott hallway.

Shane stared, horrified, at their joined hands. He couldn’t move. He couldn’t breathe. Slowly, agonizingly, he looked up.

The smirk was gone. Erased completely.

Ilya was staring back at him, and his face was a revelation. His eyes, usually narrowed in calculation or mockery, were wide open. The pupils were blown so black they almost swallowed the striking blue irises. There was no arrogance there. No game. Just naked, paralyzing shock, and beneath it, something raw and terrifyingly vulnerable.

For three seconds, the rivalry evaporated. There were no jerseys, no draft rankings, no expectations. Just two boys standing way too close, connected by a current of electricity that had nothing to do with hockey.

It was a recognition that cut straight to the bone. Shane saw the same desperate, suffocating hunger in Ilya's eyes that he felt clawing at his own chest every time they were in the same building.

Ilya was the first to move. He yanked his hand back as if he'd been burned, stumbling a half-step backward. The mask slammed back down over his face, but it was ill-fitting now. He looked flustered.

"Don't." Ilya hissed, the word lacking its usual bite, sounding more like a plea than a command.

Without another look, Ilya turned and walked away, his pace quick and uneven. Shane was left standing alone in the hallway, his palm tingling where they had touched, terrified by the realization that he wanted to do it again.

“Another lifetime’s flashin’ by.”

Shane stood frozen in the empty hallway long after the sound of Ilya’s retreating footsteps had faded. The buzzing of the fluorescent lights overhead seemed deafening now, filling the silence where Ilya’s breath should have been.

Shane looked down at his right hand. He flexed his fingers slowly. The heat of Ilya’s palm was still there, phantom and burning, a brand seared into his skin. It hadn’t just been a touch; it felt like a door had been kicked open in his mind, one he hadn’t even known was locked.

And then, between one blink and the next, the beige hotel walls dissolved.

It wasn’t a conscious thought. It was an assault of imagery, vivid and creepily real.

Suddenly, he wasn’t in a Marriott in Detroit. He was in a sun-drenched kitchen, somewhere high up, maybe overlooking a city that wasn’t Montreal or Washington. There was the rich smell of brewing coffee and something savory sizzling on a stove.

He wasn’t wearing a suffocating suit. He was in sweatpants, soft and worn. And he wasn’t alone.

Ilya was there. Not the Ilya of the ice -armored, sharp-edged, and cruel- but an Ilya with messy, sleep-tousled hair and a t-shirt that looked like it belonged to Shane. He was leaning against the counter, holding two mugs.

In the flash, Ilya looked up and smiled. It wasn’t the smirk, nor the challenge. It was a slow, easy, genuinely happy smile that reached those devastating blue eyes, making them crinkle at the corners.

“Coffee’s ready, Hollander.” The dream-Ilya said, his voice devoid of mockery, soft with morning sleepiness. He walked over and handed Shane a mug, his fingers brushing Shane’s- a casual, practiced intimacy born of a hundred mornings just like this one.

Shane felt a profound sense of peace wash over him in the vision. A feeling of being known, of being safe. He felt an overwhelming, chest-aching love that seemed to belong to a different version of himself. A version that was allowed to have this.

A whole life, compressed into a heartbeat. A lifetime where they weren’t rivals on opposite sides of a war, but just two men sharing coffee in the sunlight.

Then, a door slammed down the hall in the real world.

The vision shattered. The sunlight snapped back into harsh fluorescent glare. The smell of coffee was replaced by the chemical tang of industrial carpet cleaner.

Shane gasped, stumbling back against the wall as if he'd been physically struck. His heart was hammering a frantic rhythm against his ribs. The profound peace of the vision curdled instantly into a sickening hollow in his gut.

He stared at the empty space where Ilya had been standing moments ago. The contrast between the warm, domestic dream and the cold, lonely reality of the hotel was unbearable.

He realized with a jolt of terror that the vision hadn't been just a fantasy. It was a glimpse of everything he was going to be denied because of who they were, because of the jerseys they wore.

It was a glimpse of the lifetime they were never going to get.

Shaking, Shane shoved the hand that touched Ilya deep into his pocket, as if hiding the evidence, and turned towards his own empty room, feeling more alone than he ever had in his life.

“I’m here, standin’ in the same dress.”

The heat in Las Vegas was a physical weight, but inside the ballroom, it was replaced by artificial chill of high-end air conditioning and the suffocating pressure of a thousand expectations.

Shane stood at the edge of the red carpet, the flashbulbs of the paparazzi firing in a rhythmic, blinding strobe. He was wearing a navy, custom-tailored suit that fit him like a second skin. It was the same designer he’d worn last year. The same cut. The same pristine white shirt and the same perfectly knotted silk tie.

To the world, he looked like the pinnacle of professional success- the Golden Boy who never had a hair out of place. But as the cameras clicked, Shane felt like he was standing there in a dress he hadn’t chosen, a costume designed to hide the man underneath.

He was a mannequin. A prop. A symbol for a league that wanted him to be a saint so they could sell jerseys to families in the suburbs.

“Shane! Over here! Give us a smile!”

He pivoted on instinct, his face shifting into the practiced, easy grin that had become his greatest defense. It was a mask so well-worn that he didn’t even have to think about it anymore. He answered questions about the season, about his training, about his leadership- all while feeling his soul was ten miles away, drifting in the desert heat.

His eyes never stopped moving.

While he shook hands with sponsors and laughed at the jokes of older legends, he was scanning the crowd. He was looking for a specific shade of light hair, a specific arrogant tilt of a chin. He was waiting for the only person in this room who knew that the suit was a lie.

Then, he saw him.

Ilya was across the ballroom, surrounded by a swarm of reporters. He looked bored, his hands shoved deep into the pockets of a black suit that looked slightly more rebellious than Shane’s. he was playing his own part -the “Enigmatic Russian”- responding to questions with short, clipped sentences and that razor-sharp smirk.

For a second, their eyes met across the sea of tuxedos and evening gowns.

Shane’s breath hitched. The mannequin cracked. In the middle of all the Vegas glamour, Shane was suddenly just a man who was tired of the show. He was standing in the same suit,

playing the same game, but the only thing that felt real was the magnetic pull towards the one person he wasn't allowed to stand next to.

He was here. He was the star of the night. But he felt like he was already gone, lost in the space between him and Ilya.

“You’re in your apartment, I’m already gone.”

The digital clock on the bedside table flipped to 1:14 a.m. with a soft, mechanical click that sounded like a gunshot in the stillness.

Shane didn’t move. He remained on his side, his arm draped over the empty space next to him. The sheets were still a chaotic mess, tangled from the frantic, desperate way they had reached for each other the moment the door had clicked shut four hours ago.

Four hours.

In the grand scheme of an eighty-two-game season, four hours was nothing. It was a blink. But for Shane, those four hours were the only time he felt like he was actually breathing.

He turned his head, pressing his nose into the pillow Ilya had been using. It still smelled like him- that specific mix of expensive cologne, cool rain, and the faint, metallic scent of the rink that Ilya could never quite wash off. It was a scent that meant home to Shane, which was the cruelest irony of all, considering Ilya had to leave before the sun came up.

Ilya was probably at the airport by now, or maybe already mid-flight back to DC. He was slipping back into his life- back to the Capitals, back to his Russian teammates, back to the apartment Shane had only seen in pictures.

Shane stared at the indentation in the pillow, a perfect ghost of Ilya’s head. He reached out and traced the curve of it with his thumb.

“I’m already gone.” Shane whispered to the pitifully empty room.

He didn’t mean he had left the apartment. He meant the real Shane -the one who laughed without checking if anyone was watching, the one who let his guard down, the one who loved a man he was supposed to hate- had walked out the door with Ilya.

The Shane Hollander left behind was just the shell. The Golden Boy would wake up in five hours, head to the Bell Centre, and give a perfect interview about the upcoming road trip. He would act as if his heart wasn’t currently flying south at thirty thousand feet.

The silence of the penthouse was deafening. It echoed with the ghost of Ilya’s breathless whispers and the sharp, sudden sound of their shared laughter.

In the dark, Shane closed his eyes and tried to hold onto the lingering warmth of the bed, knowing that by morning, the sheets would be cold, the scent would fade, and he would have to go back to pretending that four hours was enough to last him a lifetime.

“When you left, I bet you held her body closer.”

The blue light of the iPhone screen was the only thing illuminating Shane’s face in the dark of his living room. It was 11 p.m. He should have been sleeping. He had a morning skate in approximately eight hours. But instead, he was doing the one thing he’d promised his therapist -and his pride- he wouldn’t do.

He was scrolling through the “Explore” page.

And there it was. A high-resolution photo from a gala in D.C. earlier that evening. Ilya looked devastating in a black-on-black tuxedo, his hair slicked back, his expression unreadable. But it wasn’t Ilya’s face that made Shane’s chest tighten until it felt like his ribs might snap.

It was his arm. It was draped casually, possessively, around the waist of a beautiful curly-haired woman in a silk dress. They were leaning into each other, the caption beneath the photo glowing with words like “Stunning,” “Washington’s finest,” and the one that felt like a physical blow: “Power Couple.”

A sharp, cold jealousy stabbed at Shane, followed immediately by a wave of nausea.

He knew the truth. He knew the woman was a family friend, a curated piece of PR designed to keep the rumors at bay. He knew that three nights ago, those same hands had been tangled in Shane’s hair, and that same mouth had been whispering Russian endearments against Shane’s throat.

But the photo didn’t care about the truth.

In the photo, Ilya looked like he belonged there. He looked like a man who had chosen the easy path- the path where he could hold a woman’s hand in public, walk a red carpet, and never have to worry about a career-ending scandal.

I bet you held her body closer tonight, Shane thought, his thumb hovering over the screen. *Just to see if you could make it feel real. Just to forget the way it felt to let me go on Tuesday.*

He wondered if Ilya looked at her and saw a simpler life. A life where they didn’t have to hide in the back of SUVs or book hotel rooms under fake names. A life where Ilya didn’t have to carry the weight of Shane around like a secret sin.

Shane closed the app and the phone onto the cushion beside him, staring into the darkness of his empty penthouse. It didn’t matter that the relationship was fake. What mattered was that to the rest of the world, she was the one who was allowed to be there. She was the one who got to hold him when the cameras were flashing.

And Shane was just the ghost waiting for a text message that might never come.

“And I was hopin’ you would tell her it was over.”

Every time the phone on Shane’s nightstand vibrated against the wood, the sound sparked a jolt of electricity that went straight to his chest.

He knew, logically, that it was probably his agent. Or his mother. Or Hayden. Or a group chat with the Montreal boys about practice times. But there was a small, irrational part of him -the part that only breathed when he was with Ilya- that hoped for something else.

He wanted to look down and see a message that broke the world.

“I’m done, Hollander. I told her. I’m done pretending she’s the one I want to go home to.”

He imagined Ilya sitting in his D.C. apartment, looking at the “Power Couple” headlines, and finally reaching a breaking point. He wanted Ilya to tell the girl, Svetlana, that it was over, not because she had done anything wrong, but because his heart was irrevocably tied to a rival captain three hundred miles away. He wanted Ilya to choose him- not in a dark hallway, not in a four-hour window, but in the light.

But the text never came.

Instead, when Shane finally reached for his phone, it was just a notification for a league meeting. Or, more painfully, a short, coded text from Ilya: *“See you in two weeks. Bring the good scotch.”*

It was an invitation, but it wasn’t a resolution.

They just kept playing the game. On the ice, they were the bitterest of enemies- slashing at each other’s skates, trading chirps that made the fans roar, and maintaining the narrative that they hated the very ground the other walked on. Off the ice, they played an even more exhausting game: the game of “Normal Professional Athletes.”

Shane would go to his team dinners alone or with a PR-approved date. Ilya would keep appearing in those gala photos, his arm a permanent fixture around Svetlana’s waist.

Shane would lie in his bed in Montreal, staring at the ceiling, wondering if Ilya ever stood in his kitchen in D.C., looking at the woman the world thought he loved, and felt like a liar.

The silence between them regarding the future was the loudest thing in Shane’s life. He wanted Ilya to say it. He wanted to say it himself. But every time they were together, the fear of losing what little they had kept the words trapped in their throats.

So, they stayed in the cycle. They stayed rivals. They stayed heterosexual. And Shane stayed hoping for a text that Ilya wasn’t yet brave enough to send.

“You’re all I think about and everywhere I look.”

It was impossible to escape him.

The NHL was a machine, and right now, the machine was fueled by the “Hollander vs. Rozanov” narrative. Shane walked into the Bell Centre, and there was a ten-foot-tall vinyl wrap on the wall of the tunnel- Shane on the left, Ilya on the right, back-to-back, a study in forced opposition. He went into the locker room, and the overhead monitors were already looping the morning’s highlights.

There was Ilya. Scoring on a backhand. Ilya, laughing as he high fived a teammate. Ilya, wiping sweat from his forehead during a post-game interview.

Shane sat on the bench to lace his skates, staring at his own feet, but he could still feel Ilya’s presence in the room. Even when the screens were off, the reporters made sure the ghost stayed in the room.

“Shane, Rozanov had a hat trick last night. Does that put more pressure on you for tonight’s matchup?”

“Shane, there’s a lot of talk about the physical play between you and Ilya Rozanov lately. Is the rivalry getting personal?”

Personal, Shane thought, his jaw tightening as he gave his standard, polished response. *You have no idea.*

It was the sensory details that were the worst. The ones the cameras didn’t catch. When Shane closed his eyes during the national anthem, he didn’t see the highlights or posters. He saw the way Ilya looked when the world was quiet. He saw the specific, messy way Ilya’s fair hair curled at the nape of his neck when it was damp from the shower. He felt the phantom weight of Ilya’s head on his shoulder and heard the way his accent thickened when he was tired.

He was being haunted by a man he was supposed to hate. A man he was supposed to be trying to beat.

Everywhere he looked, the world told him that Ilya Rozanov was his greatest obstacle, his bitterest rival, his enemy. But every time Shane saw that face -on a billboard, on TV, or across the red line- all he felt was a desperate, aching need to reach out and pull the mask off both of them.

The world was full of Ilya, and yet, Shane had never felt more like he was starving.

“I know it’s bad, but we could be so good.”

The logic was as cold and unyielding as the ice under Shane’s skates.

If he sat down and made a list of the reasons why this shouldn’t exist, the page would overflow. They were the faces of two legacy franchises that lived to beat each other into the boards. They were two men in a sport that still treated “different” like a disease. They lived in different cities, followed different schedules, and were followed by different sets of cameras that were constantly looking for a crack in the Golden Boy or the Russian Menace.

It was a disaster waiting to happen. It was bad for his career. It was bad for the Montreal Canadiens. It was bad for his sanity to spend every night wondering if a stray photo or a careless look would set his entire life on fire.

But then, Shane would think about the silence.

The silence that only happened when they were behind a locked door, away from the jerseys and the fans and the noise. He remembered the feeling of lying in the dark, Ilya’s chest pressed against his back, their breathing falling into a slow, perfect synchronicity. In those moments, there was no Ottawa or Moscow, no Senators or Canadiens, no Draft rankings or trophy races.

There was just the steady huff of air in the quiet.

When they breathed together like that, the world didn’t feel like it was falling apart; it felt like it was finally coming together. It was the only time Shane didn’t feel like he was performing. It was the only time his skin didn’t feel two sizes too small.

The world would call them a scandal. The league would call them a liability. But as Shane stared out the window of the team bus at the blurring lights of the city, he knew they were the only thing in his life that had ever felt genuinely, undeniably right.

The disaster was coming. He could feel it in the air. But for a chance to breathe like that again, he’d let the whole world burn.

“Couple years flashin’ by, and I’m doin’ okay.”

By the time 2017 rolled around, Shane Hollander had become exactly who the world expected him to be. The “C” on his chest was heavy, a constant reminder of his responsibility to the city, the franchise, and the Golden Boy legacy he had meticulously built.

He was at the peak of his career. His stats were elite, his leadership was unquestioned, and his apartment -a sleek, minimalist penthouse overlooking the river- was the kind of place people looked at in magazines and envied.

On the surface, he was doing okay. Better than okay. He was thriving.

He had a routine that kept him grounded. He was the first on the ice for practice and the last to leave. He visited his parents in Ottawa, drinking tea in their kitchen and listening to his mother talk about the garden. He went on the dates his PR team suggested- dinner at restaurants with beautiful, ambitious women who knew the drill. They’d smile for the cameras, share a polite conversation about their respective careers, and Shane would drop them off at their doors with a friendly, chaste kiss to the cheek.

He was a master of the script. He’d built a perfect life, brick by gleaming brick.

But sometimes, standing in the middle of his silent, beautiful kitchen, it felt less like a home and more like a house made of glass. It was transparent, allowing the whole world to look in and admire the view, but it was also incredibly fragile. He felt like he was walking on his tiptoes every single day, terrified that one slip -one look that lasted too long, one unscripted moment, one accidental touch in a hallway- would send the whole thing shattering into a million broken pieces.

He was doing okay because he had to be. Because the alternative was unthinkable.

He’d become an expert at living in the now, focusing on the next game, the next shift, the next PR event. He filled his time so completely that there was no room for the cracks to show. He told himself he was satisfied. He told himself that this level of success required this level of sacrifice.

But the glass was cold. And no matter how many trophies he put on the shelves or how many perfect nights he spent in Montreal, he couldn’t shake the feeling that he was just a curator for a museum that didn’t actually belong to him.

He was the Captain. He was the star. He was fine.

He just wasn’t whole.

“In the back of my mind, all I hear is your name.”

It was a frequency that only Shane could hear.

It didn't matter if the Bell Centre was roaring with twenty thousand fans or if he was sitting in the profound, expensive silence of his own living room; the soundtrack stayed the same. It was a low-frequency hum, a constant vibration in the marrow of his bones.

Ilya.

It was the rhythm of his skates- that heavy, powerful stride that sounded different from anyone else's on the ice. Shane could be at the other end of the rink, eyes on the puck, and he would still know where exactly Ilya was just by the cadence of steel on ice. It was a heartbeat he'd memorized better than his own.

On the drive home from the arena, with the city lights of Montreal blurring into long, neon streaks against the rain-slicked windshield, Shane didn't listen to the radio. He didn't need to. He had the memory of Ilya's sharp intake of breath right before he snapped a shot into the top corner. He had the memory of the way Ilya's voice dropped an octave, becoming rough and gravelly, when he leaned in close during a scrum.

“Hol-lan-der.” The way Ilya said his name was a symphony in three syllables. He made it sound like a challenge, a secret, and a prayer all at once. He said it with that specific tilt of his head -chin up, eyes hooded- as if he were daring Shane to admit what they both already knew.

Even in those first few hazy seconds of waking up, before the world rushed in and Shane had to remember how to be a captain, Ilya was there. Before Shane even opened his eyes, he was already searching for the phantom warmth of a body that was currently three hundred miles south.

Ilya wasn't just a person anymore. He wasn't just a rival or a secret lover. He had become the ambient noise of Shane's entire existence. He was the reason Shane pushed himself harder in the gym, he was the reason Shane stared at the Washington Capitals' schedule until the dates were burned into his retinas, he was the reason Shane felt like he was constantly waiting for a song to finally reach its bridge.

The world saw Shane Hollander, the focused professional. But inside, Shane was a man walking to the beat of a Russian winger's heart.

He was doing okay, but he was doing it to a soundtrack that only played one name, over and over again, until it was the only thing he knew how to hear.

**“I bet you’re happy and that’s fine, but I regret just one thing,
I never got to change your mind.”**

The bar was a hole-in-the-wall in a city that wasn’t home to either of them, the kind of place where the dim amber lighting and the smell of stale hops provided a sanctuary for those who didn’t want to be found.

They were nearly thirty. In hockey years, they were veterans. In “Hollanov” years, they were survivors.

Shane sat on a cracked leather stool, swirling the ice in his glass, watching the way the neon Open sign reflected in the amber liquid. Across from him, Ilya leaned against the bar, his shoulders slumped in a way he never allowed when a camera was present. The infamous Rozanov smirk was there, but it was brittle- a thin veneer over a deep, bone-weary exhaustion that had nothing to do with the sixty minutes they’d just played.

“You look tired, Ilya.” Shane said softly.

Ilya let out a short, dry huff of a laughter. “It’s a long season. Hollander. I am an old man now. My knees, they creak like your grandmother’s porch.”

Shane didn’t smile. He looked at Ilya and wondered if he was actually happy with the “life in the shadows” they had spent a decade perfecting. They had a system. They had the four-hour windows, the secret apartments, the fake girlfriends, and the carefully choreographed public rivalry. It worked. They were both successful, wealthy, and respected.

But looking at the dark circles under Ilya’s eyes, Shane felt a sudden, sharp pang of regret that tasted more bitter than the whiskey he was clutching in his hand.

He regretted all the nights he’d watched Ilya put his coat on and didn’t ask him to stay. He regretted the times they’d stood in hallways just like that first one in Detroit, and instead of saying “I love you, let’s make this real,” he’d just said “See you in D.C.” He felt a crushing weight on his chest as he realized he’d let Ilya dictate the terms of their existence. Early on, Ilya decided they were impossible. He’d decided the world would never accept them, that the league would break them, and that they had to stay in the dark to survive. And Shane, afraid of losing his shine, had just... agreed.

He hadn’t fought. He hadn’t tried to change Ilya’s mind. He had accepted the “impossible” label as if it were a law of physics rather than a choice they were making every single time they touched each other.

“I bet you’re happy.” Shane murmured, more to himself than Ilya. “With the way things are. It’s safe, right? No scandals. No mess.”

Ilya's gaze flickered back to him, something raw and unreadable passing behind his blue eyes before he masked it again. "It's fine, Hollander. Is what it is."

It's fine. The most devastating words in the English language.

Shane looked away, his throat tight. He'd spent years being fine while his heart was breaking in slow motion. He regretted that he'd never been brave enough to challenge Ilya's fear. He'd let Ilya believe that "bad" was the best they could ever have, and now, a decade later, he was terrified it was too late to change his mind.

**“Talkin’ wildly out of context, I wish things were different,
but I’ll never know.”**

The lights in the press room were too bright, reflecting off the Gatorade bottles on the podium and making Shane’s eyes ache. He adjusted the microphone, his movements practiced and robotic. He had just spent sixty minutes on the ice trying not to stare at Ilya, and now he had to spend fifteen minutes pretending he didn’t care where Ilya was going after the game.

A reporter in the third row raised a hand. “Shane, Rozanov had a hell of a night. That second-period goal was a highlight move. How do you account for his ability to find space in your defensive zone?”

Shane took a sip of his water, his mind instantly shifting into captain mode.

“Rozanov is... he’s a highly instinctual player.” Shane said, his voice steady and professional. “He has a way of identifying gaps that most players don’t see. He’s patient. He waits for you to make a mistake, and then he exploits it. It’s hard to prepare for that kind of situational awareness.”

He was talking wildly out of context.

To the room full of reporters, Shane was talking about defensive structures and neutral zone transitions. But in his head, the words mean something else entirely.

He has a way of identifying gaps. (He knows exactly where the armor of the Golden Boy is thinnest.) *He exploits it.* (He knows how to make me forget my own name with a single look.) *Situational awareness.* (He knows I like two sugars in my coffee and that I can’t sleep when the heater makes that clicking sound.)

Shane gripped the edges of the podium, his knuckles white. He wished, with a sudden, violent intensity, that things were different. He wished he could lean into the microphone and tell the truth.

“He’s the love of my life.” He wanted to say. *“And I hate that we’re in separate locker rooms. I hate that I have to drive to an empty house while he goes to a hotel. I hate that I’m describing his hockey IQ when I want to be describing the way he feels in my arms.”*

But the words stayed locked behind his teeth, guarded by a decade of habit and fear.

“We just have to be more disciplined next time.” Shane finished, the ultimate hockey cliché.

He stepped down from the podium, the applause of the room sounding like static. He'd never know what it would be like to speak his truth. He'd never know if the world would actually stop spinning if he said Ilya's name with love instead of professional respect.

He walked down the hall, passing the Capitals' locker room. The door was closed. He didn't stop. He just kept walking, a man trapped in his own context.

“Maria calls me and she says she’s getting’ married. She asks me if there’s any extra weight I carry.”

The vibration of the phone on the granite countertop sounded like a hammer in the silence of Shane’s kitchen. He picked it up without checking the ID, needing anything to break the quiet of another Tuesday night alone.

“Hollander.” He said, his voice a bit raspy.

“Hey, man. It’s Hayden.”

Shane leaned back against the counter, a small smile finally touching his lips. Hayden Pike was one of the few people in the league who didn’t look at Shane and see a franchise asset.

“Hey, Hayden. What’s up? Everything okay in Vancouver?”

“Better than okay. I’m actually calling because... well, it’s happening. We’re getting married, Shane. Next summer.”

Shane felt a genuine spark of warmth. “That’s amazing, Hayden. Really. Congratulations.”

They talked for a few minutes about logistics- guest lists, the fear of the media circus, the joy of finally having a date set. Hayden sounded lighter than Shane had ever heard him. He sounded like a man who had stopped holding his breath.

But then, the conversation shifted. The lightheartedness drained out of Hayden’s voice, replaced by a quiet, careful gravity.

“Shane,” Hayden said softly. “I’m looking at this guest list, and I’m looking at your name. And it’s just your name. Again.”

Shane’s grip on the phone tightened. “Yeah, well. You know how it is. Busy season, hard to find someone who gets the lifestyle-“

“Don’t.” Hayden interrupted. “Don’t give me the PR script. I’ve known you for years. You’re the most famous athlete in this country, you’re at the top of your game, and yet... you’re always alone. Every gala, every dinner, every off-season.”

There was a pause, the kind of silence that felt like it was stretching across the miles between them.

“Is there some extra weight you’re carrying, Shane?” Hayden asked, his voice thick with empathy. “Is there someone you’re holding onto so tight that you don’t have room for anyone else? Because you look like you’re drowning in it from over here.”

The silence on Shane's end was the heaviest thing in the world.

It was a physical weight- ten years of hotel room numbers, ten years of "out of context" interviews, ten years of a name he could only whisper in the dark. It was the weight of a man who lived in Washington, a man who was currently probably sitting in his own dark kitchen, carrying the exact same burden.

Shane tried to find a joke, a deflection, a lie. But for the first time in his life, the Golden Boy didn't have a clever response. The weight was too much. He was tired of being the only one who knew why his heart was permanently occupied.

"I..." Shane's voice broke, just a tiny bit.

"Yes?"

"I think about him all the time, Hayden." He whispered, the truth finally slipping past the guards.

He didn't have to say the name. In that heavy, honest silence, they both knew. Shane wasn't alone because he couldn't find the one. He was alone because he'd already found him, and he'd spent a decade pretending he hadn't.

“Do I think about the one that got away? I know his name, I think about him every day.”

Shane lowered the phone, the screen darkening until the only light in the room came from the sprawling, glittering grid of Montreal at night. He walked to the window, but he didn't look at the city. He looked at his own reflection.

In the dark glass, he looked tired. The crisp lines of his jaw, the perfect hair, the steady eyes—it all looked like a costume that had finally worn thin.

He thought about Hayden's question. *The one that got away.*

Usually, that phrase was reserved for high school sweethearts or missed connections at a train station. It was for people who had moved on, married others, and disappeared into different lives. But as Shane leaned his forehead against the cold glass, he realized the tragedy of his life was much simpler and much crueller.

Ilya hadn't gotten away. He wasn't just a memory or a ghost. He was currently in a hotel room in Detroit, or a bus in D.C., or on the ice in a jersey that was the wrong shade of blue. He was right there. He was always right there, just on the other side of a glass wall they had both spent ten years reinforcing.

They were the ones who had built that wall. They were the ones who had decided that a rivalry was safer than a relationship. They were the ones who had chosen the loneliness of a penthouse over the risk of a headline.

I know his name, Shane thought, his heart hammering a frantic, painful rhythm against his ribs.

He didn't just know it, he owned it. He had tasted it in secret hotel rooms, he had snarled it across the red line, he had whispered it into his pillow like a prayer for a decade.

Ilya. Ilya Rozanov.

Shane had thought of that name every single day for ten years. It was the first thought in the morning and the last one at night. It was the rhythm of his life. And suddenly, the weight of those ten years of “every day” felt like an anchor dragging him under.

He was thirty years old. He had the trophies. He had the money. He had the respect of the entire hockey world. And yet, standing in his perfect, empty house, he realized he would trade every single bit of it for one morning where he didn't have to think about “the one that got away” because the man was actually lying next to him.

He wasn't going to let Ilya be a memory anymore. He was done with the glass wall.

Shane straightened his shoulders, his reflection in the window looking less like a mannequin and more like a man with a purpose. He reached for his phone again. He didn't check the time.

He just dialed the only number that had ever truly mattered.

“When you left, I thought you held her body closer. I never knew that you would tell her it was over.”

The rain in D.C. wasn't a drizzle; it was a deluge, blurring lights of the monuments into smudged, grey ghosts against the sky. Inside Shane's hotel room, the only light came from the bedside lamp, casting long, amber shadows across the carpet.

When the knock came, it wasn't the rhythmic, confident rap of the Russian Menace. It was heavy and hesitant.

Shane opened the door, and for a moment, he didn't recognize the man standing there. Ilya was soaked, his dark hair plastered to his forehead, his expensive coat dripping onto the hallway floor. But it was his face that stopped Shane's heart. The smirk was gone.

“Ilya?” Shane breathed, stepping back to let him in.

Ilya didn't wait for a greeting. He walked to the center of the room and turned, looking at Shane with eyes that were raw and bloodshot.

“I am done, Shane.” Ilya said, his voice cracking like thin ice. *Shane*. Not Hollander. “The beards. The charity galas. The fake smiles for the cameras while I am thinking about how much I hate being touched by anyone who is not you. I am done with all of it.”

Shane froze, his heart hammering. “What do you mean?”

“I told her.” Ilya whispered, a shiver racking his frame that had nothing to do with the cold rain. “I told the PR team. I told everyone. No more ‘power couple’ photos. No more pretending I am something I am not just so the league can sleep better at night.”

Shane felt a wave of profound, dizzying shock. For years -since that first gala photo in 2013- Shane had lived with a specific, poisonous narrative in his head. Every time Ilya left a hotel room to return to his public life, Shane had imagined him holding “her” closer. He'd imagined Ilya leaning into that easier, heterosexual life, choosing the comfort of the status over the messy, terrifying reality of them.

He'd spent a decade thinking he was the only one drowning.

“I thought...” Shane started, his voice barely audible. “I thought you liked it. That it was simpler for you. I thought you were holding Svetlana closer to forget about me.”

Ilya let out a jagged, pained sound- half-laugh, half-sob. He stepped into Shane's space, his damp hands reaching out to grip Shane's forearms.

“I never held her close, Shane. I was just trying to survive the distance. Every time I was with her, I was counting the minutes I could see you again. I was never choosing her. I was just... I was too scared to tell you that I wanted to stop playing the game.”

The realization hit Shane like a physical blow. They had both been standing on opposite sides of the same glass wall, looking at each other and thinking the other person wanted to be there. They had wasted ten years waiting for a permission slip that only they could sign.

“You told them?” Shane asked, his vision blurring.

“It’s over.” Ilya confirmed, his forehead dropping to rest against Shane’s shoulder. “The secret. The pretending. Everything. I want to go home, Hollander. I want to go home to *you*.”

“Cause I’m all you think about and everywhere you look.”

Ilya’s grip on Shane’s arms tightened, his knuckles white against the dark fabric of Shane’s shirt. He looked up, and for the first time in ten years, the façade was nowhere to be found. In his place was a man who looked like he’d been wandering in the dark and had finally seen a light.

“You thought you were the only one haunted, Hollander?” Ilya voice was a broken whisper, stripped of its usual bravado. “You thought you were the only one who watches the screen? Every goal I score, Shane... It is not for the fans. It is not for the standings. I score it because I know you are watching the highlights. I score it so you have to see me.”

Shane’s breath caught in his throat. He thought of all those nights in Montreal, staring at the TV, feeling the sting of Ilya’s success. He’d never realized it was a conversation.

“Every chirp on the ice,” Ilya continued, a desperate sort of honesty pouring out of him. “Every time I cross the line, every time I make you angry... It is because I cannot stand the thought of you being indifferent. I would rather you hate me than not look at me at all. I have been looking for you in every crowd, in every city, for ten years. If you aren’t in the building, the game means nothing.”

The vulnerability in Ilya’s eyes was staggering. It would have shocked the hockey world- the idea that their most lethal, stoic winger was actually a man who had built his entire career around the gaze of one other person.

They had been obsessed with each other in a vacuum, two stars orbiting a center that they were both too afraid to name. Shane wasn’t just a rival; he was the only point of reference Ilya had left.

“I thought I was alone.” Shane whispered, his own hands moving to Ilya’s chest, feeling the frantic, matching thrum of Ilya’s heart. “I thought I was the only one who couldn’t escape it.”

“No.” Ilya said, his forehead against Shane’s. “Never alone. You are everywhere I look, Shane. Always.”

“I know it’s bad, but we could be so good.”

They were standing on the edge of a cliff, and the wind was howling.

Coming out wasn’t just a personal choice; it was a demolition of status. It was a scandal that would ripple through the league, a headline that would never truly go away, a decision that would change the trajectory of their careers forever. It was terrifying. It was a leap into a dark, uncertain void where the safety nets no longer existed.

The world would call it a disaster. Their agents would call it a mistake. The fans would call it a betrayal of the rivalry.

It was bad.

But as Shane looked at Ilya in the dim light of the D.C. hotel room, he realized he didn’t care about the fall. He reached out, his fingers tangling in the damp collar of Ilya’s shirt, and finally he pulled Ilya into him.

The kiss didn’t taste like a secret anymore. It tasted like ten years of wasted time, of swallowed words, and of lonely penthouse apartments. It tasted like the hallway in Detroit and the gala in Vegas and the four-hour windows in Montreal. It was desperate and heavy, a decade’s worth of oxygen finally reaching their lungs.

In that moment, the jerseys vanished. The C on Shane’s chest didn’t matter, and the Rozanov on the back of Ilya’s didn’t matter. The stats, the trophies, and the bitter history were just noise, fading into the background of a rainy night.

They weren’t rivals. They weren’t a headline. They weren’t a secret.

They were just Shane and Ilya.

Shane pulled back just an inch, resting his nose against Ilya’s, both of them breathing hard, their foreheads pressed together in the quiet. The fear was still there, but it was small now- a flicker of a candle next to a bonfire.

“Let them talk.” Shane whispered against Ilya’s lips. “Let them say whatever they want.”

Ilya let out a breath that sounded like a sob and a laugh all at once, his hands gripping Shane’s waist as if he were never going to let go again. “Let them. I am not going back to the dark. I love you. I’ve always loved you, Shane.”

“Oh, you have no idea.” Shane murmured. “I’m so in love with you, Ilya Rozanov.”

They stood there for a long time, anchored to each other, finally safe in the wreck they'd made of their old lives. The "bad" was everywhere outside that door, but inside, in the small space between their hearts, everything was finally, undeniably right.

And they were so, so good.

End Notes

this fic is deeply inspired by “so good” by halsey, which i had on repeat while writing. lines like “i know it’s bad, but we could be so good,” “do i think about the one that got away? i know his name, i think about him every day,” and “i never knew that you would tell her it was over” shaped both the structure and the emotional arc of this story.

i imagined hollanov as a decade-long timeline of longing—rivalry as camouflage, love lived in hallways and hotel rooms, and two people convincing themselves that “fine” was enough because it was safer than hope. this fic lives in that space between wanting and choosing, and in the quiet devastation of realizing the life you want has been right there all along.

thank you for reading.

i know it’s bad... but they could be so good.

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