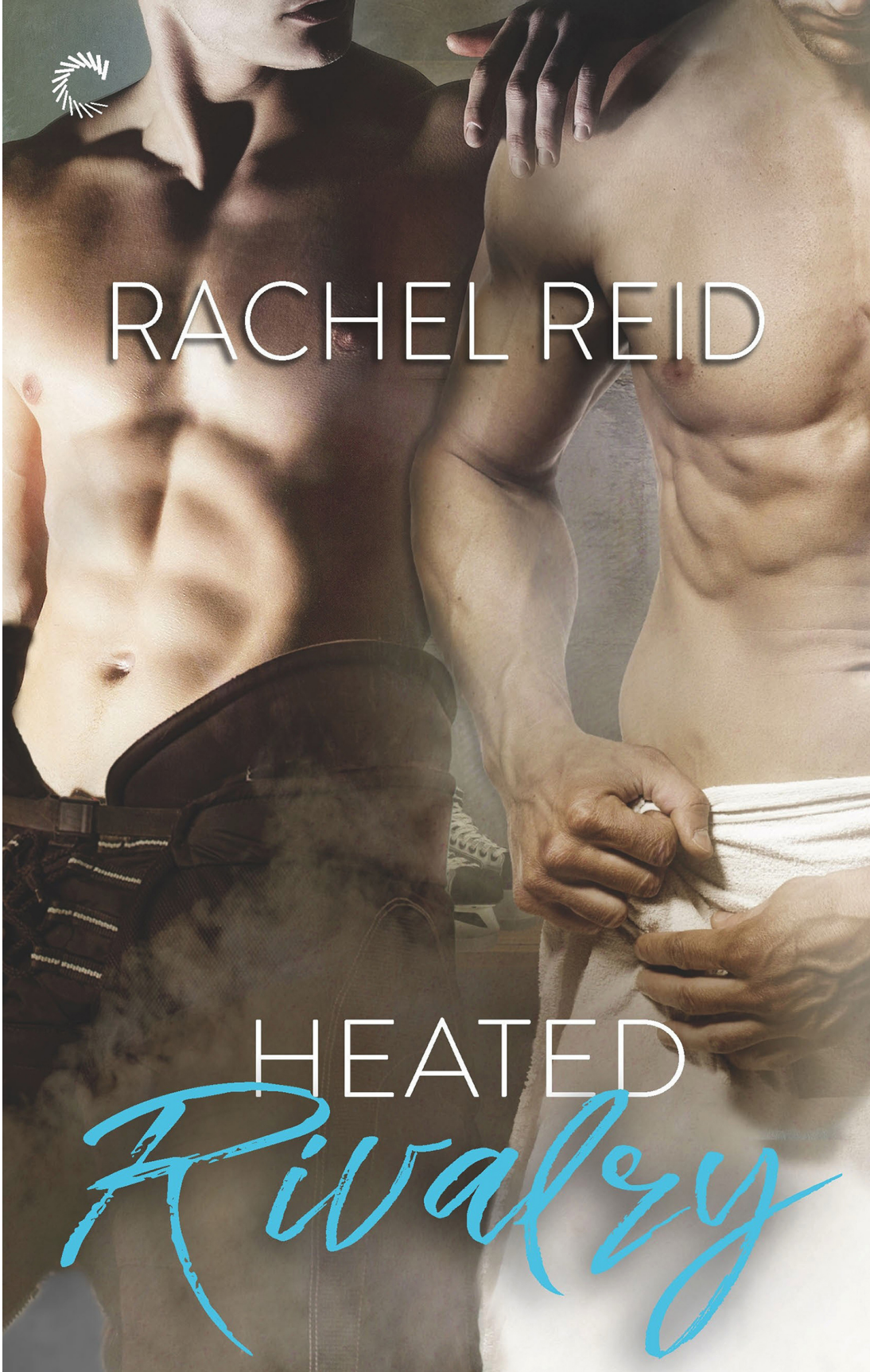




RACHEL REID

HEATED

Rivalry



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HEATED
Rivalry



Heated Rivalry
By Rachel Reid

Nothing interferes with Shane Hollander's game—definitely not the sexy rival he loves to hate.

Pro hockey star Shane Hollander isn't just crazy talented, he's got a spotless reputation. Hockey is his life. Now that he's captain of the Montreal Voyageurs, he won't let anything jeopardize that, especially the sexy Russian whose hard body keeps him awake at night.

Boston Bears captain Ilya Rozanov is everything Shane's not. The self-proclaimed king of the ice, he's as cocky as he is talented. No one can beat him—except Shane. They've made a career on their legendary rivalry, but when the skates come off, the heat between them is undeniable. When Ilya realizes he wants more than a few secret hookups, he knows he must walk away. The risk is too great.

As their attraction intensifies, they struggle to keep their relationship out of the public eye. If the truth comes out, it could ruin them both. But when their need for each other rivals their ambition on the ice, secrecy is no longer an option...

One-click with confidence. This title is part of the [Carina Press Romance Promise](#): all the romance you're looking for with an HEA/HFN. It's a promise!

This book is approximately 66,000 words

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This book is dedicated to Matt, the Frog to my Toad.

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Prologue

October 2016—Montreal

Shane Hollander was as close to losing it as he ever allowed himself to get.

He'd endured two periods and twelve minutes of one of the most frustrating hockey games he'd ever played. It should have been a glorious win at home for his Montreal Voyageurs against their archrivals, the Boston Bears. Instead it had been a grueling humiliation, and the score stood at 4–1 for Boston, with less than eight minutes left on the clock. Shane had had no less than five beautiful scoring chances. He'd taken shots that should never have missed. But they had. And the Bears had capitalized on the Voyageurs' mistakes.

One man had capitalized more than anyone. The most hated man in Montreal: Ilya Rozanov. The near century-old rivalry between the Montreal and Boston NHL teams had, over the past six seasons, become personified by Hollander and Rozanov. Their intense animosity was clear even to the fans in the farthest, cheapest seats.

Hollander bent at the face-off circle now, facing Rozanov as the referee prepared to drop the puck after the Russian's second goal of the game.

"Having a good night?" Rozanov asked cheerfully. His hazel eyes sparkled the way they always did when he was talking shit.

"Fuck you," Hollander growled.

"Still time for a hat trick, I think," Rozanov mused, his English barely comprehensible between his thick accent and his mouth guard. "Should I do it now, or wait until last minute? More exciting that way, yes?"

Hollander gritted his teeth around his own mouth guard and didn't answer.

"Shut up, Rozanov," the referee said. "Last warning."

Rozanov stopped talking, but he managed to find an even more effective way of getting under Hollander's skin: he *winked*.

And then he won the face-off.

* * *

“Fuck!” Jean-Jacques Boiziau, the Voyageurs’ giant Haitian-Canadian defenseman, hurled his stick at the wall of their dressing room.

“That’s enough, J.J.,” Shane said, but there was no real threat behind it. To make it clear that he was in no mood to fight, or even argue, with anyone, he slumped into his dressing room stall.

Shane’s left wing line mate, Hayden Pike, sat on the bench next to him, as always. “You all right?” Hayden asked quietly.

“Sure,” Shane said flatly. He tipped his head back until it met the cool wall behind him and closed his eyes.

Using the word “passionate” to describe Montreal hockey fans would be an understatement. Montreal loved the Voyageurs to the point of absurdity. Their arena was one of the toughest places for visiting teams to play, because they faced not only one of the best teams in the league, but the loudest fans in the league as well. The fans also had no problem letting their own beloved team know exactly how disappointed they were with them.

But when Montreal fans were really devastated, like they had been tonight, they were almost silent. And that was Shane Hollander’s least favorite sound.

“You know what would be sweet?” Hayden asked. “You know that movie, *The Purge*? Where you get to, like, break whatever laws for one night with no consequences?”

“Sort of,” Shane said.

“Man, if that was real, I would murder the fuck out of Rozanov.”

Shane laughed. He couldn’t disagree that bludgeoning that smug Russian face would be at least a little satisfying.

Their coach entered the room and voiced his disappointment with remarkable calm. It was early in the season—this had been their first regular season matchup against Boston—and they had been playing well most games. This was a glitch. They would move on.

Then it was time to face the press. At that moment, Shane would have preferred to see a pack of starving wolves enter the room, but he knew there was no avoiding the reporters. They always wanted to talk to him, specifically, after every game, and especially after games where he faced Rozanov.

He pulled his sweat-soaked jersey off over his head so the CCM-branded athletic undershirt would be seen on camera. Part of his endorsement contract.

A semicircle of cameras, lights, and microphones formed around him.

“Hey, guys,” Shane said tiredly.

They asked their boring questions, and Shane gave them boring answers. What could he even say? They’d lost. It was a hockey game, and one team lost, and that team was his team.

“Do you want to know what Rozanov just said about you?” one of the reporters asked gleefully.

“Something nice, I assume.”

“He said he wished you’d been playing tonight.”

The crowd of reporters was silent. Waiting.

Shane snorted and shook his head. “Well, we play in Boston in three weeks. You can let him know that I will *definitely* be at that game.”

The reporters laughed, delighted that they had gotten their Hollander vs. Rozanov sound bite for the night.

An hour later—showered, changed and finally alone—Shane drove himself home. Not to his Westmount penthouse, but to the one nobody knew about.

Shane only spent a few nights a year at the small condominium in the Plateau. It was where he went when he wanted to be sure of total privacy.

He parked in the tiny lot behind the three-story building, let himself in the back door, and quickly climbed the stairs to the top floor. He knew the other two floors were unoccupied because he owned those too. The bottom floor was rented to a high-end kitchenware boutique, which had closed for the night hours ago.

The condo on the third floor looked like what it was: a demo condo that had been decorated by a professional house stager. Technically, this was the condo that would be used to sell this one and the one below it. If Shane was ever interested in selling. Which, he told himself, he definitely would be doing. Soon.

He had been telling himself this for over three years.

He went to the stainless-steel fridge and took out one of the five bottles of beer—the only things in the pristine refrigerator. He twisted the cap off and sat himself on the black leather sofa in the living area.

He sat in silence and tried to ignore the way his stomach churned on nights like this one. He drank his beer quickly, hoping the alcohol would help at least numb the disappointment he felt in himself. The disgust at his

own weakness. He needed to dull it because he knew he sure wouldn't be doing anything to fix this mess. He'd been trying for over six years.

The knock at the door came almost forty minutes later. It had been enough time that Shane had almost convinced himself to leave. To put an end to this foolishness. But, of course, he hadn't. And if the knock had come hours later, even, Shane would still have been on that sofa, waiting for it.

He opened the door. "What the fuck took you so long?" he asked, annoyed.

"We were celebrating. Big win tonight, you know?"

Shane stepped back to let the tall, smirking Russian man into the apartment.

"I got away as soon as I could," Rozanov said, his tone less teasing. "Didn't want to draw attention, right?"

"Sure."

And that was the last word Shane got out before Rozanov's mouth crashed into his.

Shane gripped his leather jacket with both hands and pulled him closer as he kissed Rozanov breathless. "How long do you have?" Shane asked quickly, when they had broken apart for air.

"Two hours, maybe?"

"Fuck." He kissed Rozanov again, rough and needy. God, he needed this. This horrible, fucked-up thing.

"You taste like beer," Rozanov said.

"You taste like that horrible gum you chew."

"Is so I don't smoke!"

"Shut up."

They grappled and maneuvered each other until they reached the bedroom, where Shane shoved Rozanov roughly against a wall and continued kissing him. He felt the familiar slide of his rival's tongue in his mouth, and slid his own tongue over teeth that had been fixed and replaced god knew how many times.

He wanted a lot tonight, but they didn't have time for a lot. Rozanov grabbed him and pushed him down on the bed; Shane watched the other man drop his jacket on the floor and pull his T-shirt off over his head. A gold chain hung crookedly around Rozanov's neck, the shiny crucifix resting on his left clavicle just above the famous (ridiculous) tattoo of a

snarling grizzly bear (“For Russia! I had it before playing for Bears!”) on his chest. Shane would make fun of it later. Right now all he could do was watch Rozanov strip his clothes off, and belatedly realize that he should be doing the same.

They both took off everything, and Rozanov fell on top of Shane, kissing him and moving a hand down to grasp his already embarrassingly rigid cock. Shane arched up into his touch, making stupid, desperate noises.

“Don’t worry, Hollander,” Rozanov said, his lips brushing Shane’s ear, “I am going to fuck you like you want, yes?”

“Yes,” Shane exhaled, a mixture of relief and humiliation sweeping through him.

Rozanov slid down his body, kissing, sucking, licking, until he reached Shane’s cock. He didn’t tease any further. He took him into his mouth, and Shane was grateful that they were alone in the building because his moan echoed throughout the sparsely decorated room.

He propped himself up on his elbows so he could watch. Part of him wanted to lie back and close his eyes and let himself believe that it was *anyone* other than Ilya Rozanov making him feel so good. But most of him wanted to see *exactly* who it was.

Rozanov was a stunning man. Light brown curls that were always a mess fell into his playful hazel eyes and over his dark, thick eyebrows. His strong jaw and cleft chin were covered in stubble. His smile was lopsided and lazy, and his teeth were unnaturally white due to most of them not being real.

His nose was crooked, having been broken more than a few times, but the fucking thing only made him look more rugged. And for a Russian living in Boston, his skin was a lot more golden than it had any right to be.

Shane fucking hated him. But Rozanov was really good at sucking cock, and he was, for whatever reason, willing.

Shane hated *this*, but he had taken great pains to protect it, and he would continue doing so as long as Rozanov was willing. Their lives being what they were, this was not an easy thing to get. Maybe, when they had started seven years ago, they hadn’t expected their lives, their famous rivalry, to get to the point it was at now. Maybe they should have stopped by now. But, despite the wrongness of it, this was comfortable. This was familiar. And it was as close to safe as either of them were going to get.

That’s all it was.

Rozanov worked his talented mouth on Shane's cock, and Shane tossed the lube down the bed from the well-stocked nightstand. Rozanov took it without pausing what he was doing, and poured some on his fingers so he could get to work opening Shane up.

This was never Shane's favorite part because he felt so fucking vulnerable. He felt weak and ridiculous every time they were together like this, but he always felt it most acutely when Rozanov had his fingers inside him. As a result, the preparation usually took a while.

Rozanov, on the other hand, always seemed completely at ease. He was good at this, and he knew it. He slid his mouth off of Shane's cock with a parting lick to the head that sent a jolt straight through Shane's body, and said, "Relax, yeah? Is not much time, but enough."

Shane took a deep breath and let it out slowly. He hated that voice so much on the ice, and in the interviews he saw on television where Rozanov mocked him in an obnoxious, teasing tone. But here, in this bed, Rozanov's tone was patient and gentle, his voice soft and his accent wrapping elegantly around boxy English words.

Shane relaxed as Rozanov opened him with strong fingers and pressed openmouthed kisses on the insides of his thighs. When he was ready, Shane wordlessly handed Rozanov a condom before rolling over and getting on his hands and knees. He couldn't look at Rozanov. Not tonight. Not after that humiliating loss.

Rozanov seemed to understand. He entered him carefully, not taking him roughly like he had many times in the past. This was slow and considerate. Shane felt big hands on his hips and waist, holding him steady as Rozanov pushed inside. He even felt Rozanov's thumbs brush gently over his lower back.

"There. This is what you wanted, yes?"

"Yes." Because it was. It was what he always wanted.

Rozanov started to move and Shane cried out. It never took long for him to just give in and start moaning and gasping and asking for more.

"Fuck, Hollander. You love it."

Shane responded by turning, he was sure, beet red. But he couldn't deny it.

Rozanov fucked him hard with one strong hand pressing between his shoulder blades—pressing him down to the mattress. They were both *loud*, and if he hadn't known the building was empty besides the two of them,

Shane would have been worried about it. But he felt safe here, so he let himself go. He cried out with every thrust and maybe said Rozanov's name a bunch of times.

Shane *really* hoped no one could hear them.

When Rozanov reached around to take Shane's cock in his slick hand, Shane became desperate for release and started bucking back against him. This was the point where he was always reminded why he couldn't give this up. It was too good.

"You gonna come for me, Hollander?"

Hollander *was* going to. And he did. He punched the mattress and swore loudly and coated Rozanov's fist with his release.

Rozanov picked up speed behind him, sending aftershocks rocketing through Shane's body with each thrust. Just as it was becoming too much for Shane, Rozanov stilled and cried out and pulsed inside him.

Afterward, they lay on their backs next to each other, and Shane felt the familiar aftermath of guilt and shame creep in.

"Well, you won at *something* tonight," Rozanov mused.

"God. Fuck off." Shane lifted his arm to flip him off, but Rozanov grabbed his wrist and pulled him over so Shane was on top of his chest, looking down at him. Rozanov's playful smirk faded as he held Shane's gaze, and Shane felt suddenly breathless.

"Still have that stupid tattoo, I see," Shane said quickly, to distract himself from whatever the fuck was happening.

"Aw," Rozanov said, the obnoxious little grin returning to his face. "He missed you."

Shane snorted.

"He *did*," Rozanov insisted. "Give him a kiss."

Shane rolled his eyes, but he did dip his head to Rozanov's chest. Instead of pressing his lips to the tattoo, though, he trapped Rozanov's nipple lightly between his teeth and tugged.

"Fuck," Rozanov said, sucking air between his teeth.

As an apology, and also because Shane knew it would work him up even more, he brushed his tongue over the sensitive nipple. Rozanov put a hand in Shane's hair and guided their mouths back together. After a long, oddly tender kiss, Shane lifted his head and saw that Rozanov was, again, looking at him very seriously. He swallowed, but didn't say anything as Rozanov

brushed fingers through his hair. He hoped the fear he felt wasn't showing on his face.

"You are very beautiful," Rozanov said suddenly. It was said very matter-of-factly.

Shane wasn't sure how to react. They didn't really *say things* to each other. Not like that.

"Hottest Man in the NHL, according to *Cosmopolitan*," Shane joked. It was the only way he knew how to talk to Rozanov, besides yelling obscenities at him.

"They are idiots," Rozanov said, the spell broken. "They put me at number five. Five!"

"It does seem generous."

Rozanov rolled over, pinning Shane to the mattress. Shane looked up at him, laughing.

"I have to go," Rozanov said, and he sounded like he truly regretted it. "Shower first, but then I have to get back to the hotel."

"I know."

They showered together, and Shane dropped to his knees because he couldn't let Rozanov go without tasting him. Rozanov murmured his approval as he loomed over Shane in the spacious rainfall shower. His strong hands cradled Shane's head and long fingers curled in his wet hair. Shane turned his eyes up and found Rozanov gazing down at him with that damn crooked smile. Shane immediately closed his eyes and felt his cheeks flush and, to his embarrassment, his own cock get harder.

It was bad enough that he loved being fucked so much, that he loved having a dick in his mouth. But for it to have to be *this* son of a bitch, to the point that on the extremely rare occasion when it wasn't, Shane was left wanting...

So maybe it wasn't *just* that this was convenient. But that was something Shane didn't want to think about.

He brought Rozanov right to the brink and then pulled off, catching the man's release on his chin and lips and probably on his neck. The evidence was quickly washed away, down the drain, and Shane fell back to a sitting position against the shower wall. He scrubbed his hands over his face and pulled his knees in. He heard Rozanov panting in Russian.

"Shit," Rozanov said, still standing with his head leaning back against the tile opposite where Shane was sitting. "You been practicing that,

Hollander?”

“No,” Shane grumbled.

“No? You been saving it for me?”

Shane didn't reply, which was as good as confirmation.

Rozanov laughed. “You need to get laid, Hollander. Waiting for a quick fuck every couple of months is not healthy.”

“I'm *not* waiting,” Shane said. It wasn't quite a lie. He obviously wasn't one hundred percent straight, but having sex with women didn't *repulse* him. It just didn't do it for him like men did.

One man in particular.

But women were safe and easy and *everywhere*. And maybe if he kept trying he might find one he'd like to spend more than a single night with. Someone who could finally put an end to...whatever *this* was.

Rozanov turned off the water and reached a hand out. Shane rolled his eyes and took it, letting Rozanov pull him to his feet. They stood, chest to chest, and Shane watched the water that dripped from Rozanov's hair onto his shoulder and down toward his navel.

Rozanov rested a hand on Shane's face and tipped his head up. He looked at him fondly, with a little smile on his lips, and then he kissed him.

“I have ruined you,” Rozanov said when they broke apart. “No one else will do.”

“God, fuck off.”

“Such a mouth on you.”

“Don't say it.”

“I preferred it when it was on me.”

“Dammit, Rozanov.” Shane pushed the other man back against the shower wall and kissed him aggressively. It was always like this. Shoving and cursing each other and battling for control until one or both of them gave in and allowed themselves the release they both craved.

“I do have to go,” Rozanov said, but even as he said it he was scraping his teeth along Shane's jaw.

“I know.”

“I'm sorry.”

“Why? I don't care. I think we're done here anyway, aren't we?”

Rozanov stopped kissing him and looked at him, considering. “I suppose we are.”

They left the shower and got dressed quickly. Shane stripped the comforter from the bed and loaded it into the washing machine. He would make sure the place was left as spotless as he had found it.

“Three weeks, then,” Rozanov said as he stood at the door, ready to leave.

“Yup.”

Rozanov nodded, and Shane thought that was going to be it, but then the other man grinned and said, “Was it me tonight?”

“Was what you?”

“Distracting you. On the ice tonight.”

It took Shane a moment to realize what he was suggesting.

“Fuck. You.”

Rozanov’s smile spread. “Couldn’t play at all, thinking about my dick, right?”

“Goodnight, Rozanov.”

Rozanov blew him a kiss on his way out the door, leaving Shane furious and strangely relieved. It was good to be reminded of the fact that they didn’t actually like each other.

Shane pulled another beer out of the fridge and sat on the sofa to wait for the comforter to be clean. It was late and he was exhausted, but he wouldn’t sleep here. He should really talk to a Realtor about selling this building.

He would sell the building, and he would stay in his goddamn hotel room when they played in Boston and not slip out into the night to Rozanov’s penthouse. He would end this, and he would move on.

He realized, as he was making this plan, that he was brushing his fingertips over his lips. They still tingled from the memory of the other man’s mouth pressed against them.

He knew making plans to end this was pointless. As long as this was being offered, Shane would never be able to say no.

Part One

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Chapter One

December 2008—Regina

Ilya Rozanov trudged through the bitter cold of the hotel parking lot to the team bus. Like most of his teammates, it was his first time in North America. He had expected to feel more overwhelmed by that, but Saskatchewan was hardly New York City. Here, there was nothing to focus on but cold and hockey, and those were two things that Russians were very familiar with.

It was two days before Christmas, but for the world's best teenage hockey players, Christmas meant the World Junior Hockey Championships. For Ilya, it meant the chance to finally get a firsthand look at Shane Hollander.

There had been much made of the seventeen-year-old Canadian phenom. Ilya was sick of hearing the name, which had caused such a stir in the hockey world that even Moscow wasn't far enough to escape the hype. Both Ilya and Hollander were eligible for the NHL entry draft that coming June, and they were already expected to be the number one and two overall picks. The expected order of those two picks depended on who you asked.

Ilya knew *his* answer.

He had never met Shane Hollander. Never played against him. But he was already determined to destroy him.

He would start by leading Russia to a gold medal victory, here in Hollander's own country. Then he would lead his team back in Moscow to their championship. And then, surely, he would be chosen first in the draft. This was the year of Ilya Rozanov. Since he was twelve years old, 2009 had always been the year he was expected to burst onto the world stage. No Canadian pretender would change that.

The Russian team arrived at the rink for their scheduled practice at the tail end of the Canadian team's. Ilya paused with some of his teammates to watch the Canadians run drills. The practice jerseys didn't have names on them, so he couldn't pick out Hollander before he was told by his assistant coach to get his ass into the dressing room. The schedule at the practice rink was very tight.

They took to the ice as soon as it had been cleared by the Zamboni. The rink was small, and kind of dumpy. The actual games would be in the large arena downtown. There were a few people sitting in the stands, watching the Russian team practice. Some scouts, no doubt, and the few family members who had actually made the trip from Russia, as well as several local hard-core hockey fans.

Halfway through the practice, Ilya noticed a young man sitting a few rows above the penalty box, wearing a Team Canada ball cap and jacket. He was flanked by a man and a woman, who were probably his parents. It was hard to tell from the ice, but Ilya thought it might be Hollander. His mother was Japanese or something, right? He was sure he had read that somewhere...

“Care to join us, Rozanov?” his coach bellowed in Russian across the ice. Ilya turned, embarrassed to find the rest of his teammates huddled around the coach.

He didn’t like that Hollander—if that *was* Hollander—was here watching them. Or maybe he did. Maybe Hollander was nervous about facing him later in the tournament. Maybe he felt threatened.

He should.

After the practice, Ilya showered and dressed quickly. He headed back out into the rink to stand behind the glass and look at the stands. Hollander and his parents were gone. The Slovakian team had taken to the ice for their practice.

Ilya shrugged and made his way to a vending machine. He bought himself a bottle of Coke and wondered if he could slip outside for a quick smoke before getting back on the bus.

He zipped his Team Russia parka up to his chin and slipped out a side door. It was cold as fuck outside. He pressed himself against the wall of the brick building, stuffed his Coke into his coat pocket, and pulled out a cigarette and a lighter.

“You’re supposed to smoke over there,” someone said. It took Ilya a moment to translate all of the words.

He turned to see the person that he now definitely recognized as Shane Hollander. He had a very distinct look. Some of his features were clearly from his mother—jet-black hair and very dark eyes—but his father was of some bland, Anglo-European heritage, so Hollander didn’t look exactly Asian. His skin, however, was flawless. Distractingly so. Smooth and tan

with—and this was his most striking feature—a smattering of dark freckles across his nose and cheekbones.

“What?” Ilya said. Even the single word sounded stupid with his accent.

“The smoking area is over there.” Hollander pointed to a far corner of the parking lot, next to a large snowbank. It looked very windy there.

Ilya settled back against the wall and lit his cigarette. *This fucking country*. Bad enough he couldn’t smoke indoors anywhere—he needed to go sit in the fucking snow while he did it?

“I’m surprised you smoke,” Hollander said.

“Okay,” Ilya said, exhaling a long stream of smoke between his lips. There was an uncomfortable silence, and then Hollander made another attempt at conversation.

“I wanted to meet you,” he said, extending his hand. “Shane Hollander.”

Ilya stared at him, and then felt his lips twitch a bit.

“Yes,” he said. He pinched the cigarette between his lips and shook Hollander’s hand.

“You’re an awesome player to watch,” Hollander said.

“I know.” If Hollander was expecting Ilya to return the compliment, he was going to be waiting a long damn time.

When Ilya didn’t say anything else, Hollander changed the subject. “Are your parents here with you?”

“No.”

“Oh. That must be rough. With Christmas and everything.”

Ilya struggled a bit to translate so many words, then said, “Is fine.”

Hollander shoved his hands in his jacket pockets. “It’s cold, huh?”

“Yes.”

They leaned against the wall together, side-by-side. Ilya rolled his head against the brick to look down at Hollander, who stood a good four inches shorter than him. He was very interesting to look at. His cheeks were rosy from the cold, and his breath was emerging in white clouds from between his pink lips.

“Next year these are gonna be in Ottawa. My hometown,” Hollander said.

Ilya finished his cigarette and dropped the butt on the ground. He decided to make an effort, since this guy seemed so determined to talk to him. “Is Ottawa more exciting?”

Hollander laughed. “Than here? I don’t know. A little. It’s just as cold.”

“Your parents are here.”

“For this? Yeah. They’re here. They always try to come see me play wherever I go.”

“Nice for you.”

“Yeah. I know. They’re great.”

Ilya didn’t have anything to add to that, so he stayed silent.

“I should probably go. They’re waiting for me,” Hollander said. He moved away from the wall and turned to face Ilya. Ilya’s eyes went right to those damn freckles. Hollander stuck out his hand again.

“Good luck in the tournament,” he said.

Ilya accepted the handshake and grinned. “You will not be so friendly when we beat you.”

“That’s not happening.”

Ilya knew that Hollander truly believed that. That he would get the gold medal and be the NHL’s number one draft pick because he was the fucking prince of hockey.

Maybe Hollander expected Ilya to wish him luck as well, but Ilya just dropped his hand and turned to go back inside the rink.

* * *

In the car, Shane told his parents that he had been talking to Ilya Rozanov.

“What’s he like?” his mother asked.

“Kind of a dick,” Shane said.

* * *

When the final game of the tournament was over, the Canadian team had to suffer one more humiliation. The Russians stopped celebrating long enough to line up so the teams could shake each other’s hands—a show of sportsmanship that, at that moment, Shane did not feel in his heart.

For one thing, the Russian team had been *dirty*. He had hated playing against them.

For another thing, Ilya Rozanov was really fucking good. Infuriatingly good. And over the course of the tournament, the media had put a lot of effort into building up their rivalry. Shane tried to ignore the press, but it was possible that they were stoking the flames of his hatred.

When he reached Rozanov in the handshake lineup, he could see camera flashes all around them. He made sure he looked Rozanov right in the eye when he tersely said, "Congratulations."

Rozanov smirked and said, "See you at the draft."

They hung a silver medal around Shane's neck that may as well have been a dead rat, for all he wanted it. He respectfully endured the playing of the Russian national anthem, blinking back frustrated tears that he refused to let fall, and then he was finally allowed to leave the ice.

It wasn't supposed to have gone like this. He was supposed to have led his country to gold *in* his country. It was what the nation had expected. Canada's hopes had been heaped onto his seventeen-year-old shoulders and he had let them all down.

Every face-off he had taken against Rozanov, the Russian had looked him dead in the eye and smirked. Shane was not easily shaken by anyone, but that goddamn smirk threw him off balance every time.

Maybe it was just that, after a life of playing at a level above everyone else, Shane had finally met his match.

He was sure that was all it was.

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Chapter Two

June 2009—Los Angeles

“Shane, could you move a little closer to Ilya, please?”

Shane felt Ilya Rozanov’s arm brush against his as he stepped closer to him for the photographer.

“That’s perfect. All right, smile, boys.”

Shane’s eyes were bombarded with camera flashes. He stood pressed against Rozanov, who seemed to have grown another couple of inches since January. To Rozanov’s right was a giant American defenseman named Sullivan, who had been drafted third overall by Phoenix.

Rozanov had been drafted first.

Shane had spent the past six months since the World Juniors being a little bit...obsessed...with Ilya Rozanov. They had quite a bit in common, career-wise. They were both the captains of their respective teams, and had both led their teams to the championship this season. Both men had been named league and playoff MVPs, and both had been the scoring leaders of their respective leagues. The only difference between them was that Shane had a silver medal at home, and Rozanov had gold.

And now Shane had come in second place again. After a life of always coming first in hockey.

This fucking guy.

It wasn’t all bad. Shane had been drafted by the Montreal Voyageurs, who, besides being the most legendary franchise in the league, were also only an hour’s drive from his hometown of Ottawa. It was a good fit for Shane, who was fluent in both French and English, and who had always had a lot of respect for the Voyageurs, despite having grown up an Ottawa fan. But still. Being picked second stung.

Adding to the drama of the day was the fact that Rozanov had been drafted by Montreal’s archrivals, the Boston Bears. Shane knew his career was now going to be inescapably linked to Rozanov’s. If one of them had been drafted by a team in the Western Conference, maybe the rivalry would never have gotten off the ground. But this was going to be intense.

Which didn’t mean that Shane couldn’t be polite to Rozanov now.

“Congratulations,” he said, turning to shake Rozanov’s hand when the photographers were done.

There was a definite smugness in Rozanov’s smile when he said, “Thank you.”

Rozanov didn’t congratulate Shane. Instead, he patted Shane’s fucking shoulder, like he was consoling a child who had struck out at Little League. Shane jerked away from his touch, and was about to say something that was decidedly less polite than “congratulations,” but they were both immediately pulled away in opposite directions for interviews.

Shane didn’t see Rozanov again until he was back at the hotel. The lobby was packed with athletic young men in suits, but even in that crowd Rozanov stood out. He was one of the taller men there, and cleaned up—with his dark navy suit hugging his body—he looked like a *GQ* model.

Shane felt short. He had turned eighteen last month, but he felt like a kid.

Rozanov had turned eighteen too. Just last week. Which Shane knew because he was obsessed with him.

That night, in his private hotel room (his proud parents were across the hall), Shane couldn’t sleep.

It had been an exhausting day, and, yes, he had been drafted by the NHL. He had achieved the thing he had worked his whole life toward. And being chosen second overall was nothing to sulk about.

He wasn’t sulking. Not really. He was just...bothered. By something.

He sighed and rolled out of bed. He threw on some sweats and his sneakers and headed down to the hotel gym. Maybe he could shut his mind off with some exercise.

The gym was mercifully empty. Shane stepped onto one of the two treadmills and started running at a gentle pace. He didn’t wear headphones; he just lost himself in the noise of the machine.

He didn’t notice when someone else entered the gym. He only realized he wasn’t alone when the other man stepped onto the treadmill next to him.

Ilya Rozanov gave him a quick nod and turned to face the white wall at the front of the room as he started running alongside Shane.

Shane tried to ignore Rozanov’s presence. There was nothing weird about it; he must have been having trouble sleeping too. Or maybe he always hit the gym after midnight. Or maybe the time zone was messing with him. Or maybe...

Rozanov increased the speed on his machine. He didn't glance at Shane at all. Because Shane was petty and competitive, he increased the speed on his own machine...just a little faster than Rozanov's.

Within a minute, Rozanov did the same thing, raising the bar and silently waiting for Shane to match him. Shane glanced over and saw a slight smirk on Rozanov's lips. Shane shook his head and fought his own smile. He cranked up the speed.

They kept on this way, caught in a silent battle, until they were both testing the limits of their machines. They were running at a sprint pace for far longer than was comfortable, and Shane's entire body was burning in protest. But he didn't want to stop, or even slow down, until Rozanov did. Rozanov *smoked*, for fuck's sake. Shane could beat him.

But Rozanov showed no signs of quitting.

They kept up that pace for another minute or two, and Shane finally slammed his hand on the emergency stop button and stumbled off. He leaned against the back wall, gasping for breath, before sliding down to sit on the floor. Rozanov stopped his own machine, and was holding on to the console for support.

"Fuck," Shane wheezed. Rozanov laughed and sat himself on the floor against the wall facing Shane. Rozanov's gray, sleeveless shirt was soaked through with sweat. They both sat with their legs sprawled out in front of them; Rozanov's sneakers were almost touching Shane's ankle.

Rozanov ran a hand through his damp hair in a move that was more interesting to Shane than it should have been. Rozanov was so...*masculine*. Shane was baby-faced and short, and couldn't grow proper facial hair, and barely had any chest hair. Rozanov was almost exactly the same age as him, but he looked like he had crossed over a magical line to adulthood.

Shane quickly turned his gaze to the floor, and hoped the flush from the exercise covered his blushing.

"What a fucking day, huh?" Rozanov said.

"Yeah. Totally."

"Everything you dreamed of?"

Shane looked him dead in the eye. "Almost."

Rozanov grinned back. "Sorry I ruined your big day."

"Fuck off."

"Montreal is nice, yes?"

"Yes."

“Is Boston nice?”

“Sure. Yeah. I’ve only been there a couple of times, but it’s a good town.”

Rozanov nodded.

They were silent a moment, and then Rozanov tapped Shane’s ankle with the bottom of his sneaker. “Hey. We will see a lot of each other.”

It took Shane a minute. “Oh. Yeah. Montreal and Boston play against each other a lot.”

“Should be interesting.”

Rozanov took a long haul from his water bottle. Shane pretended he was only looking longingly at the way his throat worked because he had forgotten to bring a bottle for himself. It wasn’t until Rozanov’s Adam’s apple stopped bobbing and his lips were dark and glistening that Shane realized he was staring. The lips quirked up a bit, and Rozanov extended his arm, offering Shane his bottle.

“Oh. I’m all right. Thanks.”

Rozanov shook the bottle at him, and Shane took it. He needed water. It would be dumb to refuse.

The tips of their fingers touched briefly together. Shane held the bottle away from his lips and quickly squirted water into his mouth. Rozanov watched him.

It was the first time that Shane felt it. It was like the air in the room had thickened. Everything inside him was buzzing and on edge, like he was about to jump out of a plane.

He didn’t know if Rozanov felt anything. But in that moment, Shane wanted...*something*. He couldn’t even name it.

He passed the water bottle back, and this time he could swear Rozanov let his fingers brush Shane’s wrist on purpose. It was a moment that seemed to last forever, but was probably less than a second.

Shane wanted Rozanov to touch him again.

Shane wanted to touch him back.

Maybe Shane wanted to *kiss* him.

Shane scrambled to his feet. “I’m going to bed. I guess I’ll...see you around, right?”

Rozanov looked up at him from the floor. “You will be seeing plenty of me.”

Shane nodded and left the room as fast as he could. He waited until he was back in his room before he let himself freak out.

What the fuck was that?

He had never... Jesus Christ, he had a *girlfriend*. He wasn't...

A girlfriend you are hoping will break up with you. She didn't even come on this trip to see you get drafted.

Well, that was true. But she had just started a new summer job...

And you haven't thought about her all day until right now. You haven't even called her yet.

Yeah, all right. Maybe it wasn't really working out with her, but it wasn't like she was the only girl he'd ever...done stuff with.

You're half hard right now. From sitting on the gym floor with another man.

Okay, that one he couldn't explain.

But he *could* get in the shower and jerk off and try like hell to think about his girlfriend, or *any* girl. Anything other than those red, wet lips and that dark stubble and those hazel eyes...

For the rest of his life, Shane Hollander would have to live with the fact that he had ended his NHL draft day by getting himself off to thoughts of Ilya Rozanov.

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Chapter Three

December 2009—Ottawa

Ilya watched the red glowing numbers on his hotel room's alarm clock flick from 11:56 to 11:57.

The room was completely dark. His roommate was down the hall, along with half the team, watching the American New Year's Eve celebrations on television.

Ilya had been in that room too. He had watched the Black Eyed Peas perform and had eaten chips and made jokes with his teammates.

And then he just wanted to be alone.

11:58.

There was no mistaking that Ottawa was Shane Hollander's hometown. It was Shane Hollander fucking mania here. His face and his freckles were everywhere: newspapers, television, buses, banners, the sides of buildings.

Of course Hollander was from Canada's capital city. Of course the city was as inoffensive and bland as he was.

Their teams hadn't played each other yet, and they likely wouldn't before the gold medal game. It would be a shocking upset if it didn't end up being Canada and Russia in the finals.

11:59.

Ilya would be moving to Boston this summer. To America. He had never been out of Russia for more than a couple of weeks at a time. He would begin his NHL career. He would be rich and famous. He would be his own man, away from his family.

Midnight.

"Happy New Year," he muttered to himself.

He sat up on the bed and grabbed the package of nicotine gum off his nightstand. He popped a piece in his mouth and frowned as he chewed it. He could hear fireworks outside, and his teammates cheering in the rooms around him.

He wanted a real cigarette. He wanted to fuck someone.

He wanted to go down to the hotel gym and find Shane Hollander on a treadmill.

But Shane Hollander wasn't staying at this hotel. Shane Hollander was probably ringing in the New Year with friends and family in his perfect hometown that loved him so very, very much.

That night in the hotel gym in Los Angeles, six months ago now, Ilya had very nearly embarrassed himself. He probably could have covered it up with his usual cocky charm, but he had been damn close to flirting with Hollander. Or possibly just pressing him against a wall and taking his mouth.

The thing was, he wasn't so sure that Hollander would have hated it.

Unless Ilya was very bad at reading people—and he definitely wasn't—Hollander probably would have kissed him right back.

And, Jesus, that thought had consumed Ilya since draft day.

Ilya had probably fucked, in his rough estimate, dozens of women since then. He certainly had no reason to obsess over his fucking archrival. Or his archrival's freckles. Or his dark eyes. Or the way his cheeks glowed red when he exerted himself.

Fuck. *Anyway*. Russia was undefeated in the tournament so far. Canada was also undefeated. Only one team would stay that way until the end. Ilya had more important things to think about than freckles and polite Canadian boys.

* * *

Shane couldn't have been happier that his second, and last, World Junior Championship was being held in his hometown. He had spent Christmas with his family, and New Year's with his teammates at the hotel. His parents had been at every game, as usual, and he had been able to visit with lots of friends.

He'd been in a great mood for the entire tournament, and he'd been playing outstanding hockey.

And now it was the night before the gold medal game, and Canada would be facing Russia for the second year in a row.

And Shane would be facing Ilya Rozanov.

He hadn't seen Rozanov at all for this entire tournament. The Canadian and Russian teams had been practicing at different rinks and staying in separate hotels. This game would be their first match.

But Shane had watched every game Russia had played. And he'd been studying video footage of Rozanov. And this time he was going to beat his ass.

He had mostly forgotten the way it had felt when Rozanov had brushed his fingers against his hand when he'd handed him the water bottle in that hotel gym six months ago. He had barely thought at all about his flushed skin, or the way the damp curls of his hair had fallen into his hazel eyes.

It had been...adrenaline. The afterglow of the thrill of competition, when they had been sprawled out on the floor after pushing their bodies as hard as they could on the treadmills. It had been a glitch in his brain, which had been overstuffed with emotions from a roller coaster of a draft day. He had been tired and confused and his brain had just turned all of that into something ridiculous.

So Shane had gone back to life as usual after that night. Well, he'd broken up with his girlfriend, but that had been overdue anyway.

There was one other thing that had changed: Shane had found himself *noticing* men. Not his teammates or his friends or anyone like that. Just...like a guy at the airport Starbucks. Or the guy who'd been in the cereal aisle of the grocery store in Kingston a few weeks ago.

Or the guy who was on *Friday Night Lights*.

But it's not like he wasn't into girls. Girls were *very* into him, and they were throwing themselves at him now that he was about to become a millionaire superstar. So, yeah, he'd been hooking up with girls. Plenty of girls.

Like, at least two girls. Since breaking up with his girlfriend.

Not, like, all-the-way sex. But sex stuff.

He had definitely been blown by two different girls since July. And he had enjoyed it. With his head tilted back. And his eyes closed.

And he hadn't thought about Ilya Rozanov's dark, wet lips or his crooked smile at all.

* * *

"Are you getting tired of second place?" Rozanov smirked.

"I'm winning this game," Shane growled.

"There is not an 'I' in team, right?"

"There's an 'I' in 'suck my dick.'"

Rozanov raised an eyebrow as they bent for the face-off.

“There is also an ‘I’ in ‘silver,’” he said.

Shane made sure he won the face-off. And he made sure he was exactly where he needed to be to score a goal forty seconds later.

And he made sure they won that game.

* * *

For all his cockiness and teasing, Ilya took hockey very seriously. And he hated to lose.

But this time he had lost. And he would be going back to Russia with a silver medal. He wasn't proud of it.

He didn't want to return to Russia at all. He wanted to stay in North America and start the next phase of his life. He didn't want to hear his father—who likely hadn't even watched any of the games—shame him for not bringing home a gold medal. He didn't want to live with his father, or depend on anyone anymore. He wanted to be rich and famous and loved and have a huge garage full of sports cars. He wanted expensive clothes and gorgeous women and hot nightclubs. He wanted the weight of his family, and his country, lifted. He wanted to be himself.

On the ice, in the lineup to shake hands at the end of the game, Hollander had looked into Ilya's eyes. It had only been for a second, but it had felt like everything around them had frozen and fallen silent. Hollander's damp, sweaty hand had wrapped itself around Ilya's damp, sweaty hand and, when their eyes had locked, he'd squeezed Ilya's fingers, just a little.

That look, and that squeeze, had said so many things to Ilya.

I know.

We were supposed to stand alone at the top, but we will always be there together. We will keep climbing until no one else can reach us, but it will always be together.

There had been nothing apologetic in Hollander's eyes, but there had been no gloating either. And by the time Ilya had shaken the last Canadian hand in the lineup, he was smirking to himself. Because soon the real battle between himself and Shane Hollander would begin.

And he couldn't fucking wait.

Chapter Four

July 2010—Toronto

Shane had signed a lucrative endorsement deal with CCM, one of the biggest hockey equipment companies. He hadn't played a single game in the NHL yet, so he was pretty stoked about it.

Then he found out that CCM had also signed Rozanov.

And *then* he found out that they wanted to launch an ad campaign with both of them. Together.

So Shane found himself in a dark, mostly empty rink in the suburbs of Toronto on a Wednesday in July. He would be reporting to training camp in just over a month. He hadn't seen Rozanov since the World Juniors back at the beginning of January.

Spotlights had been set up around the ice, creating some very dramatic lighting. There were going to be two parts to the day: first, they would do a photo shoot, both separately and together, and then they would skate around and do some fancy stickhandling for the television ads.

Shane was getting used to photo shoots, and to having cameras on him in general. This seemed like a bigger production than he was used to. This felt like he was starring in a movie.

Costarring.

He took a couple of laps around the ice while he waited for the crew to finish setting up. He was wearing head-to-toe CCM gear, of course, including a custom black jersey with a big CCM logo on the chest where a team logo would normally go. His name and number, 24, were on the back.

Shane was wearing makeup, and it felt weird. He wasn't supposed to sweat at all before they did the photo shoot. He decided he'd better stop skating and sit on the bench while he was waiting. He watched the crew fiddle with the lighting.

After a few minutes, he felt the unmistakable presence of Rozanov at the end of the bench. He turned and saw him standing there, huge and handsome, and also wearing makeup.

"Very pretty," Rozanov teased him. "Like a doll."

"You're painted up too."

Rozanov leaned on the top of the boards and grinned. “Yes, but I’m not pretty.”

Shane rolled his eyes. He had been called “pretty boy” a few times before, usually during games, and he hated it. He *wished* he hated it this time.

In his makeup, with his carefully styled hair, and in this dramatic lighting, Rozanov did not look pretty. He looked *stunning*. Once again, Shane was astounded and irritated by how *manly* Rozanov was. The sharp edge of his jaw framed cheeks that didn’t have any of the baby fat that lingered on Shane’s own. And his eyes were like sparkling...somethings. Shane couldn’t think of a gem that had that many shades of gold and green.

The photo shoot took a lot longer than Shane had been expecting. It was mostly just standing on the ice, holding CCM hockey sticks in various positions. They did a few photos standing together, but most of them were separate. They finished with a posed photo of the two of them hunched over in the face-off position. They held the pose for what felt like an eternity, with their faces inches apart, staring into each other’s eyes.

“Try not to laugh, fellas,” the director said. “I know it’ll be challenging.”

Laughing was not what Shane was worried about. He needed to relax his eyes so Rozanov’s features blurred, just to keep himself from staring at the man’s lips.

“A little more intensity in your eyes, if you could, Shane.”

Shane blinked and tried his best to stare Rozanov down, like it was a real game. But a real game would only require him to hold this position for a few seconds. This was awkward.

He saw Rozanov’s lip twitch, and then the big Russian snorted and started laughing. Shane cracked too, and started giggling.

“Just a few more seconds, guys. Please.”

“Sorry,” Shane said, trying to school his features back into a fierce glare. It was no use. As soon as he looked at Rozanov, both men started laughing again.

“All right, we’ve probably got enough anyway. Let’s take a break and then we’ll do the film footage.”

“That was your fault,” Shane said as they skated over to the bench.

Rozanov shook his head. “Your face’s fault. Made me laugh.”

Shane bumped him with his shoulder.

The filming was much easier. They both donned CCM helmets and visors and skated around showing off for an hour or so—probably a bit more competitively than necessary. Shane was looking forward to seeing the final commercial. With some music and some voiceover, it would probably look pretty badass.

The director thanked them both, and the two hockey players were left to get showered and changed in the dingy dressing room.

Shane undressed quickly and went into the shower, which was, like most rinks, communal style with a row of showerheads facing each other on both sides of a corridor. If he hurried, maybe he could be out of the shower before Rozanov came in.

No such luck.

Shane had just gotten his hair wet when Rozanov entered the showers and stood under one *almost directly across from him*. Shane's eyes landed on the large bear tattoo on Rozanov's left pec. It was absolutely ridiculous. He also noticed the gold crucifix that he guessed the guy never took off. The chain caressed the base of Rozanov's long neck, the cross resting comfortably on his muscular chest.

Shane quickly turned his eyes to the floor. He had showered with hundreds of guys in his life, in rooms just like this one. It was just part of the game. He had never *looked* at any of his fellow players before. It was just...unthinkable.

He glanced up again, and saw that Rozanov had turned his back to him. Shane was left to stare helplessly at the display of naked, rippling muscle. His eyes trailed over Rozanov's broad shoulders and down the muscles of his back down to his tapered waist and his...

Shane blushed hard. He couldn't...why would he want to check out another guy's ass? That was just weird.

But it was a *really* impressive ass. Not that he was comparing it to others. It was just...perfect. And as Rozanov scrubbed water over his face, the muscles in his ass flexed and Shane was transfixed.

And aroused. *Visibly* aroused. In a shower. With Rozanov.

He only had time to look down at his thickening cock with horror before he noticed that Rozanov had turned back around.

Rozanov glanced down at Shane's crotch and raised an eyebrow.

"Fuck off," Shane grumbled. "It's nothing."

"Like what you see, Hollander?"

“No. It’s not... I was thinking about something else.” Shane wanted to die. He knew he didn’t sound at all convincing.

“Something else?”

Shane should have just left the showers then. He was clean enough. This was torture.

But Rozanov was grinning at him in a way that was *not* helping Shane’s...situation. And Shane didn’t seem to have the ability to move. Rozanov was teasing him, but he wasn’t punching him in the face.

And *he* wasn’t leaving either.

Shane wished he could at least make himself look away from Rozanov, but he was spellbound. Rozanov just seemed to be considering him curiously, and maybe enjoying the effect he *knew* he was having on him.

Just another goddamn thing for you to hold over me, Shane thought.

He was so busy being mortified that he didn’t immediately notice that Rozanov’s own dick was starting to swell.

The grin had faded from Rozanov’s face. His eyes were full of an intensity that was much more heated than what Shane had been facing during their photo shoot.

Shane needed to get out of here. This was too bizarre. He absolutely could not do...whatever this was.

But Rozanov let a hand trail down his stomach and wrapped it around his own dick to give it a slow, firm stroke.

Shane gasped. Loud enough that the running water couldn’t mask it.

“What were you thinking about?” Rozanov asked, his voice low.

Shane swallowed. His throat was bone dry.

“You,” he said quietly.

Rozanov heard him, and smirked. He gave himself another stroke. “You want to touch me, Hollander?”

Shane actually just wanted to watch Rozanov jerk himself off. But...

“Not here,” Shane stammered. “Someone could come in.”

Rozanov nodded and released himself. He turned and shut off the water. Shane waited, heart racing, until Rozanov had left the showers before he turned off his own water. What the hell was happening? Rozanov couldn’t possibly be suggesting that he and Shane...that they...

Holy shit. Shane had to get out of here. He wondered if he could possibly smash through the tile wall of the shower room and escape that way. Anything would be preferable to facing Rozanov again.

He took a few deep breaths to settle himself. He could do this. He could talk reasonably to Rozanov and end this thing. Determined, he wrapped his towel tightly around his waist before returning to the dressing room.

Rozanov was already half dressed and sitting, shirtless, on one of the benches.

“Look,” Shane said to the floor, “that was...we can just pretend that never happened, okay?”

“Is that what you want?”

Shane’s answer should have been a lot faster. “Yeah. I mean...yeah. Of course.”

Rozanov stood and crossed the floor until he stood right in front of Shane. “You are a bad liar.”

Shane scowled at him.

“What is your room number?” Rozanov asked.

“Fourteen ten,” Shane said, far too quickly.

Rozanov’s mouth twitched up. “If I knock on door of room 1410 tonight...maybe around nine?”

Shane fought to keep his voice even. “I might open the door.”

Rozanov smiled. “I might knock.”

* * *

Shane spent the evening freaking the fuck out in his hotel room.

He considered his options. He could leave. Just go out for a few hours so he wouldn’t be there when Rozanov knocked. That would be the sensible thing to do.

He could stay and just ignore Rozanov’s knock. There could be something satisfying in that. Give him a little bit of power over him.

He could open the door when he knocked, invite him in, and they could talk about this whole ridiculous...misunderstanding. Then they could go their separate ways forever.

Or...he could open the door and he could spend the evening exploring Rozanov’s body with his mouth.

Shane blushed just thinking about it. He couldn’t really *want* that, could he?

He had more or less decided on the second option: he would talk to Rozanov. They would put this behind them as quickly as possible so things

wouldn't be weird when the season started. He tidied up the room, even though it was already perfectly tidy. He changed his shirt to a nicer one for no reason at all. He brushed his teeth, flossed, and rinsed with mouthwash. Because if he was going to be talking to Rozanov, it would be rude to have bad breath.

He fixed his hair a bit. He switched his phone to silent mode.

He decided to turn on the television, just so it wouldn't look like he'd just been sitting there staring at the door.

He flipped to a baseball game and turned the sound down low. He shut off the overhead light and turned on all of the lamps. He checked himself in the mirror. Again.

The knock came at seven minutes after nine o'clock. Shane checked the peephole just to make sure Rozanov wasn't pranking him or anything.

It was just Rozanov. Alone.

Shane turned off the television, because having it on suddenly seemed dumb. He opened the door and let Rozanov in.

Rozanov looked like he may have put a little effort into his appearance too. He was wearing a black button-up shirt, his gold chain winking at Shane from the wide-open collar. His hair, which was usually a mess of curls, had been tamed a bit, though one lock had already escaped and was tumbling adorably onto Rozanov's forehead.

"Thought you might have chickened out," Rozanov said in his infuriatingly blunt manner.

"No," Shane said. "I mean, I just want to talk. About...you know."

"I do know. Yes."

"Uh, do you want to...sit? Maybe?"

Rozanov took a step toward him. "Not really."

He was so close that Shane could feel the heat of his body. Or maybe he was imagining it.

"I don't think this is a good idea," Shane said weakly.

"What?" Rozanov said, tucking a knuckle under Shane's chin and tilting it up. "This?"

He brought his mouth down on Shane's, and Shane flooded with panic. He was stiff against Rozanov, lips pressed together, eyes open. But Rozanov persisted. Shane felt the tip of Rozanov's tongue trace the outline of his lips, seeking entry. Long fingers threaded into his hair, and Shane

surrendered. He parted his lips and closed his eyes, and Rozanov deepened the kiss, pushing between his lips and pressing his tongue to Shane's.

Shane had never kissed a man, and somewhere in the back of his splintering brain he wondered if Rozanov ever had either. He certainly seemed to know what he was doing.

Shane felt like he was made of alarm bells. Like his panic was going to somehow wake up the entire hotel. If it was just that he was kissing a man, he might be able to get a grip. But kissing *this* man in particular was so absurd and wrong wrong wrong...

But his dick didn't seem to think so, especially not when Rozanov wedged a knee between his legs and rubbed a thigh against Shane's arousal. Shane whimpered and Rozanov tipped his head back farther, using his height and coming down hard on Shane's open mouth.

Shane wasn't sure what to do. He hesitantly slid his palms up Rozanov's chest. He heard Rozanov give a soft moan when Shane's fingers moved over his nipples, and that one little sound made Shane lose any remaining self-control.

He kissed Rozanov back, hard and frantic and wanting more but not knowing exactly what to ask for. Rozanov crowded him back against a wall and started unbuttoning Shane's shirt. When he got the last button open, he grabbed Shane's hand and pressed it against his crotch. And, oh, Shane had his hand on Ilya Rozanov's dick. Shane could feel the solid length straining against Rozanov's jeans, and he felt his own cock grow harder even as he struggled against freaking out.

He gripped Rozanov through the denim, and one clear idea of what he wanted popped into his head. He wanted the denim barrier to be gone. He wanted to see Rozanov's cock and hold it and feel it pressed against him, which was *weird*. He shouldn't want that. He shouldn't want *any* of this.

And yet...

With a goal in mind, Shane unfastened Rozanov's fly and worked his hand inside. When Shane had his hand wrapped around the thick, smooth length, Rozanov inhaled sharply and stopped kissing him. Both men looked down to watch Shane's hand move under the cotton of Rozanov's briefs. Shane could see the tip of Rozanov's cock poking out of the waistband, and he had the sudden, wild urge to kiss it. To press his tongue to the slit and taste him.

Fuck. This was really gay.

Rozanov didn't seem troubled, though. Instead, he was pulling his own shirt off and reaching to cradle Shane's face with his hand. Shane turned his eyes up and Rozanov was looking down at him with dark eyes, his mouth slack and lips swollen. His face was pure desire.

Shane stood, frozen, as Rozanov dragged his thumb over Shane's lips and then gently pushed it inside. Shane closed his eyes and sucked it into his mouth, letting his tongue wrap around it. He was shocked at how naturally he did this; by how much he loved the sensation. He felt Rozanov shudder, and Shane felt light-headed. He wasn't sure how much longer he could stay standing. He wondered if Rozanov would let him...if he wanted him to...

Shane released Rozanov's thumb and slowly sank to his knees.

"Fuck," he heard Rozanov breathe. Shane knew there would be no going back from this, but they'd probably already crossed that line anyway; may as well take what he wanted. With shaking hands, he pulled Rozanov's jeans and briefs down and lined up his mouth with his thick, rigid cock. He took a breath and, very carefully, pressed his tongue to the head.

"Yes, Hollander..." Rozanov hissed.

It tasted like...skin. Shane slowly moved his tongue around the head, completely unsure of what to do. He liked to be excellent at everything. His only experience with this sort of thing had been at the receiving end, so he tried to mimic what some of those girls had done. He took Rozanov deeper into his mouth, and it felt so *weird*. He just sort of stayed like that for a moment, his tongue flattened by the weight of Rozanov's cock. He knew he must look ridiculous.

Rozanov's expression didn't suggest that he was watching something ridiculous. He held Shane's face with one big hand and gazed down at him with hooded eyes. He murmured something in Russian and then said, "Look at you."

Shane's face flushed. An image flashed through his mind of their roles being reversed. What would Rozanov look like on his knees, taking Shane in his mouth? Would Shane ever find out?

Shane moaned involuntarily, which made Rozanov shudder. His thumb brushed Shane's cheekbone, and Shane closed his eyes and began to move his mouth. He sucked and licked, letting himself get used to the sensation of having a dick in his mouth. His mind was racing, worrying about technique and about what exactly this all meant. But then Rozanov's fingers were tangled in Shane's hair, and Shane was reminded that this was fucking *hot*.

That he'd fantasized about exactly this, alone in his bedroom, even if he had been embarrassed afterward.

He sighed around Rozanov's cock and bobbed his head slightly, losing himself in the slide of rigid flesh against his tongue. He was sure he was doing a terrible job, and his fears were confirmed when Rozanov suddenly yelped, "Stop! Stop. Stop."

Shane pulled off quickly and stared up at Rozanov, who was grimacing with his eyes squeezed shut.

"Sorry," Shane said. "I'm not... I've never..."

Rozanov laughed. "Is okay. Was..." He waved a hand around, as if trying to physically grab the English word he was looking for. "It was...too much."

"Oh." *Really?* Shane felt that he had barely done anything.

"Just...ah...very, um..."

Overwhelming? Intense? Wrong? Shane could think of a few words, but he didn't want to guess at what Rozanov was feeling.

"A lot," Rozanov finished. Then he made a frustrated sound. "No. I cannot think of word."

Shane rose off his knees because he felt foolish staying on them if he wasn't going to be doing anything down there. When he was standing, he looked curiously at Rozanov. "Have you been...thinking about this?"

Rozanov gave a crooked grin and shrugged. "I like trouble."

Shane laughed. "Well, I think we've found it."

"You have not done this," Rozanov said plainly. "With a man."

"No. Have you?"

Rozanov looked at him, and Shane knew he was deciding whether or not he could trust him, and then must have realized it was too late anyway if he didn't. He nodded. "In Russia. My coach's son."

Shane sputtered. "Holy fuck. You *do* like trouble! Was he on the team?"

"No. Not a hockey player."

"Did anyone...find out?"

Rozanov shook his head. "He would never tell. I would never tell. It was safe."

"Safe," Shane repeated. It didn't sound at all safe.

"Just fooling around. Not serious. Was...what is it?"

"Curious?"

Rozanov smiled. "Yes. Curious. And *you* make me curious."

"Oh."

He leaned in and breathed against Shane's ear in his heavily accented English, "Do I make *you* curious?"

Rozanov made Shane a lot of things: confused, infuriated, terrified, aroused, and, yes, curious.

"Obviously," Shane said, a little irritably.

"Did you like sucking my dick?"

"Oh, *those* English words you know?"

Rozanov licked under Shane's ear, and Shane gasped.

"Did you like it?" Rozanov asked again.

Shane swallowed his saliva and his pride. "Yes."

"Would you like me to lie on the bed and let you do it some more?"

"*Let me?*"

Rozanov chuckled against Shane's neck. "I'm a nice guy."

Shane shoved him and Rozanov stumbled back, pants around his knees. He laughed as he tumbled backward onto the bed.

Now that there was some distance between them, Shane could take in the full splendor of Rozanov's mostly naked body. Rozanov seemed to enjoy the attention, and stretched his muscular arms up over his head, grinning and arching his long torso. He had dark brown hair on his chest and trailing down from his belly button to his bobbing erection, which was still slick with Shane's spit.

Rozanov sat up and pulled his pants all the way off, along with his shoes and socks. Shane's eyes fell on the way his stomach muscles flexed as he curled forward, and on his thick, muscular thighs.

Once again, Shane felt very young. Very boyish. He realized that he was still mostly dressed, and he wasn't sure if he should change that or not.

Rozanov made the decision for him. "This is a bit...not fair." He moved a hand through the air, back and forth between them.

"You want me to..."

"*Da*. Yes. Let me see you."

"You've already seen me. In the shower."

"I want a better look."

Shane removed his clothes quickly. Being naked in the presence of other guys was not foreign to him, but there was nothing familiar about this scenario. He stood in his underwear for a moment, then tried not to blush as he removed them.

Shane stood with his arms out. *Well?*

Rozanov grinned and waved a hand over his own chest. “So smooth.”

“Look...”

“Like a swimmer.”

“I don’t...it’s natural, all right?”

“Yes. Come here.” Rozanov patted the bed next to him.

Shane blew out a breath and moved onto the bed. He lay flat on his back next to Rozanov, unsure of what to do next.

“What do you want?” Rozanov asked.

“I don’t know.”

“No?” Rozanov asked, and he leaned over him and kissed him.

“Nothing?”

“I...”

“What about...” Rozanov pressed a palm against Shane’s erection and curled gentle fingers around it. “Okay?”

Shane nodded. It was shockingly okay for Ilya Rozanov—a guy, a hockey player, his *rival*—to have his hand wrapped around Shane’s dick.

“Relax,” Rozanov said, and kissed him again. His hand stroked Shane carefully, without lube, and Shane was spellbound. Rozanov’s soft, accented words and his gentle hands and his confident kisses were all working together to ensnare him.

Dizzy with sensation and lust, Shane lightly pushed on Rozanov’s shoulder until he was flat on his back. Then, before he could talk himself out of it, Shane slid down his body and took his cock into his mouth again. He wasn’t any surer of his abilities, but he knew what he wanted. He wanted to get Rozanov off. He wanted to take him apart.

He let his jaw slacken and took Rozanov as deep as he could. He was nervous about biting him by accident, so he kept his mouth open wider than was probably necessary and used a lot of tongue. It was sloppy and very wet, but he could hear the encouraging sounds Rozanov was making. When Shane turned his eyes up, he could see Rozanov had propped himself up on his elbows and was watching him give his first blow job with great interest.

Shane wrapped a hand around the base of Rozanov’s cock and stroked up to meet his mouth. When Rozanov arched and moaned, Shane repeated it, stroking him hard and fast.

“Hollander...fuck.” Rozanov switched to Russian, and Shane didn’t know what he was saying, but he figured he should probably get out of the way because he wasn’t sure he was ready to take a load in his mouth.

He pulled off just in time. Rozanov put his own hand on his dick to replace Shane's mouth and stroked himself roughly until his release fell all over his own stomach.

Shane stared, dumbfounded. It was the hottest thing he had ever seen.

Rozanov flopped back on the bed, breathing hard. "Not bad, Hollander," he said.

Shane was still staring at the mess on Rozanov's stomach. His own cock was like iron. He thought about stroking himself until he came on Rozanov. He thought about Rozanov putting his mouth on him...

"Okay. Well. Goodnight," Rozanov said, and moved to get up.

Shane's mouth dropped open, and he was about to be furious when he noticed the playful, crooked grin.

"Fuck you," Shane said.

"Did you need something?" Rozanov asked innocently.

Shane glared at him. Rozanov chuckled and grabbed some tissues from the nightstand so he could wipe his stomach off a bit.

"Lie down," Rozanov instructed.

Shane did. Rozanov crawled on top of him and kissed him.

"You think I'm an asshole," Rozanov said.

"You *are* an asshole."

"I would not leave you like that."

"No?"

He kissed him again. "No."

As they kissed, Rozanov reached a hand down and gripped Shane's cock. Shane gasped into his mouth.

"Let me show you," Rozanov murmured, "how to do this."

He kissed his way down Shane's body, which felt so good that Shane forgot to be insulted. When he reached Shane's cock, Rozanov greeted it with a long, slow lick with the entire surface of his tongue, like it was a fucking ice-cream cone or something.

"Jesus." Shane shuddered.

Rozanov licked and sucked the head, tonguing the slit and pushing Shane dangerously close to the edge already. He gripped the hotel bed comforter and tried to hold on. Rozanov was shockingly good at this. How many fucking times had he met up with his coach's son? Shane felt like he should be paying attention—maybe taking notes—but his brain had left the room.

Shane reached down to run his fingers through the golden-brown curls of Rozanov's hair. He dragged his fingers down over the stubble on his cheek, the sharp line of his jaw. Shane had enjoyed watching some truly hot girls sucking him off in the past, but this was beyond anything he had ever experienced before. Watching this big, beautiful man, who knew exactly what to do with his tongue and lips and—god, his *teeth*—work him like there would be a medal awarded for performance...

“Ah, god. Rozanov! I'm gonna...”

He expected Rozanov to get the hell out of the way, but instead he sucked him harder and Shane emptied himself into his mouth.

A stream of nonsense fell out of Shane's mouth. “Holy shit. I'm sorry. Oh my god. I'm so sorry. Fuck. Wow. God.”

Rozanov pulled off, not at all hurried, and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. He laughed at Shane's babbling. “Sorry? Why sorry?”

Shane choked out a hysterical laugh. “I don't know! I just... I wasn't expecting you to...”

Rozanov shrugged as if Shane was thanking him for bringing in the mail. “I don't mind it.”

Shane felt stupid that he hadn't even tried to...properly finish the job on Rozanov. This guy was determined to one-up him at every turn.

Rozanov sat on the edge of the bed with his back to Shane. He rolled his neck and idly rubbed his jaw. Shane sat up and swung his legs over the opposite side of the bed. He gripped the mattress with both hands and looked at the floor. He felt panic surge up in him again.

He heard Rozanov blow out a breath, which made Shane laugh for some reason. The absurdity of the situation was hitting him.

“You're laughing.”

“Yeah, well...this whole thing is a little nuts.”

“I want a cigarette,” Rozanov said.

“You're not allowed to smoke in the hotel.”

“I know. Stupid country.” Rozanov sighed. “Doesn't matter. Bears told me to quit. I am trying not to smoke.”

“Oh. That's good. Smoking is bad for you.”

“Is it?” Shane could *hear* Rozanov's eyes rolling.

“So, um...” Shane said, still keeping his back to Rozanov. “This won't leave this room, okay?”

“You think I will tell people?”

Shane sincerely doubted it. “No.”

“No.”

He felt the bed shift as Rozanov stood up.

Shane had the stupid urge to ask him to stay. He imagined falling asleep in his arms and *what the fuck?* This thing they’d just done was, above all things, a huge mistake. As far as hookups went, Shane really could not have chosen a less appropriate person. And even forgetting that, there was no reason to pretend this was anything more than a quick, no-strings fuck. And why would Shane even *want* to pretend that?

He didn’t. He wanted Rozanov out of his hotel room. He wanted to forget that this ever happened. He did *not* want to reach for him. To pull him back on the bed. To do everything they just did two or three more times.

When Rozanov was fully dressed, he gave Shane one of his playful, crooked smiles. Shane had managed to put his underwear back on, but other than that, was still naked.

“My flight is early tomorrow,” Rozanov said. There was maybe a note of apology in it. Or maybe Shane was imagining things.

“All right.”

Rozanov nodded. “I’ll see you around.”

“Yeah,” Shane said awkwardly. “I’ll see you on the ice, I guess.”

“Yes.”

Shane wanted to kiss him one more time, because he was sure he would never get the chance again. But Rozanov was already opening the door.

“Goodbye, Hollander.”

“Bye,” Shane said to the closed door.

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Chapter Five

September 2010—Montreal

Shane was a man of routine.

He woke every morning at six o'clock, and immediately went for a ten-kilometer run. He would then return to his (new) apartment to do sets of pull-ups, push-ups, and crunches. Then he would stretch before he would make himself a smoothie and a bagel, which he would eat while watching *SportsCenter*. Then he would shower.

The rest of his day would be dictated by whatever was scheduled for him. He very rarely had a day with nothing planned.

He had completed his first NHL training camp, and he had secured himself a spot on the Montreal Voyageurs' roster for the 2010–2011 season. That was no surprise, but he was still damn proud of himself. He was starting the preseason games the next day. The city of Montreal had already warmly embraced him. He was excited.

On the television, the *SportsCenter* anchors were talking about Ilya Rozanov.

Shane hadn't seen, or spoken to, Rozanov since their...encounter...in the Toronto hotel room over two months ago. He would like to be able to say that he hadn't thought of him either, but that would be far from the truth.

Suddenly, Rozanov's face filled the screen. Shane felt his own face flush a bit, which was ridiculous because he was alone and not actually in the presence of those sparkling hazel eyes or that playful, lopsided smile.

He was watching the television, entranced, but not listening to a word of the interview. He didn't snap out of it until he heard Rozanov say, without a trace of irony, "The Bears will be happy with me this season. I will score fifty goals."

"Fifty goals?" the stunned interviewer asked.

"Are you fucking kidding me?" Shane asked at home.

"Yes. By end of February," Rozanov said.

Shane snorted. He was stunned by the audacity of this guy. He was announcing before the season had even started, before he had any idea how

much ice time he'd even be getting with the Bears, that he would be scoring fifty goals this season? As a nineteen-year-old rookie?

Shane had every intention of scoring at least as many goals himself, but he certainly wasn't going to *announce* it. Jesus Christ, what would his new teammates think of him? They'd think he was a cocky little asshole, that's what. And if Shane didn't perform, he'd look like a fucking idiot.

But there was Rozanov, bold as brass, calmly announcing his intention to do what maybe four or five rookies had been able to do? Ever? In history?

Ridiculous. Infuriating.

"Do you feel pressure to outperform Shane Hollander this first season?" the interviewer asked.

"Who?"

Fuck. You. Rozanov.

Rozanov looked directly at the camera, and Shane froze. *He can't see you, dummy.*

He watched Rozanov wink at the camera and Shane's eyes narrowed. He was going to shut this fucker up when their teams finally met.

* * *

The opportunity came a month later.

The hype leading up to the first meeting between Hollander and Rozanov seemed, to Shane, to be a bit much. They were both only nineteen, and their NHL careers were only weeks old. He wasn't sure what anyone was expecting to happen.

Montreal was hosting Boston. Shane met his parents for lunch the day of the game. They came to every home game, but this day they came up from Ottawa a little early because they knew how nervous he was.

"The league is always looking for a marketing angle, Shane," his father said. "It's just a game like any other."

"I know." He poked at his pasta. He couldn't imagine what his parents would say if they knew the real reason he was nervous about facing Rozanov. Pressure he could handle. He lived for hockey, and he was extremely good at it. Normally he'd be looking forward to the chance to prove himself against a rival.

You had to go and make it weird, didn't you, Hollander?

“Is Drapeau going to be starting tonight?” Shane’s mother asked. “He was weak on his left side last game. Is he hurt?”

“He’s fine,” Shane said with a small smile. In a nation of rabid, knowledgeable hockey fans, Yuna Hollander ranked near the top. Her parents had emigrated from Japan, but Yuna had been born and raised in Montreal. She couldn’t have been happier that her son had been drafted by her beloved Voyageurs.

Shane was the only child of Yuna and David Hollander, and they had given him all the support in the world. Shane loved them, and he knew how lucky he was. He definitely wouldn’t be where he was without them.

Shane knew most guys in the league didn’t have their parents coming to almost every home game, but he wasn’t ashamed to admit that he was grateful his folks lived so close. He’d played his junior hockey in Kingston, which was close enough to Ottawa that he’d seen his parents at most games there too. He’d never really felt that need to distance himself from them. Maybe it was because he was an only child, or maybe it was because he knew how much his parents had given of their time and money and energy to get him to where he was now.

Plus, he liked them.

“You need a lamp beside your couch in that apartment,” Mom said, completely out of nowhere.

“What?”

“Your living room. It’s too dark. Do you want the one from the den at home? We don’t need it.”

“That’s okay, Mom. You keep that. I’ll get one.”

“Yuna! He doesn’t need our old furniture! He’s a millionaire!”

“It’s a nice lamp!” she argued. “They don’t make nice things anymore.”

“If you have the money, they’ll make anything,” Dad said.

“Next time you guys drive up we can go lamp shopping, Mom.”

That seemed to please her. “Have you had any friends over yet?” she asked.

“One guy. Hayden. You know...”

“Hayden Pike. The rookie. Left wing. Played in the Quebec league for Drummondville,” Mom recited. “Yes.”

“Yeah. He came over to check the place out one night before we went out with some of the other guys.”

“He seems like a nice boy,” Mom said. “I saw him interviewed.”

“He’s cool. Everyone has been great so far, really.”

Dad laughed. “Of course they have been! They’re damn lucky to have you.”

Shane rolled his eyes. “I’m just another guy on the team.”

His parents looked at each other, but didn’t say anything. Shane let it go. He knew how proud they were of him.

“Anyway,” Dad said, “what were we talking about? Rozanov? We’re not worried about Rozanov, right?”

“He’s a dirty player,” Mom growled.

“He’s a *good* player is what he is.” Shane sighed.

“Not as good as you. Not in any category,” Mom said firmly.

“He’s bigger than me.”

“You’re faster than him.”

“Maybe.”

“And you’re a leader. A nice young man. Rozanov is a jerk.”

Shane laughed. “Yeah. I know.”

He’s better at blow jobs than me. The thought crashed to the front of Shane’s brain, and he quickly grabbed for his water glass, nearly knocking it over.

His mother narrowed her eyes. “What’s wrong with you, Shane? You aren’t usually this nervous.”

“Nothing! I just want to win tonight. That’s all.”

It seemed to be the right thing to say, because she smiled. “You will. Screw Ilya Rozanov, right? That can be your mantra tonight.”

Or not.

Shane forced a smile. “Sure. Screw him.”

* * *

“All right, fuck it,” Coach LeClaire said. “Rozanov, get out there and take the face-off against Hollander. Let’s give ’em what they want.”

Rozanov vaulted over the boards and headed for the face-off circle. He was on the ice with Hollander for the first time in an NHL game.

“Shane Hollander,” he said casually when he reached his opponent.

“Rozanov.”

Ilya let his lips curl up a bit into a little smile. Hollander’s face hardened and he shook his head slightly.

The crowd was so fucking loud. This city was nuts.

“Will you disappoint them, Hollander?”

“Nope.”

They bent for the face-off.

Ilya wished he didn't have the mouth guard in because he would have loved to do something distracting and sexy with his tongue.

He probably should have been focusing more on the puck and less on bothering Hollander, because he lost their first face-off. And that was something he'd never get back.

* * *

Ilya scowled at the ceiling of his Montreal hotel room. He was furious with himself—not at his team, at *himself*—for losing this first match against Hollander.

He didn't know what to do with his anger. It was not the best moment for his phone to ring.

It was his goddamned brother, Andrei.

“What is it?” Ilya said, forgoing niceties. It wasn't like Andrei was calling just to chat.

“Did you play tonight?”

“Yes,” Ilya said tightly. He had teammates from the Czech Republic whose families back home watched every game online.

“Oh. Did you win?”

“What do you want?”

Andrei was quiet. Ilya's heart sank. “Is Dad...?”

“Fine. Why wouldn't he be?”

Ilya's jaw clenched. His brother could pretend all he wanted that there was nothing wrong with their father, but it was increasingly obvious that it wasn't the case. He decided to ignore Andrei's lies for the moment.

“Do you need money, then?” Ilya asked. It was the only other possible reason for Andrei's call.

“Just...not much. Like...twenty thousand?”

“Twenty thousand! *Dollars*?”

His brother laughed. “Not rubles. Of course dollars.”

“What the fuck for?”

“Life,” his brother said vaguely. “You know what it's like here.”

He knew what his *brother* was like. He was either making a bad investment, or had already made a bad investment. Or was gambling. Or something else that a police officer really shouldn't be doing.

"I gave you ten thousand like two months ago. Where the fuck is that?"

"Life, Ilya. Like I said."

"Life. Right."

"It's not like you can't afford it. I know what your signing bonus was."

"I'm sure you do." It was probably the only part of Ilya's career that Andrei had bothered to follow.

"I wouldn't ask if it wasn't important, Ilya."

Ilya rolled his eyes at the phone. He could say no. He *should* say no. He didn't owe his asshole brother a goddamned thing.

But if he said no, then his father would call next to give him the speech about family and being a good son. And as much as Ilya hated Andrei, he was still his brother. But this was the last fucking time.

"I'll send you the money. But don't ask again."

"Could you send it now? What time is it there?"

"What? No! Fuck you, I'll send it tomorrow. I'm going to bed."

"Fine. Good night then."

"You're welcome."

Andrei ended the call. Ilya threw his phone down on the bed.

He turned on the television, and there was Shane fucking Hollander's face, filling the screen. All sweaty and flushed and happy. Answering questions in perfect goddamned French. Ilya couldn't even say a basic English sentence without sounding like a cartoon villain. He hated his stupid accent. He hated his asshole family.

Shane Hollander was speaking French and he was breathless and smiling and drenched in sweat with his hair sticking up in all directions. His cheeks were pink and his lips were dark and wet. He looked so fucking proud of himself.

Ilya told himself the twisted feeling in his stomach was just jealousy, but he was terrified that it was something much, much worse.

Chapter Six

January 2011—Nashville

Ilya swiped his key card for the third time and his hotel room door finally unlocked. Once inside, he fell back on the king-size bed with his arms outstretched, pleasantly buzzed from the drinks he'd consumed at his All-Star team's dinner.

He had expected to be on a team with Hollander, since they played in the same conference, but the league had decided to change it up this year and have North American players form one team, and European players form the other. No secret as to why. The league couldn't get enough of the Rozanov/Hollander rivalry.

Ilya was close to making good on his promise to score fifty goals by the end of February. He had already scored thirty-eight.

Hollander had scored forty-one.

Fucking Hollander.

Ilya'd spotted him in the lobby earlier that evening, but that was it. No words had been exchanged. He hadn't even gotten a nod of acknowledgment from him.

Ilya wondered what Hollander was doing right now.

He wondered if there were any cute girls at the hotel bar.

Was Hollander in his own room, lying on his bed?

Was he wondering what Ilya was doing?

Why was Shane Hollander so fucking hard to shake? They'd hooked up *once*. Months ago. It had been a mistake, obviously. A giant, ridiculous mistake. Or, at the very least, something that should be forgotten about. Not a big deal.

On the ice it was easy enough to focus on the game. Ilya actually *loved* playing against Hollander. He would never actually *tell* him, but Hollander was really fucking good. He challenged Ilya in ways that Ilya wasn't used to. He loved taking the puck from Hollander. He loved slamming him into the boards. He loved skating around him. He loved shit-talking him because his eyes would get all squashed up in anger and his pink lips would curl into an adorable little attempt at a snarl. Like an angry kitten.

Okay. It wasn't entirely easy to focus on the game.

And after the games...and all the days between their games...when Ilya had to watch Hollander being interviewed with his lovely fucking manners and his adorable, boyish smile. When Ilya watched him play against other teams, and watched how he moved with flawless, calculated grace. When Ilya heard him switch effortlessly between perfect English and perfect French at press conferences. When Ilya thought about how eager his mouth had been back in that hotel room in Toronto...

He didn't even have Hollander's phone number.

He'd see him tomorrow night.

* * *

Shane should have been expecting the press conference.

Saturday morning, the day of the All-Star Skills Competition, he had received a phone call from someone from the NHL's PR office telling him there was a short press conference scheduled for that afternoon. Two o'clock. It would just be him...and Ilya Rozanov.

"Why?" Shane had asked.

"It's your first All-Star Game! You're both having legendary rookie seasons! And besides, the press love the idea of getting you two together."

Shane had flushed a little.

So now he found himself sitting behind a raised table, staring at a room full of reporters and cameras. That part was very familiar, and didn't cause Shane any stress. The large Russian man next to him—who was sitting so close their forearms were almost touching where they rested on top of the table—was the one responsible for Shane's dry mouth and (probably) noticeable stammering.

"Ilya," one reporter said, "you announced at the beginning of the season that you would score fifty goals by the end of February. You've scored thirty-eight so far. Do you think you'll keep your promise?"

Rozanov took a moment to reply. Shane wondered if he was working through all the English words.

"Yes," Rozanov finally answered. There was scattered laughter when it became clear that he wasn't going to elaborate.

"Shane, you've scored forty-one goals this year already. Do you think you'll beat Rozanov to fifty?"

“I don’t really think about stuff like that,” Shane said carefully. “This is a team sport, and I’m happy when my team is doing well. I just try to contribute.”

Rozanov was wearing a ball cap and had his head down so the reporters couldn’t see his reaction, but Shane could *feel* him rolling his eyes beside him.

“Ilya, how’s it feel to play with a team of Europeans for this All-Star Game?”

“Good. Perfect. Locker room makes more sense than usual.”

More laughter.

Shane watched the way Rozanov was slowly rubbing the knuckle of his forefinger with his thumb. He probably didn’t even realize he was doing it. Rozanov had nice hands...

The questions kept coming, and they were all exactly what Shane had been expecting. He did his best to answer them, and even chanced a glance over at Rozanov’s profile next to him. His curls poked out from under his All-Star Game ball cap, and his jawline was covered in stubble. He was wearing a V-neck T-shirt, and Shane could see the glint of his gold chain where it disappeared beneath the fabric.

Shane turned his head abruptly back to the reporters.

He took a sip of his water and sat back in his chair. Except now he had an even better view of Rozanov, and the way he was hunched forward over the table. Shane could see the muscles in his back and shoulders straining against the thin material of the T-shirt.

“Shane?”

“Sorry?” Shane snapped his eyes forward.

“Just a quick one from the *Toronto Star*: Would you like to play on an All-Star team *with* Ilya in the future?”

“Oh. Sure. Yeah. I mean...” He took a breath. “Ilya’s a great player.”

“Ilya? Same question?”

“If Hollander does not mind me being starting center. Yes.”

Shane made a show of rolling his eyes as the room laughed. He clasped his hands together and rested them on the table in front of him, leaning over his microphone as he awaited the next question. Rozanov’s elbows were resting on the table too. His left elbow was almost brushing Shane’s right. Shane could swear there was an electric current in the narrow space between them. He felt like the hair on his arm was standing up.

“Both Montreal and Boston have been out of the playoffs for three seasons now. Do you guys feel the pressure to restore your team’s legacies, even this early in your careers?”

Shane rubbed his arm and furrowed his brow. He turned his head and saw that Ilya was looking at him, and his face showed that he was hoping Shane would field this one. Rozanov probably only understood about half the words. Shane thought it was a pretty stupid question, honestly.

“Um,” he said. “I can’t speak for Rozanov, or what it’s like in Boston, but I know the fans in Montreal love their team and definitely are expecting us to turn things around and get back in the playoffs and win some cups. And, you know, I feel the exact same way. So... I guess my answer is that I don’t really feel any pressure that I’m not already putting on myself.”

He hoped that satisfied him. Unfortunately, the reporter didn’t pick up on the fact that Rozanov was clearly struggling with understanding the question, and said, “Ilya?”

“Ah,” Rozanov said. “What Hollander said. Yes.”

He gave the room one of his playful smiles, and everyone laughed again. Shane looked at him, and Rozanov caught his eye and winked. Shane pursed his lips to stifle a grin.

Under the table, he felt Rozanov’s foot tap against his own. It was the chastest contact in the world, but it still made Shane’s heart stop.

The press conference ended. Both men stood as the room erupted into the chaos of dozens of people packing up recording equipment. Shane offered Rozanov his hand, and Rozanov shook it. When Shane released their handshake, Rozanov slowly slid his fingers along Shane’s palm.

“I’ll see you later, Hollander,” he said in a tone that was far more suggestive than it should have been.

Shane swallowed. “Yeah. Later.”

* * *

Shane allowed himself a moment, on the ice, to take everything in. The NHL’s All-Star Skills Competition was held the night before the All-Star Game, and was a chance for the stars to show off and try to prove themselves the fastest skater, or the hardest shooter. It was just a laid-back, fun night, and no one took it very seriously, but he was *here*, dammit. He

was a rookie and he was an NHL All-Star. He could be a little proud of himself.

All of the players from both teams were on the ice now, clustered in front of their respective benches. Some of the players kneeled as they waited for their events to be called. Others stood and chatted with their just-for-this-weekend teammates. The league had been less than subtle about their desire to see Shane and Rozanov go head-to-head in one of the competition events. That event ended up being the shot accuracy competition.

Rozanov went first. The net had four foam bull's-eye targets—one in each corner—fastened to the goalposts. When the timer started, the object was to break all four targets with shots from the blue line as fast as possible. The league record was about seven seconds.

When the whistle blew, Rozanov wasted no time. He broke the top two targets with the first two shots, then missed the next one, then cleanly broke the bottom two targets with his fourth and fifth shots.

Eight seconds.

Shane shook his head and watched Rozanov play to the crowd. Rozanov skated around the ice holding his stick like a rifle, celebrating his skills by pretending to shoot at the rafters.

Shane skated up to replace Rozanov on the blue line, and Rozanov came to a stop right in front of him. “Sorry about that, Hollander.”

“You think I can’t beat that?”

Rozanov just winked and nudged Shane a little as he passed him. Shane heard the crowd’s delighted reaction.

Fuck it. Fuck *him*. Shane could do this. He could do this with his fucking eyes closed.

The whistle blew and Shane just locked on to those targets. He watched each one burst apart with four perfect shots.

Six. Point. Seven. Seconds.

The crowd went wild. Shane threw his arms over his head and celebrated more than was probably necessary or sportsmanlike, but fuck, it felt *good*.

He smirked at Rozanov as he skated back to his teammates. Rozanov wasn’t smiling now, but the look in his eyes was...

Shane flushed and turned his attention to his teammates.

His contribution to the competition completed, Shane could now just relax and enjoy himself as he watched the others battle each other. He would like to say his gradual movement down the line in front of the bench

to where the two teams met was not deliberate, but that would be a lie. And it seemed he wasn't the only one making that journey.

Shane leaned casually against the boards at the end of the bench, pretending to focus on the players competing for hardest shot, instead of on the man who was standing a couple of feet from him.

"Nice job, Hollander," Rozanov drawled.

"Thanks."

"Have fun last night?"

"Last night?"

"With your teammates. Dinner somewhere? Get drunk?"

Shane looked down at the ice. "Oh. Yeah. It was fun. Um...how about you guys?"

"Lots of fun. No fucking Canadians or Americans. Was perfect."

"Ah."

He turned his gaze to Rozanov's face. No one wore helmets for the skills competition, since there was no actual body contact, and Shane could admire the profile of his chiseled jaw, and the soft curls of his hair.

"Going to bed early tonight. I think," Rozanov said suddenly.

Shane's mouth went a little dry. "Oh?"

"Yes."

They stood in silence, watching the action on the ice. Loud music blared and the crowd cheered as another record was broken.

Rozanov leaned down. His breath ghosted over Shane's ear when he said, in a low voice, "Twelve twenty-one."

A shiver ran through Shane's body, and before it had even left him, Rozanov was gone. Shane watched him skate down the ice to talk to a fellow Russian player.

Shane hoped he wasn't blushing.

"The fuck did Rozanov want?" asked Liam Casey, a defenseman for Pittsburgh.

"Nothing," Shane said quickly. "Just shit-talking, you know?"

"Guy's a fucking asshole."

"Yeah," he said.

* * *

Ilya wasn't surprised at all when the knock came.

It was late. After midnight. He had been back in his room for almost two hours.

Hollander pushed into the room as soon as Ilya opened the door. He turned and flipped the bar latch as if someone was going to burst in any moment.

He looked terrified.

“Is there a ghost out there?” Ilya asked, amused.

“No. Fuck you. This is fucking dangerous and you know it.”

“Is it? We are not doing anything.”

Hollander looked at him hard. His dark eyes were a mixture of anger and lust. Ilya decided to drop the act.

“You came anyway,” he said.

“Yeah,” Hollander said, his voice tight and full of forced courage. “I guess I did.”

Ilya nodded, and then Hollander swore under his breath and lunged forward to kiss him. He grabbed Ilya’s T-shirt in a tight fist and pulled him closer.

Ilya moaned at the hot slide of Hollander’s tongue against his. He tugged roughly on the hair at the back of Hollander’s head, tipping his head back so he could deepen the kiss.

They broke apart and Hollander looked at him, eyes wild and dark hair a mess, silently begging for instruction.

“On your knees,” Ilya said softly, just to see what he would do.

Expecting Hollander to tell him to fuck off, Ilya’s breath caught in his throat as he watched him sink fluidly to the floor. He gazed up at Ilya. Those onyx eyes, always so sharp, were hazy with desire. Hollander leaned forward to nuzzle and mouth at the bulge in Ilya’s sweatpants.

“Christ, Hollander,” Ilya breathed, gently pulling at Hollander’s hair as he pressed hot, openmouthed kisses to the fabric that pulled tight over Ilya’s erection. He felt dizzy and less in control than he wanted to be as Hollander tucked fingers into Ilya’s waistband and pulled down until Ilya’s cock was freed.

Hollander didn’t hesitate. He dragged his tongue up the length before wrapping his lips around the head and sinking down. Ilya couldn’t even make a smart remark. He just gasped and let his head fall back, completely overwhelmed by Hollander’s need for this. He certainly didn’t have the ability to conjure English words right now.

Hollander reached a hand up and slid it, fingers splayed, under the hem of Ilya's T-shirt. He pushed the shirt up until Ilya took the hint and pulled it off over his head. He carefully stepped out of his sweatpants, Hollander's mouth never leaving him, and planted a hand on the back of Hollander's head. He was careful not to hold him too firmly in place. This wasn't control—Ilya just wanted to touch him. To let the silky strands of his hair slip through his fingers as Hollander gave in to what he had clearly been craving.

Hollander's hands wandered as he sucked him. His touch was light and curious, his fingertips almost tickling Ilya as he explored his thighs and hips and around to his ass. Ilya wondered how far Hollander was willing to go with him. He wondered if he'd done anything with another man since their last time. The desperate, unskilled motion of his mouth and the slight tremble in his hands suggested that he hadn't.

The idea that Ilya was probably the only one who ever saw him like this—that he was the only person in the entire fucking world who knew what it felt like to have those pretty pink lips wrapped around his cock...

Ilya swore in Russian and pulled away. He grabbed Hollander by the front of his shirt and hauled him up, kissing him roughly before throwing him on the bed. He wanted to know how much he would give him tonight.

Hollander stared up at him, eyes wild, lips dark and wet and parted. His hair was everywhere. Ilya just stood there and watched him toe off his sneakers, never breaking eye contact. Hollander was breathing heavily, as if he wasn't one of the most physically fit people on the planet.

Ilya bit his lip and watched him pull his shirt off. In seconds Ilya was covering him on the bed with his body, and kissing him hungrily.

Ilya had always been this way. He loved sex, and he loved it more when it was dangerous—when it was with someone he *knew* he shouldn't be with. Whether that was his coach's son, or his brother's girlfriend, or his teammate's sister, Ilya couldn't resist a bad idea.

And Shane Hollander was a *bad* fucking idea. The *worst* idea. Wrong in every way imaginable. Two men. Two NHL players, poised to be the two biggest stars in the league soon enough. Two bitter rivals on opposing teams that had hated each other for almost a hundred years.

Plus, Ilya hated this guy. He hated his pretty boy face and his perfect goddamned English and his perfect goddamned French and his loving parents and his polite little manners and his million-dollar smile. He hated

how serious he was. How *earnest*. He was everything the league wanted from their stars.

Ilya kissed his dumb mouth and swallowed his stupid little sighs and felt his annoying fingers in his hair. He pulled back so he could look at his horrible face with its ridiculous freckles.

Fuck.

Ilya kissed him again so he wouldn't have to think about him. He wanted to fuck him. God, would Hollander let him fuck him?

They kissed each other frantically, rolling and taking turns straddling each other and pulling off what was left of Hollander's clothes in the process. Ilya kissed his way down his body and took him into his mouth. Hollander's hips jerked off the bed, nearly forcing Ilya off him, but Ilya held on. He sucked him and enjoyed the desperate noises he pulled out of him.

He let his fingers trail down below Hollander's balls. He tapped one finger against his puckered opening and waited for a reaction. Hollander's body stilled on the bed, so Ilya drew light circles around his hole, just a casual suggestion.

He could feel Hollander tense up. He was completely silent now. Ilya pulled his mouth off him and looked up at his face.

"Have you ever?" Ilya asked.

Hollander shook his head.

"Would you like to?"

"I don't know."

"You are scared."

"No! No, I'm not *scared*."

"Is okay to be."

Hollander exhaled loudly. "I'm *not* scared," he said again.

"Have you ever touched yourself," Ilya asked, circling his finger again, "here?"

Hollander's face flushed bright red, and Ilya grinned.

"Jesus Christ," Hollander muttered.

"You are embarrassed."

"Well!"

"You don't play with your ass? It makes you gay?"

"Oh my fucking god..."

"You know what makes you gayer?"

“Rozanov...shut the fuck—”

“Sucking my dick. You were doing that a minute ago.”

Hollander sat up. “I’ve played with it, all right? I’ve—I’ve got a...thing.”

“A thing?”

“A dildo! Okay?”

Rozanov grinned so hard it hurt. “What color?”

“Fuck you!”

“Is it big?”

“I’m leaving.”

Hollander moved to get off the bed. Ilya quickly covered him and pinned him back down. He held him down by the wrists, and Hollander made a halfhearted attempt to fight him off, but stopped when Ilya kissed him.

“I want to fuck you, Hollander,” Ilya said against his ear.

Hollander shuddered, and Ilya was sure he was going to say yes, but instead, “I...no. I can’t. Not here.”

Ilya considered his answer, and nodded. Not here. Not in a hotel surrounded by their fellow NHL players. By the media. By fans. Not now, when they would both have to be as close to silent as possible when Ilya entered him for the first time...

“Okay,” Ilya said, nipping at his throat. “Next time, then.”

Hollander snorted, but he was smiling hopefully. “Next time?”

Ilya shrugged one shoulder. “We play in Montreal in two weeks.”

“That doesn’t mean we can... I mean, how *would* we? *Where* would we?”

“Are you homeless?”

“No.”

“Well then...”

“So, what? You’re just gonna sneak out of your hotel? What will you tell your teammates?”

“The fucking truth! I’m going to get laid! Like every city we play in!”

Hollander’s brow furrowed. “Oh.”

“Yeah. Oh.”

“So...after the game you just want me to wait at home for you?”

Hollander’s voice was tight, like he was angry about something.

Ilya rolled his eyes. He had no idea why they were wasting time talking right now anyway. “Yes! Wait for me. I will come to your house and fuck you.”

Hollander looked embarrassed again. “It’s an apartment,” he mumbled.

“Jesus! Fine! I will fuck you in your apartment. Can we get back to things now?”

“Yes.” Hollander frowned. “But...”

“But?”

“In the shower. The water will drown out...anything.”

Rozanov huffed, but it was actually a good idea.

“Yes,” he said, springing off the bed and onto his feet, “but hurry the fuck up.”

Hollander shoved him as he walked by, leading the way to the bathroom. He turned the water on, and as they waited for it to get hot, Ilya kissed him against the closed door until Hollander shoved him away so he could pull Ilya into the shower. He slammed Ilya against the tile and wrapped a hand around his cock as he kissed him. Ilya grinned against his mouth. This was the Shane Hollander he wanted: competitive, aggressive.

“Your hands are so soft,” Ilya said. “Like a girl’s.”

“Fuck you.”

Ilya laughed. Hollander jerked him harder, as if trying to prove how strong and masculine his hands were.

Ilya bit his own lip and gave up teasing his rival. For now. He reached for Hollander and they brought each other off frantically and roughly in the shower, letting the rush of water muffle their English and Russian profanity.

Hollander got dressed quickly when they were done. Ilya stood with a towel wrapped around his waist, waiting to hear what Hollander would say.

“Um...”

Ilya didn’t say anything back. He waited.

“I know we said...about Montreal...but...”

Ilya crossed his arms and leaned against a wall.

“We probably shouldn’t,” Hollander finished.

“No?”

“No. I mean...obviously, right?”

Ilya watched Hollander run a nervous hand through his damp hair.

“It’s stupid,” Hollander said, more to himself than to Ilya. “This is stupid. I don’t know why we did this. Again.”

Ilya walked slowly toward him. When he reached him, he put a hand on the side of his face and tilted his head until he could look directly in his eyes. “Give me your phone.”

“My phone?” Hollander asked weakly.

“Yes.”

Hollander fumbled the phone out of his pocket and handed it to Ilya. Ilya took it and entered his number into Hollander’s contacts, under the name Lily. Hollander snorted when he saw it.

“Who should I be?” he asked as he picked up Ilya’s phone from the dresser. “Shannon?”

“Jane,” Ilya said.

“Jesus Christ,” Hollander muttered as he typed.

“No. Just Jane.”

Hollander glared at him as he handed his phone back. “This isn’t a yes, just so you know,” he said.

“It will be.”

Hollander shook his head, but Ilya could tell he was fighting a smile.

“Good luck tomorrow,” Hollander said.

“Sure.”

Hollander turned to open the door, but stopped. “Hey, um...you wanna take a look out there and see if the coast is clear?”

Ilya couldn’t quite translate his words. “Sorry?”

“Just...take a look and see if the hall is empty. I don’t want anyone to see me coming out of your room!”

Ilya opened the door enough to stick his head out. “Empty.”

Hollander blew out a breath. “Okay. Well...bye.”

“Goodnight.”

Hollander nodded. And left.

Chapter Seven

February 2011—Montreal

Fifty minutes on the treadmill and Shane still couldn't get his brain to quiet down.

He had a very nice gym in his apartment, which was close to the Voyageurs' practice rink in Brossard. Some younger players shared apartments or houses with other young teammates, but Shane preferred to live alone. He had been under intense focus since he was sixteen, and it had made him cling to whatever private moments he could steal. Also, he walked a dangerous line with his teammates as it was; his...status...in the hockey world had a tendency to make his teammates understandably jealous. He was sure any tension would only be made worse if he lived with any of them.

Shane was supposed to be focusing on the game that night against Toronto as he pushed his body on the treadmill. Instead, he kept thinking back to a certain Russian's promise to come to Shane's *home* and...

There were too many things to process. Ilya Rozanov had gotten him off in a hotel room. *Again*. Ilya Rozanov wanted to sneak out of his team's hotel the next time they were in Montreal (next week!) and meet Shane at his *apartment* so he could *fuck* him.

Ilya Rozanov wanted to *fuck him*.

Shane was both terrified and undeniably aroused by the idea. Undeniably *extremely* aroused by the idea.

But that didn't change the fact that it was a really, *really* bad idea.

Shane had accepted the fact that he was more than okay with having sexual encounters with a man. Fine. He had suspected that about himself for a while now, and maybe Rozanov was just the first man to see that in him, to offer him the chance to experiment a little. So maybe what Shane actually needed to do was find *another* man to fool around with.

But who the fuck was *that* going to be?

This was *Montreal*. He was *Shane Hollander*. If his career went the way he was planning, that situation was only going to get more impossible. He definitely didn't want any rumors of his sexuality—whatever it was—

getting out there. The NHL liked to pretend it was inclusive now, but Shane knew what it was like on the ice, and in the dressing room. There had never been an openly queer NHL player, and homophobic slurs were thrown around enough that Shane couldn't imagine that happening. Whoever came out first was going to have to be brave as hell. It sure as shit wasn't going to be Shane.

One thing he was certain of about Rozanov: he wasn't going to tell anyone. He had as much to lose as Shane did.

As far as Shane could figure, he had three choices: Forget about fucking men entirely and just stick to women; Risk finding men, or even just *a* man, who could be discreet and...patient; Let whatever the fuck was happening with Rozanov keep happening and try not to think too much about it.

Obviously the first option was the most sensible. Certainly the safest.

Also the most unappealing.

Fuck.

Shane slowed the treadmill to a cool-down speed and grabbed his water bottle.

Yeah. No. Okay. He definitely had to end this nonsense with Rozanov. He'd made it to the NHL and was at the very beginning of what he hoped would be a very impressive career. A giant fucking scandal probably wasn't the best way to kick things off. And Shane couldn't see a way that they could possibly keep this thing quiet if it continued.

Why was he even *thinking* about that? A long-term secret relationship with Ilya Rozanov? Was that what some part of his dumb brain was hoping for?

No. Definitely putting a stop to this. This was just Shane being...nineteen. He was nineteen and horny and oddly lonely, for a star athlete. Just because Rozanov was making himself *available* didn't mean Shane had to accept.

Pleased with his decision, he stepped off the treadmill and headed to the chin-up bar. There would be nothing to it. Rozanov would text him to ask for his address, and Shane would write back *no*.

The next week—Montreal

Lily: I need your address.

Shane: No.

Shane smirked at his phone, very pleased with his prompt and clear reply to Rozanov's text.

Lily: Fuck off. What is it?

Shane: None of your business.

Lily: Fine. Your loss.

Shane stopped smirking. He sat down hard on his couch and turned on his brand-new lamp. The Bears would roll into town the day after tomorrow. They would play later that evening, and then...

Shane chewed his lip, thinking. It's not that he didn't want to...see Rozanov. If he was being honest, he'd been obsessively thinking about it since the All-Star weekend. He just didn't want his archrival coming to his home. That seemed like too big of a line to cross.

He wrote back. Could we meet somewhere else?

He felt a flush of embarrassment as he hit send. God, why couldn't he just have left it where it was? He'd successfully rejected Rozanov. Why give the power right back to him?

Lily: Like where?

Shane: I don't know!

Lily: Figure it out. Let me know.

Shane hated how relaxed Rozanov was about all of this. It wasn't fucking fair. He almost wrote back *Forget it*, but instead just stood and slipped his phone into his pocket.

He would figure it out.

* * *

Shane: 1822.

Lily: ?

Shane: Room number.

Lily: OK...where is the room?

Shane: Same hotel you're in.

Lily: See you soon.

Shane sat on the end of his king-size hotel bed. Then he stood up. Then he sat back down again.

This was so fucking dumb. Why was he doing this? Booking a room in the same hotel as the entire Boston team (several floors above theirs, but still) so he could hook up with a man he *didn't even like*? If they were caught it could be devastating to both of their careers.

At the very least, it would be *very* embarrassing.

Shane stood and went to the mirror. He checked his teeth and nudged a stray lock of hair back into place.

There was a sharp rap on his door. He spun around, startled by how loud it sounded, and quickly crossed the room to open it. "Jesus. You trying to get *everyone's* attention?"

Rozanov slid into the room. His ball cap was pulled low over his eyes. Shane closed and latched the door quickly behind him.

"You are nervous," Rozanov said. It wasn't a question.

"No," Shane lied.

"Is just sex, Hollander," Rozanov said.

"I know."

Rozanov pulled the ball cap off and brown curls tumbled out, falling messily around his grinning face. He was wearing a charcoal-gray T-shirt with a small Nike logo on the chest and black track pants. Shane was wearing dark blue pants and a striped cashmere sweater and felt ridiculous.

"You look nice," Rozanov said. His tone was flat like he was just stating a fact rather than offering a compliment. *You look nice. It's cold outside. This hotel is big.*

"Thanks," Shane said, because he had to say *something*. "I feel overdressed."

"Yes. We both are," Rozanov said, and he pulled his T-shirt off over his head before bending to remove his high-top sneakers.

Shane's eyes fixed on the way Rozanov's gold cross dangled in the space between his knees and his chest; the thin chain glinted against the back of

his neck.

When Rozanov stood again, Shane couldn't remember why exactly this was a bad idea.

"Come here," Rozanov said.

"No. *You* come *here*."

Rozanov grinned and shook his head, and stepped toward Shane.

Shane must have taken a step forward himself because they kind of crashed into each other. A second later, he was against the wall, and Rozanov was attacking his mouth. Shane shoved back against him, and was reminded that Montreal had won the game that night. Rozanov had to be at least a little pissed off about that, and Shane felt he might be taking it out on him. Shane had no problem with that. He sank his fingers into Rozanov's biceps and hauled him closer. He wrapped his foot around Rozanov's ankle, and Rozanov growled and, without warning, grabbed Shane's thighs and hoisted him up the wall so that Shane had no choice but to wrap his legs around the taller man's waist.

Which Shane should have been angry about, but instead he gasped and kissed Rozanov even more wildly.

"Could fuck you just like this," Rozanov growled. "Against the fucking wall. You would like that, yes?"

Would Shane like that? Probably.

"Not tonight," Rozanov continued, moving his mouth close to Shane's ear. "Tonight I will go easy on you."

Shane wanted to tell him to fuck off, but Rozanov was kissing his throat, scraping his teeth over the sensitive skin, so instead he threw his head back against the wall like the eager slut he apparently was.

He felt Rozanov chuckle against his throat, and then Shane felt himself being pulled away from the wall and carried—*carried!*—to the bed like a fucking child!

"Put me down, asshole!"

"Shhhh."

"I can walk!"

Rozanov's big hands gripped his ass as they crossed the room. Shane pushed back off Rozanov's shoulders, and he could see that crooked smile and those playful eyes.

"Put me down."

Rozanov turned and dropped Shane on the bed. Shane glared up at him. He was about to tell him off, but he got distracted by the tall, bare-chested, muscular form looming over him. Shane suddenly felt very small on the bed, which was ridiculous—he was five feet, ten inches and built of solid muscle himself. But Rozanov was gazing down at Shane, who was still fully clothed, like he was trying to decide where to take his first bite, and Shane felt...vulnerable.

And he was kind of *into it*.

Rozanov slid his track pants down and off and stood at the end of the bed wearing only his black boxer briefs, his gold chain, and his stupid fucking bear tattoo. Shane's eyes went right to the briefs, and the hard length that was trapped beneath. He also noted the way Rozanov's enormous thighs burst out of the legs of the shorts, hard muscles jutting out from the straining fabric.

Rozanov leaned down and planted a knee firmly on the bed between Shane's sprawled legs, dangerously close to his crotch. Shane looked up, wide-eyed, as Rozanov descended on him and captured his mouth again. Two big hands landed on Shane's chest, stroking him over his sweater.

"This is soft," Rozanov murmured.

"It's cashmere," Shane said stupidly.

"Yes. Take it off."

He did. Rozanov pulled up, keeping his knee firmly between Shane's thighs, as he watched Shane strip down to his own briefs.

He lay there, waiting for Rozanov to cover him again, to press his weight down on him, but instead Rozanov lightly dragged his fingertips up one of Shane's legs, tickling his skin and making every hair stand up. He drew a path up to where Shane's skin disappeared into the leg of his briefs, and then paused. Shane felt like there was an electric current running through him. He could see his own cock twitching in his shorts, begging for attention. He bit his lip and waited.

Rozanov dipped his head and kissed Shane's stomach. He did it over and over again, his lips almost as gentle and teasing as his fingertips had been. Shane inhaled sharply. How was Rozanov so good at this?

Rozanov's mouth found one of Shane's nipples and bit it gently before licking it. Shane squirmed and Rozanov wrapped a hand most of the way around Shane's thigh to hold him down. Shane once again marveled at how big his hands were.

When Rozanov returned his mouth to Shane's, he *finally* moved his hand to palm Shane's erection through his briefs. Shane made an embarrassing noise into Rozanov's mouth.

"Did you bring everything?" Rozanov asked.

"Yes," Shane said. He was pretty sure he had everything. Lube and condoms, right?

"Good boy."

"Fuck you."

"Yes."

His hand slid inside Shane's shorts and pulled his erection out. Shane slipped a hand in between their bodies so he could rub his hand over the front of Rozanov's shorts.

Rozanov kissed him hard and ground his crotch against Shane's, holding himself up with one hand planted next to Shane's head.

Shane moaned at the feel of Rozanov's hips and pelvis rolling against him.

He's going to fuck me.

His whole body tensed up. Rozanov noticed.

"Relax," he breathed against Shane's ear. "You will like this."

"Yeah," Shane said, his voice strained. "Just..."

Rozanov pushed off him for a moment so he could quickly rid himself of his briefs. Shane did the same. When he returned his eyes to Rozanov, he was struck by how big his cock was. He'd seen it before, of course, and he knew it was a decent size, but looking at it now, with the idea that it was supposed to somehow fit *inside* of him...

He must have been wearing his anxiety all over his face. Rozanov laughed. "It will fit."

Shane blushed furiously, which made Rozanov laugh more.

"Trust me. Where is the stuff?"

Shane, grateful for something to do other than stare at Rozanov's cock in horror, reached over and opened the nightstand drawer. "I've got, um, lube. I ordered it online. It's supposed to be the best for...this."

"Ass fucking?"

Shane rolled his eyes. "You sweet talk all your sex partners like this?"

"I'm very charming." He took the bottle from Shane and inspected it.

"I have condoms too," Shane said. He pulled a strip of them out of the drawer.

Rozanov raised an eyebrow. "Are you sure that will be enough?"

"All right, look..."

Rozanov grinned that sexy goddamned lopsided grin and Shane laughed too. He watched as Rozanov poured a good amount of lube on his fingers, then wrapped those fingers around Shane's cock.

"Oof," Shane huffed. "It's cold! You coulda warmed it up a bit!"

"Shhh. Relax."

Shane had something smart to say back to him, but it dissolved on his tongue as Rozanov rubbed his thumb over Shane's slit.

They both watched as Rozanov teased the slit until he drew out a bead of liquid. He smeared it over the head of Shane's cock, and Shane's fingers grabbed at the bedding.

With his other hand, Rozanov gently rolled and tugged at Shane's balls. He was so confident, but so careful. The combination was making Shane throb with need.

"Please," he whispered.

"Please what?" Rozanov asked with a raised eyebrow.

"I don't know," Shane answered honestly.

"Please touch you...here?" Rozanov asked, his fingers trailing below Shane's balls and over the smooth skin that led to...

"Yes," Shane said. He closed his eyes and let his head fall back on the pillow.

"Do you know how this works, Hollander?"

Not really. "Yeah. Sure." He opened one eye. "You've done this before?"

"Yes."

"With...the coach's son?"

Rozanov shrugged. "Sure. He was one."

"Oh."

"Girls too, Hollander. You have not done this with a girl?"

Shane had never really wanted to do anything with a girl that was complicated. Or that would...make things take longer.

"No," he said.

Rozanov stilled both of his hands. "You have had sex before, yes?" he asked.

"Yes! God!"

"Okay." Rozanov went back to stroking Shane's cock and dancing his fingers closer to Shane's opening.

“You really think I haven’t?” Shane was outraged.

Rozanov shrugged.

“I’ve had plenty of sex, Rozanov. Lots.”

“Fine.”

Shane didn’t like how amused Rozanov looked.

But he *did* like it when Rozanov poured more lube over his fingers and began to stroke them over Shane’s hole. He sucked in a breath and his whole body shuddered.

“Just relax, Mr. Lots-of-Sex,” Rozanov said. “I will make sure you are ready for me.”

Shane wanted to scowl at him, but in truth he was sort of charmed by the level of care Rozanov was showing. But Shane was still at least thirty-five percent terrified.

Rozanov kept gently brushing his fingers over Shane’s hole, while at the same time lazily stroking Shane’s cock. Together, it all felt wonderful. Shane felt his body release a lot of the tension he had been holding, and he floated a bit on the good feelings that were coursing through him. It was so good, he could almost forget to be embarrassed about where Rozanov was touching him.

“Good?” Rozanov asked.

“Mmm...” Shane sighed.

And then he felt the tip of Rozanov’s finger enter him, and he clenched in response.

“Sorry.” Shane winced, then took a breath.

He *did* know how this worked. He *had* done a little...experimenting. On himself. With the aforementioned dildo. But those times had been him alone. In private. This was...

“Is okay,” Rozanov said in a low, soothing rumble. “We will go slow, yes?”

“Thank you,” Shane mumbled.

The other thing about the private dildo sessions was that Shane had been kind of...bad at it. At least, he had been pretty sure he had been doing something wrong. It hadn’t felt *bad*, necessarily. But it hadn’t been mind-blowing either.

Rozanov dipped his head and took Shane’s cock into his mouth. Shane felt himself relax; each stroke of Rozanov’s tongue making him forget to be

nervous. He took slow, even breaths as Rozanov worked his finger in a little deeper and then...

Oh.

Shane arched and gasped. "Holy shit!"

Rozanov pulled his mouth off him and smirked. "Good, yes?"

He rubbed his fingertip again over what had to be Shane's prostate. Shane had kind of nudged it himself before, when he had been alone, but Rozanov seemed to know exactly where it was and what to do with it.

Shane squeezed his eyes shut and bit his lip. If he didn't, he was going to do something embarrassing, like whimper. The combination of Rozanov's mouth on his cock and his finger inside of him was like nothing he had ever felt before. And there was no way he was going to last long enough for Rozanov to fuck him if this continued.

"You gotta...fuck. Just...wait a minute," Shane rasped out.

Rozanov stopped immediately. "Okay?" he asked.

"Yeah. Yeah...very okay. *Too* okay."

"Ah."

Rozanov used the break time as an opportunity to give his own erection a few lazy strokes. Shane watched him, and noticed again how absurdly large Rozanov's dick looked.

"We do not have to," Rozanov said, noticing Shane's face.

"I want to," Shane said quickly. Too quickly.

Rozanov nodded, and reached for the lube and the condoms. He got himself ready, and then returned his attention to Shane. Shane felt two fingers press against his opening before they slipped inside. There was less burning this time.

"Stroke yourself," Rozanov instructed.

Shane nodded and obeyed.

Rozanov let out a low noise that sounded like a growl. "Turn over," he said.

Shane got on his hands and knees, because that's how this worked, right? He was pretty sure. He had watched about forty seconds of gay porn, once, before he'd gotten embarrassed and closed his laptop. Now he wished he had endured a little longer, if only for research purposes.

He felt Rozanov's hands grab his thighs, and he was hauled back until his knees were at the end of the bed. Rozanov put one foot on the mattress, next to Shane's knee, and placed a hand firmly on Shane's hip.

And then Shane could feel it; the much-too-large blunt head of Rozanov's cock bumping against his hole. He clenched his eyes shut, and braced himself for pain.

When Rozanov pressed in, it was slow and careful, but Shane's whole body trembled anyway. The pain was there, but not as sharp as Shane had been expecting. The pressure was the most overwhelming sensation. He felt impossibly full, and couldn't imagine how Rozanov was supposed to move once he was all the way in. Shane was struck with the sudden, horrific thought that Rozanov would become *stuck* inside him. Oh Jesus, they would have to call 911 or something!

Shane forced himself to take a breath and pushed images of doctors trying to separate them while all of Rozanov's teammates watched out of his mind.

"Okay?" Rozanov asked again. He ran a hand over Shane's back, slow and soothing.

"Yeah," Shane said. His voice sounded strained.

Rozanov pulled out a little then pushed back in, even deeper this time.

"Fuck," Shane gasped. "Wow."

Encouraged, Rozanov repeated the motion. And again.

Then Rozanov adjusted his hips a little and, on the next thrust, hit Shane's prostate, sending a jolt of pleasure through him.

"God. Yes! Fuck. Keep doing that."

"I will. Don't fucking worry."

Shane wasn't feeling any pain now, and he wasn't scared. He started to push back against Rozanov when he thrust into him, which Rozanov seemed to take as an invitation to go harder. His thrusts became faster, causing the bed to shake and Shane's arms to tremble as he struggled to hold himself up. It was more than Shane had thought he'd be able to take, but he wanted it. He loved it.

Rozanov's fingers were digging hard enough into Shane's hips to leave marks. He was hauling Shane back against him as he pounded into him. Shane lifted a hand up to his own mouth so he could bite his knuckles to keep from screaming out.

This, he realized, was why people were so wild about sex. He had never, ever felt like this with anyone before. And of course Ilya Rozanov, all of nineteen years old, fucked with the confidence and skill of, like, a sex god.

Shane chanced taking his hand out of his mouth so he could wrap it around his dick. He wished he had put a towel down or something—he was going to come all over this hotel bedding. He knew he was going to feel bad about that, but not enough to do anything about it now.

“Yeah. Come on, Hollander,” Rozanov growled. Rozanov, who did not care at all about the poor hotel maids.

“Fuck,” Shane gritted out. And he came so hard that most of it shot up and hit him in the chest. He was so dazed by his own orgasm that he almost didn’t register when Rozanov tensed and stilled behind him. Rozanov grunted and came *inside of Shane’s body*. Into a condom, but still. Shane’s body had made that happen, and he couldn’t quite wrap his brain around that fact.

Then, to Shane’s dismay, Rozanov collapsed on top of him, crushing Shane and the mess all over his chest into the mostly clean bedding.

“Now the bed’s all dirty,” Shane complained before he could stop himself.

“What?” Rozanov said sleepily. “Shut up.”

Shane closed his eyes and enjoyed the weight of Rozanov on top of him.

Eventually, Rozanov rolled off and went to the bathroom to clean up. Shane shifted carefully to his back, already feeling the pain that was going to make it hard to sit down tomorrow.

With Rozanov safely out of the room, Shane grinned stupidly at the ceiling. He was maybe happier than he should be that his most successful sexual experience to date was with Ilya Rozanov.

The smile faded as he wondered how in hell he was ever going to experience this again. Because he couldn’t keep letting Rozanov fuck him. Obviously. And he wasn’t sure how to safely find other men to do it.

“Hit the showers, Hollander,” Rozanov said as he left the bathroom. “I will get dressed and leave.”

“Oh,” Shane said. Of *course* he was going to leave. What the fuck had Shane been expecting? He stood up. “Yeah. Okay. Well...”

Rozanov put one hand on Shane’s shoulder in a fairly condescending way. His lips were twitched up in an irritating little smile. “Was fun,” he said.

“Yeah, um. Thanks, I guess.”

Rozanov nodded, then turned to pick up his scattered clothing. Shane went to the bathroom, closing the door behind him.

When Shane left the bathroom, freshly showered and wearing a towel, Rozanov was gone. There was no trace of the man, other than the messed up bedsheets. Shane grimaced at them, then pulled off the top sheet and dropped it on the floor. He imagined that hotel maids probably dealt with worse shit than this all the time.

He'd leave a big tip.

He dropped the damp towel beside the soiled bedding and got himself dressed. He wasn't going to spend the night here. He made sure he had removed everything he had brought into the room, then dropped a fifty-dollar bill on the dresser for the maid and left to go back to his apartment. Alone.

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Chapter Eight

June 2011—Las Vegas

It couldn't have been a closer race.

It was the night of the NHL Awards in Las Vegas, and all anyone had been talking about leading into it was who would win the Rookie of the Year award. Both Shane Hollander and Ilya Rozanov had scored over fifty goals. In fact, they had each scored exactly sixty-seven goals. Both men had helped their teams reach the playoffs for the first time in years, though both had been eliminated in the first round. The two men had been the most talked-about players in the league all season, sparking fierce debate among fans and the press about which of them was the better player.

Shane knew that it was impossible to definitively answer that question, but being named Rookie of the Year would certainly feel good.

Rozanov brought something out in him. Shane wasn't the type of guy who needed to be the best player on the team—he just always *was*. And maybe that was it. Maybe Shane had been a little bit bored before Ilya Rozanov came along.

Rozanov was a lot of things, but he wasn't boring. He frustrated Shane on the ice, and flustered him off the ice. Shane wanted to crosscheck him in the mouth, and then kiss it better. He wanted to forget about him, and he wanted to play every game against him. He wanted...

He wanted to win this fucking Rookie of the Year award.

He wanted to rub it in Rozanov's face.

He wanted to rub himself *on* Rozanov's face.

The Canadian rock band on stage finally finished their song and a B-list celebrity walked out on stage, holding an envelope.

This was it.

Shane's mother put her hand on his arm. She was as nervous as he was. Maybe more.

Shane gave her a weak smile, and waited.

* * *

The reception afterward was as raucous as anyone would expect a Vegas hotel banquet hall packed with professional hockey players to be. Most of the guys were pretty drunk, but Shane couldn't have gotten drunk even if he *had* been legally old enough to order a drink in Nevada because he was faced with an unending parade of people slapping him on the back and congratulating him. Some even tousled his hair.

The only person Shane hadn't seen that night was Ilya Rozanov.

Secretly, Shane had been searching for him all night. Half the times he'd been talking to someone, he'd been looking over their shoulder. He never caught even a glimpse of golden-brown curls, which should have been easy to spot, given Rozanov's height.

He wondered if Rozanov had just gone back to his room.

The thought made Shane angry. What a fucking baby. If Rozanov had won, Shane would be here, in this room, ready to congratulate him. If Rozanov wanted to spend his first NHL Awards sulking in his hotel room, that wasn't Shane's problem.

Or maybe he just wanted to stealthily get drunk in his hotel room, and then come to the party. Rozanov wasn't old enough to order a drink here either.

"You seen Roz anywhere?" someone asked him suddenly.

Shane flinched. He felt like his mind had been read.

"No!" he said, way too quickly. And with more blushing than was necessary. He took a breath. "Why would I know where Rozanov is?"

The guy—a forward for Toronto—shrugged. "Thought you guys might be at the kiddie table together or something."

"No," Shane said. "I haven't seen him. At all."

"Okay, well. Congratulations, kid." He squeezed Shane's shoulder and walked past him.

It was hot in the room. Too many people. Quite a few of the guys had removed their jackets and ties. It was getting harder to tolerate the atmosphere of the place without the help of alcohol.

Shane scanned the room for his parents. He spotted his father slumped in a chair, drinking what Shane was sure was a Sprite. Shane's mother seemed to be talking a star goaltender's ear off.

"I'm just gonna step out for some air," Shane told his father. "Just for a minute. I'll be back."

“Sure,” Dad said. He looked exhausted. “I’m going to try to convince your mother it’s bedtime in a minute anyway.”

“Good luck.” Shane smiled.

As soon as he left the room, Shane felt the relief of the air-conditioning that flowed, unencumbered, through the mostly empty hallway. He leaned against the wall for a minute and exhaled.

He wondered what room Rozanov was in.

No, he thought. He’s a fucking baby and he doesn’t deserve...anything.

Was Rozanov really that upset, though? He was normally so cool and collected. If anything, Shane would have expected him to show up at the party just to show everyone how unbothered he was about losing.

He knew where Rozanov couldn’t be right now: the casinos. The bars. He could be in his room. Or...someone else’s room. Or in his own room with someone else.

Shane frowned. He pulled his phone from the pocket of his tuxedo jacket so he could check the time. Almost two in the morning. Not that time meant anything in Las Vegas.

Shane had never been to Las Vegas before. He had just flown in the night before, and hadn’t really done any sightseeing yet. He probably wouldn’t get a chance, because he was flying out tomorrow afternoon. He had been told, when he had checked in, that the hotel offered a spectacular rooftop view of the city. Feeling restless, and not wanting to rejoin the party, he decided he may as well check it out.

He took the elevator to the top. There was a trio of loud, drunk girls in the elevator with him. He pressed himself into the back corner and fixed his eyes on the glowing floor numbers as the elevator ascended.

“Oh my god! Is it your wedding day?” one of the girls asked him suddenly.

“Pardon?”

“The tuxedo,” she said. “Did you get married today?”

“Oh. No.”

“He doesn’t have a *ring*,” one of her friends hissed.

They all erupted into giggles.

Shane turned his eyes back to the numbers above the doors. They weren’t moving fast enough.

“Are you going to Strat-speeeeer?” the first girl asked.

“To where?”

“Strat-o-sphere,” she said again, more slowly.

“Um.”

“Stratosphere,” one of her friends explained. “The bar on the roof.”

“There’s a bar on the roof?”

They all laughed again. “You are so cute,” the friend said. They nodded and giggled some more. “Come to the bar with us!”

“I can’t. Sorry.” Jesus, this was a long elevator ride.

By the time they finally reached the top, the girls had forgotten about him. They stumbled out of the elevator and turned right, presumably in the direction of the rooftop bar. Shane turned left.

There was a lot of noise coming from the bar. Pulsing music and loud, drunken voices. On the other side of the roof, there was a quiet corner that looked out over the city. It was a place that Shane guessed was normally used for weddings. It was empty now.

Almost empty.

Shane didn’t see him, at first. All black in his tuxedo, with his head bent down over the railing, Rozanov blended right into the darkness. Then he raised his head and let out a white cloud of smoke.

“It’s not worth jumping over,” Shane said, moving to stand just behind him.

Rozanov turned. He didn’t even seem surprised to see Shane. He took another long drag of his cigarette then said in a tight voice, “Is the party over, then?”

“No. I just needed some air.”

Rozanov exhaled. The smoke swirled around his face and then floated up into the desert sky. “Such an exciting night for you.”

“I guess.”

Rozanov rolled his eyes. “*I guess.*”

“It could have gone to either one of us.”

“It went to you.”

“Yeah, well, you know. Who knows how they decide these things?” Shane wasn’t sure why he was even saying this stuff. He didn’t need to apologize for anything. He’d earned that fucking trophy. “So you’re just sulking up here all night, then? It bothers you that much that I won?”

Rozanov took another drag and turned back to the view. He said something that Shane couldn’t hear.

“What was that?” Shane asked, moving to stand beside him against the rail.

“Not everything is about you, Hollander.” He didn’t look at Shane at all when he said it. His voice hadn’t been angry. He just sounded...tired. And sad.

Shane studied his profile. His own anger left him, and he found himself *caring* about Ilya Rozanov, which was an odd sensation. “So what is it then?”

Rozanov dropped the butt of his cigarette on the ground and stamped it out. He laughed a little, without any humor at all. “What do you want, Hollander?”

“Nothing. I just wanted some air. To see the view.”

“Well,” Rozanov said, sweeping a hand through the air in front of them, “here is view.”

Shane’s eyes turned toward the blanket of city lights that sprawled beneath them, but they quickly found their way back to Rozanov’s face. He saw the clench in Rozanov’s jaw, and the hardness of his eyes.

“I go back to Russia. In three days.”

“Oh.”

They were both silent for a long time. Shane wasn’t sure if Rozanov had more to tell him or not. He decided not to push. It wasn’t like they were friends.

“I should get back,” Shane said, after several minutes of gazing down at the city. “My parents might still be at the party.”

“Your parents,” Rozanov said. “Right.”

“I guess... I guess I’ll see you next season.”

Shane stuck out his hand. Rozanov looked at it. Then he turned his head left and right, looking all around them.

A split second later, Shane found himself pushed back from the railing, against a wall. Rozanov’s mouth was pressed hard against his, and his hands gripped his arms roughly, fingers digging into his biceps.

Shane felt panicked. This was super fucking dangerous. And stupid. And confusing. And...

Shane kissed him back, just as angrily. Because fuck this guy for doing shit like this. Hiding away all night on a fucking rooftop, smoking a goddamned cigarette in the dark like the worst cliché of a brooding heartthrob. Making Shane feel bad for winning an award that he completely

fucking deserved. And then, on a whim, pressing Shane against a wall and kissing him like he would die without Shane's mouth on his. Kissing him until Shane's senses were full of hard muscle pressed against him and the taste of cigarette and the slick heat of Rozanov's tongue in his mouth.

What the fuck.

Shane grabbed Rozanov's lapels and shoved him back. They couldn't do this here. At all.

Shane looked frantically around them. There was no one. But, Jesus, there *could have been*.

Rozanov leaned in to kiss Shane again, and Shane dodged him.

"No," he said. "No way. Not here. What's *wrong* with you?"

Rozanov gave him that crooked grin that did absurd things to Shane's stomach.

"We can't," Shane said. He meant it, but it hurt to say. "I have to go. You should go to bed, Rozanov."

The smile disappeared.

"See you next season," Rozanov said. Then he turned and walked toward the elevators.

Shane waited a few minutes so they wouldn't have to ride down together.

Next season. Next season would be different. He was going to end this stupid thing between them and focus on his game.

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Part Two

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Chapter Nine

December 2013—36,000 feet over Pennsylvania

Tap. Tap. Tap. Tap.

Ilya could hear Ryan Price's foot drumming against the floor, even with an empty seat between them. Even though Ilya was wearing headphones, and watching a very loud *Fast and Furious* movie.

Ilya glanced over. Price's knee was bouncing, jostling the paperback novel he was balancing, open and upside down, on his thigh. Price was gripping both armrests and his eyes were closed. He looked bad.

And he was definitely going to drop that book on the floor. And then he would lose his place.

Ilya sighed, hit pause on the movie, and removed his headphones. He didn't know Price very well. No one did; he had only joined the team at the start of this season. He was a gigantic defenseman, but his real position on the ice was enforcer. His job was to make sure no one interfered with the more talented players. Ilya could take care of himself, but playing with guys like Price meant he didn't have to.

Ilya talked shit on the ice, got under other guys' skin, and then Ryan Price had to take their punches. Pretty sweet deal for Ilya.

"Price," he said. "Your book."

No response.

"Price," Ilya said again. Still nothing, so Ilya reached out and poked his arm. "You okay?"

Price's eyes flew open and he jumped a little, causing his book to tumble to the floor. Ilya watched it fall in dismay. He had failed.

"Sorry," Price said. "Was I tapping my foot?"

"Yes."

"Sorry," Price said again. "Just, um, nervous flier. Sometimes."

"Ah." Ilya bent and retrieved the book. He glanced at the cover before handing it back. *Anne of Green Gables*. Wasn't that a children's book for girls or something? "You lost your place."

Price gave a thin smile. "It's okay. I've read it before. It's kind of just... I bring it on planes as kind of a comfort thing."

Ilya could not figure this guy out. He was even taller than Ilya, and much bulkier, with shoulder-length red hair and a beard that made him look like a biker gang member. He could knock a guy out with one punch. Some of the toughest opponents in the league were scared to face Price in a fight.

“Is it the red hair?” Ilya asked. He didn’t understand Price, but he could at least try to help him calm down. “*Anne of Green Gables?*”

Price stared at him like he had no idea what he was talking about, and then he laughed. It was quiet and uneasy, but it was still a laugh. “Yeah, maybe.”

This was, Ilya was pretty sure, Price’s fourth NHL season, but he had played for three different teams already. He was quiet in the dressing room, scary on the ice, and clearly a nervous wreck on planes, so Ilya imagined he didn’t make friends easily.

“Are you like this every flight?” Ilya asked. He couldn’t imagine what that would be like. Price was definitely in the wrong line of work if he hated flying.

Price shook his head. “Not every flight. I mean, yes, I’m always nervous, but not always this bad.” His cheeks flushed, as if he hadn’t meant to even admit that he was more terrified than usual. They were en route to Montreal from Raleigh, North Carolina, which wasn’t a particularly long flight, but it had been a turbulent takeoff. Maybe that had been the difference. Ilya didn’t really want to talk about it, and he figured Price didn’t want to either.

So he gestured toward his iPad. “*Fast Five*. Have you seen it?”

“Yeah. I think so. Is that the one with the bank safe chase scene?”

“Yes. Is the best one.” Ilya flipped down the table for the unoccupied seat between them, and moved his iPad onto it. He only had the one set of headphones, but he always had subtitles on. It helped to improve his English.

He handed Price the headphones, figuring he could use a fully immersive distraction.

“Oh, uh...” Price ran a hand through his bushy hair.

“Is okay. I will tell you if pilot says we are crashing.”

The joke was a risk, but it paid off. Price snorted and took the headphones. “Thanks.”

They watched the movie, Price listening and Ilya reading, and Price’s leg remained still for the rest of the flight. He even asked the flight attendant for a Coke, which had to be a good sign.

When Ilya got tired of reading movie dialogue, he stared out the window into blackness. He had, in truth, been trying to distract *himself* with the movie, because heading to Montreal always put him on edge. It wasn't nerves, it was...something else. Anticipation, maybe. He didn't want to say excitement.

They would play tomorrow night, their second game of the season. Montreal had been in Boston for their season opener in October. Boston had won in overtime, and Hollander had been in a terrible mood when he'd shown up at the room Ilya had booked in the hotel down the street from where Montreal was staying.

Ilya liked it when Hollander was angry. He liked it when Hollander took out his frustrations on Ilya's body. He liked him cursing him as he fucked Ilya's mouth.

These were the kinds of thoughts that Ilya had been trying to distract himself from with the *Fast and the Furious* movie. Because thinking about this fucked-up thing with Hollander made him feel pretty disgusted with himself. It also made him uncomfortably aroused, which only made him feel *more* disgusted with himself.

Yeah. Super fucking healthy.

"Roz, you awake?"

Ilya glanced up to see Cliff Marlow's face peeking over the seat in front of him. Cliff was a year younger than him, a bit of an idiot, and probably Ilya's best friend.

"No," Ilya deadpanned.

"I've been talking to this chick in Montreal. We've been sending each other messages on Instagram for a couple of weeks. She's hot as fuck. Check it out." He thrust his phone into Ilya's face. There was, indeed, a hot woman on the screen.

"Good job," Ilya said.

"So she wants to meet up after the game tomorrow night. She's hot for hockey players, and she said she could bring her friend. You want in?"

Oh, no thanks. I will be busy fucking Shane Hollander in a hotel room.

"We have a curfew tomorrow night. Early flight the next morning, yes?" Ilya reminded him.

"Yeah, I know, but..." Cliff looked wistfully at his phone. "I gotta see her. Maybe I can just...no. You know what, Ilya? I'm gonna be completely

honest here: I'm probably going to break curfew. It's not like I'll miss the bus to the airport."

Ilya rolled his eyes. "I am assistant captain, shithead. Do not tell me about your plan to break curfew."

"I thought that 'A' was for asshole."

"Funny."

"So, no to going out with me tomorrow night?"

"No. But have fun."

"I remember when you used to be fun, Roz."

"I *am* fucking fun." *Gonna have a solid hour of fun before I'm back in time for curfew.*

Cliff nodded at Price, who was watching the movie intently and didn't seem to notice him at all. Cliff's face was a question mark, and Ilya had no idea what the question was. So Cliff, being an asshole, held a hand to the side of his face to block it from Price's view, and mouthed *Weird guy, right?*

Ilya shrugged. Maybe Ryan Price was weird, or maybe he just wasn't exactly what people were expecting him to be. Ilya was certainly in no position to fault someone for that.

The following evening—Montreal

"I'm telling you right now," J.J. said, "if fucking Rozanov starts shit with you tonight, I'm taking him out."

Shane pulled his shoulder pads over his head and began securing them in place. "If you go for Rozanov, Ryan Price is gonna go after *you*."

"Fuck Price. I'll send that dumb motherfucker crying back to wherever the fuck he's from."

"Nova Scotia, I think."

"I'm just saying—" J.J. pointed his shin guard at Shane, for emphasis "—Rozanov gives you trouble, I'm ending him. Price or no Price."

Shane politely ignored the fear that J.J. was trying not to show. J.J. was one of the biggest players in the league and could handle himself in a fight, but Ryan Price was a fucking terror.

Price was just one of the things that made these games against Boston extra tense. Montreal was a city that buzzed with excitement about their hockey team all winter—you could *feel* the electricity in the air every home game day. And whenever Boston was in town, Shane felt like the city was

pulled as tight as he was. Every cell in his body sparked with the need to get on the ice and face Rozanov. And when the games were over, he pulsed with a different kind of need.

A loud bark of laughter interrupted Shane's thoughts. Hayden thrust his phone in his face. "Hey, look at what the fans are doing outside."

It was a video, posted to Twitter, of a group of people outside the arena burning what appeared to be an effigy of Ilya Rozanov.

"Well, that's a bit much," Shane said.

J.J. grabbed the phone. "Ha! This is happening now?"

"A few minutes ago," Hayden said.

"Beautiful. Love it."

Hayden took his phone back and studied the screen. "They didn't make the dummy ugly enough."

Sure, Hayden. "They've probably burned effigies of me in Boston," Shane said.

"Oh yeah! They totally have. Here, let me go to YouTube..."

"Yeah, no. I actually am trying to focus on winning a hockey game right now. No YouTube, please."

The team's PR manager, Marcel, came into the dressing room, and Shane sighed.

"Shane," Marcel said. "NBC wants to talk to you. You good?"

"Sure. I'll be out in a sec."

The broadcasters always wanted to talk to Shane before the games, especially before games against Boston. He tried to think of a new and exciting way of answering the question, "What does Montreal have to do to win tonight?" as he made his way to the hallway outside the dressing room.

* * *

"Last question, Shane: What does Montreal have to do to win tonight?"

Shane put on his best "thinking" face, to give the impression that he certainly hadn't expected this question. "Get the puck to the net, take shots, stay out of the penalty box..." *Score more goals than the other team before the game ends.* "We're in good shape tonight, everyone is healthy, so I think we're definitely going to make it tough for Boston."

"Thank you, Shane, and good luck tonight."

"Thanks, Chris."

Shane tried not to begrudge these interviews. Whenever he had to do one, which was often, he would think of the kids who were watching. He used to love seeing his favorite stars interviewed on television before and after the games.

Back in the dressing room, he picked up his phone to send a quick text to his parents. He messaged them before every game.

He saw that he had a message waiting for him, and it wasn't from his parents.

Lily: How many times can you come in one hour?

What. The. Fuck.

This was dirty fucking pool, even for Rozanov. They didn't text each other *before* the games. Especially not about shit like that.

He definitely wasn't going to write back. And he definitely wasn't getting hard in his jock strap.

Fuck. He *was* hard. And now he was writing back.

* * *

Ilya nearly choked when he saw Hollander's reply.

Jane: I dunno. Twice, maybe?

So fucking pure! So honest and sweet.

Ilya: You are very bad at sexting.

Jane: Who taught you that word?

Ilya: Your mom.

Okay, that was pretty stupid. But Hollander loved his mom and that probably *would* bother him.

Jane: Stop. I'll text you after the game.

A few seconds went by.

Jane: If you're lucky.

Ilya snorted. Hollander was probably so proud of himself for that dig.

Ilya: Are you hard right now?

No answer. Ah well. Ilya knew he was crossing a line with these texts, but it was just so damn fun to tease Hollander. He could just picture him now, in the Montreal dressing room, blushing as he shoved his phone into a bag or something so no one would see it.

He hoped Hollander was still mad about it later, when they met in a hotel room.

* * *

Ilya frowned at the abandoned-looking three-story building the cabdriver had delivered him to. He checked the address again, and confirmed that it was the same as what Hollander had texted him. *The fuck?*

Hollander's only instruction had been for Ilya to go around the back of the building, text him, and wait at the door. So Ilya did that, trying not to think about being murdered in a dark empty lot behind a creepy building. If he believed Hollander had a diabolical bone in his body, Ilya would suspect he was about to be pranked.

The back door opened a minute after Ilya sent the text, and all it revealed was Hollander, who glanced nervously around as if he was expecting a S.W.A.T. team to descend on them.

"Get in here," he said. Ilya stepped past him, into a dimly lit stairwell, and Hollander locked the door behind them.

"What is this place?" Ilya asked.

Instead of answering, Hollander pushed him hard with both hands. "Fuck you for texting me before the game, you asshole!"

Ilya grinned. "You *were* hard, weren't you? For how long? The whole game?"

Hollander glared at him, then said, "Follow me."

He led them up way too many stairs, to the top floor, and then used a key to unlock another door. It opened to reveal a large loft apartment, only partially finished, from the looks of it. The walls looked like they had been freshly plastered, and hadn't been painted yet. There was a ladder leaning

against one wall, and an open box of tools beside it. The kitchen area had a brand-new countertop and cupboards, but no appliances.

“Is this your place?” Ilya had never been to Hollander’s home. It had always been hotel rooms before. The idea excited him.

“No. I mean, I don’t live here. But, yes, I own it.”

“You will move here?”

“No. It’s just an investment, or whatever. And I thought it could be a safe place to...meet.”

Hollander was damn cute when he was embarrassed.

“Did you buy a building so we would have somewhere to fuck, Hollander?”

Ilya assumed he was trying to look stern, but the flush of his cheeks was ruining the effect. “No. It’s an *investment*. I’m having it renovated and then I’ll sell the condos. And I already have a tenant lined up for the commercial space on the main floor.”

“Wow. Businessman.”

Hollander folded his arms. It did not make him look any more intimidating. “Enough questions. We’re not here to talk.”

“Yes. Where do you want me? On that ladder? On the pile of wood over there?”

“In here, idiot.”

Hollander crossed the room and opened yet another door. This one led to...

...a fully finished bedroom. Like, a really nice one.

“I, uh, I kinda made the bedroom the priority. And the bathroom. So we could—”

But Ilya didn’t let Hollander finish his sentence. He gripped Hollander’s arms and pushed him back against the closest wall and kissed him. Hollander had bought them a fucking *building*.

Ilya had been sure, all summer, that this would be the year Hollander would call it off. But he had thought the same thing last summer too, after their rookie seasons had ended with Hollander shoving Ilya away after they’d kissed on a Las Vegas rooftop. But when their teams had met for the first time that second season, Ilya had texted him a hotel room number and Hollander showed up twenty minutes later.

“You were smoking,” Hollander complained now, as he broke away from their kiss.

“Only one.”

“You aren’t supposed to be smoking.”

“You aren’t supposed to be talking.” Ilya pushed Hollander’s chest and knocked him flat onto his back on the bed. Ilya took a moment to gaze down at him—at his flushed cheeks and mussed hair, and at the strip of exposed skin where his T-shirt had ridden up. Then Ilya pounced.

They kissed in their usual combative style for a while—Hollander rolling them to pin Ilya down and attack his mouth, before Ilya would flip them and regain control. Shirts came off, then pants, then socks and underwear.

“An hour,” Ilya murmured. He was on top now, biting and licking his way along Hollander’s collarbone. “Then I have to go.”

“Then hurry the fuck up.”

Ilya smiled against Hollander’s skin. He was such a little brat. Ilya raised himself up and straddled Shane’s waist, making sure to squeeze just a little too hard with his thighs. He took his own dick in his hand and stroked it slowly, thoughtfully. “You want this, Hollander?”

And, oh god, Ilya could see the war going on in Hollander’s head. He could see how much he wanted to tell Ilya to fuck off and die, but more than that, he could see the way Hollander’s tongue poked out to moisten his lower lip.

“Starving for it, yes, Hollander?” Ilya slid forward, positioning his body closer to Hollander’s face. To his mouth. Hollander’s chest was heaving beneath him, and he glared up at Ilya with dark, intense eyes. “Is okay,” Ilya said soothingly. He tapped the head of his cock against Hollander’s lips. “You can. Take it.”

“I hate you.”

“Yes. I know. Show me.”

“*Fuck,*” Hollander whispered, seemingly to himself. Then he parted his lips, and licked the moisture off Ilya’s slit.

Ilya’s hand shot out and gripped the headboard. It seemed like a nice headboard, sturdy. He expected he’d find out exactly how sturdy soon enough.

Hollander teased the head of Ilya’s dick for a maddeningly long time, but, damn, what a show. Ilya watched Hollander’s eyes flutter closed as he sucked the head into his mouth. His tongue rolled around it, flicking the underside of Ilya’s dick and then dipping into the slit. It was so fucking good, and not nearly enough.

Hollander growled, seemingly as frustrated with the angle as Ilya was, and pushed him down to the mattress before taking Ilya's cock into his mouth again. This time Hollander made a meal of Ilya's dick, his head bobbing in a quick rhythm that Ilya was *not* going to be able to endure for very long. Not if he also wanted to fuck Hollander in their allotted hour of time.

But Hollander wasn't letting up. He tugged at Ilya's balls with just the right amount of pressure, and Ilya could feel Hollander's erection sliding along his thigh.

"Hollander..." he warned. He was flying way too high, too fast.

Hollander moaned, or maybe he'd tried to form a word around Ilya's dick, but all it did was cause vibrations that Ilya really *didn't* need right now.

"Fuck. *Fuck*. You have to stop. If you want me to fuck you..."

Hollander ripped his mouth away from Ilya's cock, but then he went very still. "Shit. Oh god. Fuck."

Ilya felt wetness splash against his thigh. Hollander's body jerked a couple of times, and then he buried his face in Ilya's shoulder. "*Fuck*."

"Hollander?"

"I'm sorry," he groaned. "I can't believe I just...you didn't even *touch* me!"

And Ilya just...laughed. Because it was fucking funny.

"Don't fucking laugh at me."

"Been a while?" Ilya teased.

Hollander kept his forehead planted on Ilya's shoulder, hiding his face completely. "Shut up."

But Ilya laughed harder. He laughed until Hollander joined in, and then they were both holding each other and laughing until they were wiping tears from their eyes.

"You could win the fastest shot competition."

Hollander punched him lightly in the chest. Ilya rolled to his side, dumping Hollander on the mattress beside him. "Is too bad. I wanted to fuck you. Do you still want?"

"I don't think I can. I think I'm too fucking embarrassed to get it up again."

"Is that a challenge?"

"No. But can I...finish what I was doing?"

Ilya flopped onto his back again and folded his arms behind his head.
“Go for it.”

And Hollander did, but this time he was far less frantic and took his time. Ilya enjoyed every second of it.

Ilya would be lying if he said Hollander had the most talented mouth that had ever been wrapped around his dick. But he was so...eager to please. So determined to be good at this. For Ilya.

There was something very sweet about the way Hollander was sucking him off right now—like he wasn’t trying to just get it over with, even though Hollander had already had his own orgasm. He seemed to legitimately enjoy making Ilya feel good.

Ilya always did feel good with Hollander. He didn’t want to say it was better than it was with anyone else, but it was...different. And not only because Hollander was a man. Ilya hadn’t been with a man who wasn’t Hollander in...huh. Over a year. Almost two, maybe? But that wasn’t it.

Hollander glanced up at him, and Ilya smiled and stroked his hair. The clock was ticking, and Ilya really did need to leave, so he gently held Hollander’s head and guided him so he’d hit the rhythm Ilya needed and...there. Yes. Oh fuck...

“That’s good, Hollander. Just like that. Make me come.”

Hollander moaned and dug his fingers into Ilya’s thighs, keeping the pace with his mouth that Ilya had set. The familiar, exhilarating pressure of impending release gripped Ilya’s body—the high that he couldn’t stop chasing—and he squeezed his eyes shut.

“I’m going to come. Oh, fuck, Hollander.”

Hollander pulled off, replacing his mouth with his hand. “I want to see it.”

Seconds later, Ilya erupted. He cried out, much louder than usual, as a white-hot orgasm rocketed through his body.

“Holy shit, Hollander,” Ilya gasped when he was able to speak again. “I’m dead. You killed me.”

Hollander was sitting up now, and staring at the mess on Ilya’s stomach. “That was really hot.”

“Yes.”

“I’m glad we were in an empty building where no one could hear you.”

And then Ilya felt the rare and unwelcome sensation of his cheeks heating in embarrassment. He didn’t usually yell like that when he was

coming.

He didn't want to think about it, so he said, "I have to go."

"All right."

Fifteen minutes later, they were waiting at the bottom of the stairs for Ilya's taxi to arrive.

"Is a nice building," Ilya said, because he hated the silence. "You don't want to live here?"

"No. But renovations might take a while, so I'll probably be able to use it for...this. For a bit." More silence, and then Hollander said, "You must be excited for the Olympics. In Russia."

"Yes." Ilya *was* excited. But thinking about the expectations of his home country, of his father, made his stomach hurt. And made him want a cigarette.

"Been dreaming of the Olympics my whole life," Hollander said. "I can't wait."

"For what? A bronze medal?"

"Fuck you."

Ilya laughed. "Hey, remember when you shot your load for like no reason at all?"

Hollander rolled his eyes, but Ilya could tell he was trying not to laugh.

"Oh my god. Go to hell."

"Amazing trick."

"Your cab must be out there, right?"

Ilya put his hand on the door, but before he pushed it open, he leaned down and kissed Hollander quickly on the mouth.

"Goodnight, Hollander."

"Goodnight."

Ilya was grinning like an idiot for the entire cab ride back to his hotel.

Chapter Ten

February 2014—Sochi, Russia

“Shane Hollanderrrrrrr!”

Shane nearly jumped at the sound of his name being bellowed behind him. He spun around, and spotted two familiar faces approaching him: Carter Vaughan (yelling) and Scott Hunter (not yelling). Scott was the captain of Team USA’s men’s hockey team, and Carter was his teammate both here and in New York, where they played for the Admirals.

Shane had been walking, alone, on the beach in Sochi. He had the rest of the day and night off, and had been at a bit of a loss of what to do. His parents had considered traveling to Russia but had ultimately decided against it. For one thing, the travel arrangements and accommodations were a nightmare. Shane had convinced them that it really wasn’t worth the hassle, and pointed out that they’d watched him compete in international tournaments since he was a teenager. And maybe he was being overly cautious, but there had been a lot of articles leading up to these Games about possible security concerns, and he wanted to keep his parents safe.

Shane had had no idea what to expect before he’d arrived in Sochi. He’d never been to Russia before, and he wasn’t sure this over-the-top spectacle was the best representation of Rozanov’s homeland. He found himself wondering, often, about the pressure Rozanov was feeling. Being in the Olympics at all was thrilling and stressful enough for Shane without it being in his country.

“What’s up, guys?” he said as Carter and Scott caught up with him. “Did you know there was going to be a beach here? What the fuck is this place, right?”

Carter laughed. “No! There are fucking palm trees here! I thought Russia in the winter would be, like, cold.”

“Congrats on your win last night,” Scott said. Scott was a super nice guy. Carter was nice too, but Scott was, like, an angel who was really good at playing hockey. He *looked* like an angel: blond hair and blue eyes and built like a Navy SEAL who was also a model and maybe also a firefighter.

“Thanks. It was a pretty easy win, but I’ll take it.”

“These early games are all easy. Who are we playing next, Scotty? Fiji?” Scott frowned at him. “Denmark. And I don’t want anyone being cocky about it.”

“Yes, sir,” Carter teased.

Carter looked nothing like Scott, with his dark skin and brown eyes, but he was just as attractive. The difference was that Carter *knew* he was attractive. He was the kind of guy who took over a room, but in a good way. Everyone liked him.

“How are you finding the accommodations?” Shane asked.

“Are you kidding?” Carter asked. “I’m sleeping on a *cot*—”

“It’s a twin bed,” Scott corrected him.

“Whatever. A fucking twin bed, wedged between two other twin beds. One of them has this fucking oaf snoring away on it.”

“I don’t snore.”

“And the other has Sully—Eric Sullivan—and I don’t even know that kid, but he’s even bigger than Scott. I would like to find the Sochi Four Seasons.”

Shane laughed. “I’m rooming with J.J., and your teammate, Greg Huff.”

“Well, Huff doesn’t take up much space,” Carter said, “but J.J. is a giant.”

“He’s not a fan of the beds either.”

“What are your plans for tonight?” Scott asked.

“I thought I’d watch some of the speed skating.”

Scott’s face lit up. “Yeah? That would be cool. I saw the men’s figure skating short program is tonight too.”

“Oh, right. That’s probably going to be packed.”

“Those fucking guys are brave to be here, you know?”

“Brave?” Scott asked.

Carter lowered his voice and glanced around the beach. “Yeah, like...because of the gay thing, right? Some of those guys are risking their lives for real here. Brave as hell.”

“Right,” Scott said. He turned his gaze to the ocean. Shane knew about Russia’s laws against homosexuality, but he’d been trying not to think too much about stuff like that. He just wanted to enjoy the Olympics, win the gold medal, and go home. But now he was thinking about Dev, a guy he’d trained with a bit from Ottawa who was on the men’s speed skating team, and who Shane knew was gay. He was here. Was he terrified? He must be.

“They should have beach volleyball at these games!” Carter said cheerfully. “Women’s beach volleyball. That’s exactly what the Winter Olympics needs, right?”

Shane nodded, but he was still thinking about Dev.

And about Rozanov.

Rozanov could take care of himself. This was his home turf. He would know how to keep safe.

“You still with us, Hollander?”

Shane blinked and looked at Carter and Scott. “Sorry. What did you say?”

“We were going to check out the McDonald’s in the athlete’s village. Thought it might be fun. Want to join us?”

“Um, I think I’m going to...” Text Rozanov? Try to lay eyes on him? Make sure he’d not been arrested for blowing a ski jumper or something? “Relax a bit in my room. Still jet lagged, y’know?”

“You can relax in that room?” Carter laughed. “Good luck, then. You have my number?”

“Yeah, I have it. I’ll see you guys later.”

Shane tried not to walk too quickly as he left, but he was suddenly desperate to make contact with Rozanov. The only problem was he had no idea where to find him.

He sent a text. Having a good time?

There. That was cool and casual. Just a friendly “Hey, we’re both at the Olympics! Fun, right? Also, are you in jail?”

He waited all night for a reply, but none came.

* * *

The Olympics were bullshit.

Ilya had been on edge all week. It had been days of smiling for the Russian media and mingling with government officials who made his skin crawl. Men and women who supported their country’s leader without question, and who expected Ilya to do the same. Ilya hadn’t had any time to enjoy himself; he’d barely had time to focus on his game.

And it showed.

The Russian men’s hockey team was a mess. These sorts of international tournaments were always awkward, with players being tossed together to

form a “dream team” of superstars who had no idea how to play with each other, but this team was especially hopeless. Too many egos. Too much pressure, here in their home country, making tempers run high in the dressing room and on the ice. Too many stupid penalties being taken, too few goals being scored.

They were already out of the running for a medal, and that was beyond humiliating. Ilya just wanted it all to be over so he could go...home.

When had he started thinking of Boston as home?

Tonight Ilya’s attendance was requested (required) at a ridiculous gala, which was just a chance for the government to show off to foreign dignitaries. It was exactly the sort of event he couldn’t stand.

And making it worse was the fact that his father would be there. His father, who had only spoken to him this week to let him know how badly he had let Russia down, would be parading his famous son around the ballroom as if he was proud of him.

But first, Ilya was expected to go to his father’s hotel room. He wished he was strong enough to refuse.

He wasn’t. So he knocked on the hotel room door five minutes before six o’clock, because anything past five minutes early was late, in his father’s eyes.

The door opened, and there was Grigori Rozanov, in all his intimidating glory. He was wearing his full dress police uniform, and Ilya could see his stern frown even through the gray beard that covered his face. He was almost fifty years older than Ilya.

He stepped aside to let Ilya into the room. He waited for Ilya to remove his wool overcoat, and then the inspection began. His father’s eyes raked over him while Ilya stood there, like a trembling child who was awaiting punishment. There was nothing—*nothing*—wrong with Ilya’s tuxedo. It was classic black, perfectly tailored, and his bowtie was impeccable. He had even given himself the closest shave he’d had in years. But his father would find something.

“You need a haircut,” was what Grigori finally settled on. Ilya had let his hair grow out this past season, but he’d slicked it back tonight.

“Yes, sir.”

His father frowned at his hair for another minute, as if he could scare it back into Ilya’s scalp, before he crossed the room to the bar. He poured vodka into two tumblers, and handed one to his son.