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

HEATED RIVALRY

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 con-

dom 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.

If Shane hadn't known the building was empty besides the two of them, he would have been worried about how loud he was being as Rozanov fucked him. 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 huffed, then 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."

"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 god-damn 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

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.