

Sasha's Story

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Sasha's Story

by [perachdavida](#)

Summary

Shane and Ilya's son Sasha is a 17 year old hockey star entering the NHL draft. He's about to get everything he ever wanted. Except for the straight teammate he is in love with.

Notes

While not strictly necessary, my Shane/Ilya fics are all conceptually linked and are best enjoyed in chronological order, which is as follows:

The Interview

The Offer

Two Are More Than Twice As Much Work As One

A Day In Disney

Date Night

First Day Of School

A Perfect Christmas

The Mouse House

The Hit

Family Hockey Game

The Changeling

Sasha's Story

This particular work will not be as meaningful without first reading at least some of my earlier works with the original characters of Sasha and Eva.

Update: I wrote these fics over a year before the release of the TV show. I named their son Sasha long before there was even a TV show in the works at all, much less a script where Ilya's ex-lover was named Sasha. Way to ruin my head cannon, Jacob Tierney! I'm not budging on the name. Everyone just ignore that that happened.

Chapter 1: The Sneak Out

Sasha stopped and looked over his shoulder, making sure all the lights were out and the house was still before he quietly pulled the sliding door shut behind him. Turning back around, he took one step forward before a voice from his right said, “Where do you think you’re going?”

Sasha jumped slightly and whipped his head to the side, only to find his sister standing five feet away, holding a lit cigarette between her dangling fingers. “Jesus, you scared me. What the hell are you doing out here?”

“Same as you, I imagine,” she said, taking a drag of the cigarette and blowing upward, the smoke circling with her breath in the cold winter air. “Sneaking outside to do things I shouldn’t be doing.”

Sasha snorted and closed his eyes, shaking his head. His sister was both nosy and overprotective of him. There was no way she was letting him leave without an explanation. “I don’t suppose you’ll leave me to my wrongdoing if I leave you to yours?”

She smirked, flicking a bit of ash from the end of her cigarette with her pastel purple nail. “Not a chance. Spill, baby brother.”

Sasha rolled his eyes. “By ten fucking minutes. Christ.”

Eva lifted her eyebrows and took another drag. “Doesn’t matter. Firstborn is firstborn, ten minutes or ten years. Regardless, you’re changing the topic,” she accused, pointing the cigarette at him. “Where are you going at midnight that you don’t want the parents to know about?”

Sasha bit his lip and sighed. “You’re acting like I’m headed to a club to do heroin.”

“I implied no such thing,” Eva said breezily. “And I know you would never do that. But you’re doing something shady. So what is it?”

“Fine,” he bit out. “I’m just meeting a couple of the guys at the farm.” He paused before muttering, “For pond hockey.”

Eva’s eyes narrowed. “Sasha?” she said in a warning voice.

“What?” he spit out, exasperated. “That’s why I’m not telling them. You know Dad will go off.”

“And you know why. After what happened to Charlie last year? Global warming. Unstable ice. The parents are right to be concerned.”

“That was a freak accident and you know it. Pond hockey is as safe as any hockey, which is to say, none of it is actually all that safe. Just part of the game. I know how to judge ice. Now,

I don't want to leave them waiting. I'm taking off. Do you want to come and babysit me like we're four?"

She eyed him shrewdly before throwing down the cigarette and crushing it under her heel. "Actually, that's a great idea. I haven't played pond hockey in forever. Let's go."

Sasha stared her down. "You're going to risk getting in trouble too just because you're worried about me?"

"Why not? I've been doing it our whole lives. Come on. I'll even let you drive." They started for the car, and Eva side-eyed him. "Also, I know you're not really going just to play pond hockey. Declan will be there, won't he?"

Sasha side-eyed her in return. "So what if he is? We're teammates. And friends"

Eva snorted. "A teammate you want to fu—"

"OK!" Sasha interrupted before she could get the word out. "You're such a pain in my ass." He grabbed her arm and turned her to him, holding up a finger. "If you say anything to him, I will pour melted marshmallows on your hair while you sleep."

Eva smirked, and mimed zipping her lips. Sasha rolled his eyes, and grabbed for the car door, as Eva cackled behind him.

They were giggling and trying to close the slider as quietly as possible when the table lamp in the living room clicked on. They froze, realizing that their papa was lounging on the sofa, his feet kicked up on the coffee table and a tumbler of vodka in his hand. He watched them silently, taking a small sip, waiting them out.

Ilya Rozanov might have been almost fifty years old, but he didn't look it. His hair was still thick and golden and wavy, with a smattering of gray at his hairline. Only the finest wrinkles showed around his eyes and mouth. Sasha and Eva were embarrassed at how their friends, both girls and boys, swooned over him and called him a DILF. It was gross. And mortifying. And just so very wrong. He was their FATHER. Ugh.

On the bright side, if someone was going to catch them sneaking into the house in the middle of the night, it was far better to have their papa than their dad. That was a scene Sasha wanted no part of. Eva, ever the smooth operator, took one for the team. "Hey Papa. What are you doing up? Can't sleep? Does Dad know you're treating insomnia with vodka? He probably wouldn't like that."

Sasha stared at her in awe. Blackmailing their father? She had balls of steel, which was saying something as she was the only member of their family without actual balls.

Papa just chuckled, holding up his glass in salute. "Well done, moya malen'kaya gadyuka. But there is no need for the theatrics. You think I am angry? I think you forget, I was a very bad boy when I was your age. I am sure anything you would do out of the house in the

middle of the night, I have done much worse and more often. But I am curious what you thought you couldn't tell me. You are almost eighteen. Not babies. I trust you."

The hint of disappointment in Pop's voice filled Sasha with remorse. He was a good kid, very rarely disobedient. He hated conflict or letting anyone down. Still, nothing was more important than hockey. And boys. If anyone understood that, it was his pop.

"It's not so much I didn't want to tell you as I didn't want to tell Dad. You know how he worries."

Papa smiled softly. "Yes he does. But sometimes with good reason. Where were you?"

Sasha toed the carpet as he mumbled, "Pond hockey."

His pop raised his eyebrows. "Pond hockey? No drugs? No clubs? No sex in public?"

"Papa!!" they both yelled in dismay before they remembered they didn't want to wake their Dad. "Ugh. Really?" Sasha said. "No, none of those things."

Papa took a sip of his drink. "It can be dangerous. The ice has been breaking more often. I wish you would have told me. But also, you will be finished with school soon and these things must be done while you are still a child, yes?"

Sasha felt the tension leave his shoulders. His papa got it. He was planning to enter the NHL draft in June. His childhood was essentially at an end in the near future. Not that he had had much of a childhood the last 2 years playing in the CHL. While he was excited, he was also nervous. And frankly, a little guilty. Eva was a better hockey player than he was. Possibly better than their dads. But she was a woman. And women hockey players didn't get nearly the accolades they deserved.

After years in the OWHL, she was going the college route, having been recruited to play for one of the top Division 1 Women's Hockey programs, in Minnesota. Eva had always been the smarter one anyway. Sasha had never been a great student, with average grades and test scores. Eva worked hard and did well. College made much more sense for her than for him. She would play there for four years and then maybe join the WHL. Ultimately she had her eye on being an agent or an NHL coach or GM, which was why she was studying sports management and sports psychology. Sasha wasn't sure what he would do if he couldn't play hockey. He really didn't want to think about it.

Sasha turned his attention back to his father. "Thanks Pop. I'm glad you understand."

Papa held up his glass in salute and downed the remains of his drink. He stood up and came over to squeeze Sasha's shoulder. "Come on, let's go to bed." He turned toward Eva. "You too, General. If I didn't admire your nerve so much, I would be pissed."

Eva opened her mouth to retort when they heard creaking on the stairs. All three of them turned around to see his dad standing on the staircase, holding the bannister, looking sleepy and confused. "Why is there a party down here at 3 in the morning?" He paused, squinting. "And why are you two wearing coats and boots? What did I miss?"

Papa smiled sardonically. "I have caught our children sneaking back into the house after an adventure. We had a good talk. Now we are all going back to bed."

His dad's look of confusion deepened. "OK? I should probably ask more questions but I'm too tired. Ilya, why were you down here in the first place at 3am?"

Eva cleared her throat and piped up. "He was drinking. Vodka."

Papa glared at her. "And you were out playing pond hockey. If you are going to snitch on me, I will snitch on you."

"Oh my god," his dad said, wiping his hands down his face. "I'm surrounded by toddlers." He waved them forward and pointed behind himself. "Everyone get the fuck upstairs and you can explain yourselves in the morning after I've had coffee."

Sasha took the out offered, and bolted up the stairs three at a time. He was the same height as his papa and had long legs. He threw himself in his room, slammed his door closed, and fell face first onto his bed with his clothes still on. He was exhausted. Though he hadn't told Pop, Eva had guessed correctly that the childish joy of pond hockey wasn't the main reason he had snuck out of the house. It was to see Declan. His friend. His Major Juniors teammate. His secret crush. Who was supposedly, painfully straight.

Chapter 2: The Confession

The next morning, Sasha woke up late. As the previous night's events slowly came back to him, he groaned. Fucking hell, he'd have to go downstairs and explain everything to his dad. He wasn't worried about the consequences of sneaking out for pond hockey. Worst case, his dad would give him a "being responsible/safety comes first" speech that he would nod through, then hum his agreement and go about his day. What he was dreading was the thought of explaining about Declan if his sister couldn't keep her big mouth shut.

It had taken Sasha a long time to figure out his sexuality. His parents had always been gender neutral in their language when discussing theoretical future relationships. He found people of all genders attractive in an abstract sense, but he had never been attracted to any particular individual of any gender in reality. He had thought at various times that he was bi, or pan, or demi or even ace.

And then he walked into the practice rink one day a few months ago and saw Declan. Tall, though still a little shorter than Sasha. Thick and muscly. Dark hair and lots of it - everywhere. All thoughts of trying to parse out his sexuality fled. Because it didn't matter anymore. As of that moment, he was happily and devotedly Declan-sexual.

Declan was a defenseman which meant they spent less practice time together. However, he made it his business to put himself in Declan's way at every opportunity. As he got to know Declan, he learned that he was friendly but not gregarious. Open but not inappropriate. Kind but not a pushover. Confident but not cocky. In short, he was perfect.

And so fucking hot that Sasha had to work excruciatingly hard not to pop a boner in the locker room every time he looked at him.

The conundrum was how to assess if Declan had any interest in him. Sasha had zero romantic experience, despite the hoards of girls - and boys - who had tried to capture his attention over the years. He was a dead ringer for his pop. Sasha was the furthest thing from conceited, and he could definitely be oblivious sometimes, but he also wasn't a total idiot. He knew he was objectively a good looking guy. With famous parents. And money.

He had options. He just hadn't been interested in any of his options until now.

He had tried to subtly test the waters. Touching a little more than necessary. Standing a little closer than usual. Paying earnest attention when Declan spoke. Handing out compliments a little too freely. Declan didn't seem to be bothered by any of these things. But he also didn't seem particularly interested in them either. Sasha had decided he might have to suck up his teenage reticence and actually ask his dads for advice when his fantasies came to a crashing halt.

They had been in the locker room after a practice, talking shit like always. Someone was passing around a gossip mag, making a joke about how the male celebrity on the cover was scorching hot. When the mag got to Declan, he said "I guess. Too bad I don't swing that way." As Sasha's heart started to sink, another teammate asked him, "Then who is your

type?” When Declan answered, “My girlfriend,” Sasha’s heart plummeted all the way to the floor. He didn’t hear anything after that.

Sasha had spent the next several weeks dejected, moping and pining. It was so far from his typical chilled out personality that his dads kept asking him what was going on. He just shrugged it off in front of them. Eva was not as easy to shake. She had pried, tortured and guilted it out of him.

Unlike Sasha, Eva’s romantic life was not a mystery. She had easily, loudly and proudly declared her “I don’t give a fuck” sexuality at fourteen. In the last three years she had steamrolled their parents with a parade of fleeting romantic interests rotating through their house. When she got rid of one, she’d be sad for just a day or two until another showed up. His papa found the whole thing highly amusing. His dad handled the cis girls, trans boys and girls, and enbys with reluctant but surprising grace. The cis boys were a different story. He glared. A lot.

Sasha wasn’t Eva. But also, he couldn’t mope forever. Finally, he had decided that enough was enough. He really liked and admired Declan as a person. If friendship was all they could have, he would swallow his feelings and be grateful for that much. He had been pretty successful. Mostly. Sort of. If only Eva would stop reminding him.

He wandered downstairs to find his dads and his sister sitting together drinking coffee at the kitchen table. Sasha grabbed himself a mug and sat down with them. His dad was looking annoyed but not pissed. A solid start.

“Eva was filling me in on your exciting night,” Dad informed him.

It seemed like he was waiting for Sasha to respond, so he said, “OK.” Dad looked at him as if that was the incorrect answer. “What do you want me to say?” he added.

“What was so important about playing pond hockey at midnight, and why did you feel like you had to sneak out of the house to do it?”

Sasha sipped his coffee. “Would you have let me go if I had asked you?”

Dad paused. “Maybe,” he grumbled.

Sasha raised his hand with a flourish, as if to say “See? Point made.”

Dad frowned. “That’s not like you. I would have expected Eva to be sneaking out without permission, but not you.”

Eva narrowed her eyes while her mouth hung open, an impressive combination. “Gee, thanks Dad.”

His papa laughed. “But it is true, no?”

“You know what I mean,” Dad said. And Sasha did. It wasn’t like him to be sneaky or disobedient. Not off the ice at least.

If Sasha had to define his personality in one word, it would be easygoing. He grew up in a family full of very strong personalities. It was just easier to sit back and watch, to go with the flow, to be the observer instead of the leader. But that was before Declan. If anyone understood feelings making you do crazy things, it would be his parents. Maybe he should just come clean already, regardless of the torment that listening to his dad’s give him romantic advice would bring.

He looked over at Eva. She knew what he was thinking as always, and gave him a subtle nod of encouragement. He took a deep breath. “OK, fine. So, you know the D man on my team, Declan Sklar? Number 20?”

“Yes,” Dad said hesitantly. “What about him?”

“He was there last night. He’s the one who told me to come”

Dad looked at him suspiciously. “Has he been pressuring you to do stupid things? Who is this kid?”

Sasha suddenly knew where his own occasional obtuseness came from. “God, no. No. You’re missing the boat entirely.”

Pop chuckled. “I think what Sasha is saying is that he has a crush on this D man, and wants to spend as much time with him as he can. Yes?”

Sasha blushed but managed to mumble, “Uh huh,” before dipping his face back into his coffee cup.

His dad’s eyes widened. “Oh. Huh. OK.” He watched his dad wrapping his head around that information. Sasha had never shared anything about his sexuality either way with his parents, mostly because he hadn’t known himself. Now they would assume he was gay. He didn’t bother correcting them. Maybe they were right, maybe not, but it was too complicated to bother parsing it out right now anyway.

“So what’s the problem?” Dad finally asked, having adjusted to the news pretty quickly.

Sasha knew he had a mopey expression on his face. “The problem is that he has a girlfriend. The problem is that he’s straight. Or he thinks he’s straight. Whatever. The point is, he’s not interested in me as more than a friend.” He trailed off and his voice softened as he mumbled, “And it sucks.”

Dad took Sasha’s hand in his own. “Oh honey. I’m sorry. That does suck. But if there’s one thing I know for sure, it’s that 17 year olds are often clueless about their sexuality.”

Papa straightened up. “I was not clueless. Eva is not clueless. You were definitely very clueless, Shane. And Sasha is maybe clueless also. But this boy, Declan, we have no idea if he is clueless.”

Eva snorted as his dad turned to glare at his pop. “Thank you, Ilya, for that enlightening information. You’re not helping our son, who is sad and would like some support.”

In response, Pop patted Sasha on the back and told him in Russian, “There, there, I am sorry, I support you. What can I do?”

Sasha wasn’t sure if he was being genuine or sarcastic or a little bit of both, but he responded in Russian, “Thanks Papa, but I don’t think there’s anything to do. I’m just trying to accept that we might never be more than friends.”

His dad nodded and spoke tentatively. “You’re out of here soon anyway. Who knows what city you’ll be in after the draft? Who knows what city Declan will be in? I know it hurts, but better anyway not to start something now that has no hope of continuing.”

Sasha tightened his lips and sighed. In for a penny, in for a pound. “You’re right. I know you’re right. It’s just that I’ve never really felt this way about anyone before. Not emotionally. Not physically. Not girls or boys. I thought maybe I just wasn’t attracted to anyone at all. It’s like he woke me up. And what if that doesn’t happen again?”

His parents looked at each other and something passed between them. Dad smiled sadly and said, “I want to tell you that that’s crazy. That you’re only 17 and you’ll meet lots of people over time that you could be attracted to. But I met your papa at 17, and I can honestly say I never felt about another person, emotionally or physically, the way I felt about him. I was just lucky he felt the same.” Papa smiled and ruffled Sasha’s hair as Dad continued. “I don’t know this Declan at all, but I guess if it’s meant to be, it’s meant to be, and if it’s not then it’s not.”

They all fell quiet, sipping their coffee. Then Eva got up and went around the table toward him. “Family hug!” she yelled. They all gathered together and squished Sasha between them. He laughed as he tried to hug everyone back. In the end, nothing really mattered but this. He had the best family in the world.

Chapter 3: The Interview: The Next Generation

6 Months Later

Sasha paced nervously in front of the couch in the green room. His dad and sister sat on said couch, their eyes following him back and forth like a metronome.

He and Eva had graduated high school a couple of weeks earlier. His parents threw a huge party at their house with seemingly everyone in Ottawa, plus other friends from as close as Montreal and as far away as California.

Now the draft was a week away and Sasha was expected to go in the first round. He was still debating whether to spend one more development year in the CHL like his dad did, or go straight for a roster spot in the fall. It partly depended on where he was drafted to.

His dad had put out feelers for him to the teams he was most interested in. He was hoping for something either within a few hours drive of home, or a few hours drive from Eva in Minnesota. In fact, Minnesota was his number one wish. They were a middle of the road team, with decent enough stats and occasional playoff spots. They were slotted to pick early in the first round but not in the top three. That was fabulous as far as Sasha was concerned. Unlike his parents or sister, he had no desire to be number one, even if he had spent much of his hockey life as number one. He played hockey because he loved hockey with his whole heart, and he was great at it. He wasn't driven by competition. The only person he was interested in competing against was himself.

And the price of a potential high profile hockey career was this - standing in a green room, waiting to be interviewed on a well-regarded sports news show about the upcoming draft. He had had limited experience with the press through his time in the CHL and his World Juniors appearance for Canada. But this was something different. Sasha was no longer shy like he had been as a little kid, but he also wasn't an attention hog like his sister. She would ace this kind of interview. Sasha was just hoping he didn't say anything stupid.

Finally Pop spoke up. "You seem nervous, but you will be fine. This is good practice for you. I had to give interviews when I barely spoke English. I wasn't even sure I was answering the questions they asked, but no one cared anyway. You can just smile and give vague answers and they will love you."

Sasha rolled his eyes, along with Eva and his dad. They all loved his papa more than anything in the world, but frankly he was conceited. They all knew the subtext of his pep talk was, "You look like me, and I am hot, and the camera is our friend."

But he just smiled and said, "Thanks for the pep talk, Pop."

The intern who had brought them to the green room came back to get Sasha. He took a deep breath and said, "Wish me luck." He got a chorus of "Good luck!" in response, said earnestly (Dad), delightedly (Pop) and unimpressed (Eva).

Sasha sat down in the chair opposite the host at the news desk. Jake Albert was a veteran sportscaster, and Sasha knew from watching this show most of his life that he was a fair and decent guy. He was given the countdown to air, and willed a sense of calm to come over him.

“Welcome back to Sports In Depth! Our guest today is Sasha Rozanov Hollander, a very talented center forward who is a top contender for the upcoming NHL draft and who is widely expected to be chosen early in the first round. And for those unaware, if there are such people out there, he is also the son of retired NHL legends Shane Hollander and Ilya Rozanov. Sasha, welcome to our show. Thanks for joining us.”

Sasha tried to remember to smile. “I’m glad to be here. Thanks for having me.”

“So Sasha, you grew up around the NHL. What is it like to anticipate joining as a player?”

Sasha was glad for the softball opening question. “I’m excited. I’ve been working toward this goal my whole life really. I learned to skate at the same time I learned to walk. I’ve never wanted to do anything else but play hockey.”

“You have some very impressive stats from the last couple of seasons in the CHL. It’s hard not to be compared to your parents’ stats at the same age.”

“Don’t I know it! But those comparisons have been there my whole life. It’s just how things are, and I don’t put much stock into it. I’m not the player my dads were. No one is the player they were. But I’m hoping to cut out my own career with the skills I do have.”

Jake looked at him doubtfully. “You say you aren’t the player your parents were, but most people wouldn’t agree with you. The expectations for your career are certainly very high. Maybe more so than for any rookie in the last several years. How do you manage the pressure?”

“I can only be the best player that I can be with the skills I have. There’s no use in trying to copy anyone else’s career. I don’t pay attention to that kind of pressure. And my parents have certainly never pressured me. Every step my sister and I have taken in hockey has been by our choice.”

“You mention your sister. Eva Rozanov Hollander. Another talented hockey player. She’s been a scoring leader in the OWHL.”

“Yes, she has. Honestly, I think my sister is a better player than I am. She could kick the pants off of most players in the NHL, including our parents. It’s the one thing that really ruins the excitement of the upcoming draft for me - knowing that she deserves all the attention I’m getting probably more than I do, yet people don’t show enough respect to certain women’s sports, especially women’s hockey, for that to be the reality.”

Jake frowned. “That’s unfortunately true, although things have been slowly changing and I’m hopeful we’ll see more and more parity between the NHL and PWHL.”

“I’m hopeful as well. Personally, I’m a huge women’s hockey fan. There is so much talent there. It’s a real loss for any true hockey fans who aren’t paying attention to the women’s

leagues.”

“So is there any jealousy between you and your sister over the likely differences in what your hockey careers will look like?”

“No. Not at all. She’s my biggest cheerleader. She would throw down with anyone to protect me. And believe me when I tell you she’s scary. You don’t want to mess with her.” They shared a laugh.

“While we know what’s next for you, what’s next for her?”

“She’ll be playing Division 1 hockey for the University Of Minnesota, a top NCAA team. And I’m certain she’ll make Team Canada for the next Olympics.”

“Are you hoping to make Team Canada as well?”

Sasha couldn’t help but laugh. “Let’s not get ahead of ourselves. Let me get through the draft first.”

A sly look came over Jake’s face, and Sasha had been waiting for things to go in the direction he suspected they were now heading. “So since we’re talking about family, your parents never spoke much with the media about you and your sister, or about how your family with two dads came about. So forgive me if this question is intrusive, but it’s impossible not to notice that you are the mirror image of Ilya Rozanov at 18. In fact, if you look on the screen behind you there is a side by side photo comparison of the two of you at the same age. It’s uncanny.”

Yes, it’s fucking intrusive, Sasha thought. Why does everyone care so much? Except for maybe his papa who was probably beaming smugly in the wings. Instead of saying any of that, he flashed his shy, crooked grin. “I certainly can’t deny it. He’s obviously my biological father. But that doesn’t mean much. Everything I learned about hockey and all the skills I’ve acquired came equally from both of my parents. Like I said, they taught us to skate practically before we could walk. Hockey was our dinner table conversation every night. We went to all of their games, and attended their summer hockey camps, and played on travel teams that they coached after retirement. We even have a practice rink at our vacation house. My grandparents are hockey fanatics too. It was all hockey all the time even when we stayed with them. My sister and I might have started with good hockey genes, but our whole lives have been centered on hockey.”

“And your performance on the ice certainly shows that. Let’s look at some highlight reels.”

Thankfully they transitioned into technical hockey conversation while narrating the plays highlighted in the clips. Hockey talk was where Sasha felt most comfortable. Eventually they wrapped up the interview with pleasantries and Jake’s good wishes for the draft, and then he was walking offstage to where his family stood watching by the curtain.

“You did a fantastic job,” Pop said, hugging him.

Eva punched his shoulder. “Yeah, baby bro, you sounded like a real person. Good job.”

He made a face at her. “What does that even mean?”

“She means you sounded professional,” Dad translated. “Like an adult. You did really well.”

Sasha just shrugged and motioned for everyone to leave the studio. He was done and wanted out of there. “Awesome. Thanks for the feedback. Now can we go get some food? I’m starving.”

Chapter 4: The Move

Chapter Notes

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

Two Months Later

Packing was taking forever. Each time they unearthed a new forgotten childhood treasure, they had to pass it around and share memories, and his dads had to pretend not to cry a little more before they could move on to the next drawer or closet and repeat the whole cycle again.

“Oh my god, it’s Bun Bun!” Eva cried, pulling out a very threadbare stuffed rabbit from Sasha’s closet. Bun Bun had been Sasha’s constant companion from toddlerhood until the age of ten, when he reluctantly decided that he would henceforth be mortified if his friends came over and found a rabbit stuffie in his bed. “And look!” she continued, “he still has his sling that Grandma sewed for him. Awwwww. I need to take a picture and send it to her.”

Sasha grabbed Bun Bun from Eva and held the rabbit tight to his chest. “Mine. He’s coming with me. I need a comfort object in my new bedroom.”

In a week, Eva would be leaving for the University Of Minnesota to start both classes and training with her new hockey team. Sasha would be going too. His dream had come true. He’d been drafted to Minnesota, as a perfectly respectable number four pick in the first round. He decided to forgo a loan back to his CHL team for another year so that he could move with Eva. Early indications said he would most likely have a spot on the roster for at least part of the upcoming season, which made him comfortable enough to lease a place in St. Paul.

“Well you have enough space to bring whatever you want. I don’t,” Eva complained. “You get to live in a beautiful high-end apartment overlooking the river. I get to live in fucking athlete housing on campus. Do you notice the discrepancy here? Being a girl sucks.”

“I apologize for my entire gender. Can I make it up to you by having you move in with me next year? My place is only 20 minutes from campus.”

Eva made a buzzer sound. “No can do. Coaches won’t like it. But thanks for the option. I might come stay once in a while when I need a break. You better decorate a bedroom just for me.”

“No way. I’m not dumb enough to fall into that trap. You can decorate it yourself. You have carte blanche.”

She preened. “That’s just how I like it.”

Sasha rolled his eyes. His dad spoke up from the corner of the room where he was sorting old hockey trophies and gear that had piled up in the back of Sasha’s closet. “Papa and I were

thinking, maybe we'd get a small place there too. It will make it easier for us to visit both of you whenever we want, for your games and other events."

Sasha frowned. "You don't need to get a place. Mine has three bedrooms. Plenty of space for all of us anytime you want to come."

Papa spoke up from where he was lounging in the doorway. "You don't want us staying with you."

Sasha looked at him quizzically. "You won't be in my way. I'm not going to be bringing random hook-ups home or throwing raging kegers. You know I don't roll that way."

His pop gave a low laugh. "No, my boy. You misunderstand. You don't want us staying with you for more than a day or two." He looked at Sasha suggestively. In the corner, his dad made a sound like he was choking. With dawning horror, Sasha understood his pop's meaning.

Once when he was 13, he had accidentally walked in on his parents having sex, after coming home unexpectedly early from a practice. His pop brushed it off. His dad was mortified. Sasha was permanently scarred. When he brought his distress to Eva, she had given him a withering glare and said, "What do you think they were doing every time they dropped us at Grandma's house for a sleepover, dumbass? Having a knitting party? You're so naive." Sasha felt that was unfair. It's not like he didn't know old married people had sex. He just didn't want to actually see it. Or think about it. At all. Ever.

Sasha shook his head and shoulders to dislodge the memory from his brain. "Holy fuck," he told his pop. "You guys are so gross. Now that I think of it, please stay out of my apartment altogether. It's safer that way."

Pop laughed and his dad threw an old yearbook at him. "Ow!" he cried out. "That actually hurt."

"Serves you right," his dad threw back. "Stop traumatizing the kids."

"I'm not traumatized," Eva proclaimed. "I find all our family interactions to be vastly entertaining."

Sasha stuck out his tongue at her. So what if it was juvenile. He was discombobulated. "Good for you. Leave me and Dad to be horrified in peace. You and Pop can go drink beers and watch porn or whatever."

Eva's eyes shot to their papa and her mouth opened. "No!" he said quickly before she could get any words out. "No beer or porn or anything like that."

"Well I'm glad to find out where you draw your lines, Ilya," Dad said. "Or that you even have lines. Cause I was wondering."

Papa acted shocked, holding his hands to his chest like a Southern lady clutching her pearls. "I am offended. I am a very responsible parent."

“Uh huh,” the three of them chorused in response.

“A model of integrity,” Sasha said

“The cover boy of parenting,” his dad added.

“The most responsible DILF of them all,” Eva stated like a TV announcer. Now all three of them threw random items at her as they booed. She hunched over squealing.

Sasha sighed heavily. “Can we just finish going through this stuff quickly and then go out for some dinner?”

“I’m starving,” the three of them finished in unison before he could even get the words out.

He pouted in response. “I’m a growing boy who burns a lot of calories. Give me a break.”

Papa chuckled. “OK. Let us go get your disgusting pineapple pizza. How does that sound?”

“It’s not disgusting!” Sasha fumed. “I will die on this hill!”

“Simmer down, Hulk,” his dad said. “You can eat whatever you want and your pop will stop messing with you. Won’t you, Ilya?” he directed sharply at Papa.

“Me? I am a choir boy,” he exclaimed in offense.

His dad rolled his whole head along with his eyes. “Why don’t we just go out now and finish packing later?”

They all stood up and brushed off their clothes, which had gotten dusty while sorting through years of detritus. As Sasha went to move past Eva, she grabbed his arm. “Are you going to say goodbye to Declan? I heard he’s leaving next week too.”

Sasha looked down in contemplation. Declan had been drafted by Colorado in the second round, but he was expecting to spend some time with their AHL affiliate. Sasha wanted to see him one more time but also didn’t want to have to face the reality of leaving Declan for good. They weren’t close enough friends that they’d be messaging and video chatting with each other much. At best, he might see him on occasion when they were both back in Ottawa visiting family. He shook off the depressing thought.

“Maybe. We’ll both be so busy. I’ll message him and see if he can meet up briefly, but I’m not going to push.”

Eva surprised him by pulling him into a hug. “I love you,” she whispered in his ear. “And I’m sorry you didn’t get what you wanted. But I’m so, so happy that I’ll have you in Minnesota with me. We’ve been together since before we were born. I wouldn’t know what to do without you.”

Sasha crushed her to him tightly. Eva wasn’t generally sentimental, but they didn’t need words to feel what they meant to each other. They had always known what the other was thinking. Still, he responded, “I love you too, even though you enjoy tormenting me. We both

know I'd be hopeless without you." They held on for a few more moments until he released her. As he opened his mouth to speak, she beat him to it. "Yes, we all know you're starving. Let's go eat."

After a stressful few days of getting everything ready, shipping ahead boxes that they couldn't bring with them on the plane, and ordering some basic furniture to be delivered to Sasha's place upon their arrival, they were ready to go.

His parents helped him pack up the car with their luggage, and before he knew it, they were ready to head to the airport. He and Eva stood together at the front door, taking a last look around. She kissed him on the side of his head and ruffled his hair. "Come on. Let's go."

They stepped through the door and Sasha glanced back just one more time. He had lived in this house his entire life. In quick succession, he saw the corner where their Christmas tree always sat bursting with presents, the spots he and Eva would always pick when they played hide and seek, the kitchen table where he had tried to do his elementary school homework but instead dreamed of playing in the NHL one day. Eight year old Sasha would be very happy to know that all the time he spent dreaming instead of doing homework wasn't a waste.

He was looking forward to the excitement of a new city, new people, new experiences. He was getting everything he had ever wanted. Except for one. Declan was the only dream that wouldn't be coming true. For the first time, he felt like that would be OK.

It wasn't as if he'd never be back to his house again, he knew. But something about this change felt momentous, even though he knew he was ready. He gave a final internal wave goodbye to his home and shut the door behind him.

Chapter End Notes

This is as far as I've gotten, writing wise. I only have broad notes for Chapter 5 and beyond, so it'll take a while to post more content. Unless I get into an ADHD hyperfixation this weekend, in which case it might show up sooner!! But I can promise a couple things: that in the next chapter, there will be a time jump, and Declan will finally show up as a main character; and that in general, this is going to be a low angst story about two fundamentally nice, kind people.

Chapter 5: The Surprise

Chapter Notes

Hahahahahaha! My ADHD hyperfixation kicked in hard this weekend, and I finished chapters 5 through 7. I'm almost done with chapters 8 and 9. I'm not sure how many more chapters after that there will be to finish the story. Maybe 13 total? We'll see. Anyway, enjoy!

Three Years Later. February.

Sasha walked out of his bedroom, rubbing his unruly hair and feeling a little disoriented after waking up from an afternoon nap. That was his usual routine on a game night. He headed for the coffeemaker, passing Eva who was sitting at the kitchen table with her laptop, typing furiously. She had finally moved in with him several months ago, at the start of her senior year of college, to the bedroom she had decorated for herself and had been staying in half the time anyway for the last couple of years.

“Are you coming to the game tonight?” he asked her. “If you want to leave with me, you need to be ready soon.”

Eva winced, focused on her screen. “I wish, but I can’t. I absolutely have to get this paper done. It’s due on Thursday, but I’m leaving for an away game tomorrow morning.” She sounded stressed, which was unusual for Eva. In moments like this, Sasha couldn’t help but be glad he had chosen to skip college. Just the thought of juggling a hockey season AND all of that schoolwork made his head hurt.

Sasha was in the middle of his fourth season in the NHL. After some initial back and forth his first year between St. Paul and their AHL affiliate in Iowa, he had been officially rostered for the last three seasons. While he hadn’t matched his parents’ legendary scoring stats in their early years, he had done quite well for himself. And Eva had been killing it for UMN, smoking every other NCAA women’s hockey player and leading her team to the Frozen Four twice. She was going to stay on for another year of grad school after graduation, in order to get her accelerated master’s degree in sports management, and then hopefully sign with a PWHL team.

“Where’s Rachel? I haven’t seen you alone here without her in weeks.”

“Yeah, well, the semester is really ramping up for both of us. She has a study group meeting today which is just as well since I’m stuck with this paper.”

After several previous college girlfriends and boyfriends who were so awful, even his papa actively hated them, they were all thrilled when she settled into a serious relationship with Rachel Kue, a 2nd year law school student at UMN who was friendly, even-tempered, hardworking and wickedly smart. She was a local, having grown up in the Hmong community of St. Paul, and best of all, her older brother had played D1 hockey so she was a huge fan of the sport. Her parents were very warm and accepting, and Eva loved going to their house because Rachel's mom was an outstanding cook. She had brought home leftovers a few times, and they went down Sasha's throat before they could even hit the refrigerator. Rachel was a frequent visitor to their home, and she had even earned her own key.

Sasha wasn't nearly as lucky in the relationship department. He had tried dating a few times, whenever someone even remotely caught his interest, but none of them had lasted more than a couple of months at most. He knew it wasn't the people he was dating; it was definitely him. They were all lovely men and women who deserved to be wanted more than Sasha was capable of wanting them.

"OK, well I'm going to get ready and head out. I guess I'll see you when I get home."

"For sure. I'll be home for the rest of the night. Maybe we can hang out for a little bit after the game."

"Sounds good." He left her to her work and got ready to leave. He now understood why his parents had always torn off their suits the second they walked in the door after a game. They were so uncomfortable. Restricting. How could people wear these to work every day of their lives? He'd have to ask Rachel, who planned to be a contract lawyer and would undoubtedly be a daily suit-wearing professional.

Before leaving, Sasha swung by Eva to give her a kiss on the head. "Good luck!" she yelled at his retreating back. "Beat Montreal's ass! Remember that we hate them!"

He turned back to her, his hand on the doorknob. "I think that after more than 20 years we can give up that grudge."

"Never. Giving up grudges is quitting, and we're not quitters."

Sasha raised his eyebrows. "You used to be so peppy and cheerful when we were little. What happened?"

"I'm still peppy and cheerful," she insisted. "I just apply my pep and cheer to sarcasm and troublemaking."

He didn't even know how to respond to that. He just shook his head, waved goodbye, and focused on getting his head into game mode.

Walking into a locker room was something Sasha had done almost every day of his life. For him, it was as eventful as any random Tuesday. But that particular day would forever live in his mind because just as he was undressing and shoving his belongings into his locker, the

Coach came into the room and said, “I have an announcement. You all know to expect some trades before the deadline at the end of this month, and here’s our first. Say hello to our new D man, Declan Sklar, coming to us from Colorado. They got Pickney in return.”

Mumbles started around him, mostly unhappiness about Pickney being gone. A couple people thoughtfully greeted their new teammate. But it all sounded like static in Sasha’s ears, because his brain had simply stopped working as soon as he heard that name.

Declan was here?

He was almost afraid to look, but forced himself to lift his head. There, standing in the entryway, was the embodiment of his dreams, come back to haunt him. Sasha had only kept the loosest tabs on Declan, running into him once in Ottawa a couple years ago, and reading about his being called up to Colorado from the AHL mid-season last year, where he had been rostered ever since, and by all measures was doing a solid job.

Sasha knew this must be what it felt like when people described being in shock. He literally couldn’t move. Or think. Or breathe, to be honest. Declan was even more beautiful than he remembered. A little bigger, more filled out and manly, his stance more confident. Although right then, he mostly looked disoriented. Sasha guessed that was normal, after having been ripped from one life into a totally new one in the space of 24 hours.

Sasha took a deep breath and forced his body back into motion. “Declan,” he called out roughly, half question, half entreaty. Declan turned toward him, and Sasha could see the moment recognition dawned. His lips turned up into a smile, and a look of relief overtook his face. “Sasha.” He walked over and gave Sasha a hand clasp and a bro hug. “It’s so good to see you. My head was so turned around, I didn’t even remember you played here.”

“Hey Rozi, you know this guy?” someone asked. He wouldn’t know who if his life depended on it. His whole being was focused on Declan.

Declan! Here!

“Uh, yeah,” he answered, never moving his eyes away. “We played on the same CHL team in Ottawa.”

“A reunion! Excellent,” that same unknown voice said. Was it Chester, maybe?. “Welcome to the team, Rozi’s friend from Ottawa.” A general cheer of “Here, here” went up.

Sasha realized he needed to do or say something. “Um, here. Let me show you where your locker is. I’m assuming you’re taking Pickney’s. It’s just a few stalls down from mine, over there.”

Declan looked at him gratefully. “Thanks, man. This has been a really shitty 24 hours. It’s so nice to see a familiar face. And a friendly one to boot. It’s the first good thing to happen to me today.”

Sasha’s throat felt tight, and he hoped he could squeeze words out. “Yeah. Of course. It’s great to see you too. We should catch up. After the game. Or another day if you’re tired.”

“No. Tonight is great. I could use the company.”

Sasha tried to think quickly. He didn't trust himself to be alone with Declan. He would for sure do or say something stupid. But Eva was going to be home tonight. They were supposed to hang out after the game. Perfect.

“Do you want to come over to my place? My sister lives with me. You remember her, right? She's a senior at UMN. Plays D1 for them. We were gonna hang out for a bit after the game anyway. Why don't you join us?”

Declan's smile widened. “Yeah? That sounds great. Thanks.” His voice was so sincere. So deep and smooth and nice.

Shit, Sasha thought. I am so, so fucked.

Chapter 6: The Invitation

After somehow making it through a game with his head in the clouds and his feet forgetting how to skate, Sasha drove them home.

Declan is in my car. Declan is about to be in my house. Holy shit.

Declan spoke, commenting on the game, their teammates, and the coaching staff, and asking questions about living in the twin cities. Sasha had no idea what he answered or if it even made sense, but Declan wasn't looking at him weirdly so he figured everything must be OK.

He had barely stepped into the apartment when Eva's voice floated to him from down the hall. "What the hell was wrong with you tonight? I turned on the game for a bit and it was like you forgot how to play hockey." Eva turned the corner and stopped dead in front of Sasha. The moment she saw Declan, he knew recognition had set in. Her eyes bugged out of her head and for a moment she was speechless. If he wasn't so freaked out, he would think of it as an accomplishment.

"What have we here?" she purred, her voice doing a one-eighty turn from harpy to siren.

"Declan, you remember my sister Eva. And Eva, I know you remember Declan."

"Yes, of course," they both said at the same time and laughed.

"Well isn't this the surprise of the century," she said, sounding like Scarlett O'Hara. "What are you doing in the twin cities, Declan?"

Sasha tried to give her a look that said "Take it down a notch" but she chose to ignore him, her manic smile staying in place. "He just got traded from Colorado yesterday. Today was his first day with Minnesota. As you can imagine, it's been really jarring. I invited him over so you and I could give him some hometown familiarity, and a nice welcome." He stressed 'you and I', hoping she would pick up on his need for help.

"By all means," she said. "We are the welcome wagon of Minnesota. Come on in. Make yourself at home. Our casa is your casa and all that." She gestured vaguely toward the living room.

"Thanks. Do you mind if I use your bathroom for a minute first?"

"Oh, of course." Eva waved her arms like Vana White. "It's down the hall, the second door on the right."

As Declan stepped into the bathroom and closed the door, Eva turned to him. "Oh my fucking god!"

"I know!"

“It’s a sign, Sasha. The universe loves you. Do not waste this opportunity.”

“Eva, I’m totally freaked out. I need you to take over and like, keep me from being a total idiot.”

“No, you’re going to do great. You’ve got this. Carpe Diem, et cetera.”

“What do you mean—?” He was interrupted when Declan opened the door and stepped back into the hall.

“Declan, I was just telling Sasha that I’m so stupid. I totally forgot that I was supposed to meet my girlfriend tonight after her study session. She’s waiting for me. I’ll probably just stay at her place since it’s so late already. Don’t expect me back until the morning. It was so good to see you again, though. Welcome to Minnesota.”

Sasha watched frantically as she headed toward the door. “I’m just going to see her out,” he told Declan, turning around to follow Eva. “Why don’t you sit down? I’ll be back in a sec.”

“Eva!” he whisper-shouted behind her. “Eva! Get back here! Do not leave me.”

“What? I’m sorry. I can’t hear youuuu.” She trailed off as she flounced through the front door, giving him a wink over her shoulder.

“I will get you back,” he called after her as she walked down the hallway toward the staircase. “You are dead.” She held up her hand in a wave goodbye and then disappeared down the stairs.

Well, fuck.

Sasha stood in the doorway with his hands on his hips, his head hung and his eyes closed. OK, he thought. I can do this. Just act normal. Get the man a drink. Talk to him like any other teammate.

Any other teammate that you have brought back to your apartment who is a thirst trap. That makes your dick so hard it’s impossible to hide.

Sasha shook it off and went back into the living room. “Hey, sorry about that. Let me get you a drink. Beer OK?”

“Yeah, sure. That’s great.” Declan turned around to face Sasha over the back of the couch as he went into the kitchen and grabbed two beers and a bottle opener. “This is a really nice place. And it must be so great to have family close by. You all always seemed close.”

Sasha smiled. “Yeah. She’s a pain in my ass, but she’s also my other half, so I guess it evens out.”

Sasha sat down on the couch, as far away from Declan as possible, and handed him a beer. “So do you have a plan? I know you’ve barely even had time to think about it, but where are you staying?”

Declan rolled the bottle between his hands and pursed his lips. "I'm not sure what to do. I kind of don't want to sign a lease on a place only to get traded again at the end of the season. It's like intellectually you always know that it could happen at any moment, but you don't really ever expect it will happen to you. At least I don't have a family or anything. I don't know how the guys with girlfriends or families deal with it."

Sasha tried to make his voice as nonchalant as possible. "So, you're not leaving a girlfriend or anything behind in Colorado?"

"No. I mean, I haven't been a monk. I go out sometimes. I've dated around some, but nothing serious. You know how hard it is, with our schedules."

That information perked Sasha up. "Whatever happened to that girlfriend you had in high school? You seemed really into her."

Declan frowned. "Ashley? Oh, that was pretty much over before I even left for Colorado." He shook his head. "God, I haven't thought about her in years. I can't believe you even remember that. I guess I was a lot more self-centered than you in high school," he said. "I never paid attention to anyone but myself."

I didn't pay attention to anyone else but you, Sasha thought. Dangerous territory. Time for a subject change. "So, I was asking about your plans. You don't want to sign a lease?"

"No. Right now they have me in a hotel until I can figure something else out. I was thinking maybe I'd just wait out the rest of the season in one of those executive suite hotels where you have a kitchen and stuff. It's like a small apartment but without any commitment."

"What about all your stuff in Colorado?"

"I'll just have the team send someone to pack it up and put it in storage here. It's only for a few months until I see how things go. I don't need that much stuff to get by."

Sasha frowned. That seemed to Sasha like a pretty sad way to live. Declan deserved better than that. An idea started to form in his mind. A terrible idea. An incredibly awful, moronically stupid, profoundly self-flagellating idea.

No one had ever accused Sasha of being smart.

"So, Declan?" he said hesitantly, picking at the label on his bottle, his heart thundering so loudly he could feel it pulsing in his ears. "I was just thinking that maybe there's another option for you. We have a third bedroom. We don't use it, except as storage for some extra equipment. My parents have their own place in Minneapolis, so anytime we have visitors they stay over there." He gulped. Was he really doing this? He was really doing this. "You could stay here with us. You and I are on the same schedule, so it would make things easy. You would have a proper home and it would be less lonely. And I know for a fact that Eva won't mind. Neither of us are even here that much anyway, as you know. And if you feel secure enough at any point to commit to your own place, I'll be glad to help you find one."

Dedclan didn't say anything for a long moment. He just stared at Sasha, who suddenly wondered if he had made the biggest mistake of his life. Was Declan going to laugh at him? Tell him that he was crazy? Say thanks, but that would be way too weird and uncomfortable? Instead, a slow, sweet smile spread across his face, his drugging brown eyes going liquid and soft. "I had forgotten that you are the nicest, most genuine guy I've ever met. I'm so glad to see that hasn't changed."

Sasha's heart stopped, and then lurched painfully back into action. He swallowed hard, hoping his voice wouldn't crack. "So, is that a yes?"

"Yeah," Declan said quietly. "I think that's a yes. Thank you, Sasha."

Sasha's mouth was so dry, he wasn't sure he could make words. He cleared his throat, and forced a smile. "That's great! This is exciting." He paused. Might as well push his luck "So, it's pretty late already. I'm happy to do whatever you prefer, but if you want to just crash here, we can run by the hotel in the morning and grab all your stuff on the way to practice. There's a bed in your room, at least. We can clear everything else out tomorrow."

Declan still had that dopey grin on his face. Sasha was going to have a heart attack if he had to keep looking at it. "Sounds like a plan." His smile faded slightly. "I think I have an extra pair of clothes in my bag. I need to check."

"No problem." He eyed Declan and then realized that was a mistake as his dick twitched in his pants. He subtly rearranged himself on the couch. "You're a little bulkier than me, but I have some loose clothes that would definitely fit you if you need."

"Thank you," Declan said. "Again. I feel like I'm going to owe you big time. I'm not sure how I'll repay you."

I can think of so many ways, Sasha thought, and then immediately shut it down. Bad Sasha. Stop it. "Don't even mention it. I get the benefit of Eva's rabid attention not being exclusively on me. This is partly selfish, you know."

"OK, sure," Declan laughed. "If you say so." He stood up and stretched. Sasha tried not to stare at the way his biceps bulged with the movement. "I am really beat. It's been a bonkers forty-eight hours. I feel like I could sleep for a week."

"Yeah. Absolutely. Let me get everything together for you." They cleared off the bed and put on fresh sheets. Declan did indeed have extra workout gear for tomorrow but nothing to sleep in. Sasha gave him his loosest pair of shorts. He tried to give him a t-shirt too but Declan said just the shorts were fine. Sasha didn't want to think of him asleep across the hall in nothing but a pair of Sasha's low rise shorts. That was likely to keep him up all night salivating. He did actually need to rest if he wanted to redeem himself from his horrible performance that night.

"OK. Well, if you have everything you need, then I'll see you in the morning. We should leave around 9am."

"Great. And thanks again. Really." Declan paused. "Good night, Sasha."

“Good night, Declan,” he returned softly. They both went into their bedrooms, and shut the doors. Sasha leaned his head back against the frame, his hand gripping the doorknob tightly, his eyes squeezed shut. What had he done? It was either the stupidest or the most brilliant decision of his life. He was terrified to find out.

Chapter 7: The Bombshell

Sasha pressed the snooze button on his alarm for the second time, and groaned. After a restless night of alternately sleeping, tossing and turning, and mentally berating his stupidity, he willed himself to get up and dressed. He could always take a nap later. Right now, they needed coffee and breakfast before heading to practice, and Declan wouldn't know where anything was. When he got to the kitchen, he was faced with Declan's back peering through cabinets, probably looking for the coffee. His naked back. His solid, muscled, smooth, golden toned naked back that tapered down to a trim waist and the swell of the top of his ass just visible above the low waistline of the borrowed shorts. His back that was naked because he had turned down Sasha's offer of a t-shirt the night before.

Fuck me, he groaned internally. This is so, so bad.

He forced his tongue to roll back into his mouth and his feet to move forward. "Good morning."

Declan swung around, and the smile on his face along with his equally drool-worthy naked chest caused Sasha to almost trip over his own feet. "Good morning. I was just looking around, getting familiar with where everything is. Hope that's OK."

Sasha opened a cabinet next to where Declan stood and pulled out the canister of coffee beans. "Of course. This is your home now. Treat it like you would your own place." He set to grinding the beans and then steeping the french press.

Declan whistled. "You grind the beans fresh? Fancy."

"Hardly. We just rely way too much on coffee to have it be subpar." He was so focused on not staring at Declan that he didn't hear the front door opening. So he was surprised when a gasp sounded behind him. He whirled around to see Eva and her girlfriend Rachel standing there, mouths hanging open. Oh shit, he thought. I didn't tell her what's going on.

He ran over to her quickly and grabbed her arm. "Hey, good morning. Um, I need to talk to you for a second. Rachel, there's fresh coffee if you want it. We'll be right back." He literally dragged Eva behind him until they got to his bedroom and he slammed the door.

Eva pushed him backward and pointed her finger into his chest. "If you don't spill every single detail this very second, I'm going to march out there and ask Declan to tell me instead."

"It's not what you think!" He threw up his hands like Eva was holding him at gunpoint.

"Sasha, I don't think there's an alternative explanation for why the man you've been pining over for four years is suddenly standing half naked in our kitchen, wearing borrowed clothes, at eight o'clock in the morning!"

He held his hands toward her placatingly. “OK, but there is a reason. He’s going to move in with us for a bit.”

Now her eyes popped out of her head. “That’s even more crazy than you two just fucking all night.”

He pinched the bridge of his nose and shut his eyes. This was not going well. “Just hold on a second. Let me start over.” He lifted his gaze to her and took a deep breath. “He doesn’t want to sign a lease because he’s afraid he’ll just get traded again in a few months. He was going to stay in a long term suite hotel, but that sounded so depressing to me. I told him that we have an extra bedroom we don’t use, so if he wanted to ride out the season here with us that would be fine. If he’s still with Minnesota at the end of the season, I’ll help him look for a place.”

Eva eyed him suspiciously. “And he agreed to that?”

“Yes. He’s really off kilter. It’s his first trade, and he doesn’t know anyone here, and he’s already feeling lonely. He seemed grateful for the offer.”

“Hmpf.” She mulled that over for a moment. “And this offer was purely out of the goodness of your heart, Saint Sasha? This has the potential to go all kinds of sideways and get people hurt. Does he know you have feelings for him?”

Sasha was sure he looked slightly guilty. “No, of course not. I don’t think he even knows I’m not straight. I can’t imagine how he would. It’s not something that ever came up in Ottawa. And it’s not like my love life is a big media topic.”

Eva gave him her best motherly stare. “You need to tell him.” His eyes widened and he opened his mouth to object, but she held up her hand. “Not about your feelings for him. But he should know you’re queer. Hanging out with someone and living with them are two different things. If he finds out later, he might feel betrayed. Even if he turns out to be the rainbow-friendliest guy in the world, it’s not worth the risk.”

Sasha had to admit she made a good point. He nodded. “OK. I’ll talk to him in the car.”

“Good.” A sly grin came over her face. “But you can’t tell me you weren’t drooling over the eye candy. Are you sure he didn’t notice? You’re not Mr. Subtle.”

“Eva, I’m not sure of even one fucking thing at this moment. Except that we have to get to practice. So let me get dressed.”

She saluted him. “Aye, aye Cap’n.” And then she marched out the door.

When Sasha got to the kitchen, they were all chatting and Declan was finishing off a smoothie. “Hey. Rachel here was kind enough to help me find supplies for breakfast. Just let me get dressed and we can head out.”

“Sure. No rush.” As Declan went to his room, Rachel turned to Eva, “Babe, I reaaaaly hope someone explains to me what the heck is going on. I had no idea how I was supposed to treat

him, so I just didn't ask him anything other than what he wanted for breakfast when he told me he was looking for food."

"I'm sure the gossip queen will be more than happy to share the details with you," Sasha said.

Eva took Rachel's hands. "As soon as they're gone, it's story time. You're not going to believe this." They put their foreheads together, giggling, and then Eva kissed her sweetly. Sasha smiled.

At first glance, they didn't look like they belonged together. Rachel was on the short side and curvy, compared with Eva who was relatively tall for a woman and had the straight, muscular physique of an elite athlete. Rachel had shoulder length brown hair, a round face, glasses and burnished brown skin, in contrast to Eva's flowing mane of silky black hair and clear milky white skin. But as soon as he spent a few minutes with the two of them together, he could understand the attraction.

Rachel was trustworthy. Eva could tell her about Sasha and Declan and she would never say anything.

Declan came back into the room. "Ready to go."

Eva gave him a beaming smile. "See you later, Roomie! Glad to have you on board."

"Thanks." Declan smiled at her, sounding pleased. "I'll look forward to getting to know you better. And Rachel, it was good to meet you. Thanks so much for the breakfast assist."

She waved at them. "No problem. Have a good practice!"

They made their way down to the building's parking garage, where Sasha kept his car. As they drove up and out, Declan looked like he wanted to say something but was hesitant to ask. "What is it?" Sasha asked. "You look like a man with something on his mind."

Declan grinned briefly. "I don't want to be intrusive, but also I'm curious. I guess Eva is a lesbian?"

"You would be wrong," Sasha said cheerfully, turning the wheel. "Eva is an equal opportunity romantic to all comers. If a gender or sexuality exists, she's dated someone who identifies with it."

Declan looked intrigued. "Wow. That's cool. I've never met anyone like that before."

"I would imagine your queer circle isn't too large."

Declan looked uncomfortable, like he had just been criticized. "It's not like I don't know gay couples. I mean, your dads for one. And I've had friends and teammates over the years. But it's...I don't know what I'm saying. I guess it seemed like they were either gay or straight, and that was that. I didn't really think about how there were other options. I'm ashamed to say I never paid enough attention to look any deeper."

Well here was a very convenient opening for the conversation he had promised Eva he would have with Declan. “Does it feel weird to you, having just agreed to live with a queer roommate?”

Declan startled. “What? No. That’s not what I meant at all. I apologize if it came off that way.” He thought for a moment. “I just meant I have a lot to learn about the world, I guess.”

Sasha tried to keep his voice even and calm, despite his pulse thundering madly. “That’s good. Because Eva is not the only queer person in our apartment.”

Declan turned toward him. Sasha kept his eyes resolutely ahead on the road. The meaning of the words must have taken a minute to settle because Declan suddenly said, “Oh.”

Sasha forced himself to look over, but Declan didn’t seem upset. Rather, he looked thoughtful. Finally, he said, “Well I guess now is my chance to start my education. What brand of queer are you then?”

Sasha snorted. “Brand of queer. Like are you Tollhouse or Nestle?”

Declan laughed nervously. “Sorry. I’m just putting my foot in it all over the place this morning.”

“No, no, I understood what you meant,” Sasha reassured him. “And the answer is that I’m off-label. I don’t really have a word for what I am. Without getting too deep into it, I find it really hard to be attracted to anybody at all. But when I am attracted, gender doesn’t make a difference.”

Declan mulled that over. “Interesting,” he finally mused. He waited until Sasha looked over at him to say, “Thank you for being so honest with me. You didn’t have to share any of that, and I appreciate it.”

Sasha looked away, heat coming into his face. Could he be any more perfect? he thought. This is going to kill me.

“Well the upside,” Declan added cheerfully, “is that this will make it interesting to wingman for each other if we go out.”

Uh, what? Did Sasha just hear what he thought he heard?

“You can help me with women, and I can help you with whoever catches your eye. I’ve never had to help cruise for guys before. It will be a learning experience for sure.”

Sasha couldn’t do anything more than nod his head slightly in response. He wasn’t sure how it didn’t just roll off his shoulders entirely.

What. The. Fuckity. Fucking. Fuck.

Screwed didn’t even begin to cover what Sasha was.

Chapter 8: The Lake House

Chapter Notes

Just a quick note for the story going forward. If I were ever to write an original romance novel, I would absolutely do dual POV. I think it's much more difficult to be invested in an MC when you can only see them through someone else's eyes. But this is first and foremost a fan love letter to Shane and Ilya and their (imaginary) family. So my intention was to give equal weight to the family dynamics as to Sasha and Declan's romance. That's why it's single POV, and I think a consequence of that moving forward, from my highly experienced romance-reader's eye, is that if we're at all invested in Declan, it's because Sasha is invested in Declan, not necessarily because Declan himself inspires readerly devotion on the page. I did my best to make his character and feelings and intentions clear so that we understand why Sasha would be so passionately devoted to him. But it's a challenge when I intentionally chose to spend so much page time on the family instead. Maybe you will disagree with me. That's the beauty of fiction!

The next two months were both the best and worst of Sasha's life. The best part was all the time they spent together, both on the ice and off of it. Perhaps because they had trained together at such a formative age, they really gelled when sharing the ice. They could communicate so easily, and they made some beautiful plays. There were days it felt like magic, and the coaches were looking quite happy with their performances. Sasha was as happy about that for Declan as for himself. Any feedback that made him more secure about his position in Minnesota was something that Sasha wanted Declan to have.

Off the ice, they spent almost all of their time together. Eva was in and out of town with games just as they were, which left them alone in the apartment often. They became so tied at the hip that the players they roomed with on the road decided to switch, leaving Declan and Sasha to share a room together. Declan said it made hanging out at away games easier. Sasha didn't tell him that sharing a bedroom in addition to an apartment was its own kind of hell.

Then there was the bad side. Which involved going out to bars and clubs and restaurants together, watching Declan pick up women, go on dates with women, go home with women, and knowing that somewhere out there, he was having sex with women. Some nights Sasha felt like he couldn't take it any longer; like if this kept up, he might lose his mind.

Eva's team was on fire, and for the third time in her four years at UMN, they won the Frozen Four. He, his dads, and Rachel were all there to see the win and celebrate with her. What a beautiful end to her college playing career, he thought. A couple weeks later, the Stanley cup playoffs started. Sasha's team made it all the way to the third round before being knocked out. They were getting steadily closer to the Cup each year. Sasha was patient. Their time would come. He was happy to wait.

By then it was late May, and Sasha had been able to make it to Eva's graduation ceremony. Even though she would be staying in the same place for another year of school, it was still a huge accomplishment. Out of the four of them, she would be the only one with a college degree.

His whole life, they had always left for the lake house as soon as school was over or the playoffs were finished - whichever came first. That year, they coincided. Now that the season was over and it looked like Declan would probably still be around next year, Sasha kept waiting for him to mention looking for his own place. But Declan never brought it up, and Sasha certainly wasn't going to be the one who said something first.

Sasha knew that Declan planned to spend at least some time over the summer visiting his family in Ottawa, but he didn't want to leave him alone in their apartment for the rest of it. That felt weird and inhospitable. And lonely. For both of them.

Instead, Sasha and Eva lingered in Minnesota for longer than they normally would have, until Sasha finally asked Declan if he wanted to join them for a few weeks at the lake house before they had to leave for the hockey camps they coached in Ottawa and Montreal to benefit the Irina Foundation. Over the years, the camps had expanded exponentially, to more weeks and more cities, and they were known for producing some top talent among their graduates. He and Eva and his dads still coached at the original two camps. For the past few years, Sasha had always been able to corral one or two teammates to join them as coaches. This year, he asked Declan, who seemed delighted at the invitation.

Sasha, Eva, and Declan arrived at the lake house on a sunny Friday afternoon in late June. His parents had already been staying there for the past three months. Ever since he and Eva had left home, the lines became more and more blurred between year-round house and summer house. His dads had started talking more seriously about selling the Ottawa house and moving full-time to the lake house.

As they got out of the car, Declan turned in a slow circle, mouth hanging down in wonderment. "This place is amazing."

"Yes, it is," his papa called, sauntering down the front steps to meet them. "I felt the same way the first time I came here." He picked up Eva in a giant hug and spun her around in a circle. She squealed like she was three years old. Then he took Sasha in a big bear hug. Which was funny when he thought of the giant bear tattoo on his pop's chest.

Pop held out his hand for Declan to shake. Though Declan had seen his dads many times at games when they were younger, they had never actually met. Their first meeting was when his parents were in town for Eva's graduation. When they first heard that Declan had been traded to his team, he had to warn them on pain of death to never ever ever mention to him about Sasha's long-standing feelings. So far, to his everlasting astonishment, they had complied.

His pop grabbed a couple of their numerous bags to help, and they all headed into the house. "Your Dad is on the back deck, grilling. Why don't you go say hi to him. We can take all the bags to your rooms later."

Eva rubbed her hands together with glee, a mischievous grin on her face. She tiptoed through the back slider, then snuck up behind their dad before peeking her head over his shoulder and yelling, “Boo!” Dad screeched and jumped. Eva cackled like a witch. “You fall for it. Every. Single. Time. Dad!”

“I’m not a young guy anymore, sweetie. You’re going to give me a heart attack one day.” He pulled her into a tight hug and rocked her back and forth.

“No,” she said into his chest. “You’re immortal. You and Papa both.”

Next he gave Sasha a hug, and then shook hands with Declan. His dad looked around. “I thought Rachel was coming too,” he said.

Eva’s shoulders dropped. “She is, but not for a couple weeks. She’s doing that internship, and their schedule is tight.”

“Boo hoo,” Sasha taunted. “You have to spend time with us instead of being cozied up in your love nest.”

Eva punched him in the arm. “Ow,” he cried out, holding his arm, “that actually hurt. You might be a girl but you’re strong as hell.”

“You deserved it. And why do you care? You’ll be cozied up with Declan anyway.”

Sasha felt his cheeks heat at the insinuation in her words. He glanced over at Declan, who didn’t seem to have noticed.

“Dad!” he called. “How much longer until the burgers are ready?”

“Almost done. Why don’t you guys get the rest of the food out of the kitchen and grab some drinks.”

Eva looked at Declan over her shoulder as they walked back inside. “Be warned, Pop is going to make you drink some super-special, one-of-a-kind, illegally-imported-from-Russia vodka that will feel like a gasoline fire going down your throat.”

“Hey!” his papa yelled. “Do not insult my vodka. If I have to choose between my children and my vodka....I don’t know.”

Now Eva punched Papa in the chest. “Holy shit! You are strong. Stop injuring people and grab some beers. Do not touch my vodka.”

“As if I’d ever want to touch your vodka,” Eva snarked.

They started bickering in Russian. Sasha only half paid attention as he and Declan grabbed some of the bowls and plates to bring out to the deck.

“Um, that’s Russian, right?” Declan asked him. “Do you all speak it?”

Sasha nodded. “Yeah. We spoke it often in the house growing up, and our nanny was Russian when we were little.”

“Oh. So do you speak Russian in front of other people when you don’t want them to understand what you’re saying?”

They set down everything they were carrying onto the table. “Sometimes,” Sasha admitted. “Mostly it’s just that Russian is our yelling and fighting language. When pop is upset, the Russian breaks out. It’s actually quite useful because if you walk in the door and people are already speaking Russian, you know you’ve probably walked into a fight.”

Declan shook his head, laughing. “This family is very interesting.”

Eva’s voice came from behind them. “I hope you mean that as a compliment.” She appeared with several bottles in her hand, putting them down and then opening two and handing them to Sasha and Declan.

“Of course,” Declan told her. “I would never insult my second family.” They all clinked bottles and drank. Declan and Eva had developed a bit of a teasing sibling relationship in the time they had all lived together. It was cute.

The five of them sat down to eat, the teasing bountiful, the conversation lively. Sasha loved how easily Declan slid into their family dynamic. Same as Rachel had, Declan just seemed to get it.

Papa did indeed make Declan drink his vodka, and Declan choked and sputtered just like they had predicted. Sasha patted him on the back and then rubbed his hand in circles. “There there. It’s OK. I promise your esophagus will live another day.”

Declan leaned into Sasha’s touch, still coughing occasionally. “I don’t know. You might have to resuscitate me. Wow, that shit is strong.” Sasha tried not to notice the look his parents exchanged across the table.

When everyone was finished and picking at the remains of their dinner, Papa turned to Sasha. “So what in the world is going on with you and this boy?” he asked in Russian.

“Really?” Sasha responded, also in Russian. “We’re going to do this now, in front of him?”

Papa waved his hand like he was shooing a fly. “He doesn’t know what we’re saying. Come on. This is confusing. Eva told us about you two and now I can see it for myself. You act like boyfriends but you’re not boyfriends?”

Sasha glared at Eva. “Traitor. How could you?”

Eva piped up. “Because I’m concerned about you. Papa’s not the only one who’s confused. I live with you guys and I can’t even figure it out.”

“This is incredibly rude,” Dad complained to Pop. “And you’re upsetting Sasha. We should do this later in private.”

“How are we going to do it in private?” his pop asked. “They are never apart! Like boyfriends would be, I might add.”

“Just stop it,” Sasha said, frustrated, his voice raising in volume. “Frankly, I don’t even know what’s going on between us except that we’re very close friends and in the rare times when he’s not with me, he’s out picking up and fucking girls. So that makes me think we’re nowhere close to being boyfriends!” By this time he was shouting.

Everybody froze, even Declan, who had no idea what was going on. “That explains a lot of things,” Eva said quietly to herself.

His dad closed his eyes and shook his head. “Are you happy, Ilya? I said later, and you didn’t listen.”

Papa looked chastened for once. “I’m sorry, son. Your dad was right. It’s just hard not to be protective of you. And I like Declan a lot. It is a shame he doesn’t see what’s happening in front of him.”

They were all quiet for a moment. “So…” Declan ventured hesitantly to Sasha, “you told me that anytime Russian breaks out, it’s because people are fighting. That definitely sounded like fighting. Should I know what it was about, or is it none of my business?”

“It was about my pop being an inappropriate jerk, which happens sometimes,” Sasha answered, switching to English.

His pop shrugged. “That’s fair. I was.”

“Who wants to build a fire and make s’mores?” Eva asked like a cheerful camp counselor, effectively distracting all of them.

“I would never turn down s’mores,” Declan said.

“I’ll go get the supplies,” his dad said.

“I’ll start the fire,” his pop said.

“I guess we should clean up,” Declan said to Sasha, standing up and grabbing plates.

Sasha looked at Eva and mouthed, “Thank you.” She winked back at him. Then they all finished cleaning up, and spent the rest of the night gathered together around the backyard fire, joking and laughing and telling stories while they melted and burned terrible s’mores.

Chapter 9: The Kiss

The next few weeks felt like a paradise. They went swimming in the lake, taking turns throwing each other off the dock and sunbathing on the floating platform. They paddled around in canoes and kayaks. Declan was as excited as a little kid when Sasha showed him the jet skis, and they zoomed across the water, racing each other. He was equally as excited about the super soakers, and they spent an afternoon hunting each other around the property, only stopping when there wasn't an inch of dry skin left on any of them.

They read and napped in the hammock, and Declan was introduced to the bloodsport that was Hollander family game night. But the most magical moment was when Declan saw the hockey rink. He examined every inch of it as if it were a great European cathedral. He begged them all to play daily. They started with 2 on 2, rotating one person to act as ref. When Rachel finally showed up, she took over that role.

It was entertaining as hell watching Eva get in her girlfriend's face and yell at her for making a bad call. Rachel stood her ground, threatening to call a penalty if Eva didn't back down. Dad, perplexed, said, "Um, it's not a real game, honey. Maybe you should calm down." She glared at him in answer, her teeth grinding as she said, "ALL games are real, Dad. You should know that."

One afternoon, Sasha and Declan were taking a meandering walk around the property when they came to a small gravestone under a shady poplar tree.

"What is that?" Declan asked. "Did you bury an old ancestor here or something?" he joked.

"No." Sasha's lips twitched. "No ancestors. No people, actually. That's our dog, Anya."

"Oh." Declan's tone immediately became somber. "I'm so sorry. Losing a pet is awful. How long ago did she die?"

"A long time ago. Maybe 12 years? My parents already had her for a few years when we were born. We grew up with her." He crouched down over the grave. "She was the sweetest thing. A mutt. She had been abandoned in the countryside and Papa adopted her. Eva and I were so devastated when she died. It was the first time we had lost anyone close to us."

He stood back up, putting his hands in his pockets. "But the worst part was watching what it did to my papa. I've never seen him cry like that, either before or since. It broke something in him, I think. He hasn't ever wanted another dog. He said he couldn't go through that kind of loss again."

Declan was silent for a moment. "That's....not how I would picture Ilya Rozanov."

A smile flitted across Sasha's lips. "I don't think anyone outside our family really knows my pop. I mean, the larger-than-life-asshole persona isn't fake. That's definitely a part of him. But he's got the biggest heart of anyone I know, and he doesn't show it to very many people. That's sad, I think. For anyone to miss out on knowing the real him."

Declan moved closer to him, their shoulders brushing. He looked at Sasha fondly. “Well at least now I know where your loving heart and sensitivity come from. You’re a caretaker, and it sounds like you get that from your pop.”

Sasha suddenly started to tear up. Declan looked alarmed. “What did I say?”

Sasha had to swallow before he could speak. “My whole life, people have told me how much I look like my papa. The outside is all they see. No one else has ever noticed how I’m like him on the inside. And that part is so much more important to me.” He turned to Declan and looked him in the eye. “Thank you.”

Declan looked stunned. “I...I guess maybe I should get to know your pop better. He must be really wonderful if he’s similar to you.”

Sasha felt lit up like a firefly inside. Declan couldn’t possibly know how much his words meant. “He had a really rough childhood in Russia. The kind that would have messed anybody up. I think so much of the personality that people see as ‘Ilya Rozanov’ is the armor he had to develop to protect himself. I’ve often thought that if he had grown up in a loving and supportive home like I did, the personality that he showed the world would be a lot more similar to mine.”

They stood there quietly for a while, lost in thought. Then Declan put his arm around Sasha’s shoulders. Sasha leaned his head down against Declan’s. They stayed like that for a few minutes, before slowly making their way back to the house.

The twins’ 22nd birthday arrived near the end of their stay and they threw a small party at the house. Declan got to meet Sasha’s grandparents, who were pushing 80 years old but looked and acted much younger. Declan was surprised to realize that while Sasha looked just like his pop, Eva looked very much like her grandmother. “Maybe one day you’ll explain to me where you and Eva came from,” Declan said to Sasha.

“We came from Ottawa,” Sasha said in a deadpan voice.

Declan rolled his eyes. “You know what I mean.”

“Of course I know what you mean. And while I get annoyed when most people ask me, you asking feels OK. I know you’re genuinely interested because you care. If you want the nitty gritty details, we can talk about that sometime. For right now, I think you’ve already figured out whose biological dad is whose.” He turned Declan toward the kitchen. “Come on. I want to eat my birthday meal.”

They enjoyed a wonderful catered dinner, and toasted happy birthday several times with champagne. The twins blew out candles on a three tier chocolate fudge cake, and then they gorged on it with more champagne and wine. Papa had made a playlist that he blasted through the bluetooth speakers, and a dance party broke out. They laughed hysterically while challenging each other to both good dance-offs (Eva was crowned the best dancer among them, though Declan was a close second) and bad dance-offs (his pop came up with moves

that were so cringe-inducing, no one could hope to surpass him). All the while, there were more champagne toasts.

By the time everyone was ready to call it a night, they all ranged from tipsy to wasted. Sasha's grandparents had gone to bed hours before. Declan was going to camp out in Sasha's room for the night so that his grandparents were able to stay over instead of driving back home late in the evening.

Rachel, while not incredibly steady on her own feet, helped a fully inebriated Eva to their room, telling her along the way, "You are going to have a hell of a headache tomorrow, my love."

Similarly, his parents leaned on each other as they made their way to the master suite. "Wow, I have not drunk that much in a really long time," his dad confessed. "I hope I don't die."

"You might feel a little sick, but I think you will live," Pop answered him.

Declan and Sasha, decently drunk themselves, tried to get to their room without tripping over themselves. "You are a mess," Declan declared.

"I'm a mess? You're a mess," Sasha slurred. "I guess we're both a mess. Hey, that sounds like a poem. Does it rhyme?"

"Dunno," Declan said. "I'm not a poetry person. Rachel seems like she would be a poetry person. We should ask her tomorrow."

They stumbled through his doorway, just barely managing to close the door before they both staggered to the bed and collapsed.

"This is not comfortable," Sasha said in a muffled voice, his knees on the floor and his face buried in the fluffy comforter at the edge of the bed.

"That's because you're not actually on the bed. Here, I'll help you climb up." Declan steered Sasha so that they ended up more or less in the correct position, next to each other on the pillows with heads up and feet down.

"I had a great birthday," Sasha said.

"It's not over yet. It's only," he glanced at his watch, "11:54PM. You have 6 more minutes of birthday left."

"Wow. What do you think I should do with it?"

Declan looked like he was trying very hard to think. "Make more wishes?"

"No," Sasha breathed out. "I've made enough wishes. There's only one I want anyway."

"Well," Declan offered, "did you have a birthday kiss?"

Sasha turned his head on the pillow. "Who would I have got a birthday kiss from?"

“I don’t know. I just know everyone deserves a happy birthday kiss,” Declan opined.

“That would be nice. I’d like one,” Sasha mused.

Declan looked around, as if there might be other people hiding in Sasha’s bedroom. Finally he said, “I think I’m the only one here. So I guess I have to give you your birthday kiss.”

Through his drunken haze, Sasha vaguely started to understand what was happening. “Uh. OK.”

Declan leaned over him and brought their mouths together. It only lasted a few moments, and then Declan pulled away. “There,” he said proudly. “Happy Birthday.”

Sasha couldn’t tear his eyes away from Declan’s mouth. “I think there’s still three minutes of my birthday left. If you want to make it special, you could kiss me again until the clock hits midnight.”

“OK,” Declan said. “That’s fair.” He leaned back over Sasha and took his mouth again, this time a little deeper. He pulled back just a hairsbreadth from Sasha’s lips. His eyes darkened and his voice became husky. “I have three whole minutes to fill and I want to do a good job. OK?”

“Yes. You’re very responsible,” Sasha whispered against his lips.

They crashed their mouths back together, and this time Declan rolled on top of him, lining up their bodies and wrapping his arms around Sasha’s back. Declan’s tongue licked into his mouth, and Sasha groaned. They tangled their tongues together, their bodies rubbing against each other. Sasha lifted up and forcefully crushed his mouth to Declan’s. Declan gasped in air and returned Sasha’s ardor.

He lost track of time as they mauled each other, their hands roaming, Sasha’s dick painfully hard. He was vaguely aware of Declan’s own hardness pressing against his stomach. He had no idea what was happening, but he wished with all his heart that this night would never end.

Sasha didn’t get his wish. Eventually, Declan pulled off of him and said, “I think that was a lot longer than three minutes.” He sounded almost whiny when he added, “But it was so nice, I didn’t want to stop.” As Sasha’s brain went completely off-line at the comment, Declan collapsed on his back next to Sasha. “Happy Birthday,” he said. Then as his eyes were closing, Sasha was certain he heard Declan say, as soft as a whisper, “You’re so beautiful.”

Before Sasha could get his brain to function again, Declan was softly snoring, already passed out. Sasha was torn between reliving every moment of what had just happened, and trying desperately not to think about it at all. Because he was certain come morning, one way or another, he was really going to regret this.

Chapter 10: The Talk

When Sasha woke up, the sun was already high in the sky. He had a wicked hangover. He tried not to pay attention to the throbbing in his head, but it was impossible. Very slowly, the previous night's events came back to him. Birthday cake. Champagne. Dance party. Declan sleeping in his room.

Declan in his bed.

Oh. Fuck.

Gingerly, he peeked over his shoulder, expecting to see Declan passed out next to him. No one was there. Furrowing his brow, he sat up and looked around the room. Nothing. He got up and knocked on the bathroom door. No answer. He left his room to look in the kitchen, the living room, on the back deck. After searching every room in the house, he started hunting down his family members. Everyone else who was awake save his grandparents were in as poor a state as he was, but no one had seen Declan.

Sasha went back to his room to grab his phone, thinking to call him. But when he opened his screen, there sat a text from Declan, timestamped three hours earlier.

Sorry. Had to head back to my parents' house.

Sasha stared at the screen for several minutes. Was he hoping that by waiting long enough, the words would change?

He called Declan's number, but it rang out. He texted You OK? but after five minutes there was still no response. His heart felt like a stone sinking in his chest. What did he do now? Fuck if he had a clue.

Eva found him an hour later just laying on his bed, staring at the ceiling. She carefully sat down next to him. "What's going on, Sasha? I heard that Declan's gone."

Silently, he handed her his phone. She read the brief text exchange. "Shit. What happened?"

So he told her. There had never been any secrets between them.

She took a minute to process everything, then lay down next to Sasha, pulling him into a hug and bringing his head to her shoulder.

"What do I do?" he asked like the scared little boy he had once been, needing his big sister to take charge and make him feel safe.

She squeezed him tighter. "He's probably really freaked out right now. This is about him, not you. I think you should give him a day to cool down, and then try contacting him again. Don't take no for an answer. Maybe he wants to ignore this out of fear, but that will only make things worse."

“I don’t know what to say to him though. Part of me feels like there’s no turning back, and if this thing doesn’t finally happen we need to part ways. It’s so painful having him but not having him.” He started to cry. He couldn’t help himself anymore. “But the thought of not having him in my life at all isn’t any less painful. The other part of me says if he wants to ignore it, I should let him if that means I don’t lose him for good.”

Eva just held him for a while, comforting him while he quietly cried out four years of hurt. Eventually, there wasn’t anything left inside him but a hollow ache.

Finally, Eva spoke. “Sasha. I really think he loves you, but he just doesn’t understand himself. We grew up in a home where we were taught that love can look like a million different things, and nothing was assumed about which one would work for us. And despite all the room in the world to explore and figure yourself out, you still found it hard to define yourself.”

“Now, as far as I know, Declan’s parents are perfectly nice people. But I’m certain he didn’t have the kind of encouragement we did that absolutely any way to feel and love was OK. And while men’s sports culture has come such a long way since our dads came out, there’s still an incentive, if you know you find women attractive, to stop right there and not question things any further.”

She let Sasha mull all that over for a while. “OK. But also, he’s an adult. I can’t and I shouldn’t force him to deal with something he doesn’t want to deal with. That’s not my call.”

“I don’t think that’s true, Sasha. This doesn’t only affect him. He has a responsibility towards you too. Not just personally but professionally. If he can’t be the adult here, then you have to do it. I know it sucks to be the one to put yourself on the line first. But you need to keep trying until he responds. I think you should go to his house and talk to him in person.”

Sasha ran his hands through her hair, something he had always found soothing. “I’ve said it many times before but I’ll say it again. I’d be hopeless without you.”

She kissed him on the cheek. “Lucky you, you’ll never be without me. So you won’t have to find out.”

“You should go back to Rachel. We’ve been here a long time.”

“Rachel won’t care. If she did, she wouldn’t be the kind of person I could love like I do.”

Sasha smiled against her hair. There was almost nothing in the world that could comfort him in the midst of this heartache. But laying there with Eva at his side was the one thing that could.

The next morning, Sasha steeled himself and texted Declan.

Can I come over? Please Declan. I really need to talk to you.

There was no response. As the day went by, he checked his phone over and over again. With a sinking feeling, he started to think that Declan really might want to pretend that none of this had ever happened. How could he possibly do that? He didn't think he could. He remembered Eva's words about not giving up. He was getting ready to send another entreaty when finally, close to dinner time, he got a one word text back.

OK.

Sasha breathed a sigh of relief. Thank you, he texted back. Leaving soon.

I'll be outside in the garden.

The whole drive from the lake house to Declan's, Sasha ran through what he wanted to say. He held whole imaginary conversations in his head. In the end, he decided there were no right or perfect words. He just had to tell Declan how he felt and wait for Declan to share his feelings in return.

He parked in front of the house, and walked around the side to the garden. He immediately spotted Declan sitting on a bench beside a fire pit. He was slouched down and huddled up into a hoodie, a pose that looked almost protective. Sasha sat down, making sure to leave a safe amount of space between them. He bent forward, his hands clasped together, his elbows on his knees. After a minute, when it seemed like Declan wasn't going to say anything, Sasha closed his eyes and took a deep breath. What he had to say would be easier if he didn't look directly at Declan.

"I was never going to tell you this, because I dreaded making things weird or awkward between us. But right now, it feels like there's no possible way to make the situation worse. So I'm just going to lay all my cards on the table, and you can decide what you want to do with them."

He could sense Declan's attention shifting to him, his head turning slightly so that when Sasha opened his eyes he could see Declan in his peripheral vision, watching him.

Slowly and carefully he said, "Declan, I've been in love with you since I was 17." There. The hardest part was out. He felt a little lightheaded in relief. "Over the years, I tried so hard to forget about you, but you were always there, in the back of my mind. No one else could ever compare. I told you once that it's really hard for me to be attracted to people. Well, the day I walked into the locker room and saw you for the first time, I couldn't breathe. I pined after you for months. When you made a comment that you had a girlfriend and weren't into guys, I was devastated. I told my dads that I was afraid I would never find another person that I felt the same way about. And unfortunately I was right. Because four years later, I still haven't."

He finally turned to look Declan fully in the eyes. His were wide and unblinking. He looked rapt with attention. Sasha figured if Declan hadn't run away yet, he was unlikely to. "When you showed up in the Minnesota locker room, I didn't know what to think or what to do. But you looked so lost. And I remembered that above everything, you were a good person and I cared about you. So I did whatever I thought would help you. That's why I invited you home and offered for you to move in. I swear I didn't have an ulterior motive. I might have wanted more with you, but I never dreamed it had a chance of actually happening."

He paused, trying to figure out how to say what needed saying. “And then we started hanging out. All the time. And I began to wonder... We’ve been inseparable for months now. By your own choice. The way we are together. I think you know it’s different. And...” God, why was this so hard to say. “And even though we were pretty drunk last night, I’m certain you were into what happened as much as I was. But here’s the thing. I can’t keep going on in this weird limbo. It’s too painful, Declan.”

Sasha reached out tentatively toward Declan’s hand. Declan didn’t stop him, so he picked it up between his own two hands and squeezed. He needed to make sure Declan understood. “If you can’t do this thing that’s been happening between us. If you really don’t see it, or want it, or want to want it... then you need to tell me now. Clearly and definitely, so I can finally move on for good. I’ve spent years wanting something I couldn’t have, and I’m tired.” A single tear ran down his face, and he couldn’t stop a second one from joining. “If you don’t want to keep me, then please just let me go.”

Declan stared at him, owl-eyed, for so long that Sasha thought maybe he wouldn’t say anything. But then he turned his head away and sat up straighter, pulling his hood down but shoving his hands in the front pocket.

He spoke hesitantly, like he was trying to put the words together even as they were leaving his mouth. “Remember right after I moved to Minnesota, when I told you that I had always seen people as either gay or straight, and I never really thought about the choices in the middle? Well, I applied that understanding to myself as well.” He paused and then turned his body slightly toward Sasha’s.

“I would always notice certain guys and think to myself, ‘Girls must find him attractive’. Or I would look at a guy and think, ‘Wow, I wish I could have arms like that or a chest like that or hair like that’. I thought I was looking at those guys because I admired them, not because I was attracted to them. I had always liked girls, and so it didn’t even occur to me that I could like guys too.” He stopped, like he was letting that information sink in for himself as much as for Sasha.

He looked up and met Sasha’s eyes, then slid slightly forward, narrowing the space between them just a little bit. “You’ve become the best friend I’ve ever had. And it shifted something. I would be on a date with a girl, and I would think, ‘this isn’t nearly as much fun as I have when I’m with Sasha’. I would like them and find them attractive, but I would feel like there was just something missing, and I couldn’t put my finger on what it was. Then I would come home and see you and think to myself, ‘I wish these girls could be as kind as Sasha. As thoughtful as Sasha. As down-to-earth and generous and witty and fun as Sasha’.” He swallowed. “And then one day, right before we left for the lake house, I caught myself thinking, ‘No one else will ever be as freaking hot as Sasha’.”

Declan slid slightly closer still. Sasha’s whole body went rigid. He didn’t even dare breathe. “It wasn’t until we kissed that I understood I didn’t just admire you. I wanted you. I woke up and saw you next to me and remembered everything that had happened. I laid there for a while reviewing my entire life through a whole new lens. It freaked me out so much that I didn’t know what to do.” He reached out a hand, and tentatively touched a finger to the curl that always fell over Sasha’s eye. “I was a coward, and I ran away. I’m really ashamed of

that, and I'm so sorry. But at the same time, I'm still really confused. And I'm not sure what I actually want." He looked at Sasha imploringly, begging him to understand.

Sasha could hardly believe this was happening. WAS this happening? It appeared that Eva had been right. He tried to think of what to say. Declan clearly needed reassurance that Sasha would be understanding no matter what happened between them. He could do that, he thought. He could give Declan that much and mean it.

"I will respect and honor anything you want, whatever that turns out to be. But I will just ask you to consider what I'm about to say. You told me I've become your best friend. Well, you're mine too, Declan. The only other person I've ever been as close to in my life is my sister. And the thing is, when you get down to it, dating is just being best friends who also want to kiss."

Declan smirked and huffed out a laugh. "And other things."

"And other things," Sasha agreed with a smile. It broke the tension that had been suffocating between them. "But kissing is the first thing. So if you liked kissing me, then what if we just focused on that for a while? No pressure. No goals. No timelines. Just practice being best friends who also kiss."

Declan looked at him consideringly. And, if Sasha was being honest, a little hungrily. "That makes sense. But what if I decide at some point I want to be even friendlier than just kissing? You would be OK going slowly?"

"Yes," he promised. "As slowly as you need. I promised you I'd honor whatever you wanted, and I meant it. You need to understand that you have the upper hand here, Declan. I know what I want. What I've always wanted since the day I met you. But you could decide that this isn't a relationship you're interested in, and walk away from me anytime. So you get to set the rules, and I'll follow."

Declan frowned. "That doesn't sound very fair. A relationship is two people making decisions together. I don't want you to feel like you have no say in what happens between us."

"Once you're in a romantic relationship, it's two people making decisions together. But when one person is still deciding whether or not they want to be in a romantic relationship, then that's just one person making decisions for themselves. So you make whatever decisions you need to make that will give us the best chance of working out in the end. And if that happens, then we can start making decisions together."

Declan looked at him with shining eyes full of affection, and toyed with his curls. "You're really smart, you know that? And wise. And mature. Most 22 year old hockey players are idiots."

Sasha snorted. "Most 54 year old hockey players are idiots. Just look at my pop."

They shared a laugh. "So we go slowly?" Declan asked.

“We go slowly,” Sasha confirmed.

Suddenly a sheepish expression came over Declan’s face. He averted his gaze downward. “I feel kind of stupid. If I meet a girl in a bar, I’m at her place having sex a couple hours later. I don’t know why being with a guy should feel any different to me than being with a girl, but it does.” He paused and looked up. “I’m sorry. I never thought I’d be asking to go slowly with someone at 22 years old.” He laughed uncomfortably, but Sasha put his fingers under Declan’s chin and held his gaze.

“Hey. Don’t do that to yourself. If it feels different to you for any reason at all, then that makes it different. This isn’t a sacrifice for me. I’m perfectly happy with slow.” He paused, considering his words. “I’m not a virgin, but I also don’t have that much experience. With guys or girls. I’ve told you I’m not attracted to many people, and I’m also not the kind of person who wants to have sex just to have sex. To be honest, if you wanted to go at it right now, I’d probably be a little freaked out myself.”

Declan stared at Sasha for a long time, his gaze searching Sasha’s face. Finally he said, “You are the sweetest, kindest, gentlest person I’ve ever met.”

Sasha snorted. “Don’t tell my sister that. She’ll laugh in your face.”

Declan looked unconvinced. “Would she though? I don’t know. Sometimes I think you don’t see yourself very clearly. You don’t give yourself nearly as much credit as you deserve.”

Sasha’s smile faded, his voice becoming quiet and shy. “What you just said about me. Is that a good thing? Calling a guy sweet doesn’t usually equal feeling passionate about him.”

Declan took Sasha’s face in his hands and looked directly into his warm brown eyes. “I promise you’re wrong. It’s a very good thing,” he whispered, moving toward his lips. He kissed Sasha so tentatively, so gently. They held there for a moment, breathing each other in. Then Declan pulled away, averting his eyes, his mouth pinching into a thin line. He spoke hesitantly. “Can...” He trailed off then tried again. “Can we not tell anyone outside your family?” He closed his eyes and shook his head, looking pained. “God, I feel like the world’s biggest asshole saying that. It’s not like I’m ashamed or anything. But...I just don’t want the pressure and the attention that would be on us while I’m still trying to figure things out. You know?”

Sasha just shrugged and said easily, “OK.”

Declan looked at him with surprise and then doubt. “Ok? That’s it? Just, ‘OK’?”

“I told you, you make the rules and I follow.” Sasha thought for a moment. “If you had asked me to keep it a secret from my family, that would have been a hard no. I would never want to do that, and honestly, I wouldn’t be able to even if I did. But everyone else? No problem.”

They just sat there, the silence stretching between them. “So...what now?” Declan asked.

Sasha smiled. “Now we sit here together enjoying the crisp night air and the stars in the summer sky. And, only if you feel comfortable, we hold hands.” Declan slid his hand into

Sasha's without hesitation. "And, only if you want to, maybe we can kind of cuddle." Declan moved over on the bench until their sides were pressed together. He slung his arm around Sasha's shoulders and pulled him in close. Then he looked at Sasha again expectantly. Sasha licked his lips. "And maybe, only if you're really really sure, we kiss a little more. And I think that's as far as anything should go tonight."

Declan leaned over and took his lips with a little more force than before. Smiling against Sasha's mouth, he said, "See? The sweetest." They stayed like that for a long time, cuddled together, very occasionally kissing softly. Sasha's heart felt like it might burst out of his chest with joy. If he never got more than this one night with Declan, he'd count himself lucky. In that moment, everything felt absolutely perfect.

Chapter 11: The Montreal Game Changers Hockey Camp

Chapter Notes

Note of warning: Things get spicy from here on out. Also, I'm now pretty sure this story will come to 15 chapters total, which means there are probably 4 more left after this one.

Ryan and Fabian fans - these next two chapters are for you.

Three days later, Sasha and Declan stepped into the Montreal townhouse that his parents had bought many years ago, after his dad had sold his other house and moved to Ottawa. His family kept the townhouse for year-round visits, but primarily as a place to stay during the week of hockey camp they coached every summer. This summer in particular was a big deal. The next morning, they would celebrate the 25th anniversary of the Game Changers Hockey camp, and they were anticipating some press attention. Thankfully, his family now had minimal responsibility for the actual running of the camps, and were free to just enjoy coaching and occasional PR responsibilities.

Declan seemed excited to work with the kids, having never coached before. Sasha wryly told him to let him know if he still felt the same way at the end of the first day. "These kids are cutthroat. Be prepared."

Sasha and Declan had spent very little time together over the last two days, as Declan visited with his parents whom he hadn't seen in several months. They had left from Ottawa together, in advance of Sasha's family who were driving straight from the lake house to Montreal, sans Rachel who had to return to Minnesota for work.

Sasha gave Declan a brief tour of the house, stopping in front of the bedrooms. "This is the guest room, next to mine. They share a bathroom. It's all yours." He paused. "Unless..." he hedged, biting his lip, "you're OK staying in my room?"

Declan gave him a soft smile. "Yeah. I think I'm okay staying in your room."

"Well, that's exciting," Sasha teased. "I finally get to wake up next to you in the morning."

Declan blushed. "Ugh. Please don't remind me. I'm so sorry I did that."

"Hey," Sasha said, taking his chin. "I was kidding. Stop that." He kissed him lightly, then let go of his chin and rubbed his hands up and down Declan's arms. "Also, if you're at all concerned, I promise I will behave like a perfect gentleman."

Declan chuckled. "What if I don't want you to behave like a perfect gentleman?"

"Then I will strive to be a less than perfect gentleman, but only in the ways you ask for."

Grinning, Declan said, "You're cute." Sleeping arrangements decided, they dropped their bags just inside Sasha's door.

"So, I think my dads wanted to take us all out to dinner at one of their favorite places. But we have a little time before they get here. What do you want to do?"

Declan put his hands on Sasha's waist and pulled him close. "What do you think I want to do? We haven't been alone in three days."

Sasha put his own hands against Declan's chest and walked him backwards to the wall. He kissed him hungrily, then lifted his head. "Can whatever we're doing be done shirtless?"

Declan didn't even flinch. "Shirtless will always be the preferred option."

Sasha helped Declan pull his shirt over his head, then did the same to his own, dropping it to the floor. He rubbed his face against Declan's like a cat, enjoying the scratch of a day's worth of unshaven stubble, his clean scent filling Sasha's nose. Declan practically purred in response.

They kissed for a few minutes, their hands roaming up and down each other's chest and back. "Just to be clear," Sasha said, "I'm perfectly happy not doing anything more than this. But I was wondering...is it OK if I touch you?" He ran his hand tentatively down the front of Declan's pants.

Declan took in a sharp breath, then moaned. "Um. Yes." He sounded slightly uncertain but also lust drunk. Sasha could have paused and double checked. But they had made an agreement to be completely honest with each other. Sasha knew from their talk that if Declan gave him a yes or a no, he didn't need to ask any further questions. They had to trust each other without constantly second guessing. If Declan changed his mind, he would tell Sasha so.

Sasha wrapped his hand over Declan's cock and gently squeezed. Declan made a strangled sound as Sasha felt his dick jump in his hand beneath the fabric. Sasha leaned in and kissed Declan, keeping their mouths light and teasing while lower down his hand gripped tighter and started to move slowly up and down. Within a minute, Declan was panting into Sasha's mouth.

Sasha pulled back slightly. "Good?" Declan seemed like he couldn't speak, but then managed to grind out, "Fuck yes." He grabbed Sasha's hand and plunged it inside his joggers, beneath the waistline of his boxer briefs. Sasha was now able to be a lot tighter and firmer with his pulls. Declan started moving his hips in time with the stroke of Sasha's hand. He looked lost to it, and Sasha reveled in this proof that Declan was growing more comfortable by the day with the physical side of their relationship.

Sasha felt Declan's cock swelling in his hand, causing Sasha to move faster, pulling him in for a fierce and dirty kiss. Declan gave a shout into Sasha's mouth as he exploded against Sasha's hand.

Sasha continued stroking very slowly and lightly as Declan came down, finally letting him go as his dick softened. Sasha picked up his shirt and wiped off his hand, then caged Declan against the wall, his hands at Declan's hips. "Did you like that?" he asked softly.

Declan stared at him with glazed eyes. "That's a pretty stupid question. I'm not sure I can stand."

Sasha's lips twitched. "How about we lay down on the bed for a bit. We'll have to clean up and get dressed before my family gets here, but we have a little time."

Declan glanced down, sobering. "What about you?" he asked, looking meaningfully at the tent in Sasha's track pants. "I should reciprocate."

He ran his hand through Declan's hair, smiling at him. "You don't have to return the favor. It's something I wanted to give you for myself. I didn't do it with an agenda."

Declan frowned. "That still feels unfair."

"Tell you what. Why don't you sit with the idea. If you still want to tomorrow, I will be happy to let you. If you want to wait a bit, that's completely fine too. My family will be here soon anyway and I don't want us to feel rushed." He led Declan over to the bed and lay down next to him. "Let me just enjoy your company for a few minutes, and then we'll get cleaned up."

"That seems dangerous. You're comfy. This bed is comfy. I just came my brains out. Add it all together and I'm likely to fall asleep."

Sasha nuzzled against his ear. "You can fall asleep for fifteen minutes. But then I'll have to wake you up."

"Deal," Declan murmured.

Within a couple minutes, he was sound asleep. Sasha just stared at him, drinking in his beautiful face, running his fingers through Declan's short bristly hair. He let more than fifteen minutes pass. He waited until he heard the garage door opening below them to shake Declan awake. "Hey. They're here. Why don't you jump in the shower. I'll get dressed and go down."

Declan grumbled but got up and went into the bathroom to turn on the shower. Sasha washed his hands, then kissed Declan and smacked him on the butt, earning a startled yelp, before he left the room and went downstairs to greet his family.

The next morning, Sasha and Declan walked into the training facility early in order to get oriented and set up for the day's activities. They had had a nice evening with his family, everyone happy to see each other for the first time since the birthday party.

His dad had told Declan that he was relieved they had managed to work things out. His papa had told Declan, "Remember when we were speaking Russian at lunch on your first day at

the lake house? And you asked what we were arguing about?”

“Yes,” Declan replied cautiously.

“We were talking about you and how you were being an idiot.”

A trio of voices yelled “Papa!” and “Ilya!” in outraged admonishment.

His papa just chuckled. “But I tell the truth, yes? I think you appreciate that.”

Whether Declan appreciated it or not, he had no choice but to agree. But also, he told Sasha later, he really did appreciate it. He had always found Sasha’s frankness refreshing, he admitted, and it seemed like it was one more trait he shared with his papa. Sasha was inordinately pleased with the compliment.

Making their way through the front lobby and toward the bleachers, they found a very large man with graying red hair setting out equipment. “Uncle Ryan!” Sasha yelled in excitement, then ran over to him only to be caught up in a big bear hug.

“Good to see you, Little Rozanov,” he said. He put Sasha down, who then turned to Declan to introduce him.

“Declan, this is Ryan Price, a former NHL D-man who’s been coaching here since the camp’s first year. I’ve known him my whole life. He’s been running the entire program for the last 12 years, ever since my grandmother retired. Uncle Ryan, my teammate and our new defense coach, Declan Sklar.”

Declan and Ryan shook hands. “Good to have you on board. Sasha’s friends always do a great job with the kids.” He turned back to Sasha. “Where’s the rest of your family?”

“They should be here any minute.” The words were barely out of his mouth when Eva burst through the door, saw them, and squealed.

Just as Sasha had done, she raced over, screeching “Uncle Ryan!” and throwing herself into his arms. He spun her around and squeezed before setting her down. “Congrats on your graduation, Little Hollander. And that Frozen Four win! I was so proud of you.”

“Thank you! I’ve missed you, like always. How have the camps been going so far this year?”

“Good! You know we’re a well-oiled machine at this point. Sasha, why don’t you show Declan around, get him up to speed on how we run things. Eva, I have a job for you. Come with me?”

They took off, leaving Sasha and Declan entirely alone. Declan grabbed Sasha’s hand and pulled him in for a quick kiss. “Yes, please show me around. Preferably to a supply closet or some other secluded spot. There wasn’t time this morning to do what I really wanted to do.”

Sasha laughed. “I suppose I should make sure you know where we keep all the drill equipment. That’s pretty important.”

“Sounds like it. Let’s be responsible. Show me before the others start arriving.”

Sasha did in fact show him to the large equipment room, where Declan proceeded to back him up into the shelving unit on the wall, caging him in and kissing him senseless for several long minutes. Finally, there came a banging on the door.

“Sasha!” Eva shouted, causing them to jump apart. “Are you in there? Come on, everyone’s starting to arrive! Get yourselves together.”

He opened the door, encountering a smug expression on Eva’s face. “Is this high school?” she challenged. “You couldn’t wait five minutes to make out in a supply closet?”

“You spent plenty of time in supply closets in high school. I was a good boy. I need to catch up.”

She rolled her eyes. “Sure, Mother Teresa. Come on. Dad’s going to give an opening anniversary speech or whatever for the cameras.”

“OK, we’re coming.”

She waggled her eyebrows at them. “I bet you are.”

“Oh my god,” he groaned. “You’re as juvenile as Papa. Stop it.”

“It’s not juvenile to be sex positive,” she said, offended. “It’s mature.”

Sasha was really getting annoyed now. “We’re not being sex positive or sex negative or sex anything in the supply closet at a camp for children!”

“Uh huh. You were just playing patty cake while counting orange cones. With the door shut.”

Declan’s eyes had been ping ponging silently back and forth between them. “This is fascinating, and also it makes me grateful to be an only child.”

By the time they got back to the ice, his dads were there, along with several more of the week’s volunteer coaching staff. Everyone was either a current or former D1 college or professional hockey league player. Some had been coaching at this camp for many years. One or two besides Declan were new.

His dad gave a beautiful speech about why they had started the camps, and all the progress they had made in the last 25 years. A couple of news crews took footage while the reporters asked to speak to his dad. One of them approached Sasha and Eva, asking for a sound bite about continuing their family’s legacy, which they were happy to give.

Then the camp day started. He and Declan primarily worked with the younger kids while his dads took the older kids. The girls of all ages flocked to Eva, fawning over her and begging for her attention. After lunch, there was a nasty scuffle between two boys on opposing U12 teams. “See?” Sasha told Declan. “Cutthroat.”

At the end of the day, after cleaning up the facility and prepping for the next morning, they all went out for dinner with Ryan, where Declan got to learn the history of their friendship. By the time they arrived home, all five of them were exhausted.

“I don’t know about you kids, but I need a shower and an early bedtime,” his dad complained. “I’m getting too old for this.”

“It’s not just you,” Sasha moaned. “I don’t know why playing hockey with kids all day is as exhausting as back to back games, but it is.”

“Doing anything with kids is exhausting,” his papa added. “Try taking two of them to Disney World.”

Eva scoffed. “Not that old chestnut again. We can’t have been that bad! I refuse to believe it!”

Papa just patted her on the head like a little kid. Eva smacked his hand away.

“Well, you all can do whatever you want,” Sasha declared impatiently. “Declan and I are going to take showers and collapse on my bed and probably fall asleep. Good night.” He grabbed Declan’s hand and pulled him up the stairs. He ignored the chuckles he heard behind him. He led Declan into his room and shut the door after them. He took a deep breath, and then sauntered over to Declan. “Now. Where were we? Showers and collapsing. Do you want to go first or should I?”

Declan hedged. “Well. Maybe we should wait. I mean, if we’re just gonna get dirty, no reason to shower twice.”

A slow smile spread on Sasha’s face. “Oh really? Does that mean you thought more about our convo last night?”

“Uh huh. And now that I think about it, the most efficient thing would be if we showered together. Body wash makes excellent lube.” He stopped and thought for a second. “Well, excellent lube for what I have in mind. It would probably make terrible lube for other purposes.”

Sasha was delighted and he thought his grin must have showed it. “Color me surprised, Mr. Sklar.”

“Surprised in a good way, I hope.”

“Oh fuck yes.” He grabbed Declan’s hand and dragged him into the bathroom. “I am your plaything. Do with me what you will. There is literally nothing you can do or not do that I wouldn’t like.”

Declan turned on the water, then started undressing. “Challenge accepted.”

Sasha turned out to be right. Declan might have been a novice at fooling around with a guy, but he caught on quickly. By the time they had come all over each other’s hands and down the shower drain, Sasha was eager to fall asleep cuddled up next to the man he loved, enjoy pleasant dreams, and wake up in the morning with Declan’s beautiful face right beside his.

Chapter 12: The Ottawa Game Changers Hockey Camp

The next week they were back in Ottawa, halfway done with their second camp. This was the point each year, since becoming a coach, where Sasha started to feel cranky and wished for it to end already. It made him nostalgic for when he was a camper himself, and playing hockey all day every day with pros and like-minded kids was a dream he wished would never end. He chalked it up to just one of the many ways adulting sucked more than being a kid.

After a full morning of drills and scrimmages, they broke for lunch. Declan pulled Sasha aside and whispered in his ear, “I have a problem.”

“Oh, what’s that?” Sasha asked, unsure what kind of problem this could be.

“I haven’t been alone with you in three days.” Sex problem then. Good to know.

Sasha took Declan’s arm. “That is a massive problem that needs to be addressed immediately,” he teased. “There’s only one way to solve it.” He pulled Declan through the interior hallway, to the administrative corridor. He opened the door to the camp office and pulled Declan in after him.

Declan kicked the door shut and pulled Sasha close, kissing him forcefully. Sasha opened for him, reveling in the feel of Declan’s hand coming up to hold the back of his neck tight as he deepened the kiss.

“We’re gonna miss lunch,” Sasha managed to say against Declan’s mouth.

“I don’t care,” he responded, pushing his tongue into Sasha’s mouth and cutting off all possible replies.

Suddenly the door swung open, and they jumped apart. Ryan Price stood in the doorway, staring at them. “You’ve got to be kidding me.”

“Uncle Ryan! I’m so sorry,” he preemptively apologized. “This was really unprofessional of us. You know we would never do that in front of the kids.”

Ryan remained silent, but Sasha thought he saw a twitch to his lips. “The thing is, um, nobody knows about us,” he pleaded, waving his hand between himself and Declan, “so maybe if you could not say anything...?”

To Sasha’s great surprise, Ryan burst into peals of laughter. Every time he would seem to slow down and catch his breath, he would just double over and start guffawing again. Sasha and Declan looked back and forth between Ryan and each other, unsure what was happening. When he could finally speak again, Ryan said, “I bet you didn’t know that I used to walk in on your dads making out in this same office back when they were still a secret. Repeatedly. That’s why I was one of the first people to know about them. It’s not that they trusted me enough to tell me. It’s that they couldn’t keep their hands off each other for one whole day of camp!”

Sasha was slack-jawed. “Huh. You’re right. I never knew that about my dads. I’m not surprised though. I’ll have to rib them about it later.”

Ryan started chuckling again. “You don’t seem to get how funny this is. Do you know how many people in secret relationships I’ve walked in on at this camp in the twenty-odd years since then? None! Zero. Until today.” He slapped Sasha on the back. “What is it with your family, Little Rozanov? Jesus. You and your dads make me want to drink.” He turned around and walked out of the office, muttering, “I have to tell Fabian about this, he won’t believe it,” before slamming the door shut.

Sasha stood frozen for several moments. Finally he turned to Declan and said, “Well, at least we know that Uncle Ryan can keep a secret.”

Declan sat down on the edge of the desk and looked up at Sasha with a pout. “Maybe. But that doesn’t help the immediate problem. We’ve been foiled.”

Sasha moved between his legs and cupped his face. “I know you’ve been spending this week outside of camp with your parents, since this is the only vacation time you have with them. But maybe you could sleep at my house tonight?”

Declan perked up, and then deflated. “OK. But only tonight or my parents will wonder why, since we just spent an entire week together in Montreal, and we live together when we get back to Minnesota. I don’t really want to tell them that exploring sex with my boyfriend is more important than seeing them for a couple weeks a year.”

Sasha went still, and when he didn’t respond Declan looked at him questioningly. “What? Why are you suddenly acting weird?”

Sasha spoke slowly. “You...called me your boyfriend.”

Declan frowned. “I mean, aren’t you?”

Sasha’s eyes widened. “You tell me. Remember the whole ‘deciding whether you want to be in a relationship or not’ conversation?”

“Oh. Right,” Declan said, as if he had just forgotten that little detail when Sasha thought about it every minute of every day. “I mean, it’s not like I made a conscious decision, but I think it’s obvious we’ve got a good thing going here. I’m not freaked out physically the way I was afraid I might be. And to be honest, over the last six months, you’ve...kind of become my whole world. And I don’t want to change that. Or be with anyone else. So...isn’t that the definition of boyfriends?”

Sasha was positively beaming. “Yeah. I think it is.” He started to lean toward Declan, but then stopped himself. “I desperately want to kiss you, but I have a vision of Uncle Ryan barging back in here with my dads in tow, pointing at us accusingly. So let’s wait until later.”

Declan laughed at the image. “God forbid we worsen the scandal. Later is fine with me.”

“Come on, we’ve totally missed lunch. Let’s get back to the ice.” Sasha sighed longingly.
“Two more days until freedom.”

Declan had been in Sasha’s house a couple times over the years, but he had never been in Sasha’s childhood bedroom before. He seemed disappointed as he looked around. “I was hoping to get a real sense of teenage Sasha in all his glory. Hockey posters on the walls and ticket stubs on the dresser, and old clothing falling out of the drawers. At least that’s what my bedroom in my parents’ house looks like. This is just a pretty typical guest room.”

“Yeah, I cleared out my whole room when I moved to Minnesota. There are still a few things in the drawers and closet but most of it either came with me or got tossed. If my dads felt sentimental about something I didn’t want, they boxed it up and put it in the basement.”

“Oh well. So much for my dreams.”

Sasha gave him a sly smile. “Do you want to know what I would dream about when I slept in this room?”

“I won’t accept any answer but playing professional hockey.”

“I dreamed about you. Kissing you. Touching you.” He nodded his head toward the wall that held his bed and the door to the bathroom. “I jerked off in that bed and that shower to fantasies of you.”

Declan swallowed hard. “That’s a better answer than hockey.” He stared at Sasha consideringly for a moment. “Did you really feel that strongly about me all those years ago? I mean, I know you said that you did, but I don’t think I really understood. It seems impossible. Like I don’t get what I did to inspire that kind of love. Especially from someone like you. I was just a regular kid. Nothing special at all.”

Sasha stalked over to Declan, heat burning in his eyes. “Don’t talk about yourself like that. You’ve always been a wonderful guy. I used to think you were perfect.” He grabbed Declan’s neck and pulled his head forward for a deep kiss. Then he leaned back and smiled wryly. “I still do.”

Declan looked at him with wonder. “I guess I’ll just count myself very lucky.” He ran his hands through Sasha’s hair. “Now, where were we this afternoon?” They attacked each other’s mouths, grabbing at skin and hair and clothing.

“Maybe we should shower first,” Sasha suggested. “We’re all sweaty and gross.”

“I don’t care,” Declan breathed out, before kissing him again.

Sasha moved them slowly backwards into the bathroom, then crowded Declan up against the counter. He pulled down Declan’s pants and briefs, mouth watering at the sight of his dick slapping back against his stomach. He looked Declan in the eye. “I want to suck you. Is that ok?”

Every ounce of blood must have rushed out of Declan's head and into his cock because it instantly hardened into steel. Sasha watched as his eyes widened and he struggled to even nod his head yes. Smiling, Sasha dropped to his knees and licked his lips. Declan's cock jerked toward his mouth, begging to get inside. Sasha muzzled at his length, rubbing his cheek and his lips up and down the shaft, then over the head.

Declan moaned so loudly, Sasha was afraid his family would hear it. Then he swallowed Declan down, and the moan turned into a shout. He thought of stopping and telling Declan to quiet down. But then he decided he really didn't care. In fact, he liked knowing exactly how much pleasure he was giving Declan.

Sasha had only ever done this a few times before, and he was no deep throating champion, but he took as much as he could as deep as he could. He sucked, moving up and down the shaft and licking across the head. Declan became increasingly frantic, hips jerking, until he was grabbing Sasha's hair and fucking his mouth. Again, not generally a turn on for Sasha; but with Declan it was different. Absolutely everything felt dizzyingly hot.

It soon became obvious that Declan was about to come. Sasha used his other hand to shove down his own pants and underwear and grab hold of his dick. He had barely started to touch himself when Declan stiffened and shook and unloaded what felt like an ocean of cum down Sasha's throat. A few rough pulls on his own cock, and Sasha was spurting onto the tile floor. For a moment, he felt like he might pass out.

Sasha pulled off of Declan and collapsed on the floor. For a few moments, there was only the sound of heavy breathing. "Holy shit, I think I need to sit down," Declan said, falling back against the bathroom counter. "I don't think I've ever been that turned on in my life." Sasha inwardly preened at the words. "What about you though? Just give me a few minutes to remember how to breathe."

"Don't worry." Sasha reassured him with a chuckle. "I was so hard, it practically took care of itself." He glanced down meaningfully at the puddle on the floor.

"Fuuuuuck," Declan moaned. "That's so hot." He pulled Sasha up by the arm and folded him into a hug. "When I can move again, let's take a shower and get in bed. And if we wake up early enough, maybe you can share some of the fantasies you used to have about me in your bed, and we can make one or two of them come true."

Sasha's heart melted. This man had the power to undo him with just one word or touch. "I'd love that," he told Declan. They stood there in an embrace for a little bit longer, drinking each other in, completely content.

The last night of camp, the two of them celebrated by going out to dinner at a pub that used to be a favorite haunt of their CHL team. They sat at a booth, holding hands underneath the table, entwining their feet, and laughing as they compared their most ridiculous campers' moments of the last two weeks.

They were sipping beers and waiting for their meals when Sasha saw Declan's eyes go wide across from him. He let go of Sasha's hands and feet, and sat up straight. Sasha barely had a moment to wonder what was wrong when he felt a slap on his back.

"Sklar! Hollander! So good to see you. What are you doing here?"

Sasha turned to find two of their old CHL teammates standing next to the booth; one he remembered as Collins, but he forgot the other guy's name. Declan stood up to bump fists and Sasha did the same. "Great to see you too!" Declan exclaimed, though Sasha could tell his excitement was feigned. "We're in town for the charity hockey camp that Sasha's parents run every summer. We were coaching. Today was the last day."

"Oh, right! I remember those," Collins said. "I know some people who attended those camps. How was coaching?"

Declan was radiating nervous energy as he responded. "Different than playing, for sure. What are you two up to these days?"

Collins and the other guy - Hoffstead, he remembered - talked about their time in the EHL before calling it quits and becoming normal nine to five citizens. Sasha really wanted this visit over with so he and Declan could get back to enjoying their evening, but he didn't have it in him to be rude. He suddenly realized that they were talking to him, and he tried to pay attention.

"We always knew you'd make it to the NHL, Hollander. But that's so crazy, both of you ending up on the same team! Must be a great time. You guys hang out off the ice?"

"Uh, yeah," Sasha answered, trying not to let his annoyance show in his voice. "Often. It's nice having someone around who remembers you from way back when, and isn't impressed by you at all." He forced out a chuckle.

"Bet you two pick up plenty of ass," Collins said with a leer. "Must be puck bunnies lining up everywhere. Living the dream, right?" Declan tried to grin but looked so uncomfortable. Collins could not read the room, apparently. Time to be rude.

"It's actually really hard to go out during the season," Sasha answered. "There's not much time for that. We're so busy, training and traveling. Which is why it means so much to us to have quiet nights like tonight. We were really looking forward to just chilling out here with a beer."

"Right, right. Well, it was great to catch up. Good luck this season!"

The guys waved goodbye and made their way out of the pub. "Good riddance," Sasha muttered. He returned his attention to Declan, who he expected to share his annoyance. Instead, he looked like a kicked puppy. He reached back under the table for Declan's hands, but they were stiff.

"What's wrong?"

Declan hung his head. “I’m so sorry. I panicked that they would see us holding hands. I let them think we were nothing more than teammates. I’m just feeling really ashamed right now.”

It took Sasha a moment to get over his surprise. “Hey. Look at me. That’s what we agreed to, remember? Keep it private until we say otherwise. You were just following our agreement. You didn’t do anything wrong.”

“Maybe not technically,” Declan grudgingly admitted. “But here I just called you my boyfriend, and now I’m pretending you’re not? That’s shitty, Sasha. There’s no way around it. It’s like I can’t stop hurting your feelings.”

“You didn’t hurt my feelings,” Sasha promised him.

That made Declan look even sadder rather than reassured. “Either you’re lying or you’re so angelically nice that the Church needs to bestow a sainthood on you.”

Now that made Sasha genuinely laugh. “I promise, no matter how it appears to you, I am neither lying nor saint material.”

But Sasha’s efforts to lighten the mood weren’t working. Declan still looked troubled. Sasha squeezed his hand. “What’s wrong baby? Something else is bothering you.”

Declan huffed out a breath and looked at Sasha with sorrowful eyes. “It’s just, what Collins said, about picking up puck bunnies. It made me think about how I said more or less the same thing to you on my first day in Minnesota.” He slouched down in his seat like he wanted to disappear under the table. “It makes me want to cringe. Or punch myself. Or both. Knowing what I know now about how you felt.” He swallowed and almost looked like he might cry. “I was such an asshole.”

Sasha wanted to brush it off. Just reassure Declan and move on with their night. But they had promised to be completely honest with each other, even if it was painful.

“I won’t lie. You can’t imagine how hard it was for me to watch you going on dates, taking girls home, knowing what you were doing with them and wishing with every ounce of my being that I was the one with you instead. It broke my heart over and over. But at the same time, I don’t blame you. Just like tonight, you weren’t doing anything wrong.”

Declan was silent, absorbing his words. “I’m so sorry I hurt you. Even though I didn’t know I was doing it. I wish I had gotten my head out of my ass sooner. When I turn the tables, and I think about taking you out now and seeing you go home with someone else...” He looked up with tear-filled eyes. “Well, let’s just say it feels...fucking awful.” He gazed at Sasha pleadingly. “Do you forgive me?”

Sasha shrugged. “There's nothing to forgive.”

Declan smiled wryly but then his face crumpled. “I know you don’t mean to, but you make this really hard. You deserve so much better than me. I feel like you’ve been settling time and time again, and you shouldn’t have to. I don’t know why you’re being so patient.”

Sasha closed his eyes and took a deep breath. “This may annoy you, but I’m not going to indulge your pity party. There might come a day where I need something more or different from you in order to continue building this relationship. But I promise I will let you know if and when that happens. Until that time, no more self-flagellating. Let’s just move on.”

Declan gazed at him with such affection, it made Sasha’s heart skip a beat. “You put all other men to shame, Sasha Hollander. You’re perfect.”

“Hardly,” he snorted. “But that’s not my goal anyway. I just want to be perfect for you.”

Declan responded quietly, “I think maybe you are.”

The waitress came back to set their plates in front of them, disrupting the heavy mood. Instead, they didn’t stop smiling at each other for the rest of the meal.

Chapter 13: The Homecoming

Chapter Notes

This thing just keeps getting longer and longer. It went from 13 chapters to 14 to 15 to 16 chapters, and now I think it's actually 17 chapters. What can I say, I've been inspired.

Sasha, Eva and Declan returned the following week to Minnesota. Sasha and Declan had a brief respite before heading to pre-season training. Similarly, Eva tore off to spend a week with Rachel before she started her grad school classes, and Rachel started her third year of Law School.

No sooner had Sasha and Declan walked in the door to their apartment and dropped their bags, than they looked at each other, both with questions in their eyes. It occurred to Sasha in that moment that they had spent all summer ignoring a very important issue. He wondered if Declan was thinking the same thing.

When a few moments passed without either of them speaking, Sasha decided to brave the treacherous waters first. "So...we never ended up looking at places for you at the end of the season like we had agreed on. I kept waiting for you to bring it up, but you never did. And I certainly wasn't going to say anything. But I think we need to clarify our living situation."

Declan looked surprised. "Honestly, it never even occurred to me to look. I guess that should have been a clue about what was happening between us, but I'm not super bright. Anyway, at this point I think we both know I'm not going anywhere." He paused, as if realizing that he was inviting himself to live permanently in someone else's apartment, and rushed to add, "If that's ok with you of course!"

Sasha smiled fondly at him, and reached out to play with a lock of his hair. "Of course it is. I don't ever want you to leave me," he declared solemnly.

Declan blinked and swallowed. "It always amazes me how vulnerable you let yourself be. I'm not sure if you understand how strong that makes you. And how much I admire you for it."

Sasha moved his hand from Declan's hair to the side of his face. "Then why don't you trade some vulnerability in return. You looked like you had a question too. What were you going to say to me if it didn't involve living here?"

"Well, it does involve living here, just not about the apartment in general. I was thinking about bedrooms. Who's sleeping where?"

“Oh!” Sasha breathed a sigh of relief. “That’s easy. Why don’t you sleep in my bed? My room is bigger. And you can keep the other room for when you want some privacy.” He paused and shrugged. “Or we have a fight and don’t want to sleep in the same place.”

Declan gave him a disbelieving look. “Somehow I don’t see you being the kind of person to have ‘sleep on the couch’ fights. Eva? Absolutely. Your dads? For sure. You? I can’t picture it.”

“Ha! I’m telling Eva you said that. She’s going to love it. Especially since I have personally witnessed her having ‘sleep on the couch’ fights.”

“Great. I bet she’ll love it so much that I’ll look forward to being murdered in my sleep.” He grabbed Sasha and pulled him in tight to his body. “In the meantime, I think you should introduce me to the bed I’m going to be sleeping in.”

“My bed will be very happy to make your acquaintance.” Sasha led Declan into his room, and then lay on the bed, coaxing Declan to follow him down. “Would you like to christen it?”

Declan let out a bark of laughter. “I’m sure in your four years here, it has been christened at some point.”

“Barely. And not by you. That’s all that matters.”

Declan rolled on top of Sasha and kissed him. “Then it’s my pleasure.” He started to lean down again but stopped himself and frowned slightly. “You know, I’ve been a little selfish the last few weeks, letting you take the lead, receiving more than giving. I’m sorry about that. I really want to take care of you. I think a big part of it is discomfort. I know what to do with a girl, but I’m not confident with a guy. I feel kind of, I don’t know. Embarrassed? Like I’ll suck at it. Or you’ll be disappointed.”

Sasha wanted to roll his eyes but stopped himself. “There’s nothing you could possibly do that I would find disappointing. And being with a guy is the exact same idea as being with a girl, just with different equipment. The intentions are the same. The way you approach it is the same.”

Declan contemplated that idea. “So for example, caress and kiss and lick you all over?” he asked as he ran his hand down Sasha’s chest.

Sasha’s smile died, and he swallowed. “Exactly.”

“Murmur dirty things to you?” Declan added, kissing the side of his jaw.

Sasha started to feel fuzzy headed. “Yes, that would be great. “

“Let you know how much I want you?” Declan offered while pressing his very hard erection against Sasha’s thigh.

Sasha’s whole body felt lit up. “Yes, please.”

Declan ran his hand over the front of Sasha’s jeans. “Put my mouth on you down here?”

Sasha's brain stuttered to a halt. "Um. Only if you really want to."

Declan whispered in Sasha's ear, "I really want to," then bit his lobe.

Sasha whined. "Then that would be awesome," he said breathlessly.

Declan plastered himself against Sasha, pushing his hands underneath the pillow to encircle his back. Suddenly he stopped, and a confused expression crossed his face. "What's this?" he asked, pulling something out from beneath the pillow and staring at it.

Sasha felt a blush heat his cheeks. "Oh god. That's Bun Bun."

The look of confusion on Declan's face only deepened. "What's a Bun Bun?"

Sasha covered his face with his hands. "My stuffed rabbit from when I was little. I slept with him every night for a long time. When I was clearing out my room to move here 4 years ago, I found Bun Bun and brought him with me. I've been sleeping with him again ever since."

Declan raised his eyebrows. "So this is basically like your security blanket? That you still sleep with at 22 years old?"

Sasha stiffened, feeling defensive. "Yes. What's wrong with that? He's comforting!"

Declan burst out laughing. "Oh my god. Just when I think you couldn't possibly be any sweeter, you manage to surprise me. You have a gift, Sasha." He leaned down and kissed him gently. "You are adorable. And Bun Bun is adorable too."

Sasha took the rabbit and put him to the side. "Thank you for the validation. Bun Bun and I appreciate it. So where were we? There was kissing and licking on the menu. How about we get back to that?"

"Absolutely." Declan kissed him hotly, then leaned back to take off his shirt. He paused, hands at the hemline. "Um. Should I be concerned that Bun Bun is watching us do naughty things with his beady glass eyes?"

Sasha shifted his head to the side and saw Bun Bun sitting against the headboard as if observing them with interest. He turned back to Declan and shrugged. "Bun Bun isn't judgemental. He's a pretty chill rabbit."

Declan looked unconvinced. "That's awesome. I look forward to making friends with Bun Bun. However, for the moment, can I put him somewhere else? I'm already self-conscious enough. Being stared at by a stuffed rabbit won't help things."

Sasha reached his hand to the side to pull open his nightstand drawer, grabbed Bun Bun and shoved him inside, then slammed the drawer shut. "Problem solved. Now go ahead and have your wicked way with me." He dramatically sprawled himself flat on the bed, arms flung to the sides.

"Ok, Scarlett O'Hara," Declan snarked. "Commencing kissing and licking." Declan slowly climbed over him like a predator. "First, let me get rid of your clothes." He pulled off Sasha's

shirt, then peeled down his pants and underwear. “Then let me get rid of my clothes,” he added as he removed his.

“This is like a Wild Planet narration of humans mating,” Sasha commented. “Super sexy.”

“Shut up,” Declan said lightly. “And now that no one has clothes in the way...” He leaned down and kissed Sasha’s ear, sucking the lobe into his mouth and biting down. Sasha gasped, dick jerking. “Let me know if you don’t like something,” Declan whispered, kissing down his neck. “Or especially let me know if you do like something.”

But Sasha wouldn’t have been able to tell him anything once Declan’s lips and tongue started trailing down from his chest to his toes and back again.

Declan sat back on his heels, gaze roaming up and down Sasha’s body, admiring his work. “Look at you, all splayed out for me like my own personal playground. I don’t even know how to choose what I want to do next. Any suggestions from the peanut gallery?”

Sasha spoke three languages and he wasn’t sure if he could answer in any of them. Mouth dry, he croaked out, “Whatever you want. But, um, have you ever heard of frotting?”

Declan’s brows knitted together. “I don’t think so. What is that?”

“Let me show you.” He coaxed Declan to lay down on top of him, lining up their cocks, then took Declan’s hand and moved it between their bodies to wrap around them. Then Sasha gave a small experimental thrust so that his cock rubbed against the underside of Declan’s, whose hand slid down with the movement as he gripped both their dicks.

Declan gasped. “Oh shit, that feels good. You have the best suggestions.”

“It’ll feel even better with lube,” Sasha said breathily. He went to re-open his nightstand drawer. “Sorry Bun Bun,” he rasped out as he shoved his hand behind the rabbit to grab a small bottle of lube. He smacked the bottle into Declan’s other hand and then slammed the drawer shut again.

Declan released his hold on their cocks long enough to pop the cap and squirt some into his hand, rubbing it with his fingers to warm it up. “Bun Bun is going to be traumatized,” he ground out as took both their cocks in his hand again and slicked them up.

“I’ll pay for his rabbit therapist. Now, fuck me like you mean it.” Sasha arched into Declan’s hand and felt Declan’s shaft jerk against his at the command.

“Fuck yes.” Declan started stroking in earnest, grinding his hips against Sasha and making him feel out of control. After a few minutes, Sasha’s movements grew more frantic, causing Declan to quicken his pace in a beautiful feedback loop, pumping their cocks together in his large hand while speeding up the movement of his hips. Starting to feel desperate, Sasha reached down to pull away Declan’s hand, then put his arms around Declan’s back and pulled their chests tight together, arching up into him, rubbing bare cock to bare cock. Declan immediately caught on, stilling Sasha’s hips and taking over thrusting against him.

Watching Declan move over him, his eyes screwed shut, his head thrown back in ecstasy, was more than Sasha could bear. It was so overwhelming, he knew he would be coming sooner rather than later. "Declan," he begged. Declan opened his eyes, looking down at Sasha with a smoldering look. That's all it took for Sasha to erupt between them. Declan groaned in response and thrust wildly against him, Sasha's cum spreading between them like lube. While Sasha was still panting, heart racing, Declan gave a strangled groan and shot all over both of them. He collapsed on top of Sasha, who was all too happy to wrap Declan's large body into his arms.

After a few minutes, Sasha kissed the side of Declan's head. "Bed christened." He could feel Declan's smile against his neck. "We're a mess. Shower time?"

Declan grumbled something unintelligible. Sasha huffed out a laugh and ran his hands soothingly up and down Declan's back. Finally, Declan lifted off him. "Fine. Shower. And then, depending how we feel, maybe I can try my hand at sucking you?"

Sasha's eyes widened. "This was a much quicker journey than I expected from 'friends who kiss' to frotting and blowjobs. Not that I am complaining in any way. I'm just sayin'."

Declan smiled and smacked their lips together. "What can I tell you? You're irresistible."

Sasha supposed it must be true because a short time later, Declan was on his knees in the shower with Sasha's dick in his mouth. Sasha, who had never had much of a sex drive, felt insatiable with this man, like he could fuck him all day every day and still want more. It was a heady feeling. As he came in Declan's mouth, his knees buckling so that Declan had to hold him up, Sasha had a moment of unreality, wondering how he could have possibly gotten this lucky. One thing was for sure, he wouldn't take it for granted.

Chapter 14: The Season

The next week, they were back on the ice. While the summer had been absolutely wonderful, the ice was Sasha's home. He missed it when he was gone, and longed to return.

When their teammates asked them what they had been up to, they gave vague answers, including Sasha inviting Declan for a vacation to his lake house with his family, and coaching the charity hockey camps.

Declan made no outward move in actions or words to suggest their relationship had progressed beyond friendship, and Sasha followed his lead. Their teammates were already used to them being tied at the hip, so constantly being in each other's space was nothing unusual. But they were careful not to give any lingering glances in the locker room. No eyeing each other in the showers. No physical affection beyond typical bro-approved pats and slaps and punches and hugs. Declan seemed especially paranoid around Coach. If there was a tiny niggling voice in the back of Sasha's mind that wondered if Declan would ever feel ready to tell people about them, he pushed it aside. This was all very new. It had barely been a month. No reason to get impatient.

And if the locker room sometimes felt like a landmine, it was wonderful to feel totally free at home. Cuddling on the couch, watching a game or streaming a show with Eva, or sometimes with Eva and Rachel together, or sometimes just by themselves. Lazing in bed on mornings when they didn't have an early practice. Cooking together and popping morsels of food in each other's mouths. Kissing and touching (and fucking) whenever and wherever they wanted. It was worth the stress of the caution they employed at work.

Then there were the away games. Sasha sent up a prayer of thanks to their respective roommates last year for unknowingly giving them the perfect set-up. This season, they were automatically paired in the same room, requiring no subterfuge on their parts at all. They could have a drink in the hotel lounge with the guys, maybe even go out for a bit to a bar or a club, and then say their goodbyes and have the rest of the night to themselves. The only concession was being mindful of how loud they were, since they had teammates in rooms on both sides of them, and a lack of caution would probably earn them some questioning side glances.

As pre-season practices and then games gave way to the regular season, their whole team was on fire and feeling hungry for a title. Declan was surprising everyone as a formidable dark horse defensive talent, and though Sasha had taken a few years longer than his dad's to hit his full stride, at 22 he had finally grown from a quick and dependable center forward into a star.

They were celebrating a nail biter of a win against Chicago in the lobby bar when Sasha and Declan proclaimed exhaustion and begged off. "Where are you going?" Sasha's left winger, Thomas, complained. "You can't bail out now. This party is just getting started!"

"And it will be an excellent party with you in charge of it," Sasha said, slapping the already drunk Thomas on the back. He and Declan moved toward the elevator.

“You guys are like an old married couple!” he yelled after them. “Leaving a victory party to watch a movie or some shit. Boring!”

“Enjoy your headache in the morning!” Declan yelled back as they got on the elevator. A chorus of boos followed them until the doors shut. Declan turned toward Sasha with a loose, mildly tipsy smile and said, “It’s a shame they don’t know that going back to our room means something a lot less boring to us than it does to them.”

We could tell them, Sasha thought, but decided not to say it out loud.

When they got back to their room, Declan started throwing off his clothes haphazardly, and then starfished naked onto the bed. Sasha, amused, took his clothes off a lot more slowly, picking up Declan’s with his and neatly putting them all aside. “That pose looks like an invitation.”

“You don’t need an invitation,” Declan said cheerfully. “You have a standing invitation. Wait, why is it standing? Why not a sitting invitation, or a laying down invitation?”

“Let’s not have a grammar battle right now,” Sasha said, spreading out atop Declan’s very lovely body.

“Ok. Let’s not have a grammar battle. Let’s do something else. Like sex. That would be a great something to do, don’t you think?”

“I agree. But what do you want specifically? There are a lot of options.”

Declan stared at him blankly, like even two options was one too many. Sasha nudged him. “I have an idea.”

Declan looked relieved. “You generally have good ideas. Hit me.”

“What if we watched some porn together? It might give you some inspiration.”

“Huh.” Declan scrunched up his face, looking confused. “Do you know it never even occurred to me to watch gay porn? That’s a huge fail. I guess I’m pretty sucky at being bi.”

Sasha rested an elbow against Declan’s chest and leaned his chin against one hand. “Well, it doesn’t have to be gay porn.”

Declan raised his eyebrows. “I don’t think straight porn would be helpful in achieving our goal.”

“Not straight porn. What about MMF porn?”

“M what?” Declan looked even more confused than before.

“Male, male, female. Two guys and a girl but all three of them are having sex with each other.”

“They have that?” At Sasha’s laugh, Declan rolled his eyes at himself. “What am I saying? Of course. If you can think of a type of porn, someone out there makes that type of porn. You’d be into that?”

“We’re both attracted to girls, so it seems like a reasonable choice. If you want to move into MM afterwards, we can do that.”

“All right. I’m down if you are. But just out of curiosity, what’s with the lingo? MM, MMF. Are you a porn aficionado? I’m kind of surprised by that.”

“Not really, no. But Eva has a huge romance novel collection and a lot of them are queer. Some of them are really bonkers. She would always tell me the plots as she was reading.”

Declan looked intrigued. “Maybe we should be reading highlight scenes in these books.”

“That’s a solid option. There’s this one MMF series where the president and his vice president are banging both each other and the president’s wife all over the white house. It’s awesome.”

Declan jolted upright. “Do you have an ereader? We’re downloading this right now. Fuck watching porn. We’re gonna read it.” He thought for a second and held up a finger. “There’s a problem. How do we find the good scenes? Skimming the entire book until we get to one would take a while.”

“Eva has a hack,” Sasha said, opening his computer. “You do a keyword search for ‘thrust’. Or ‘cock’. Either works. Takes you straight to the sex scenes. Unless it’s FF, then that doesn’t work as well.”

Declan leered. “Your sister is an evil genius.”

“Don’t tell her. We don’t want world domination to be next on her bucket list. And some night in the future, I definitely want to read a dirty book out loud with you, doing the character voices and everything.”

“Holy fuck, that’s hot,” Declan said, apparently liking the idea a lot.

“But for tonight, maybe let’s go with some good old visual porn.”

“You’re captaining this boat, sir. Fire it up!” Declan said, pointing at the laptop.

Sasha scrolled for a bit on a higher end site, Declan looking at thumbnails over his shoulder until he said, “Stop.” It was a video of two guys and a girl in a train. Sasha clicked on it, then sat back against the pillows, putting his arm around Declan - whose eyes were growing wide, his mouth hanging open. “I think we’ve found your kink, Mr. Sklar,” Sasha said in amusement.

“Um. Yeah. That’s. Fuck. I don’t suppose you’d be interested in a threesome with a girl?”

Sasha wasn’t sure if Declan was serious or not, but he answered anyway. “I’m all for ENM, it works great for a lot of people, but personally I don’t think I’d be into sharing.”

Declan stared at him. "I was kidding."

Sasha shrugged. "It was a reasonable question. I gave you a reasonable answer in response."

"Wow," Declan said, looking back at the screen. "I can't imagine any of the girls I've been with not throwing objects at my head if I suggested a threesome, much less being calm and thoughtful about it."

"Lucky for you you're not with any of them then," Sasha said lightly. "Do you want to stay with this clip or find another?"

"Hang on for a minute," Declan answered, his rapt attention going back to the scene.

Sasha took the opportunity to snake his hand down over Declan's cock and start feathering soft touches of his palm up and down. Declan plumped up immediately. "What do you find hot about this?" Sasha asked him in a seductive voice, pressing his hand a little firmer.

The throuple on the screen had shifted positions into something that looked quite acrobatic. Apparently, some pegging would be happening now. Declan seemed like he was having trouble getting words out. "I'm not really sure. Maybe having all the options at the same time? A girl and a guy. Fucking and being fucked. Not having to choose."

"So both fucking and being fucked appeal to you?" Sasha asked. "For both girls and guys, or more with one than the other?"

"I don't know. Maybe all of the above? Or maybe I just like watching it and wouldn't enjoy doing it." He fluttered his eyes closed. "It's kind of hard to think with this video in front of me and your hand on my dick."

"Hhmm. Are you interested in exploring any of those options, to see whether you like it or not?"

That caused Declan to swing his full attention to Sasha. "What do you like to do? Or else, what are you comfortable trying out?"

Sasha stopped his stroking and looked Declan in the eye. "Dec? Let me be very clear. If you want me to bottom for you, I will bottom for you. If you want me to top you, I will top you. If you want me to do both, I will do both. If you don't want to do either, then we won't do either. I don't know how many ways I can say it. I just want you. I don't care how."

Declan swallowed. "I think maybe I want to try fucking you."

Sasha smiled. "See, that wasn't so hard."

"I don't know about tonight though," Declan said. "We have to play tomorrow and you probably haven't done this in a long time, if ever. I don't want you to be sore."

"Frankly, that's probably a good idea. I have done it before, but only a few times, and not for a couple years. I would rate it very highly though."

Declan laughed. "Five stars, would recommend?"

"Google reviews for sex acts. Genius! Why has no one done this yet?"

"We can set it up later," Declan offered. "For now, I have other things I want to be doing."

"And what are those?"

Declan looked to the screen, where the scene had shifted again, to one of the guys and the girl in a 69, while the second guy fucked the first one. "That looks promising," Declan said as he lay Sasha flat, then flipped around so that they could each take the other's cock into his mouth.

Sasha sucked him eagerly before pulling off and saying breathlessly, "Great ideas, brought to you by the porn industry. You're welcome." Then he swallowed Declan down again. Declan's mouth was too full for him to do anything more than moan in response.

By the time the video was finished, they had both come spectacularly and were sprawled in opposite directions across the bed. They had barely gotten their breath back and their heartbeats down when there came a loud thud against their door. They both jackknifed up. The thud was followed by a fist loudly banging. "Hey you two!" a drunken voice shouted. Was it Shep, Sasha's other linemate? "Stop being boring. Are you sleeping? Get up. Party in my room."

Sasha was about to tell Declan to ignore them and let them fuck off, when Declan stood up, hurriedly pulled on his pants, and raced to the door. Sasha flung himself under the covers as Dec opened the door and stood in the doorway. "Hey guys. Come on. Keep it down. There are other people in this hotel."

"Not on this floor!" someone else yelled. Maybe Vigoss, the goalie?

"Anyway, we're tired. We're going to sleep. Rozi is already in bed. You guys go have fun. We're fine here." There were some murmured words and exclamations before the sound carried down the hallway, away from their room. Declan shut the door and put the chain lock on, then turned back to him. "Phew. Close call."

Sasha emerged from under the covers and frowned. "Why?"

Declan frowned back. "Why what?"

"Why was it a close call? Why can't they find out about us? What would happen if they did? Would it be that bad? Are we hiding this forever?" He didn't ask with any heat in his voice, but rather curiosity.

Declan was shaking his head, like he had misheard. "What am I missing? Did we agree to tell people and I don't remember the conversation?"

Sasha spoke slowly and patiently. "When you first asked for secrecy, it was because you weren't sure about having a real relationship with me and you didn't want pressure while you figured it out. But after a while, I thought we decided that we were in this thing together.

Only you didn't seem any more interested in telling people than you had originally. I figured you had your reasons so I didn't say anything. But now I'm wondering. At what point do you feel comfortable enough about people knowing? What milestone do we need to hit?"

Declan blinked his eyes, looking stunned. "You think I still don't want people to know because I'm worried what they'll think about us? Or that I'm ashamed of you or something crazy like that?"

Sasha shrugged. "I don't think anything specifically, but I do wonder about those things."

"Sasha, no! I did feel weird at one point, but that was a long time ago. I'm afraid management will try to trade one of us or punish us somehow. It's not to their advantage to have a romantically involved couple on the same team. I don't care about the guys knowing. I care about Coach and the GM knowing!" He stopped, putting his hands on his hips and furrowing his brow. "Although now that I think about it, maybe I just assumed you were worried about the same thing I was. It seemed so obvious to me. Maybe we never actually talked about it."

"Uh. No," Sasha declared. "We never talked about it."

Declan flopped back on the bed and covered his face. "I've told you so many times that I suck, and you keep telling me I don't. Maybe you'll finally change your mind." He lowered his hands and looked up at Sasha. "I'm sorry. I just don't want to have to leave you."

Sasha took a moment to reorient himself with a deep breath. "Dec, I understand. I really do. I see now how it's a serious concern. But also, I grew up with two parents who played on the same team for almost ten years. Honestly, it didn't even occur to me to worry about that. So I guess both of us are a little dumb sometimes." He thought through his next words. "Nothing has to happen today or even soon. But I don't want to be a secret forever. I told you once that there might come a day when I need something more from you, and I think this is it. We're going to have to figure out how to do this relationship in the open, and live with the consequences."

Declan was quiet for several long moments. "You're right. We need to figure out how to let Coach know. And then the team. It makes me nervous, but I get that it needs to be done."

"Come here." Sasha beckoned to Declan, who crawled over and accepted the invitation into his arms. They cuddled up against each other and Sasha kissed him softly. "I love you, Declan. I'm proud of that. I want to be able to show it outside our apartment walls. That's all."

Declan looked like he was about to say something, but kept stopping himself. Measuring his words. Finally, he said, "I want to explain something to you, and I want you to hear me out before you say anything."

Sasha cocked his head in curiosity but nodded his agreement, so Declan went on. "I've never been in love before. I used to think the concept was overrated. Or exaggerated. You have to understand. I love my parents, they're great people. And they're happy in their own way together. But they're nothing like your parents. They like each other. They respect each other.

They're kind to each other. I'm sure they love each other, in whatever way they each define love. But it's...tepid? Like they're friendly acquaintances who enjoy hanging out sometimes, and happen to share a home and a kid and a retirement account."

"And I don't think there's anything wrong with that. They both seem perfectly satisfied with their lives, and it's not my business to judge someone else's marriage. But I always felt like that kind of relationship wasn't for me. It didn't seem worth a lifetime commitment for something that...I don't know, that transactional? If that was love, it wasn't appealing to me. If I felt like I wanted something different, I couldn't imagine what that would be, much less how to find it."

"I've been dating since I was fourteen. I've liked girls, I've been very fond of girls, I've been passionately attracted to girls. I've even been content and happy in a couple long-term relationships." He took Sasha's hand in his and looked him in the eyes. "But until we started hanging out together, I had never before felt like I was a puzzle piece and someone else fit my grooves perfectly. Is that the definition of love people write poetry about? I didn't think that was something that actually existed. But if it is, then I guess I love you."

As declarations went, it wasn't typical. Sasha supposed he could have been hurt or offended, but he wasn't. Declan always gave him total honesty, and that was worth much more to him than empty words. "You can feel whatever you feel, and you can take as much time as you want figuring it out. I know I love you, and I always have. So I'm here with you, for as long as you want to be here with me too."

Declan gathered Sasha tight, nuzzling his hair, holding him like he was trying to absorb his body. They snuggled quietly for a while, occasionally kissing, lost in both their own heads and in each other. Finally, they set their alarms for the morning and drifted off to sleep together.

Chapter 15: The Hit

Later that week, they were back home playing an evening game against Colorado, Declan's old team. It was only early November, and things were already turning nasty in their division. Minnesota was sitting at the top of the standings and everyone was trying to either catch up to them or knock them down. Fights were breaking out in almost every game. Checks were getting nasty and borderline illegal. Everybody was racking up penalties; even Sasha, who usually ended the season with one of the lowest PIMs on his team. He was one of the fastest, most agile skaters in the league and could usually get around other players before they could check or trip or stick him. But his goal numbers were big this season and everyone was gunning for him. His defense had a hell of a time staying on both him and the puck.

By the middle of the second period, they were already exhausted. Colorado didn't look much better. It was a brutal game. After getting called off for a line change, Declan and Sasha tried to catch their breath. Declan leaned over to Sasha on the bench. "Watch out for 64. I played with him in the AHL before he was called up. Nasty guy. He's got a temper, and he's been eyeing you this whole period."

Sasha nodded his understanding. Declan was excellent at reading players which was one of the reasons he was a great defenseman. "Got it."

A few moments later they were signaled back onto the ice. Sasha took off after the puck and grabbed it before Colorado's center could take a shot. He sprinted down the ice, weaving around and through players before realizing he had no shot or pass to take and circled around Colorado's net. He didn't see number 64 anywhere. He was coming around the other side, skating backwards for just a moment to avoid a check while keeping the puck when suddenly he was smashed from behind full-body into the boards.

The wind was knocked out of him and a searing pain ran down his left side. He collapsed to the ice and couldn't move or breathe for the space of a few heartbeats, especially as the other player had landed on top of him. Once he got his breath back, and the player rolled off him, he tried to sit up but the pain was awful. Then Declan was above him, asking if he was OK, screaming to the refs about sanctioning fucking number 64, but Sasha couldn't focus past getting onto his skates.

Around him, his teammates were attacking Colorado's guys in an all-out brawl. Declan shoved a few people out of the way but stayed by Sasha's side, helping him off the ice to the training room.

"I've got him," the team doctor told Declan. "Thank you. You can get back out there." Declan ignored him and took up position next to Sasha while the doctor asked him questions and examined him. Coach came in and side-eyed Declan but didn't say anything as he waited for the doctor's pronouncement.

"My guess is multiple rib fractures. We won't know how bad until we get a CT. I could bandage you up to finish the period but I don't advise it. With the tenderness in your

abdomen, there's a possibility your spleen is involved."

"Fuck that," Declan insisted angrily to Sasha. "Do NOT be a tough guy. Taking a chance isn't worth it. Go to the hospital."

"None of your business Sklar, even if he is your friend," Coach yelled.

Sasha considered for a moment, hunched over in pain. "No wrapping," he said to the doc. "I think something's wrong. I can feel it. I need to get checked out."

The coach immediately started issuing orders before heading back to the team bench. He paused. "Sklar, get your ass back out there."

"No, Coach." Declan didn't even hesitate.

Coach's eyebrows shot up to his hairline. "Excuse me?"

"I'm not leaving him." He looked Coach, who was on the verge of apoplexy, straight in the eye and said slowly, "You wouldn't want me out there playing anyway. I'll be no good to you. Sasha's more than my friend. And I'm taking him to the hospital."

Coach eyed them both angrily and warily, looking like he wanted to say something but recognizing there was no time. "We three are having one hell of a conversation once we know Rozi is OK. You're getting a game misconduct, Sklar. And who the fuck knows what the GM will do to you if you walk out. Are you sure about this?"

"Yes." Simple and no nonsense.

Coach waved them off, storming back to the bench. Sasha couldn't even care about the whole mess. He was just trying to breathe.

The EMTs arrived in three minutes, giving Declan just enough time to grab their phones and wallets from their lockers. They helped Sasha into the ambulance, and Declan stayed at his side.

"Call Eva," he ground out. "She'll be worried." They knew she was at home, watching the game on TV while she worked on a class presentation.

"Good idea." Declan hit her contact on his phone and put it on speaker so Sasha could hear.

"Declan?" she answered immediately. "What's happening? Is he OK? I'm guessing ribs. I started to worry when neither of you came back to the ice." She paused, a weighted moment of silence. "Actually, why aren't you on the ice, Declan?" she asked suspiciously.

Declan took a deep breath. "We're in an ambulance on the way to the ER. He didn't want to wrap the ribs and go back in. He thinks something more is wrong. He's in a lot of pain. The doc said there was some chance he hurt his spleen."

"Oh God. And you're with him?"

“Yes. I told Coach I wasn’t leaving him. He wasn’t happy about it.”

“Fuck him! Thank you for staying with Sasha. I’ll meet you there. Regions?”

“Yeah.”

“On my way,” she said, and hung up.

Declan smiled at Sasha and took his hand. “Cavalry to the rescue,” he joked. Sasha was in too much pain to smile.

They pulled up to the ER and lifted Sasha out on the gurney. Declan held back like he was going to stay behind while they took Sasha inside. Sasha grabbed for his hand. “Hey. Stay with me. Please?”

Declan squeezed his hand. “Of course, if they’ll let me. They might not.”

The EMT took Declan by the arm. “Just follow us in and no one will ask.”

They brought Sasha to a triage room, where an ED doctor checked him out and ordered him brought straight to imaging. When they wheeled Sasha back into triage, Eva was sitting there with Declan. She stood up and jumped to his side. “Hey. How are you feeling?”

“Like a very large guy purposely slammed me really hard into a giant wall and then landed on top of me as I fell onto very hard ice.”

“Sounds like a good time in our family,” Eva joked, but he could hear her nervousness beneath it. “I called the dads to let them know what was happening. They were watching the game too. They’re on standby if we need them.”

“I’m sure it’s fine,” he tried to reassure her, and frankly himself as well. “I was probably overreacting. We’ve all broken ribs before. Plus lots of equally nasty injuries as well. I’ll live.”

At that moment, the doctor breezed into the cubicle. “You’re right. You’ll live. But you weren’t overreacting. You have multiple rib fractures, but that’s not the big problem. Your ribs lacerated your spleen and caused internal bleeding. Definitely not as bad as it could have been, but not great either. We need to get you into surgery. I’m pretty confident we can save the spleen but we won’t know for sure until we get in there. If you lose it, that’s a whole other discussion, but we’ll cross that bridge if we come to it.”

Both Eva and Declan were wide-eyed as they listened to the doctor. Finally, he directed them to the waiting room and promised someone would update them as soon as there was information available.

They both kissed Sasha goodbye before he was wheeled off. He felt dazed. All of this was so fast. A surgery would keep him off the ice longer. His thoughts scattered in a million directions. The last thing he remembered was someone putting a mask on him and telling him to count down from ten. Did he get to seven? Then it went dark.

Sasha came around to the hum of machine beeps and the drone of low-pitched voices nearby. Everything sounded and felt muffled and hazy.

“...should be here soon...”

“...going to need help...”

“...don’t know if the recovery time is 3 weeks or 3 months or...”

“...don’t want to leave him...”

“...not a choice...”

Before he could make sense of anything, he was passed out again.

The next time Sasha woke, he could actually open his eyes and process where he was. A hospital room. A hospital room? Oh, right. Game injury. He turned his head to the side and found Declan leaning back in a chair, his feet up on the end of Sasha’s bed, his eyes closed. Was he sleeping? What time was it? He looked past Declan and found Eva laid out on a - could it even be called a couch? - against the wall.

He tentatively brushed his hand against Declan’s, causing him to jolt his head forward and open his eyes. “Hey! You’re up. You’ve been out of it for a few hours.”

His words caused Eva to stir and sit up. As soon as she saw Sasha was conscious, she jumped to her feet and came to his other side, grabbing his hand. “How are you feeling? Do you need anything? Some pain meds? They have you on a drip.”

Sasha’s mouth felt very dry, making it hard to speak. “Just some water, please.” Eva poured him a small cup and handed it to him. He felt a little better after a few sips. He settled back, wincing at the stab in his side the movement caused.

“How did the surgery go? I’m really disoriented. I don’t even know what day or time it is.”

“Well, that makes sense because it’s the middle of the night and we’re all disoriented.” Declan’s tone was joking, but Sasha could tell he was exhausted.

Eva held up her hand and counted out each of her points on her fingers. “One. They saved your spleen. Which is great, because I didn’t know what a spleen was or why you needed it, but apparently it fights infections, which seems pretty important. Two. Like Declan said, it’s close to 2 AM. We’ve been in the hospital for something like five hours. Three. Parents will be here in the morning. I called them as soon as they took you for surgery, but they can’t get a flight out for another few hours. And four, because I know you’re wondering, we won the game. 3-2 in overtime.”

“The guys were pissed,” Declan clarified. “They were all messaging me, telling me how they wouldn’t let Colorado win after pulling that dirty crap. 64 got the shit beat out of him, plus a suspension. There were a tremendous number of penalties called, but it was on both sides so it was OK.”

“Great. But how long am I out for?” That was his primary concern.

Declan shrugged. “We don’t know yet. They wanted you awake and stable from the surgery before they discussed any of that with you. Sometime in the morning probably. I’m pretty sure it won’t be too bad, though. You’re not missing the season or anything.”

Sasha frowned. “Coach was pissed at you in the training room. I don’t want you to take a punishment for staying with me.”

Declan waved his hand like it was unimportant. “I don’t care. You scared the shit out of me. I realized I don’t want to hide this anymore. It’s actually the opposite. No one knowing meant I couldn’t be there for you the way I wanted to. So we’ll clarify everything to him, and he’ll continue to be pissed, and we’ll beg him not to trade either of us in retaliation. And hopefully he’ll listen because we’ve been killing it together on the ice and he’s not stupid.” Declan paused his diatribe. “And if someone does get traded...it’ll really suck but like you said, we’ll figure it out.”

Sasha couldn’t help but smile. He was pretty sure the pain meds made the smile dopey. “I love you.”

Declan leaned over and kissed him, then put his lips against Sasha’s ear and whispered, “I can now promise with total certainty that I love you too. But in front of your sister is not how I wanted my first time saying that to go.” He pulled back and switched to a normal volume. “Oh well. Life doesn’t follow plans.”

Eva’s eyes were narrowed. “Do you need me to leave? Because I will. Grudgingly, I should add. Nothing should be kept private from me. But under the circumstances, I’ll allow it.”

Sasha snorted. “I love you too, big sis.” He felt his eyes starting to grow heavy. “I think I need to sleep some more. You can both go home and sleep in your beds. More comfortable. I’m fine here.” His words were getting slower, and slurring.

Declan just shook his head. “No way. Go to sleep. We won’t let you wake up alone.”

Sasha wanted to say more, but he was already drifting off.

Chapter 16: The Cavalry

The next time Sasha came to, it was light in the room. Declan was gone, but in his place sat Papa, sprawled out on the chair. Sasha turned his head and instead of Eva, Dad stood next to his other side. They looked terrible.

“Hey, sweetheart,” his dad said softly, kissing his forehead. “How are you feeling?”

“Hey. A little better than yesterday. What time is it?”

“Ten in the morning,” Papa answered, sitting up and leaning against the bed. “We got here maybe two hours ago. We sent Eva and Declan home to shower and eat and nap.” He looked Sasha up and down. “That was a big hit you took, huh?”

“Yeah. No offense, but you both look exhausted. Did you sleep at all?”

His dad smiled wryly, stroking Sasha’s hair back from his forehead. “I realize you’re not a parent, but when you get a call that your kid has been injured, and he’s in the hospital in surgery, and you have to wait overnight to be able to get a flight to see him, that doesn’t lead to sleeping.”

“Makes sense, I guess. I’m glad you’re here.”

His dad sat on the edge of his bed, taking his hand. “What can we do for you, baby?”

“Some water, please. And am I allowed to eat? I think I’m hungry.”

His pop stood up. “I will go ask the nurse. I’ll be right back.”

He turned back to his dad and said, “Be straight with me. How long am I out?”

Dad shook his head. “We honestly don’t know yet. The doctor said he’d be by once you were awake. But I remember I had a teammate with a similar injury in Montreal back in the day, and I think he was back within a couple months, tops.”

“I guess I should be thankful it wasn’t more serious. And I am. But it’s going to suck. Not just missing games but being stuck at home. Declan will barely be there, and neither will Eva.” In order to keep on the ice and in shape for her PWHL bid for the following season, Eva had taken a position as an assistant coach for the UMN women’s hockey team. Between that and her classes, she was sometimes home even less than Sasha.

His dad smiled and said in a cheerful voice, “That’s why we’re here! Nursing duty and entertainment committee all rolled into one.”

At that moment, Pop walked back into the room with a nurse in tow. She was very chipper. “Glad to see you awake and talking! I hear you want some food?”

“Yes, please.”

“OK then. Just press the food services button on the phone and tell them what you want. Here’s a menu. You shouldn’t have any restrictions listed on your diet at this point, so you can have whatever you want. Or if your parents want to bring you something from the cafeteria, that’s fine too.”

“Or we can go out to a restaurant and bring you back something actually edible,” Papa offered drily. “Up to you.”

“No,” Sasha pleaded. “Just stay here with me. I’ll order something.”

After asking for a traditional breakfast plate, he tried to sit up in bed. The shift in positions aggravated his ribs and he winced. “What the fuck? I’ve seen guys wrap their ribs and jump straight back on the ice. I don’t get it. I can barely move.”

“Well, those guys on the ice with broken ribs didn’t also have lacerated organs and a surgery,” Papa told him, as if offended on his behalf that someone was accusing him of weakness. “I don’t think any other hockey player would be getting out of this bed right now.”

“I had a concussion once and grandma had to take care of me for a few weeks,” Dad reminded him. “And remember when pop had a concussion when you were maybe 7 or 8? And I still had to finish the season? Grandma and Natalya and I all had to take turns helping him. So now it’s our turn to help you.”

“We’ll stay in your extra room for a bit,” Papa told him. “And once you can get around easily yourself, we’ll go to our place until you finish physical therapy.”

He stared his papa down. “What happened to ‘you don’t want Dad and I staying with you for more than a day or two’?”

Papa looked confused for a moment, and then as if remembering that conversation from years ago, waved it off. “Our child is injured. I can behave myself.”

Dad looked at him fondly. “Can you, though, Ilya?”

Pop became suddenly indignant and started complaining loudly in Russian that no one gave him enough credit for being a responsible adult, and, fine, if they were going to be that way, he would stay in the other apartment instead of with Sasha, and the two of them could be boring together in the boring apartment and he would do fun things with Eva instead.

By the end of the diatribe, Sasha’s head was hurting. He rubbed at his temple as if that would dull the noise. “Are you finished with your tantrum?” Dad asked in English. “You’re giving Sasha a headache.”

Now Papa looked contrite. “I am sorry. This is very upsetting and we haven’t slept. When I was a player I would think nothing of these injuries, for other players or even myself. Just part of the game, no big deal. Stop complaining, get back on the ice.” He paused and swallowed, then took Sasha’s hand. “It is different when it is your child. Everything is different when it is about your child.”

In that moment, Sasha was struck again, as he periodically was, that these infuriating, fastidious, egotistical, uptight, childish, complicated, imperfect men, who were also sweet and kind and protective and loyal and fiercely devoted, loved him and his sister more than anyone or anything in this world - and just how astonishingly lucky that made him.

He turned toward his pop and opened his arms. "I love you, Papa. Thank you for taking care of me."

Tears came to his pop's eyes, and he gently folded Sasha into his arms, being careful of his wrapped ribs, laying his head on Sasha's chest. Sasha lifted his left hand and beckoned his dad forward to hug him as well.

"Awww!" came a loud voice from the doorway. "Family hug!!" Eva was back.

Suddenly he had three pairs of arms around him. He tried to look past all the bodies above him to see if Declan was there too, when a familiar hand reached up to cup his cheek.

"Hey," Declan said. "Do I count in the family hug too?"

Papa lifted up to grab Declan around the waist, scoffing and pulling him in. "Dumb question."

"Of course you do," Sasha told Declan, tilting his head for a kiss.

When they all pulled back, Sasha could see that Declan and Eva looked at least a little bit more rested and less rumped. They had bags of stuff with them.

"We brought some pajamas and comfy clothes for when they say you can get out of this horrible hospital gown," Eva said briskly, pulling out items to show him. "And toiletries. And a blanket because yuck, feel this hospital thing, this is not a real blanket. And snacks because lord knows the food here is probably horrible."

"And a special visitor," Declan added, pulling out Bun Bun and handing him to Sasha. "To comfort you when I can't be here."

"Oh wow!" his dad exclaimed. "I haven't seen Bun Bun in forever. I forgot you had him here."

"I'm surprised you could even find him," his papa added. "The amount of time I spent searching for that stupid doll. You were always losing him."

"Hey! Do NOT call Bun Bun stupid," Eva threw at Papa.

But Sasha ignored their bickering as he felt tears slide down his cheeks. He fingered Bun Bun's ears just like he used to do as a kid. Looking up at Declan, he said softly, "I love you."

Declan smiled back, then leaned down to kiss him again. "I love you too."

Papa slow-clapped. "Thank goodness we've gotten that out of the way. Now you're officially part of the family. We don't have to worry about being nice to you anymore."

“Declan, do not pay any attention to the large, surly Russian man,” his dad warned. “Now, we need to find the doctor and figure out what’s happening so we can make a plan.”

As if on cue, the surgeon wandered in, catching his dad’s last few words. “Excellent. That’s what I’m here to talk about.” He stopped in his tracks. “This is quite a crowd. Can I sneak in here to examine the patient?”

Everyone moved aside while the doctor asked Sasha a series of questions and performed a physical exam.

The doctor straightened up, smiling. “As far as I can tell, this should be a pretty straightforward recovery. You’re going to feel terrible for a couple days and require limited movement. Then gradually gain back range of motion and strength. I would recommend daily physical therapy starting in a week. I’m sure your team will be on top of arranging that. If everything goes well, I imagine you’ll be back on the ice in anywhere from 4 to 10 weeks. The 10 weeks is a very conservative estimate, but I just wanted to provide a realistic range. My best guess, we’re looking at 4 to 6 weeks.”

Sasha felt relieved. A day out was a day too many for Sasha, but the estimate was not that bad, all things considered. He would still get most of the season. He could tell by the pleased looks on everyone else’s faces that they agreed.

“Thank you, doc. I appreciate all your help.”

“My pleasure. And this is definitely unprofessional, but I have to say a couple things. Number one, it is an honor to meet such hockey legends, Mr. Rozanov, Mr. Hollander. As a big fan for thirty years, you still loom large over the sport.” His dads shook hands and thanked him.

“And Sasha, you are a tremendous asset to our team, and all of Minnesota is hoping we can take it to the Cup this year. We’re all eager to see you back on the ice. But despite the pressure, do not push yourself too hard and create more problems,” he warned. “For right now, we’re going to monitor you the rest of today, and if everything looks good, you’ll be discharged in the morning. Any questions? No? All right. Good luck!”

They all waved goodbye, and his dads looked at each other. “We need to send that guy some signed merchandise or something,” Pop said.

“Great idea,” his dad agreed. “Now let’s split up and start getting things in order for the apartment.”

“Sure,” Sasha said. “But for right now, can I just spend some time with my family? I need distraction. I don’t want to think about how much my motherfucking side hurts.”

“Of course,” Papa said. “We can tell Declan lots of embarrassing stories from your childhood.”

“Not what I had in mind,” Sasha said drily.

“Actually, if it’s OK, there’s something I’ve been wanting to ask you,” Declan said to his parents.

“Of course,” his dad answered.

“I was wondering how you decided to give Eva and Sasha the middle name Rozanov and the last name Hollander instead of, like, dashing them or doing it the other way around.”

His dad nodded at his papa and told Declan, “You need to ask Ilya that question. It was his decision.”

“Oh?” Declan turned his attention to Sasha’s pop.

Papa smiled and looked at Eva and Sasha in turn, then at Declan. “My father was a terrible man. My brother too. And so was my grandfather, and probably his father and so on. The Rozanovs have been a long line of abusive assholes. Shane’s father, on the other hand, is a wonderful man. Loving and kind, and he has been more of a father to me than my own father ever was.” He paused. “I am very proud of myself, and the career I had, and the life I made. I’m proud of what the name Rozanov will always mean to hockey. But when I thought about the kind of people I wanted my kids to be, the legacy I wanted them to carry, I knew they should be Hollanders. I am happy to be the last of the Rozanovs. Good riddance to them all.”

Declan stared at him, wide-eyed. “Huh. That’s...wow. Thank you for telling me.”

“You are surprised?” Papa asked.

“I guess maybe,” Declan admitted. “That’s not the answer I was imagining.”

“You don’t think of Ilya as being sensitive or selfless or deep,” his dad said, like it was a fact. “It’s OK. Everyone underestimates him. And he doesn’t help his own image most of the time,” he threw at Papa, who just shrugged. “But you’ll get to know him. There’s a reason I risked my entire career for him, and I promise it wasn’t just his looks.”

“I’m sure that didn’t hurt, though,” Declan said almost absentmindedly as he looked between Sasha and his pop, no doubt thinking that Sasha’s identical looks didn’t hurt Declan’s own willingness to risk his career.

“It definitely didn’t hurt,” Dad agreed, winking at Declan.

They spent the rest of the day making plans, including a schedule of who could be with Sasha and when. Declan had skipped practice that morning but would have to be back the next day even though that was when Sasha was being discharged. Coach came to visit. Perhaps because his parents were there, and Coach had been huge fans of theirs back in the day, he remained polite and didn’t subject Sasha and Declan to the grilling they deserved. He promised to have someone be in touch about Sasha’s rehab schedule, and told them to call the GM to arrange a meeting in the next day or two. Though that sounded ominous, Sasha and Declan decided it wasn’t worth worrying over. There was nothing they could do, and they had other problems to worry about.

His dads, Eva, and Declan rotated through his room into the evening, at which point he begged them all to go home and get some sleep. Especially Declan, who would be playing a game the next night. They finally agreed to take off.

Sasha grabbed Declan's hand, holding him back while everyone else filed out. "I'll see you tomorrow after practice?"

"I'll head straight home," he promised.

"You know," Sasha said suggestively, "we never got to follow through on our conversation from the hotel after the Chicago game. I owe you my ass. I hope you cash in soon."

Declan burst out laughing. Sasha was confused. How was that funny? Declan got a hold of himself and gazed at Sasha fondly. "While I eagerly look forward to that experience, your orders are to do nothing strenuous for two to three weeks. Especially if it's non hockey related. Fucking is off the menu. Frankly, all sex is probably off the menu. That's the least of our worries."

Sasha pouted. "That's not the least of my worries. In fact, it's fairly high up on my worry list."

"Where is Sasha and what have you done with him? What happened to 'I don't have much of a sex drive, I can go for years without it'?" Declan asked.

Sasha turned serious. "That's because I wasn't with you. I still don't really understand how my sexuality works and frankly I don't care. Back in high school, I declared myself Declan-sexual, and I think that's proven to be true. It's like I have a lock on my body and you're the only person in the world with the key."

Declan gazed at him with so much affection. "You're a hopeless romantic, you know that? It's just as well, because it's like I had a lock on my heart and you were the only one in the world with a key."

Sasha melted. "Now who's the hopeless romantic?"

"Both of us, I guess," Declan murmured, smiling. Then he kissed Sasha goodnight.

Chapter 17: The Aftermath

Chapter Notes

Oops. It turned into 18 chapters in the end 🙄

Sasha was bored. Like, out of his mind bored. He had been home for almost two weeks and there was only so much television he could watch. He had physical therapy every day and that was going well. But just as he had anticipated, Declan and Eva were both barely home, and when Eva was home, she was busy with schoolwork. He spent all of his time with his parents, and though he loved them with his whole heart - they were driving him fucking insane.

“Dad, I swear to god, if you offer me one more pillow, I’m going to smother you with it.”

“Fine. I’m sorry,” his dad said, throwing up his hands. “I’m just trying to help.”

“Do you know what would help?” Sasha threw at him. “Letting me put on a pair of skates and just circle the rink or something.”

“You’re finally getting better at sitting and standing,” Papa chimed in. “Skating seems like a bad idea at the moment.”

Sasha covered his face with his hands and screamed. He thought back to the bedtime conversation he had had with Declan two nights ago, before he left town for a week-long away game series.

“Nuh uh,” Declan told Sasha, batting his hands away. “They said no strenuous activity.”

“OK, but is a blowjob really strenuous?” Sasha whined.

“Anything that can jar your ribs or your stitches. So I’m going with a yes.”

Sasha gave Declan his most pathetic pouting face. “You’re no fun. Please? Please, please, please? It will make me feel better.”

“You are incorrigible,” Declan said laughing. “Tell you what. When I get home, if your pain level is below a three, we’ll talk about sex. Deal?”

“Not like I have a choice,” Sasha mumbled like a surly teenager.

Now he had four more days until Declan got home. By then, he would move his parents out to their own apartment if he had to carry their stuff himself.

Sasha and Declan had been called in to meet with Coach and the GM the day after he was released from the hospital. He had brought his dads with him. Coach was a fan, and they still held some clout in the league. Sasha wasn't above using every weapon in his arsenal.

They disclosed relevant information about their relationship, pointing out how well they had been playing together for the last few months despite their involvement. They made solemn promises that they wouldn't let anything of a personal nature interfere with the team. Sasha's parents pointed out how they had played on the same team while married for almost ten years, and won multiple Cups for Ottawa in the process.

They begged Coach not to trade either of them because of their relationship. They both understood that trades were a part of the business of hockey. His dads had been in a position to demand no-trade clauses in their Ottawa contracts. He and Declan didn't have that option. If they needed to be traded for legitimate hockey reasons, that was understandable and they could do nothing about it. But it wouldn't be right for a trade to serve as punishment for them.

Coach wasn't thrilled about the situation, and the GM even less so. But they both reluctantly admitted that Sasha and Declan had been a very strong pairing on the ice since Declan's trade last season. It wasn't in the team's best interest to mess with that.

Finally, with Coach's somewhat grudging support, the GM agreed that as long as they kept up their performance levels and didn't let any drama bleed into the locker room or onto the ice, he would not trade either of them purely for relationship reasons. He did, however, fine Declan a thousand dollars and a one game suspension for leaving mid-game to take Sasha to the hospital.

Sasha's family was indignant on Declan's behalf. Eva was ready to send the GM a very nasty letter before they talked her down. As they otherwise got what they had asked for out of the meeting, they decided to let it go and move on.

Declan still privately worried about what would happen if one of them was traded for strategic reasons. "We'll deal with that if and when it happens," Sasha reminded him. "People don't play hockey forever, and I'm good at being patient."

After returning to practice and games, Declan set the team straight about the rumors that were flying around. On the whole, the guys were supportive. If any of them weren't personally thrilled with Sasha and Declan's relationship, at least they kept it to themselves.

The most amusing response, Declan relayed to Sasha, came from Thomas. "So that's why you two only ever wanted to hang out in your room at away games. Holy shit! And I called you boring! Well played, man," he had said with a hearty slap to Declan's back.

So things were as copacetic as they were going to get until Sasha was back on the ice where he belonged.

He just needed his dad to stop hovering and his pop to stop snarking. He needed hockey, or sex, or both. Preferably all of the above. Just something different than what he had right now.

Declan finally came home several days later. He reported that games were tough without their star forward, but anger and sheer bullheadedness kept the team winning more than they lost. Overall, it had been a successful road trip. Even still, it tormented Sasha that he could only watch his team play on TV.

Sasha was ecstatic to have Declan home. He had outright kicked his dads out of his apartment and into their condo that morning. It was reassuring to have them in the same city for a couple more weeks. Just not in the same space.

He told Eva to get lost and stay at Rachel's for the night.

She looked confused. "I don't care what you do," she told him, like he was an idiot. "Scream the house down. Doesn't bother me. This is my place too."

"It bothers me. And I've been injured," he whined pathetically. "Had people all up in my business for weeks. I deserve some privacy." He gave her doe eyes. It was his last line of defense with Eva, and it usually worked. Behind her back, Declan raised his eyebrows at Sasha, unimpressed at his ploy.

After being huffy for a full minute, she said, "Fine," and then proceeded to angry-pack a bag before slamming her way out the door.

Once they were finally alone, Sasha charged over to Declan, grabbed his shirt and assaulted his mouth. "Pain level is a one. Maybe in the worst moments, a two. Definitely no higher than a three. You made a promise. I want you in my ass. Get on our bed."

Declan stared at him and then rolled his eyes before taking Sasha's hand and leading him into their room. Declan gently sat Sasha down and carefully removed his shirt, then maneuvered him until he was laying with his head on the pillows. He gingerly crawled over Sasha until Declan's legs were on the outside of his, his hands beside Sasha's shoulders.

"I want to be very clear that I will not fuck you," Declan said quietly.

Sasha became indignant and immediately started to protest before Declan silenced him with a finger to his lips. "But I will very slowly and gently make love to you. Does that meet with your approval?"

Sasha's frown became a beaming smile. "That would be acceptable."

"There are rules," Declan said in a stern voice. "You don't move. I do all the work. Do you think you can behave?"

Sasha grinned lasciviously. "I don't know if you were intending this to be kinky or not, but it's certainly feeling that way. Are you going to tie me down, Sir?"

"Oh my god, you're being such a brat." Declan looked to the ceiling for patience. "I was not planning on kinky, but I am definitely open to gagging you if it will make you cooperate and let me get on with things."

“I will keep my mouth shut like a good little sub,” Sasha teased.

Declan's jaw tightened and there was fire in his eyes. “Fine. You want dominant Declan? You got him.” He leaned close to Sasha’s face in a vaguely threatening manner. “You’ll stay on your back or your right side only. If you disobey, I will stop. Is that clear?”

Sasha’s temperature felt like it suddenly rose five hundred degrees. Holy fuck, this side of Declan had him rock hard in seconds. Mouth dry, he nodded his assent. “Clear.”

Declan grunted in approval. He stared at Sasha’s body for a few moments, looking him up and down. That dark assessing gaze had Sasha throbbing and leaking.

Declan hooked his fingers inside Sasha’s waistband and very slowly pulled his pants and briefs down. His eyes warned Sasha not to move. Sasha was so transfixed, he doubted he could move if he wanted to. Once Sasha was naked, Declan pulled off his own shirt and pants, and moved to the nightstand to grab the bottle of lube. He didn’t take out the condoms. They had both been tested and previously decided they could forgo them.

His expression warning dire consequences if Sasha disobeyed the order not to move, Declan set about slowly working Sasha open with fingers and mouth and tons of lube. Sasha was certain that no one in the history of anal sex had ever taken this long. He was a whimpering, panting mess who was five seconds away from coming.

“Please just get on with it already,” Sasha whined desperately.

“I can stop,” Declan said calmly, like he was reporting the weather.

“No! You’re so unfair! And mean!!” Sasha knew he sounded like a tantruming toddler but he was too far gone to care.

“Yes,” Declan said drily, “protecting your health while also giving you exactly what you asked for and pleasuring you in the process. I must be the meanest person who ever lived.”

Sasha was almost in tears. “Oh fuck, please! I’m so ready. Please just get in me already.”

Declan sat up and leaned over him, cautiously lowering his body until they were settled together below the waist, his arms holding his upper body weight off of Sasha’s torso.

“Take your right hand and line me up,” Declan ordered. Sasha was vibrating with anticipation. He did as Declan told him to, helping to notch the head of Declan’s cock at his entrance. Declan pushed forward with small, gradual movements of his hips. Sasha felt like he was hyperventilating. “Now take your hand and place it back by your side. Remember, you are not to move. And if you feel any pain or discomfort in your side, you will tell me immediately. Do you promise?”

Sasha couldn’t even get words out. He just keened and nodded yes. Declan leaned his face down and kissed Sasha softly, nibbling at his lips. Then with the pace of a turtle, he very slowly pressed in, inch by excruciating inch. Sasha’s whole body tightened, and by the time

Declan gave that last little thrust to fully seat himself, Sasha came, untouched, spurting so violently that some landed all the way on his chin.

Declan's eyes were wide with astonishment and satisfaction. "That was a neat trick. And it's just as well you got it out of the way. Because when I said slow and gentle, I meant it. You'll be hard again long before I'm done."

Sasha, panting, was amazed to feel his cock jerk and stiffen slightly, despite the buckets of cum he had just unleashed moments before. Declan gave him the sexiest grin ever. "Told you."

Sasha felt tears prick his eyes out of sheer overwhelm. Declan, true to his word, rocked in and out in soft, languorous thrusts. They breathed each other in, staring into each other's eyes, kissing sensuously. The need built so slowly, level after level, like a physical manifestation of Ravel's Bolero. By that point Sasha was literally out of his mind, crying and babbling incoherently, until finally it ended in a crescendo of pleasure beyond anything Sasha could have imagined feeling. He felt like he was in an alternate dimension as he came in atomic-level deep pulsations. Declan made an inhuman guttural sound moments later and followed him with an endless torrent of heat inside Sasha's body.

Neither of them moved for what felt like an eternity, just trying to breathe, until finally Declan pulled out and coaxed Sasha gently onto his right side. Declan gathered him into his chest with infinite care, making sure his lower arm fell well below Sasha's left torso, across the upper thigh. They lay like that for a long time, not speaking, eventually drifting off to sleep.

When Sasha woke, Declan was eyeing him, probably making sure he was uninjured. He wasn't sure how to explain to Declan that he was suffused with such an incredible sense of well-being, every bone in his entire body could be broken and he probably wouldn't notice.

So all he did was lay his forehead against Declan's and close his eyes. Declan moved his hand with feather light strokes up and down Sasha's back. Finally, Sasha said, "I'm so happy you forced me into compliance. Because I have never felt anything like that in my entire life."

"You and me both," Declan murmured. He stroked Sasha's golden spirals, running his fingers through them, then tracing lightly down over Sasha's face and lips and chin. Sasha opened his eyes and caught Declan's, deep pools of warm melted chocolate he could drown in. He felt like they were gazing into each other's souls.

"I don't know what universe I was living in where I ever questioned loving you," Declan said in a hushed tone. "It seems like the stupidest thing I've ever done in my life. And there's a lot of competition for that honour." He roamed his gaze around Sasha's face while continuing the light strokes of his fingers. "I'm so grateful to you for being patient, and loving my dumb ass anyway."

Sasha nuzzled into Declan's questing fingers. "We do the world a disservice by promoting this one Hollywood narrative about what love looks like. It can look like a lot of different

things to a lot of different people, and they're all valid. It just makes for confusion when you know you feel something, but it doesn't line up perfectly with what your expectations were."

Declan hummed in agreement.

"What my dads have is explosive and bright and sparkling. What your parents have is warm and quiet. What we have feels to me like...a hot tub."

Declan's lips quirked. "This should be good. I'm all ears."

"It alternates between shockingly hot when you first get in, and warm and soothing and comforting once you're submerged. It feels like it surrounds you fully, but in a way that's much deeper than it looks on the surface. It's meant to make you feel good and take care of you. It's always set at the same temperature, so it's predictable. When you leave it for a few minutes, you feel cold and achy, and then as soon as you slip back in, you feel a tremendous sense of relief, like you're where you belong again."

Declan blinked at him for several long moments. Then a range of complicated emotions crossed his face that Sasha couldn't parse out. "You always joke that you aren't smart because you weren't a great student in school. But I hope you know how brilliant you are. You're a poet, Sasha Hollander. You have so many gifts and they're a million times more impressive than scoring well on tests. I feel sorry for anyone who doesn't see that you are the best man I've ever met. I feel sorry for every other person in the world who isn't me, because they don't get the honor of your love."

Sasha broke out in a beaming smile. They kissed and cuddled and eventually fell asleep again, but his smile never dimmed for the rest of the night.

Chapter 18: The HEA

Chapter Notes

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

By the time American Thanksgiving came around, Sasha was healed enough to start practicing on ice again, though full-contact competition would take another couple of weeks. It was such a relief and a joy. In his whole life, he had never had an injury that kept him off the ice for more than a few days. As the saying went, you didn't know what you had until it was gone.

For the most part his teammates were happy to see him. He felt a few curious glances in the locker room, probably wondering if he and Declan were going to just go at it in front of them. Or if he wanted to be cynical, wondering if he was going to make a pass at any of them. The thought alone made Sasha laugh to himself.

As if.

By mid-December, five weeks after his injury and right within the predicted recovery window, Sasha was done with physical therapy and cleared to play again. Conveniently, it was just before a road trip that included Ottawa, which meant that his dads could finally leave to go home, and also see Sasha play his first game back at their home arena. Because of who his parents were, the GM was allowing them to fly back to Ottawa with the team.

They shared a last dinner together at home with Eva and Rachel the night before they left. It was bittersweet in a way. It had been years since he had been able to spend extended time with his whole family anywhere except the lake house.

"I remember road trips fondly," Papa said, as they sat around the table. "Especially once we had you kids. A hotel room to ourselves? It was heaven."

Eva turned to him with outrage on her face. "And there Sasha and I sat at home, desperately sad, begging Grandma and Natalya for you two to come home. Nice to know how thrilled you were to leave us!"

His pop scoffed. "Oh come on. If you have kids one day, come back to me and tell me about how leaving your angels for even a day is so painful. Bah," he said, waving his hand dismissively. "One or the other of you was always in our bed. Hotel rooms at away games were the only way to have sex."

Sasha covered his ears and yelled "Lah lah lah lah lah!" at the top of his lungs. "I don't want to hear it!"

Eva raised her eyebrows at him. "That's a bit of overkill, don't you think?"

"Thank your lucky stars that you weren't the one who was traumatized by walking in on them as a teenager!" Sasha yelled at her. "I don't want to hear about parents and sex, OK?"

“Oh I’m sorry,” Papa snarked, “did Declan know he was dating such a prude?”

“Um, I promise you he is not a prude,” Declan retorted, confused.

Then Dad piped up. “I don’t want to hear about Sasha’s sex life anymore than he wants to hear about mine. Please, if you all love me and don’t want me to have an aneurysm, can we drop the subject?”

Papa just smiled fondly at him. “Speaking of prudes, I had a lot of work to do with your dad at first.”

Screams of “Ilya!”(Dad) and “Papa!”(Sasha) and “Didn’t want to know that!!”(Declan and Rachel simultaneously) filled the air. Eva just high fived their pop, laughing with him.

“Well he can’t have been that prudish,” Sasha shot back, reminding himself that when you couldn’t beat Papa, it was best just to join him. “Uncle Ryan told me about how he used to walk in on you two in the camp office, back when you were a secret. Sounds frisky to me.”

“Yes, “ Papa drawled. “And you take after me in more ways than one, don’t you moy mal’chik? We heard from Ryan about your escapade with Declan in that same office.”

This time, Dad giggled. “You do have to admit that’s pretty funny.”

“Guess we were no better at hiding than you were,” Sasha admitted. “Thankfully, we only had to last four months instead of eleven years.”

Declan choked on his drink. “Eleven years?!” he wheezed.

“It’s a whole story,” Dad said. “We’ll tell you sometime.”

“Not to interrupt the fond memories, but Rachel and I had something we wanted to talk to you all about,” Eva told them.

They all perked up, especially Sasha who was very rarely unaware of anything happening in Eva’s brain.

“I have Farah making some enquiries to PWHL teams on my behalf. There’s no way around the draft, but I need some control about where I end up. Rachel is willing to follow me, but there are some considerations.” She looked to Rachel to explain.

“Well, first of all, I need to know which state, and even which country, to take the bar exam in. That’s not something you can study for last minute, and particularly for Canada vs the US, the paperwork will take time. And also, I’d really prefer to live where there’s some kind of Hmong community. When you cross that with cities that have PWHL teams, ideally we’re looking at either staying here in Minneapolis, or going to Wisconsin, Michigan, or Toronto. There are a few other places that could work if necessary, including Ottawa, but with 16 teams, it’s a real crapshoot.”

“And so I think it makes sense to approach those teams and gauge interest beforehand instead of leaving it totally up to chance,” Eva finished.

Dad was nodding. “Makes a lot of sense. But I’m going to be honest sweetie, you’re going to be high on every team’s radar. If the top three draft picks are to teams you don’t want, that could put you in a tough spot. Are you willing to refuse a contract and wait another year or two for free agency? That cuts down significantly on your professional playing years, especially since you’re already starting much later than the four of us did,” he said, rotating his finger between himself, Declan, Sasha and his pop.

“I know. But I think I can’t make that decision now. We just have to see what happens. In the meantime, I want to do whatever I can to tip the balance in my favor.”

“And I’m not saying those cities are a dealbreaker,” Rachel added. “I’m also not saying I wouldn’t be willing to do long distance for a year or two if that was necessary. But the hours for entry level law positions are possibly even more crazy than hockey schedules. It’s going to be really tough for us even under the best circumstances.”

“I wish I could make this better for you. If we can help you in any way, you know we’re always here for you,” Dad said to Eva, taking her hand.

She smiled at him, squeezing his hand. “I know Dad, Thank you. For right now, I’ll leave things in Farah’s hands until I have something to work with.”

Papa cleared his throat. “Speaking of helping our children, you know our old Coach Brandon Wiebe is the GM for Ottawa. He’s a good friend,” he added for Declan’s sake. “The four of us are going to meet him for a late dinner tomorrow after the game.”

Sasha’s curiosity peaked. “And how exactly does that help us?” he asked.

“Like Eva said, it is good to explore options,” Papa said. “Not to leave things up to chance.”

Declan and Sasha looked at each other, then he looked back at his pop. “Do you mean he might be interested in picking us up?”

“I don’t know,” Papa said, waving his hand vaguely. “This is why we’re having dinner with him. Find out how things are going with the team. What direction they are thinking of taking to move back up in the standings.”

“Your pop is right,” his dad said. “They’ve lost some veteran players in the past few years and the newbies aren’t pulling their full weight fast enough. They could use an infusion of experienced talent.”

Declan looked intrigued. “It’s certainly worth exploring,” he said to Sasha. “You have two more seasons until free agency, and I have at least four. We can’t really choose anything on our own until then. But a possible backup option if they try to separate us would be a great idea.”

“See?” Papa said proudly. “You are welcome.”

Sasha felt like he had something to prove on the ice during his first post-injury game, and boy did he prove it. He was a demon, whipping through players before they could see him coming, stealing pucks, managing breakaways, and walking away with a goddamned hat trick and an assist. He felt like he was flying. Ottawa would be pissed, but he didn't care. It might have been his home team for eighteen years of his life, but business was business.

It was surreal to him every time he came to Ottawa as a player, seeing pictures of his dads hanging on the walls of the corridor, remembering the hundreds of times he'd visited there as a kid. The ice he'd played on tonight was the same ice he'd learned to skate on when he was barely more than a baby.

Once he got through post game interviews, and he and Declan were showered and dressed, they met his dads at the players' entrance. They gave him huge congratulatory hugs, and the four of them headed up to the skybox to meet with Brandon Wiebe.

Sasha had grown up with him. He was Uncle Brandon to him and his sister. The Wiebe children had occasionally babysat Eva and Sasha. They would let the twins listen to explicit songs and watch inappropriate TV shows, which made staying with them infinitely preferable to staying with either their nanny or their grandparents.

Wiebe gave him a hug hello, and offered Declan a handshake. He was in his mid-sixties but you would never know it. "I should be angry at the trouncing you gave my guys tonight. But I can't help being proud of you, Rozi."

Sasha's hockey nickname had been with him since he was a child. His dads' teammates had called him and his sister Little Rozanov and Little Hollander as far back as he could remember, because of their parental resemblances. As Sasha got older, it morphed into Rozi, and the nickname had stuck with each subsequent team he played on.

Hearing Wiebe call him that name now brought back fond memories. "It's great to see you, Uncle Brandon. Not sure if you remember that Declan is from Ottawa too. We played together in the CHL. It's always fun to come back home to play, even if it's as the opponent."

"I'm sure. So I'm looking forward to dinner, but I thought we could get some business things out of the way first."

"OK," Sasha agreed, still not clear exactly what business they were discussing. Wiebe signalled for them all to sit down.

"Sasha, your parents mentioned that you're worried Colorado management might trade one or the other of you and leave you separated," he began. "Obviously that's going to be a risk in any franchise until you hit a contract negotiation where you have enough clout for a no-trade clause. And I imagine that you might be interested preemptively in a move to a team that would be willing to consider your personal situation when making player decisions."

Sasha looked over at Declan, gazes meeting. Declan arched an eyebrow and waved his hand at Sasha, as if to say 'This is your show, you handle it'.

Sasha turned his attention back to Wiebe. “We might be,” he affirmed, “but it depends. What exactly are you suggesting, Uncle Brandon?”

Wiebe held out his hands to the sides. “I would never turn down an opportunity to have you play with us, Rozi. And you know that with our family history, I would always go the extra mile to take care of you.” He leaned forward. “But also, you’re a high value target. Add in Declan, and we’d have to go deep for a worthwhile trade that Minnesota would be interested in. And frankly, with your place in the standings right now, it’s not clear to me that you’re looking to leave Minnesota.”

“You’re right,” Sasha told him. “We’re happy where we are at the moment. We have a real shot at the Cup this year, and our teammates have been pretty accepting of us. If we had some kind of signal from Coach that if it came to a trade, he would do his best to look out for us, or even promise just to give us some warning that there were talks happening so we weren’t blindsided and scrambling to figure things out with a couple hours notice, we wouldn’t even question staying. Hockey partners know upfront they might have to pick up and move at any time. We’re in a different situation because we literally can’t. But Coach and the GM have made it clear that we don’t thrill them as a couple. They did promise not to trade either of us for retaliation, but that doesn’t mean they give a shit about what happens to us when it comes to a strategic trade.”

Wiebe nodded, satisfied. “That’s how I understood the situation, so I’m glad to have you confirm it. Here’s what I am willing to do. I can give your GM a call, let him know that I have my eye on you two, and if at any point he’s considering a trade that would involve either of you, I would appreciate it if he came to me first to see if I can meet his needs. It costs him nothing to agree, and gives him an advantage because then he knows he can push me a little farther in negotiations than another GM.”

Sasha was speechless. “You would do that for us?”

Wiebe smiled at him. “It’s true that this is a business, and business requires hard decisions sometimes. People can get hurt and that’s just the cost of things. But also, I like to think of the Centaurs as a family. We care about each other here. These men,” he said, pointing to Sasha’s dads, “won us three Cups in their time here, and it wasn’t just because they were star players. It was because we all fought for each other, with a real sense of loyalty.” His parents nodded their agreement. Sasha knew that to be true from his own childhood experience.

“I do not consider trades without talking to my guys first,” Wiebe went on. “I don’t give a shit what’s in their contracts. I start by gauging in general at the start of every season, who would be open to a trade, who has a family situation where it would be a catastrophe to move at all, or to a certain kind of place, etc. And we discuss broadly what kind of talent we’re looking to acquire and to the best of our knowledge what kind of talent some other teams are looking for in trade. That doesn’t mean I can always honor it when someone either wants or objects to a trade. But I hate the way we assume it’s normal to ambush players, throwing them on a plane and uprooting their lives and the lives of their family with a few hours notice. It might be business, but business shouldn’t be cruel.”

“Do a lot of higher ups in the NHL hate how I do things?” he continued. “Yes. Do I have more Cups as a coach and a GM than any of them? Also yes. So who’s doing things the right

way here?”

Sasha had forgotten just how much he loved Uncle Brandon. He was truly a stand-up guy.

Sasha swallowed, considering his words. “I don’t know if it’ll ever happen, but I just want to say that one day it would be my honor to try to win another Cup for you, Uncle Brandon.”

Declan added softly, “I couldn’t agree more.”

“Excellent! Now that that’s out of the way, let’s go celebrate with some drinks.”

“What are you celebrating, Wiebe?” Papa asked. “You lost. By a lot.”

Dad smacked him across the chest. “Ignore him, Brandon.”

“I always do!” he said laughingly. He turned to Sasha. “I’m celebrating your win, even if it’s not mine.”

Sasha took him into a tight hug. “Thank you so much. You’re the best.”

Wiebe hugged him back. “I don’t know, I think I have some competition. You always were a lovely boy, Sasha. By all accounts, you’re an equally wonderful man.”

They pulled apart. “Come on,” he said, waving them forward. “Ilya, you can tell me about that new car you bought.”

“I told him not to get that thing but he wouldn’t listen,” Dad said, their voices trailing off as they left the room.

With a few moments alone, Sasha took Declan’s hands in his. “So what did you think?”

Declan shrugged. “Wiebe is a really great guy. And it sounds like a solid plan. But I need you to understand something.” Declan pulled Sasha in and cupped his face. “Ottawa could trade for us tomorrow and I’d be fine. We could stay in Minnesota for ten more years and I’d be fine. When we were in Juniors, a hockey career was all I could think about. I’d do almost anything to make it happen. I couldn’t imagine something being more important than playing and winning. But now, I honestly don’t care where I play, Sasha. I just want to play with you.”

Sasha smiled softly, leaned forward and kissed him. “I love you. And I look forward to playing with you for a long time.”

They held hands as they followed his dads and Wiebe out. Maybe this was their season to win a Cup, Sasha thought. And if not this year, then hopefully next year. He felt in his bones it would happen one day, whether in Minnesota or Ottawa or somewhere completely different. They would make it happen together.

But this year, they had chosen each other. And Cup or no Cup, as far as Sasha was concerned, that meant they had already won.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for taking this wild ride with me! Prior to these Heated Rivalry fanfics, I hadn't written any fiction since college (a LONG time ago). I appreciate all the positive feedback and encouragement.

Thanks also to Terri for explaining to me about the Hmong community in the twin cities.

As a side note, while I have read 5 million hockey romances and occasionally watch NHL games, I have zero knowledge about how the business of hockey works. So take any parts involving the NHL draft, Minnesota management, Brandon Wiebe's offer, or Eva's PWHL plans with a grain of salt. No idea if they're remotely realistic, as Google taught me most of what I know. Also, I decided that almost 20 years from now, there will be 16 PWHL teams instead of the current 6.

Finally, the title "Sasha's Story" was originally a throwaway placeholder, and I was going to change it once I got a feel for where the story was heading. But honestly, it grew on me and now I kinda like it! So I'm gonna leave it.

Shane and Ilya forever 

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