

when the world sees (we run toward each other)

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when the world sees (we run toward each other)

by [pucksandpower](#)

Summary

One security camera. One leaked video. One choice that changes everything.

Ilya Rozanov loses his country, his team, and his shot at Olympic gold in a single night. But he doesn't lose Shane, and that makes all the difference.

A story about finding home in a person, not a place. About choosing love over legacy. And about winning the medal you never knew you needed, standing next to the one person who matters most.

Chapter 1: escape from south korea

The thing about Olympic Villages is that they're designed for athletes to fuck.

Ilya knows this. Shane knows this. Everyone knows this, even if no one says it out loud. All these peak physical specimens crammed together for two weeks, adrenaline running high, away from home and cameras and the weight of their regular lives. The organizers hand out condoms by the thousands. They're not stupid.

What the Olympic Village is not designed for is sneaking around.

"Here," Ilya says, pulling Shane by the wrist into a narrow gap between buildings. It's dark — properly dark, not just shadowy — and there's maybe four feet of space between the back of Team Germany's residence and what looks like a maintenance shed. "Is fine."

"Is it fine?" Shane hisses, but he's already pressing Ilya against the concrete wall, so his protest doesn't carry much weight. "We could just go back to—"

"No." Ilya cuts him off with a kiss that's more teeth than anything else. "Is too far. I need you now."

They've been texting all day — well, all week, really, since they arrived in PyeongChang. Careful texts at first, mindful of who might see, but getting progressively less careful as the days wore on. Shane made it through the preliminary round. So did Ilya. They've barely seen each other except in passing, a brush of shoulders in the dining hall, a long look across the practice rink.

It's been torture.

"You're ridiculous," Shane says, but his hands are already working at Ilya's belt. "Anyone could—"

"No one here. Is late." Ilya palms Shane through his jeans, feeling him hard already. "You want this too. Don't lie."

"I'm not, fuck—I'm not lying." Shane's breath is hot against Ilya's neck. "I just think we should—"

But Ilya's already sliding down to his knees, right there on the cold concrete, and Shane's words dissolve into a sharp intake of breath.

"Ilya—"

"Shh." Ilya looks up at him, can barely make out Shane's face in the darkness, just the shape of him, the way his chest is already rising and falling faster. "Let me."

He makes quick work of Shane's zipper, tugs everything down just enough. Takes him in hand first, stroking slow while Shane braces himself against the wall with both palms.

"Jesus Christ," Shane mutters. "You're—we're—"

"Stop talking," Ilya says, and takes him into his mouth.

The sound Shane makes is worth every risk. Worth the cold seeping through Ilya's track pants, worth the possibility of discovery, worth everything. Ilya knows exactly what Shane likes — knows to press his tongue flat on the upstroke, knows to hollow his cheeks just right, knows that Shane loses his mind when Ilya hums around him.

He does all of it.

Shane's hand comes down to tangle in Ilya's hair — not pushing, never pushing, just holding on like Ilya's the only solid thing in the world.

"God, your mouth," Shane breathes. "How are you so good at—"

Ilya pulls off just long enough to say, "Practice," then takes him deeper.

They shouldn't be doing this. Ilya knows they shouldn't be doing this. They're competitors right now, not just hockey players who happen to be in love with each other. They're representing different countries. If Russia makes it to the semifinals, if Canada makes it to the semifinals, they could end up standing in the way of each other for a chance to fight for Olympic gold.

But right now, in this dark little space with Shane's cock in his mouth and Shane's fingers in his hair, none of that matters.

What matters is the way Shane's breathing changes, gets shorter, more desperate. What matters is the flex of his thighs, the way he's clearly trying so hard to stay quiet and failing. What matters is that they get so little time together, and Ilya's going to take every second he can get.

"Close," Shane warns, voice strangled. "Ilya, I'm—"

Ilya just takes him deeper, and Shane comes with a bitten-off curse that echoes slightly off the concrete walls.

Ilya pulls off slowly, carefully, tucks Shane back into his jeans while Shane just stands there breathing hard and looking completely wrecked.

"You're insane," Shane says finally.

"Da." Ilya gets to his feet, wincing slightly at the ache in his knees. "But you love me."

"Yeah." Shane pulls him close, kisses him soft and sweet, which is unfair because Ilya's still painfully hard and Shane's mouth is very distracting. "I really do. Come on, let's get back before someone actually does see us."

They make it back to Shane's building without incident. Shane's roommate — some kid from Manitoba — is already asleep, so they're quiet as they tumble into Shane's narrow bed. It's cramped and ridiculous, and Shane's hand in Ilya's pants is perfect, and afterwards they lie there tangled together in the darkness.

"I should go," Ilya murmurs, but he doesn't move.

"Probably," Shane agrees. "Stay five more minutes."

Five minutes turns into ten, turns into twenty. Eventually, Ilya really does have to go — can't risk being caught in Shane's room, can't risk the questions — so he kisses Shane one more time and slips out into the quiet corridors of the Village.

He doesn't notice the small security camera mounted high on the corner of the German building.

Three days pass. Canada beats the Czech Republic. Russia demolates Norway. Ilya plays some of the best hockey of his life, all adrenaline and speed, and when Russian reporters ask him about the upcoming semifinal against Canada, he says all the right things about respecting the opponent and playing as a team.

He doesn't mention that he'll be playing against Shane.

He doesn't mention that the night before, they met up again — properly this time, in Shane's room after his roommate left for a party. That they made love slow and careful, mindful of the noise, of being caught. That Shane held him afterwards and said, "Whatever happens in that game, it doesn't change this."

"I know," Ilya had told him.

He'd meant it.

Now it's the evening before the semifinal, and Ilya's in his room going over game footage when his phone rings. It's Svetlana.

"Turn on the news," she says without greeting. "Any channel. Now."

"What? Why?"

"Just do it, Rozanov."

Ilya grabs the remote with a sinking feeling in his stomach. Flips to BBC first because his English is better than his Korean. Takes him a moment to figure out what he's seeing — it's footage of the Olympic Village, dark and grainy, clearly from a security camera. Two figures in the space between buildings.

Oh.

Oh no.

The footage is dark, but not dark enough. You can't see the other person's face — Shane's face, thank God — but you can absolutely see Ilya's. Can see him sinking to his knees. Can see exactly what he's doing.

The BBC announcer is speaking in that precise, measured tone they use for scandals.

“-appears to show Russian hockey player Ilya Rozanov engaged in a sexual act with another man. The footage was allegedly leaked from Olympic Village security systems. We must warn viewers that the content is explicit in nature-”

Ilya's phone is ringing again. Text messages flooding in. He stares at the screen, watching the footage loop, and feels his entire world crack apart.

His door slams open. It's Sergei, the team captain, and his face is white.

“Pack,” Sergei says in Russian. “Pack now. They're coming.”

“Who-”

“Everyone. Managers, officials. They'll be here in minutes. Ilya-” Sergei looks genuinely scared. “You need to go. Now. You understand?”

Ilya understands. Of course he understands. Russia has laws against “gay propaganda.” Russia has laws against being anything other than straight. Russia has made it very clear what they think of people like him.

He'd just thought he could hide it forever.

“How bad?” He asks, already moving, grabbing his duffel bag from the closet.

“Bad.” Sergei's helping him, throwing clothes in without folding them. “There are already calls for prosecution. They're saying you've embarrassed the nation. Ilya, they could arrest you when you land in Moscow.”

“Or worse,” Ilya says quietly.

“Or worse,” Sergei agrees. “So you need to disappear. Right now.”

It takes less than five minutes to grab everything essential — passport, wallet, phone, clothes, toiletries. Ilya's hands are shaking so badly he can barely zip the bag. His mind is racing but also completely blank. This isn't real. This can't be real.

His phone keeps ringing. He doesn't answer.

“Go out the back,” Sergei tells him. “There's a service entrance. I'll tell them I saw you go toward the rink.”

“Sergei-”

“Go.” Sergei grips his shoulder once, hard. “And Ilya? I hope he's worth it.”

Ilya thinks of Shane's smile. Shane's laugh. The way Shane looks at him like he's something precious.

"He is," Ilya says.

He makes it out of the building without being seen — pure luck, really, or maybe Sergei's running interference. The cold air hits him like a slap. He has no plan, no idea what he's doing, just knows he needs to move.

There's a taxi stand at the edge of the Village. Ilya throws his bag in the back of the first available car and says in broken Korean, "Airport. Now. Fast."

The driver looks at him in the rearview mirror. Says something in Korean that Ilya doesn't understand. But he starts driving, so that's something.

Ilya's phone buzzes. Another text. He should turn it off — they can probably track it — but he can't make himself do it. Instead, he opens the messages.

Forty-seven missed calls from Shane.

Jane: ILYA

Jane: pick up your fucking phone

Jane: please

Jane: I saw the video

Jane: where are you

Jane: ILYA PLEASE

Jane: I'm coming to find you

Jane: which building are you in

Jane: Ilya I swear to god

Jane: please just let me know you're ok

The most recent message is from two minutes ago: I love you. Whatever's happening, I love you.

Ilya's hands are shaking so hard he can barely type. Eventually, he manages: I'm ok. Going to airport

The reply is instant: WHAT

Lily: Have to leave. Not safe

Jane: Where are you going

Lily: Don't know. North America. Anywhere

Jane: Stay there. I'm coming with you

No. No, absolutely not

Lily: NO. You have game tomorrow. Semifinal. You need to play

Jane: I don't give a fuck about the game

Jane: I'm not letting you run alone

Jane: Tell me where you are right now

Ilya closes his eyes. Takes a breath. Types: You give fuck about game. Is Olympic medal. Is your dream. You play

Jane: ILYA

Lily: I will be fine. I go to cottage. Our place. Will be safe there

Jane: Let me come with you

Jane: Please

The driver says something else in Korean, and Ilya realizes they're approaching the airport. He can see it in the distance, all lit up against the dark sky.

Lily: I will call you when I land. I promise. But you stay. You play game. You win gold medal for Canada

Jane: I don't want a fucking medal I want YOU

Ilya types and deletes three different responses. Finally settles on: I love you. I will be at cottage waiting. You come after Olympics end. Ok?

A long pause. Then: You promise you'll call?

Lily: I promise.

Jane: If you don't call I'm getting on the next plane

Lily: I will call.

The taxi pulls up to the terminal. Ilya pays the driver with American dollars — way too much, but he's not thinking clearly — and shoulders his bag.

Inside, the airport is bright and overwhelming. Ilya keeps his head down, pulls his hood up, heads for the ticket counters. His phone keeps buzzing, but he ignores it now. Needs to focus.

"First flight to North America," he tells the woman at the desk. "Anywhere. I don't care."

She looks at him like he's crazy. "Sir, I need a specific destination—"

"Vancouver," he says, because it's in Canada and that's all that matters. "First flight to Vancouver."

It costs an obscene amount of money for a last-minute first-class ticket. Ilya doesn't care. He hands over his credit card — his American credit card, thank God — and tries not to think about how they might be able to trace it.

The flight doesn't leave for three hours. Ilya finds a quiet corner of the terminal, away from the crowds, and pulls his hood lower. He should probably try to disguise himself more, but with what? He's six-three and built like a hockey player. Not exactly inconspicuous.

His phone won't stop buzzing.

He opens his messages again. Shane's still texting, a steady stream:

Jane: I'm sitting with Hayden right now

Jane: He says you did the right thing

Jane: But I hate this

Jane: I hate that you're alone

Jane: I hate that I can't be there

Jane: Please be safe

Jane: Please please please be safe

Then, a minute later: They're pulling all the Russian players out of the semifinal. Games in chaos. Officials are losing their minds.

Ilya's stomach drops. Of course. Of course they are. He's cost his team their shot at a medal. He's humiliated his country on the world stage.

He's destroyed everything.

Lily: I'm sorry.

Jane: Don't you dare apologize

Jane: This isn't your fault

Jane: None of this is your fault

Lily: I should have been more careful

Jane: Ilya stop

Jane: We'll figure this out ok?

Jane: Together

Jane: I love you so fucking much

Ilya has to put the phone down because his eyes are burning and he refuses to cry in the middle of Incheon International Airport. He sits there with his head in his hands, breathing carefully, trying to think.

He can't go back to Russia. That much is clear. Which means ... what? He lives in the Boston for most of the year anyway. His work visa should be fine. He can go to the cottage, lay low, wait for the worst of it to blow over.

Except it won't blow over. This isn't the kind of thing that blows over. This is career-ending. This is life-ending.

This is-

His phone rings. Shane's name lights up the screen.

Ilya answers without thinking. "Hello."

"Oh, thank God." Shane's voice is rough, like he's been crying. "Are you at the airport?"

"Da. Flight in three hours."

"Okay. Okay, good." A shaky breath. "Ilya, listen to me. I talked to my agent. And Hayden's cousin — you remember Jonathan? He's a lawyer. They're both—we're all working on this. You're not alone, okay?"

"Shane—"

"No, let me finish. Jonathan says your work visa should protect you. You're a US resident for tax purposes. They can't extradite you for—for being gay, or bi, or whatever. That's not a crime in the US or Canada."

"But in Russia—"

"Fuck Russia," Shane says, and the venom in his voice is startling. "Sorry. I just—fuck them. You're not going back there. Ever. We'll figure something else out."

"Shane, I have family there. My life—"

"We'll figure it out," Shane repeats. "I promise. But right now, you need to get on that plane and get somewhere safe. And then you need to call me the second you land."

"I will."

"I'm serious. The second you land."

“I know. I will.” Ilya scrubs a hand over his face. “You should sleep. Is late there.”

“Like I could sleep.” A bitter laugh. “I’m supposed to play hockey tomorrow against a team that is in the middle of a witch hunt because of this. Because of us.”

“Not because of us. Because of video.”

“Same thing.”

“No,” Ilya says firmly. “Not same thing. We did nothing wrong.”

“I know that. You know that. But the rest of the world-” Shane breaks off. “Sorry. You don’t need me ranting right now. You need support.”

“I need you,” Ilya says quietly. “But you are there and I am here, so. Is what it is.”

“Not for long. The second these Olympics are over, I’m coming straight to the cottage. I don’t care if we win gold or get knocked out in the semis. I’m coming to you.”

“You better win gold.”

“Ilya-”

“I am serious. You win gold. For both of us, ok? Because I cannot.” The words stick in his throat. “I cannot win anything now.”

“That’s not true-”

“Is true. But is ok. You win. You make me proud.”

There’s a long silence. Then Shane says, very quietly, “You already make me proud. Every day.”

Ilya has to cover his eyes with his hand. “I love you.”

“I love you too. So much.” Another pause. “Two hours and forty-five minutes until your flight?”

“Da.”

“I’ll stay on the phone with you until you have to board.”

“Shane, you need to-”

“I’m not hanging up,” Shane says. “So you might as well stop arguing.”

So Ilya doesn’t argue. He sits there in his quiet corner of the airport, hood pulled up, phone pressed to his ear, and listens to Shane breathe on the other end of the line.

Sometimes they talk — Shane tells him about the chaos in the Village, about how half the Canadian team wants to forfeit in protest, about how Hayden threatened to punch a reporter

who asked if Shane knew the other person in the video. Sometimes they don't talk, just exist together in the silence.

At one point, Shane says, "Remember the first time we went to the cottage together?"

"Of course."

"I hadn't even furnished the place yet. We slept on that shitty air mattress."

"Was romantic," Ilya says.

"It was freezing."

"But was romantic."

Shane laughs softly. "Yeah. It was." A beat. "That's still our place, okay? No one can take that from us. Russia can't take it. The media can't take it. It's ours."

"Ours," Ilya agrees.

Around hour two, Shane starts falling asleep. Ilya can hear it in his voice, the way his words are getting softer and less frequent.

"Sleep," Ilya tells him. "I will be ok."

"No, I'm—" A yawn. "I'm awake."

"Shane."

"Fine. But you'll call me. Right when you land."

"I will call you."

"Love you."

"Love you too."

The line goes quiet, but Shane doesn't hang up. Ilya can hear his breathing even out, slow down. He's asleep.

Ilya sits there listening to Shane sleep for another thirty minutes. It's pathetic, probably. Definitely pathetic. But it makes him feel less alone.

Finally, it's time to board. Ilya ends the call carefully, sends one more text: At gate. Getting on plane now. Sleep well. I love you

The first-class cabin is nearly empty — it's a strange time for a flight, middle of the night. Ilya settles into his window seat and stares out at the dark tarmac. In a few hours, he'll be in Vancouver. From there, he can get a connection to Ottawa, rent a car, drive to the cottage.

Hide.

That's what he's doing, really. Hiding. Running away while Shane stays behind to face the questions, the media, the fallout. It makes Ilya feel sick.

But what else can he do?

His phone buzzes one more time as the flight attendants are doing their safety demonstration. It's Jane: Stay safe. I love you. I'll see you soon

Then another message: And Ilya? We're going to be ok. I promise

Ilya wants to believe him. He does. But as the plane starts to taxi toward the runway, all he can think is that he's lost everything — his team, his country, his chance at Olympic gold. All because of one dark corner and one security camera.

The only thing he has left is Shane.

He looks out the window as the plane lifts off, watches South Korea disappear beneath the clouds, and hopes like hell that will be enough.

The flight is twelve hours long. Ilya doesn't sleep.

He tries — God knows he tries — but every time he closes his eyes, he sees that video playing on loop. Sees himself on his knees. Sees the way the camera caught everything, made something private and precious into something scandalous and shameful.

He wonders who leaked it. Some Olympic official? A security guard looking to make a quick buck? Does it even matter?

The first-class flight attendants are very attentive, keep offering him champagne and hot towels and meals he can't eat. Eventually, they leave him alone. Ilya's grateful. He doesn't think he could make small talk right now even if his English was perfect.

Instead, he scrolls through his phone. Looks at the news coverage, which is a mistake.

RUSSIAN HOCKEY STAR IN SEX TAPE SCANDAL

OLYMPICS ROCKED BY EXPLICIT VIDEO OF ILYA ROZANOV

RUSSIA PULLS PLAYERS FROM SEMIFINAL, FORFEIT LIKELY

The comments are worse. A mix of supportive messages and vitriolic hate, people calling him a disgrace, calling him slurs, saying Russia should prosecute him to the fullest extent of the law. Some are calling for his deportation from the US. Some are calling for worse.

But there are good comments too. Messages of support from fans, from other athletes, from random strangers telling him to stay strong. A whole thread of people analyzing the video forensically, trying to figure out who the other person is, but most seem to agree that Shane's face is too obscured to identify.

Small mercies.

There's a statement from the Russian Olympic Committee, formal and cold: We are aware of the video circulating online. The matter is being investigated. Mr. Rozanov has been asked to leave the Olympic Village. No further comment at this time.

Nothing from the Bears. Nothing from the NHL. It's probably too soon for official statements. Or maybe they're scrambling, trying to figure out what to say, how to handle this.

How to handle him.

Ilya forces himself to put the phone down. Stares out at the clouds instead. Somewhere below them is the Pacific Ocean. Somewhere ahead is Canada, safety, Shane.

He just has to get there.

The plane finally lands in Vancouver at — Ilya checks the time, tries to do the math — early morning local time. He's lost track of what day it is. Everything blurs together.

Customs is a nightmare he's been dreading. But the officer who checks his passport just glances at it, stamps it, waves him through. Either he doesn't recognize Ilya, or he doesn't care. Either way, Ilya's grateful.

He finds a quiet corner in the terminal and calls Shane.

It rings four times. Five. Six. Then, "Ilya?"

Shane's voice is rough with sleep. Ilya checks the time again — it would be afternoon in PyeongChang. Maybe Shane finally crashed.

"Is me," Ilya says. "I landed."

"Oh, thank God." The relief in Shane's voice is palpable. "You're in Vancouver?"

"Da. Now I need to get to Ottawa."

"There's a flight in—" A pause, sounds of movement. Shane must be checking his phone.

"Three hours. I already looked. I can book it for you right now."

"Shane, you don't have to—"

"I'm booking it. Give me your passport number."

Ilya recites it, too tired to argue. Hears Shane typing.

"Okay, done. You're on the 2:15 to Ottawa. First class again."

"You don't have to buy—"

"Ilya, I have millions of dollars and nothing to spend it on except you and hockey equipment. Let me buy you a plane ticket."

Despite everything, Ilya almost smiles. "Ok. Thank you."

"How are you doing? Really."

"I am-" Ilya stops. Tries again. "I don't know. Is strange. I am in Canada but feel like I am running."

"You are running. But you're running toward safety, not away from it. That's different."

"Maybe."

"Definitely." A pause. "Have you eaten anything?"

"No."

"Ilya."

"I know, I know. I will eat."

"Promise me."

"I promise I will eat terrible airport food and think of you."

Shane laughs softly. "That's all I ask." Then, more seriously, "Have you looked at the news?"

"Some. Was bad idea."

"Yeah. It's-" Shane sighs. "It's a mess. Russia formally forfeited the semifinal. Canada advanced to the finals by default. There's talk of canceling the game entirely, but I think they'll still play it. Against Finland, probably."

"You will win," Ilya says.

"Maybe. I don't know if my head's in it."

"Shane. You must play. You must focus."

"I know. Hayden keeps saying the same thing. Everyone does." A pause. "I just keep thinking about you alone in airports."

"I am not alone. You are with me on phone."

"You know what I mean."

"I know." Ilya leans back against the wall, closes his eyes. "How is team? Your team."

"Supportive. Angry. Confused. The usual." Shane pauses. "A couple of reporters asked if I knew who the other person in the video was."

Ilya's eyes snap open. "What did you say?"

“I said I didn’t know and even if I did, it wasn’t anyone’s business. Hayden threatened to fight anyone who asked again.”

“Hayden is good friend.”

“The best.” Another pause. “Ilya, we need to talk about what happens next. After the Olympics. Have you thought about it?”

“No. I just think about getting to cottage.”

“Okay. Well, when you’re ready — Jonathan wants to talk to you. And my agent. And probably your agent too. We need to figure out the legal stuff, the visa stuff, all of it.”

“Is too much to think about now.”

“I know. I’m just saying—you’re not dealing with this alone. You have people. You have me.”

“I have you,” Ilya repeats quietly.

“Always,” Shane says. “You’ll always have me.”

They talk for another twenty minutes before Ilya’s phone battery starts to die. He promises to charge it on the next flight, promises to text when he lands in Ottawa, promises to be careful.

“I love you,” Shane says. “More than anything.”

“I love you too,” Ilya tells him. “Now go. You have practice soon, yes?”

“Unfortunately.” A sigh. “Call me later.”

“I will.”

Ilya finds an outlet, plugs in his phone, and goes in search of food. He’s not hungry, but he promised Shane. He settles for a mediocre sandwich and coffee that tastes like hot water.

The next flight is easier, somehow. Shorter, at least. Ilya sleeps for most of it — not well, but it’s something. When he lands in Ottawa, it’s mid-afternoon. The sky is gray and overcast, promising snow.

He rents a car — pays in cash, uses his American license — and starts the drive north to the cottage. It takes two hours, the last thirty minutes on increasingly rural roads. The cottage is isolated, accessible only by a long private drive through the woods. That’s what they’d liked about it when Ilya bought it three years ago. Privacy. Seclusion.

Now it just feels like hiding.

The cottage looks exactly the same — weathered wood, big windows overlooking the frozen lake, smoke curling from the chimney. Wait. Smoke?

Ilya parks the rental car and approaches cautiously. Someone's been here. Recently. His hand goes to his phone, ready to call ... who? The police?

The front door opens.

It's Jonathan, Hayden's cousin. He's holding a coffee mug and looks completely unsurprised to see Ilya.

"You made good time," Jonathan says in French-accented English. "Come inside. It's cold."

Ilya just stares at him. "What are you doing here?"

"Shane called me. Asked me to come up, make sure the place was ready for you. Get the heat going, stock the fridge, that sort of thing." Jonathan steps aside. "Come on. You look like you're about to fall over."

Ilya's legs are shaky as he climbs the porch steps. Inside, the cottage is warm and lived-in. There's a fire going in the fireplace. The kitchen counters are covered with grocery bags.

"I didn't know what you'd want to eat," Jonathan says, "so I got a bit of everything. There's also beer in the fridge. And vodka, obviously."

"Obviously," Ilya echoes faintly.

"Why don't you sit down? I'll make you something."

Ilya sinks onto the couch — the same couch where he and Shane have spent countless hours, watching hockey games and bad movies and each other. It feels surreal to be here without Shane. Wrong.

Jonathan brings him tea and what looks like leftover soup. "Eat," he says firmly. "Shane made me promise."

Ilya eats mechanically. The soup is good — homemade, probably by Jonathan. When he's done, Jonathan takes the bowl and settles into the armchair across from him.

"So," Jonathan says. "We should talk about legal matters."

"Now?"

"Unless you'd rather wait. But I'm here, and you're here, and we might as well get started."

Ilya nods slowly. "Ok. What do I need to know?"

"First: your work visa is solid. You're employed by an American team, you pay American taxes, you have residency. Russia can't touch that. They can revoke your Russian citizenship, but that doesn't affect your legal status in North America."

"They will revoke citizenship?"

“Probably. Eventually. But that might actually work in your favor for seeking asylum.”

“Asylum?” The word feels foreign in Ilya’s mouth.

“It’s an option,” Jonathan says carefully. “If Russia does formally charge you with anything — and they might, just for show — you could apply for asylum in Canada or the US based on persecution for sexual orientation. It would make your status here permanent.”

Ilya processes this. “I would be refugee.”

“Technically, yes. But a well-paid, professionally successful refugee who plays professional hockey.”

“Still refugee.”

“Yes,” Jonathan agrees gently. “Still a refugee. I’m sorry.”

Ilya stares at the fire. He left Russia when he was eighteen to play in the NHL. He’s spent more of his adult life in North America than in Russia. But it was always supposed to be temporary. He was always supposed to go back eventually. Bring his children there for the off-season, one day. Retire there, maybe.

Now that door is closed. Locked. Sealed shut.

“What about my family?” He asks quietly.

Jonathan’s expression turns sympathetic. “That’s complicated. You can’t go to them, obviously. But they could come here. Visit, or immigrate if they want.”

“They are old. My grandfather, he is not well. They cannot just leave everything.”

“I know. I’m sorry.”

They sit in silence for a minute. Then Ilya says, “What about Shane? If people find out-”

“Shane can’t be prosecuted for anything. What you two did in PyeongChang wasn’t illegal by South Korean law, and it definitely isn’t illegal here.”

“But his career-”

“Shane’s career will be fine. He’s Canadian, he’s talented, and he’s on a team that supports him. The league might not love the publicity, but they’re not going to do anything official.” Jonathan pauses. “The bigger question is whether you want to confirm or deny that Shane was the other person in the video.”

“I would never-”

“I know. But at some point, people are going to ask directly. You need to think about what you’ll say.”

Ilya rubs his eyes. “Can I think about it later?”

“Of course.” Jonathan stands. “I’m going to head back to Montreal. There’s food in the fridge, wood for the fire, and the heat’s working.”

“Thank you. For coming here. For everything.”

“No need to thank me. We take care of our own.” Jonathan pulls on his coat. “And Ilya? You’re not alone in this. Remember that.”

After Jonathan leaves, Ilya sits by the fire and stares at the flames. His phone buzzes periodically — more news alerts, more messages he can’t bring himself to read. He should call Shane. He should check in, let him know he’s safe.

Instead, he just sits there as the afternoon fades to evening, as the room grows dark except for the firelight, and tries to figure out how his life fell apart so completely in less than twenty-four hours.

Eventually, he forces himself to move. Charges his phone properly. Texts Jane: I’m at cottage. Jonathan was here. Is good. How are you?

The response comes quickly: Thank god you’re there. I’m ok. Trying to focus on the game tomorrow. Missing you so much.

Lily: Miss you too. You will be great tomorrow.

Jane: Hope so. Wish you could watch.

Lily: I will watch. On TV.

Jane: It’s not the same.

Lily: I know. But it’s what we have.

They text back and forth for a while — nothing deep, just small talk, normal talk. Shane tells him about practice, about Hayden’s attempts to keep the team’s spirits up, about how weird it feels to be in the finals by default.

Jane: It doesn’t feel earned.

Jane: Can I call you? Texting isn’t enough right now.

Ilya’s thumb hovers over the keyboard for a moment before he just hits the call button himself.

Shane picks up on the first ring. “Hi.”

“Hi.” Ilya settles deeper into the couch, pulls a blanket around himself. “Is easier to talk, yes?”

“Yeah. So much easier.” Shane’s voice is soft, intimate in a way that makes Ilya’s chest ache. “I hate that I can’t see you right now.”

“Two more days. Then you come here.”

“Two more days,” Shane repeats. “It feels like forever.”

“Will go fast. You have game tomorrow. Finals. Then you fly here.”

“I don’t even care about the game anymore. I just want to be with you.”

“Shane.” Ilya closes his eyes. “You must care about game. Is Olympic finals. Is everything you work for.”

“You’re everything I work for.”

“That is very romantic, but also bullshit. You work for hockey since you are child. You work to be best. This is your chance.”

Shane laughs quietly. “When did you become the logical one in this relationship?”

“I am always logical. You are just noticing now.”

“Fair enough.” A pause, and Ilya can hear rustling on the other end, like Shane’s getting comfortable too. “Tell me about the cottage. Is it the same as we left it?”

“Da. Same. Jonathan make fire, bring food. Is warm.” Ilya looks around the familiar space — the exposed beams, the big windows that look out onto darkness and trees, the bookshelf full of Russian novels he’s never finished. “But is lonely without you.”

“I know. I’m sorry.”

“Not your fault.”

“Feels like my fault. If I hadn’t pulled you into that corner-”

“I pulled you,” Ilya corrects. “I was one who couldn’t wait. Who was impatient.”

“We were both there.”

“Da. Both there. Both wanted it. So both to blame, or neither to blame.”

Shane is quiet for a moment. “I keep thinking about how it happened. Some asshole just—they were probably scrolling through footage for something completely different and found us and thought they could make money off it. Or make a point. Or just cause chaos.”

“Is done now. Cannot change.”

“I know. I just—I hate that something private got turned into this public thing. I hate that you’re the one paying for it.”

“We both pay. You have to play game tomorrow with everyone watching, everyone wondering if is you in video.”

“Let them wonder. I don’t care.”

“You should care-”

“Ilya, I really don’t.” Shane’s voice is firm now. “I don’t care if people know. The only reason I’m not confirming it publicly is because Jonathan said we should wait, figure out the legal strategy first. But I’m not ashamed. I’m not going to hide that I love you.”

Ilya’s throat feels tight. “You might have to. For your career.”

“Then fuck my career.”

“Shane-”

“I mean it. If it comes down to hockey or you, I choose you. Every time.”

“Is not fair to make you choose.”

“You’re not making me do anything. This is my choice.” A pause. “Do you remember what you said to me? That first time at the cottage, when we were lying on that shitty air mattress?”

Ilya smiles despite everything. “I said many things. You have to be more specific.”

“You said-” Shane’s voice goes quieter. “You said that you spent your whole life pretending. Pretending to be straight, pretending to be what everyone wanted. And that with me, at the cottage, you didn’t have to pretend anymore.”

Ilya remembers. He’d been half-asleep, warm and sated and so stupidly in love that the words had just spilled out.

“I remember,” he says softly.

“Well, that’s what you gave me too. A place where I don’t have to pretend. And I’m not going to throw that away because some asshole leaked a video. We have something real, Ilya. Something worth fighting for.”

“I know we do. I just—I don’t want you to lose things because of me.”

“The only thing I’d lose is you, and that’s not happening. Okay?”

“Okay,” Ilya whispers.

They talk for another hour about nothing important — what Ilya should watch on TV tomorrow during the game, whether he should try to cook or just eat Jonathan’s leftovers, whether the lake ice is thick enough to skate on yet. Normal things. Couple things.

It almost makes Ilya forget that the entire world now knows he's not straight, that Russia wants him arrested, that his face is all over the news.

Almost.

"I should let you sleep," Shane says eventually, though he sounds reluctant. "You've been traveling for almost twenty-four hours."

"What time is it there?"

"Almost midnight. Game's at two tomorrow afternoon. But I won't sleep anyway."

"Try," Ilya says. "For me."

"I'll try." A soft exhale. "I love you. So much."

"I love you too. Win gold medal tomorrow, yes?"

"I'll do my best."

"Your best is very good."

Shane laughs. "I'll call you after. Might be late your time."

"I don't care. Call me."

"I will. Sleep well, Ilya."

The way his name rolls off Shane's tongue makes Ilya's chest warm. "You too."

They hang up, and the cottage feels immediately quieter. Empty. Ilya sits there with his phone in his hand, staring at the dark screen, and tries not to think about how long two days can feel.

He should eat something. Should shower. Should do something productive.

Instead, he just sits there, watching the fire burn down, until his eyes start to drift closed.

The doorbell rings.

Ilya jolts awake so fast he nearly falls off the couch. His heart is hammering. The fire's almost out — he must have been asleep for hours. He checks his phone: 10:19 PM.

Who the fuck is at the cottage at 10:19 PM?

The doorbell rings again.

Ilya's mind immediately goes to the worst places. Russian officials somehow tracked him down. Reporters. Angry protestors. Someone from that dark corner of the internet that wants him dead.

He looks around for something — anything — he could use as a weapon. Settles on the fireplace poker. Grips it tightly as he approaches the door.

“Who is there?” He calls out in English.

“Ilya? It’s David and Yuna.”

Ilya stops. Shane’s parents.

He sets down the poker and opens the door.

David Hollander is standing on the porch in a heavy winter coat, holding what looks like several bags. Behind him, Yuna Hollander is carrying even more bags, her breath fogging in the cold air.

“We’re sorry to come so late,” David says. “We tried calling but I think your phone was off?”

Ilya checks. His phone died. “Shit. Sorry. I fell asleep. Come in, please.”

They bustle inside with their bags, and immediately the cottage smells like food — real food, homemade food. Yuna starts unpacking containers onto the kitchen counter without being asked.

“Shane called us earlier,” David explains, shrugging off his coat. “Told us what happened. Asked if we could check on you.”

“He worries too much,” Ilya says, but his voice cracks slightly.

Yuna turns to look at him, and her expression is so full of warmth and concern that Ilya has to look away.

“He worries the right amount,” she says firmly. “And we wanted to come. You shouldn’t be alone right now.”

“I am fine-”

“Ilya.” Yuna crosses to him, takes his hands in hers. Hers are small and warm, slightly roughened from the cold of Canadian winter. “You don’t have to be fine. Not with us.”

Something in Ilya’s chest cracks.

He’s been holding it together for how long? Since he saw the video. Since he ran from the Olympic Village. Since he got on a plane and flew halfway around the world. He’s been focused on survival, on movement, on the next step and the next step and the next step.

But now there’s nowhere to run. He’s here. He’s safe.

And Shane’s mother is looking at him with such kindness that Ilya can’t hold it back anymore.

“I’m sorry,” he manages, and then he’s crying.

Not quiet tears. Not dignified. Full-body sobs that shake his shoulders and make it hard to breathe. He tries to cover his face with his hands, mortified, but Yuna just pulls him down — he has to bend almost in half because she’s so much shorter — and wraps her arms around him.

“Let it out,” she murmurs, rubbing his back like he’s a child. “It’s okay. You’re safe now.”

Ilya can’t remember the last time someone held him like this. His mother died when he was twelve — overdosed on pills, left him and his father alone and broken. After that, his father had shut down, become distant and cold. There’d been no comfort. No softness.

He’d learned to be hard. To not need things like hugs and reassurance.

But God, he needs it now.

“I’m sorry,” he says again into Yuna’s shoulder. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean-”

“Shh. Nothing to be sorry for.” She just holds him tighter. “You’ve been so brave. But you don’t have to be brave right now.”

David’s hand comes to rest on Ilya’s shoulder, steady and grounding. Between the two of them, Ilya feels surrounded by safety, by care. By something he didn’t realize he’d been desperately craving.

He cries for a long time. For everything he’s lost — his team, his country, his privacy, his sense of safety. For the future he thought he’d have that’s now impossible. For his friends and family back in Russia, his grandparents who won’t understand, who maybe won’t even speak to him again.

For the mother he lost when he was too young, who he needed now more than ever.

Eventually, the sobs subside into shaky breaths. Yuna guides him to the couch, sits him down, disappears into the kitchen and comes back with water and tissues.

“Drink,” she instructs.

Ilya drinks. His throat is raw, his eyes are burning, and he’s exhausted in a way that has nothing to do with jet lag.

“Sorry,” he says for the third time. “I don’t usually—I’m not-”

“You’re human,” David says simply. He’s settled into the armchair, watching Ilya with concern but not pity. “You’re allowed to fall apart sometimes.”

“Shane is your son. You must think—you must be worried that I am bringing problems to him.”

Yuna makes a soft sound of disagreement. She sits next to Ilya on the couch, takes his hand again. “We think Shane is lucky to have you. We think you’re good for him. We think you make him happy.”

“But now there is scandal. Now there is video and questions and-”

“And none of that is your fault,” David interrupts. “You didn’t ask for that video to be leaked. You didn’t do anything wrong.”

“In Russia, what I did is very wrong.”

“Then Russia is wrong,” Yuna says with surprising fierceness. “Not you.”

Ilya looks at their joined hands. Yuna’s wedding ring catches the light from the dying fire. “My mother,” he says quietly. “She died when I was twelve.”

“Shane told us,” Yuna says gently. “I’m so sorry.”

“She was—she had depression. Very bad. My father, he didn’t understand. Didn’t believe in it. Thought she just needed to be stronger, to pray more.” Ilya’s thumb traces over Yuna’s knuckles. “I was at hockey practice. Came home and found her in bed. Thought she was just sleeping. But she did not wake up.”

“Oh, Ilya.” Yuna’s other hand comes up to cup his face, turning him to look at her. “That must have been so hard. I’m so sorry you went through that.”

“My father, after—he was angry all the time. At her, at me, at everyone. He said she was weak. That she abandoned us. That she chose death over her family.” The words taste bitter even now, all these years later. “I tried to be strong after. To be what he needed. To never cry, never show weakness. To be perfect son, perfect hockey player.”

“That’s too much to ask of a twelve-year-old,” David says quietly.

“In Russia, is normal. You are strong or you are nothing.” Ilya looks at Yuna, and something in him breaks open even further. “I never had someone to hold me like you did. To say is okay to not be strong. I didn’t know I needed it until now.”

Yuna’s eyes are shining with tears. “Well, you have it now. For as long as you need it.”

“I’m not your son-”

“You’re Shane’s,” she says simply. “Which makes you ours too, if you want to be.”

Ilya has to cover his face again because he’s crying again, quieter this time but somehow deeper. He’s twenty-seven years old. He’s a professional athlete, a public figure, someone who’s supposed to have his shit together.

But right now, he’s just a scared kid who lost his mother too young and never learned how to ask for comfort.

Yuna pulls him close again, and this time he doesn't fight it. Just lets himself be held, lets himself be cared for. David moves to restart the fire, then disappears into the kitchen. Ilya can hear him moving around, unpacking the food Yuna brought.

"I'm afraid," Ilya admits into Yuna's shoulder. "I don't know what happens now."

"None of us do," Yuna says. "But you're not facing it alone. You have Shane. You have us. You have people who love you."

"What if Shane's career is hurt because of me?"

"Shane's a grown man. He knows what he's choosing. And honestly?" She pulls back to look at him. "I've never seen him happier than when he's with you. Before you, he was always so focused on hockey, on being the best, on winning. He never let himself just ... be. But with you, he's different. Softer. More himself."

"He makes me different too," Ilya says. "Makes me better."

"Then that's what matters. Not the video, not the scandal, not what Russia says. Just that you two have something real." She squeezes his hand. "Okay?"

"Okay," Ilya whispers.

David comes back with plates of food — oyakodon that's still somehow warm, nikujaga, okonomiyaki, and what looks like vareniki, which Yuna must have somehow found a recipe for. "Yuna made enough to feed an army," he says. "Come eat."

"I'm not hungry—"

"Eat anyway," Yuna says, in that tone that makes it clear there's no arguing.

So Ilya eats. The food is incredible — rich and flavorful and comforting in a way that makes his chest ache. Yuna watches him with satisfaction, refilling his plate before he even finishes the first serving.

"Shane always asks for the oyakodon when he's stressed," she says. "I figured you might need it too."

"Is perfect. Thank you."

They eat in comfortable silence for a while. Then David says, "I played hockey too, you know. Not professionally, but competitively enough. I understand what it's like — the pressure, the expectations, the way your entire identity gets wrapped up in the sport."

"Shane is better than you?" Ilya asks.

David laughs. "God, yes. So much better. He got his mother's determination and coordination. From me, he got — well, decent skating, I guess."

“You gave him good values,” Yuna says. “Taught him to be kind, to work hard, to treat people with respect.”

“That was mostly you.”

“It was both of us.” She looks at Ilya. “My parents didn’t like that I was marrying a white man. Said I should stay with my own kind, that it would be too hard. But we made it work because we loved each other and we refused to let other people’s prejudice define us.”

“And now they worship me,” David adds with a grin.

“Now they tolerate you,” Yuna corrects, but she’s smiling. “The point is people will always have opinions. About who you love, how you live, what choices you make. But you can’t live your life for them. You have to live it for yourself.”

“Is scary,” Ilya admits. “To live for myself. I always lived for Russia, for my father, for hockey.”

“For what other people expected of you,” Yuna says.

“Da. Exactly.”

“Well, now you get to figure out what you want. Not what anyone else wants for you, what you actually want.” She pauses. “What do you want, Ilya?”

No one’s ever asked him that before. Not like this. Not like the answer actually matters.

“I want-” He stops. Thinks. “I want to keep playing hockey. I want to live with Shane somewhere safe. I want—I want to not be afraid all the time.”

“Those are all good things to want,” David says.

“I want to see my family again,” Ilya adds quietly. “Even though they probably hate me now. I want them to understand. Maybe even accept.”

“That might take time,” Yuna says gently. “Or it might never happen. You have to be prepared for both possibilities.”

“I know.” Ilya pushes food around his plate. “When my mother died, I thought if I was perfect, if I never made mistakes, if I was everything he wanted, then maybe my father would love me enough. Maybe he wouldn’t leave too.”

“Oh, sweetheart.” Yuna’s hand covers his. “Your father’s love shouldn’t be conditional like that.”

“But was. With him love was earned. Was transactional. You were good son, good citizen, good man, then you deserve love. Otherwise-” He shrugs. “Otherwise, nothing.”

“That’s not love,” David says firmly. “That’s control.”

Ilya looks up at him. “What is love then?”

David and Yuna exchange a glance, something passing between them that Ilya can’t quite read. Then David says, “Love is showing up at a cottage at almost eleven at night because your son asked you to check on someone. Love is making oyakodon even though your arthritis is acting up because you know it’ll bring comfort. Love is—it’s choosing someone every day, even when it’s hard. Especially when it’s hard.”

“Love is what Shane feels for you,” Yuna adds. “What you feel for him. It’s not about being perfect. It’s about being present.”

Ilya’s eyes are burning again, but he’s too tired to cry anymore. “Thank you,” he manages. “For coming here. For ... everything.”

“Of course.” Yuna stands, starts clearing plates. “Now, you need to sleep. Real sleep, in a bed.”

“I’m fine-”

“Bed,” she insists. “David and I will take the guestroom tonight.”

“No, you should-”

“Ilya.” David’s voice is gentle but firm. “Let us take care of you. Please.”

So Ilya lets them. Lets Yuna show him to the bedroom, where she’s somehow already changed the sheets and put out fresh towels. Lets David make sure the doors are locked and the alarm is set. Lets them both hug him goodnight, Yuna squeezing him tight and David clapping him on the shoulder with fatherly affection.

“We’ll be here when you wake up,” Yuna promises. “And we’ll watch the game together tomorrow, okay?”

“Okay,” Ilya says.

He crawls into bed — Shane’s bed, their bed — and for the first time since the video leaked, he feels something like peace. Not happiness. Not relief. Just peace. The knowledge that he’s not alone, that there are people who care, that maybe he’ll survive this after all.

His phone is charging on the nightstand. He checks it one more time before sleep.

There’s a text from Shane, sent an hour ago: Mom just texted me. Said you’re doing okay. I’m so glad they’re there. Love you so much. Sleep well

Ilya types back: Your parents are very good people. I am lucky. Love you. Win tomorrow

He sets the phone down, pulls the blankets up to his chin, and closes his eyes.

Outside, the wind picks up, rattling the windows. Inside, the cottage is warm and safe. And for the first time in thirty hours, Ilya Rozanov sleeps.

Chapter 2: reunions and revelations

Chapter Notes

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

Ilya wakes to the sound of something dropping — a thud, followed by a muttered curse that's distinctly Shane's voice.

For a moment, he thinks he's dreaming. He's been having dreams like this for days — dreams where Shane comes through the door, where everything goes back to normal, where they can just be together without the weight of the world pressing down on them.

But then the bedroom door creaks open, and Shane whispers, "Shit, sorry, I didn't mean to wake you—"

Ilya sits up so fast the room spins. "Shane?"

"Hey." Shane's silhouetted in the doorway, backlit by the living room lamp. "Yeah, it's me. I'm here."

Ilya's out of bed before he consciously decides to move, crossing the room in three strides and crashing into Shane hard enough that they both stumble backward. Shane catches him, arms coming around tight, and Ilya buries his face in Shane's neck and just breathes.

"You're here," Ilya says against Shane's skin. "You're really here."

"I'm here." Shane's hands are moving over Ilya's back, his shoulders, like he needs to confirm Ilya's real too. "I'm sorry it took so long. The flight got delayed in Vancouver, and then—"

"I don't care. You're here now."

They stand there in the doorway for a long moment, just holding each other. Ilya can feel Shane's heartbeat against his chest, fast and strong. Can smell the staleness of airport and airplane on his clothes, underneath the familiar scent that's just Shane.

"Come to bed," Ilya says finally. "You smell like travel."

Shane laughs quietly. "Yeah, I probably do. Let me just—"

He pulls back enough to start stripping off his clothes — hoodie, t-shirt, jeans that have seen better days. Ilya watches, drinking in the sight of him. It's only been five days since PyeongChang, but it feels like months. Years.

"Did you watch the game?" Shane asks as he kicks off his jeans.

"Da. With your parents. You were incredible."

“We won.” Shane says it like he still can’t quite believe it. “Fucking gold medal.”

“I knew you would win.”

“Yeah, well.” Shane pulls off his socks, stands there in just his boxers. Even in the dim light, Ilya can see the exhaustion written across his face — the dark circles under his eyes, the tension in his shoulders. “It didn’t feel like winning. Not without you there.”

“I was watching. On TV.”

“Not the same.” Shane climbs into bed, and Ilya follows, immediately pressing against his side. Shane’s cold from the outside air, goosebumps on his arms, but he’s solid and real and here.

Ilya throws an arm over Shane’s waist, hooks a leg over his thighs, basically plasters himself to Shane’s side like an octopus. Shane’s hand comes up to card through Ilya’s hair.

“Are my parents still here?” Shane asks quietly.

“They left yesterday morning. But they came every day. Your mom brought more food. Your dad helped me fix the dock.”

“The dock’s been broken for two years.”

“Now is fixed.” Ilya presses his face harder into Shane’s shoulder. “They were very kind to me. Your mom especially. I-” He stops, not sure how to explain what happened that first night, how he’d fallen apart in Yuna’s arms.

“She texted me,” Shane says. “Said you’d had a rough night but that she thought you’d be okay. She really cares about you, you know.”

“I know.” Ilya’s throat feels tight. “She reminds me of my mother. Not how she looks or talks, but ... the feeling. The way she makes me feel safe.”

Shane’s hand stills in Ilya’s hair. “I didn’t know that.”

“I don’t talk about my mother much.”

“I know.” A pause. “Do you want to talk about her now?”

Ilya considers. He’s spent so many years not talking about his mother — not her life, not her death, not the gaping hole she left behind. His father never wanted to discuss it. His teammates wouldn’t have understood. And Shane knows the basics, but not the details. Not the weight of it.

But lying here in the dark with Shane’s heartbeat steady under his ear, he thinks maybe he can.

“She was very beautiful,” Ilya says quietly. “And very sad. I didn’t understand when I was young, I just knew that sometimes she would be happy, would laugh and cook and play with

me. And sometimes she would stay in bed for days. Wouldn't eat. Wouldn't talk. My father would get angry with her, say she was being lazy."

Shane's arm tightens around him but he doesn't interrupt.

"When I was twelve, I came home from practice and saw her in bed. There was pill bottle in her hand." Ilya's voice is steady, detached, like he's telling a story about someone else. "They said it was too late."

"Jesus," Shane breathes. "Ilya, I'm so sorry."

"My father, he was—he blamed her. Said she was selfish, that she chose to leave us. He never cried, never mourned. Just got angry." Ilya traces patterns on Shane's chest with his finger. "I learned from him. Learned to not show feelings, to not be weak. To just keep going."

"That's not healthy."

"No. Is not." Ilya lifts his head to look at Shane. Even in the darkness, he can make out the shape of his face, the concern in his eyes. "But is what I knew. Until your mother held me while I cried and told me is okay to not be strong. First time anyone said that to me."

Shane cups Ilya's face with his hand, thumb stroking across his cheekbone. "You're allowed to not be strong. Especially with me."

"I know. I'm learning." Ilya leans into the touch. "Your parents are very good. You are lucky."

"I know I am." Shane pulls him back down, settling them so they're facing each other on the pillows. "I'm sorry you didn't have that growing up."

"Is okay. I survived."

"You did more than survive. You became this incredible person who I'm stupidly in love with."

Ilya feels his lips curve into a smile — the first real smile in days. "Stupidly?"

"So stupidly. Embarrassingly. I spent the entire medal ceremony thinking about you instead of the gold medal around my neck."

"Did you bring medal?"

"Of course I brought the medal. It's in my bag." Shane shifts closer, until their foreheads are nearly touching. "I'll show you tomorrow. Right now, I just want to hold you."

They lie there in silence for a while, just breathing together. Ilya can feel Shane starting to relax, the tension bleeding out of his shoulders, his breathing evening out. But there's still something there — something unsaid hovering between them.

"What happened after the game?" Ilya asks. "With media, with team?"

Shane sighs. “It was a circus. Everyone wanted to talk about the win, but half the questions were about you. About the video. If I knew who the other person was.”

“What did you say?”

“I said no comment. Over and over. No comment, no comment, no comment.” Shane’s hand finds Ilya’s in the darkness, laces their fingers together. “Some of the guys asked me privately. Hayden told them all to fuck off. But I think—I think some of them know. Or suspect.”

“Is okay if they know.”

“Is it?” Shane searches his face. “Because I don’t want to out you further if you’re not ready. But I also don’t want to lie. I don’t want to hide you.”

Ilya considers this. A week ago — hell, five days ago — he would have said they needed to hide it. That Shane’s career depended on discretion, on maintaining the illusion of straightness that professional sports demanded.

But now? Now the worst has already happened. He’s been outed in the most public way possible. Russia wants him arrested. His face is all over the news with the word “scandal” attached to it.

What does he have left to lose?

“I don’t want you to lie either,” Ilya says finally. “If someone asks directly, you can tell truth.”

“You sure?”

“Da. Maybe is better, even. Then we don’t have to hide anymore. Then we can just be together.”

Shane’s hand tightens around his. “Together. I like the sound of that.”

“Me too.”

They shift closer, and suddenly the space between them feels charged with something more than just comfort. Ilya’s aware of every point where their bodies touch — legs tangled together, chests pressed close, Shane’s breath warm against his lips.

“I missed you so much,” Shane murmurs. “Every night, I’d lie in that shitty Olympic Village bed and think about this. About being here with you.”

“I missed you too. Was hard to watch game on TV, to see you and not be able to touch you.”

“You can touch me now.”

It’s not a question, but Ilya answers anyway. “Da. I can.”

He closes the distance between them, kissing Shane soft and slow. There's no urgency to it, no desperation — just the steady reassurance that they're both here, both safe, both together.

Shane makes a quiet sound against Ilya's mouth, his hand coming up to cup the back of Ilya's neck. They kiss like they have all the time in the world, like there's nothing beyond this room, this bed, this moment.

When they finally break apart, Shane rests his forehead against Ilya's. "I love you," he says, voice rough. "I love you so fucking much."

"I love you too." Ilya kisses him again, then his jaw, then the sensitive spot below his ear that always makes Shane shiver. "Let me show you how much."

"Ilya—"

"Shh." Ilya's hand trails down Shane's chest, over his stomach, slips beneath the waistband of his boxers. "Let me take care of you."

Shane's breath hitches. "You don't have to—"

"I want to." Ilya pulls back enough to meet his eyes. "I want to touch you, taste you, make you feel good. Want to remind us both that this is real. That we are real."

Shane's pupils are blown wide, his lips parted. "Okay," he breathes. "Yeah. Okay."

Ilya takes his time stripping Shane out of his boxers, trailing kisses down his body as he goes. Shane's hands fist in the sheets, then in Ilya's hair as Ilya settles between his legs.

"Look at me," Ilya says, and Shane does. "I love you. You are everything to me."

"Ily—" Shane's words cut off as Ilya takes him in his mouth.

It's different from the rushed encounter in PyeongChang. That had been desperate, risky, stolen. This is deliberate. Reverent. Ilya worships Shane with his mouth, his hands, taking him apart with the kind of focused attention he usually reserves for hockey.

Shane falls apart beautifully, biting his lip to stay quiet even though there's no one to hear them. When he comes, Ilya's name falls from his lips like a prayer.

Ilya crawls back up Shane's body, kissing him deep and filthy. Shane rolls them over, pinning Ilya to the mattress, and returns the favor until Ilya's the one gasping into the pillows.

After, they lie tangled together, sweaty and satisfied and completely wrecked in the best way. Shane traces lazy patterns on Ilya's chest, and Ilya plays with Shane's hair, and everything feels perfect and right in a way it hasn't since before PyeongChang.

"This feels different," Shane says after a while.

"What feels different?"

“This. Us.” Shane props himself up on one elbow to look down at Ilya. “I can’t explain it. It’s like—before, we were always hiding. Always looking over our shoulders. But now everyone knows, or will know soon. And it’s terrifying but also kind of freeing?”

“I know what you mean.” Ilya reaches up to touch Shane’s face, traces the line of his jaw. “Before, I felt like I was pretending all the time. Even with you, sometimes — always part of me was worried about being caught, about what would happen if people found out. But now?” He shrugs. “Now worst already happened. Nothing left to hide.”

“So what do we do now?”

“Now we live. We play hockey. We are together. We figure out rest as we go.”

Shane grins. “That’s very un-Russian of you. I thought you people loved five-year plans.”

“I am very un-Russian now. Russia doesn’t want me anymore, remember?”

The joke falls flat. Shane’s expression turns serious. “Have you heard anything? From your brother, or grandparents, or anyone?”

“No.” Ilya looks away. “Phone has been quiet. I think—I think maybe they are done with me.”

“Ilya-”

“Is okay. I expected it.” Ilya swallows hard. “They barely accepted me playing in America. They definitely cannot accept me being with man. Being bisexual. Is too much for them.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Me too.” Ilya pulls Shane back down against his chest, needing the contact. “But I have you. I have your parents, who treat me like son. Is enough.”

“Is it though?”

Ilya thinks about that. About the family-shaped hole in his life that’s always been there, even before this. About the country he can’t return to, the people he’s lost. About everything that’s been taken from him in the past week.

Then he thinks about Shane’s weight on top of him, warm and solid. About Yuna’s arms around him while he cried. About the cottage and the lake and the life they’re building together.

“Da,” he says finally. “Is enough. You are enough.”

Shane kisses him, soft and sweet. “You’re enough for me too.”

They drift off like that, wrapped around each other, Shane’s gold medal forgotten in his duffel bag and the rest of the world forgotten entirely.

Ilya wakes to sunlight streaming through the window and the smell of coffee. For a moment, he panics — someone's in the cottage — but then he remembers. Shane. Shane's here.

He finds Shane in the kitchen, wearing sweatpants and nothing else, humming off-key while he makes breakfast. The sight is so domestic, so perfectly normal, that Ilya has to stop and just look at him for a moment.

"Morning," Shane says without turning around. "Coffee's ready."

"How did you know I was awake?"

"You shuffle when you walk. It's cute."

"I do not shuffle."

"You absolutely shuffle." Shane turns, spatula in hand, and grins at him. "Morning, sleepyhead."

"What time is it?"

"Almost ten. We slept for like eleven hours."

"We were tired."

"We earned it." Shane gestures to the stove. "I'm making omelets. My parents left eggs and vegetables and approximately seven types of cheese."

Ilya pours himself coffee and leans against the counter, just watching Shane cook. It's such a simple thing — making breakfast in their kitchen — but it feels profound somehow. Like they're playing at normal life, at being a regular couple doing regular couple things.

"What are you thinking about?" Shane asks.

"This. You. Us." Ilya sips his coffee. "Is nice. Being normal."

"We're not normal though. You're a Russian hockey star seeking asylum, and I'm a Canadian Olympic gold medalist. Normal is not really our thing."

"You know what I mean."

"I do." Shane plates the omelets, hands one to Ilya. "Come on, let's eat outside. The sun's actually out for once."

They settle on the back porch, bundled in blankets even though it's cold. The lake is still frozen, the trees bare, but the sun is warm on their faces. Shane's gold medal is hanging around his neck now — he'd dug it out of his bag, put it on like it's the most natural thing in the world.

"Show me," Ilya says, gesturing to the medal.

Shane lifts it over his head, hands it to him. It's heavier than Ilya expected, solid and real in his hands. He turns it over, reading the engraving on the back.

"Is beautiful," he says quietly.

"It's yours too. You helped me get here."

"I wasn't even playing."

"Doesn't matter. All those years of rivalry, of pushing each other to be better — that's part of this." Shane takes the medal back, but instead of putting it on himself, he loops it around Ilya's neck. "There. Now you have an Olympic gold medal."

"Shane—"

"Just for a minute. Let me see what it looks like on you."

Ilya touches the medal, feels the weight of it against his chest. He'd wanted this so badly. Had dreamed of representing Russia, of bringing home gold, of making his father proud.

Now he'll never get the chance.

"Hey." Shane's hand covers his. "I know this hurts. I'm sorry."

"Is not your fault."

"Still sorry." Shane pauses. "You would have won gold with Russia, you know. Your team was incredible."

"We'll never know now."

"No, I guess we won't." Shane takes the medal back, sets it on the table. "But maybe that's okay. Maybe this — us, here, together — maybe that's better than gold."

"Very romantic, but also bullshit. Nothing is better than Olympic gold except Stanley Cup."

Shane laughs. "Okay, fair. But this is pretty damn good."

"Da. Is pretty damn good."

They finish breakfast in comfortable silence, just enjoying the sun and each other's company. Ilya's starting to think maybe everything will be okay, maybe they can actually pull this off—

The sound of car tires on gravel interrupts his thoughts.

Shane frowns. "You expecting someone?"

"No. You?"

"No." Shane stands, moves to where he can see the driveway. "Shit. That's—there are three cars. Black SUVs."

Ilya's stomach drops. "Government?"

"Maybe? Or ... I don't know." Shane's already moving, grabbing his phone. "Stay here. Let me check."

"I'm not hiding while you—"

"Ilya—"

But Ilya's already following him to the front door. They reach it just as someone knocks — loud, official-sounding knocks that make Ilya's heart race.

Shane looks through the peephole. "There are like six people out there. They're wearing suits."

"Open door. If is government, they will come in anyway."

Shane opens the door.

There are, in fact, six people on the porch. Four men, two women, all in dark suits that scream official business. One of the men steps forward, holding up identification.

"Shane Hollander? Ilya Rozanov? I'm Special Agent Lawrence with the US Department of State. These are my colleagues from Global Affairs Canada, and representatives from the Boston Bears organization and the NHL. May we come in?"

Shane and Ilya exchange glances. Shane's still shirtless, wearing only sweatpants. Ilya's in boxers and a t-shirt. Neither of them is exactly dressed for official visitors.

But more than that — they're both here. Both obviously here, obviously just woke up, obviously spent the night together. And the way these six people are looking between them, the way their eyes are widening slightly, the way Ilya can literally see them putting the pieces together—

They know.

"Um," Shane says. "Yeah. Come in. Let us just—we should probably get dressed."

"That would be appreciated," one of the women says. She's wearing a Canadian flag pin on her lapel. "We'll wait in the living room."

Shane and Ilya practically run to the bedroom. They throw on clothes — jeans, shirts, socks — in record time, not speaking, both clearly freaking out.

"They know," Shane hisses as he yanks a sweater over his head. "They figured it out."

"Was obvious. You are here, we both just wake up, your medal is—"

"Fuck. My medal." Shane runs a hand through his hair. "Okay. Okay, it's fine. We knew this might happen."

“Is fine,” Ilya agrees, though his hands are shaking as he buttons his jeans. “We have nothing to hide now.”

“Right. Nothing to hide.”

They head back to the living room holding hands — a small act of defiance, or maybe just comfort. The six officials have arranged themselves around the room. Special Agent Lawrence is standing by the fireplace. The Canadian representative has taken the armchair. The two men in NHL and Boston Bears polos are standing near the door like they’re ready to bolt.

Everyone’s staring at their joined hands.

“Please, sit,” Agent Lawrence says, gesturing to the couch.

They sit. Don’t let go of each other’s hands.

“First,” Agent Lawrence says, “let me assure you both that you’re not in any trouble with the United States or Canada. This is purely an informational visit.”

“Why are you here?” Shane asks. His thumb is rubbing circles on the back of Ilya’s hand — Ilya’s not sure if Shane realizes he’s doing it.

“Mr. Rozanov,” the Canadian representative says. Her name tag reads Olivier. “We’re here to inform you that the Russian Federation has formally requested your extradition.”

Ilya’s stomach turns to ice. “On what charges?”

“Public violations of Article 6.21 of the Administrative Code — the so-called ‘gay propaganda’ law. They’re also suggesting potential charges under Article 242 for distribution of pornographic materials.”

“That’s bullshit,” Shane says immediately. “He didn’t distribute anything. Someone leaked that video.”

“We’re aware,” Agent Lawrence says. “And for the record, both the United States and Canada have denied the extradition request. You’re protected under your work visa, Mr. Rozanov, and Canada has also indicated they’d be willing to offer asylum if needed.”

Some of the tension bleeds out of Ilya’s shoulders. “So I am safe? They cannot take me back?”

“Not unless you voluntarily return to Russia, which I’d strongly advise against.” Olivier leans forward. “However, I need to be clear about what this means. You cannot return to Russia — possibly ever. Your assets there may be seized. Your family members may face pressure or questioning. And Russia has significant influence in certain countries, so international travel will be complicated.”

“I understand.”

“Do you have family in Russia?” Agent Lawrence asks.

“My grandparents and brother. That is all.”

“We can try to facilitate communication if you’d like, but I should warn you — anything you say to them could be monitored.”

Ilya nods slowly. He hasn’t heard from them in days. Hasn’t expected to. But hearing it laid out like this, the finality of it, makes it real in a way it hasn’t been before.

He’s truly alone now. Cut off from his homeland, his family, everything he grew up with.

Except Shane’s hand tightens around his, reminding him that’s not quite true.

One of the NHL representatives clears his throat. He’s older, balding, with the kind of face that’s perfected corporate neutrality. “Mr. Rozanov, we need to discuss your status with the league.”

Here we go.

“The NHL has a zero-tolerance policy for illegal activity,” the man continues. “However, as your actions weren’t illegal in any relevant jurisdiction, there’s no grounds for suspension or termination. Your contract with the Boston Bears remains valid.”

“But?” Ilya prompts, because there’s definitely a ‘but’ coming.

“But,” the Bears representative says — younger, clearly uncomfortable — “the organization is concerned about the publicity. The distraction. The potential impact on team cohesion and fan relations.”

“What does that mean?” Shane demands. “Are you asking him to leave the team?”

“We’re not asking anything at this time,” the man hedges. “We’re simply having a conversation about expectations going forward.”

“Expectations like what? That he hide? That he pretend this didn’t happen?”

“Mr. Hollander-”

“It’s Shane. And I’m not just asking as a random concerned party. I’m asking because-” Shane looks at Ilya, and Ilya gives a tiny nod. “-because I’m the other person in that video. Because Ilya and I are together. So whatever affects him affects me.”

The room goes completely silent.

The two NHL representatives exchange glances. Olivier’s eyebrows have risen nearly to her hairline. Agent Lawrence looks unsurprised — probably was already briefed, or at least suspected.

“Mr. Hollander,” the older NHL rep says carefully. “Are you saying that you and Mr. Rozanov are in a romantic relationship?”

“Yes,” Shane says firmly. “We’ve been together for years. We’re in love. And I’m not going to pretend otherwise to protect anyone’s feelings or the league’s image.”

“Shane,” the Bears rep says, and he actually looks pained. “You have to understand the position this puts everyone in. The NHL has sponsors. Teams have fans. There are ... considerations.”

“Considerations like what?” Ilya asks, his voice cold. “Like homophobia? Like pretending that LGBTQ players don’t exist?”

“That’s not what I’m saying-”

“Then what are you saying?”

The man flounders for a moment, then looks to his NHL colleague for help. The older man steps forward, and Ilya recognizes the look on his face — it’s the same look executives always have when they’re about to say something carefully worded and completely meaningless.

“The NHL supports diversity and inclusion,” he begins.

“Bullshit,” Shane interrupts.

“Excuse me?”

“I said bullshit. The NHL talks about supporting diversity, but what are you actually doing? Do you have protections in place for LGBTQ players? Do you have training for teams on inclusion? Do you even acknowledge that we exist?”

“Mr. Hollander, the league’s position has always been that players’ private lives are their own business-”

“Except when those private lives become public, and then suddenly it’s everyone’s business, right?” Shane’s voice is rising. “Suddenly there are ‘considerations’ and ‘concerns about publicity.’ You want us to exist quietly, invisibly, so you can claim to be progressive without actually doing anything.”

“That’s not fair-”

“Isn’t it? Because right now it sure sounds like you’re more worried about sponsors than about supporting one of your players who’s facing persecution from his home country.”

“We’re here, aren’t we?” The NHL rep argues. “We could have just called, but we came in person because we care-”

“You came in person because you wanted to see if the rumors were true,” Ilya says quietly. “You wanted to know if Shane was the other man. If your Canadian star player is also gay,

also a problem.”

The silence that follows is damning.

Agent Lawrence clears his throat. “Gentlemen, perhaps we should refocus. Mr. Rozanov, Mr. Hollander — the important thing is that you’re both safe and your rights are protected. The NHL’s internal politics are, frankly, not my concern.”

“But they’re mine,” Shane says. “Because if the league or the Bears try to punish Ilya for this-”

“We’re not punishing anyone,” the Bears rep insists. “We just need time to strategize. To figure out how to handle the media, the fans, the locker room dynamics-”

“The locker room will be fine,” Shane says. “Most of the guys don’t care. The ones who do were already assholes anyway.”

“You don’t play for the Bears, Mr. Hollander. You can’t speak to their locker room culture.”

“No, but I play for Montreal, and I guarantee you we have the same percentage of assholes as Boston. And if they give Ilya shit for being bi, that’s a them problem, not an Ilya problem.”

The older NHL rep looks like he’s developing a migraine. “Mr. Hollander, while we appreciate your support, this is a delicate situation that requires careful handling-”

“Careful handling,” Shane repeats flatly. “Right. Like how you’ve carefully handled every other diversity issue in the league? Like how you carefully looked the other way when players used slurs? How you carefully avoided taking any real stance on social issues until it became financially beneficial?”

“That’s not—we’ve made significant progress-”

“Have you? Name one openly gay active player in the NHL other than Scott Hunter. One.”

Silence.

“Exactly,” Shane says. “And now you have the chance to actually support one, to show that all that talk about inclusion means something, and instead you’re here talking about ‘considerations’ and ‘strategies.’ It’s pathetic.”

Olivier stands up. “I think,” she says diplomatically, “that perhaps the NHL and Bears representatives should have a separate conversation with Mr. Rozanov at a later date. We’ve accomplished what we came for — Mr. Rozanov has been informed of the extradition request and its denial. The rest can wait.”

“Agreed,” Agent Lawrence says. He hands Ilya a business card. “My contact information. If you need anything, or if Russia escalates their efforts, call me immediately.”

“Thank you,” Ilya says, taking the card.

Olivier hands him one too. “Same goes for Canadian authorities. We’re prepared to fast-track asylum paperwork if you decide you’d prefer Canadian citizenship. Think about it.”

The officials start filing out. The two NHL representatives linger, clearly wanting to say more, but Agent Lawrence essentially herds them toward the door.

“We’ll be in touch,” the Bears rep says over his shoulder. “Ilya, just ... think about what’s best for the team, okay?”

“I always think about team,” Ilya says coldly. “Maybe you should think about players.”

The door closes behind them. The sound of car engines starts up, then fades as the SUVs drive away.

Shane and Ilya sit on the couch, still holding hands, staring at the closed door.

“Well,” Shane says eventually. “That went great.”

“Da. Very great. Now NHL hates us and Russia wants me arrested. Is perfect morning.”

“The NHL doesn’t hate us. They’re just—they’re scared. They don’t know how to handle this.”

“They should not have to handle. Should just say ‘is okay to love man’ and move on. But they won’t, because of money and sponsors and conservative fans.”

“Yeah,” Shane agrees. “Pretty much.”

Ilya turns to look at him. “You didn’t have to do that. Tell them about us.”

“Yes, I did.”

“Shane-”

“No, listen.” Shane shifts to face him fully. “I’m done hiding. I’m done letting the league and teams and everyone else make decisions about my life, about our relationship. If they want to punish me for being with you, then fuck them. I’ll find another team. I’ll play in Europe. I’ll retire and become a fucking barista. I don’t care.”

“You would be terrible barista.”

“Probably. But the point stands.” Shane cups Ilya’s face with his free hand. “You’re more important than hockey. You’re more important than anything.”

“Hockey is your life.”

“You’re my life. Hockey is just what I do.”

Ilya feels his eyes stinging. “That is very romantic. Possibly too romantic. You sound like greeting card.”

Shane laughs, and the tension finally breaks. “Okay, fair. But it’s true. All of it.”

“I know.” Ilya leans forward, rests his forehead against Shane’s. “I love you. Thank you for standing up for me. For us.”

“Always,” Shane promises. “I’ll always stand up for us.”

They sit there for a long moment, just breathing together, processing everything that just happened.

Finally, Ilya says, “So. Russia wants me arrested, NHL is useless, and we just came out to two different government agencies and two sports organizations.”

“Yeah.”

“What do we do now?”

Shane considers. “Ice cream?”

“Is ten in morning.”

“Exactly. Perfect ice cream time.”

Despite everything — the extradition request, the awkward meeting, the uncertainty about the future — Ilya finds himself smiling. “Okay. We have ice cream.”

“There’s a place about twenty minutes from here. Best maple walnut you’ve ever had.”

“I don’t like maple walnut.”

“Then get something else. The point is ice cream and getting out of this cottage for a bit.”

“Okay,” Ilya agrees. “But I drive.”

“You hate driving my car.”

“Da, but you drive like maniac. I want to live long enough to eat ice cream.”

They bicker about driving all the way to Shane’s SUV, which Ilya does end up driving because Shane’s too jet-lagged to argue properly. As they head down the long driveway toward the main road, Ilya catches Shane looking at him.

“What?” Ilya asks.

“Nothing. Just ... you’re here. We’re together. We’re going to get ice cream despite the fact that half the world is losing their minds about us.” Shane grins. “It’s kind of perfect, actually.”

“Is kind of insane.”

“That too.” Shane reaches over, takes Ilya’s hand where it rests on the gear shift. “But we’ll figure it out. Together.”

“Together,” Ilya echoes.

And as they drive through the quiet Ontario countryside, sun streaming through the windows and an Olympic gold medal left haphazardly on the living room coffee table, Ilya thinks maybe Shane’s right.

Maybe they will figure it out.

They have to.

Because the alternative — a world where they’re not together, where they let fear and politics and other people’s prejudices tear them apart — that’s not acceptable. That’s not even an option.

So they’ll face whatever comes next. The media scrutiny, the league politics, the uncertainty about Ilya’s future with the Bears. Russia’s threats, his family’s silence, all of it.

They’ll face it together.

And maybe, just maybe, that will be enough.

Chapter End Notes

So ... Shane and Ilya have occupied my brain for weeks and never left.

You may have noticed that I changed some details and took some liberties that deviated from the books. Because the CCTV video outing Ilya accelerated the timeline of pretty much everything after early 2018 (and the events of the *The Long Game* go down pretty different to say the least), these little tweaks kept some of that relationship building and tension going without having to rewrite a whole book.

That’s the beauty of fanfiction!

Chapter 3: o canada

March comes in cold and bitter, and Ilya returns to Boston with Shane's hand in his at the airport, right up until they have to go through separate security lines — Shane heading back to Montreal, Ilya heading to Boston.

"Call me tonight?" Shane says, thumb rubbing over Ilya's knuckles.

"Da. After practice, I call."

"Good luck. It's going to be fine."

Ilya wishes he believed that.

Boston's not fine.

The locker room goes silent when he walks in — actually silent, conversations cutting off mid-sentence. A few guys nod at him. One of the veteran defensemen claps him on the shoulder and mutters, "Good to have you back."

But most of them just stare. Or worse, don't look at him at all.

Ilya changes into his practice gear in silence. Takes his usual stall, hangs his suit carefully, pulls on the pads and jersey that have been his uniform for five years. Everything's familiar, but nothing feels right.

"Rozanov."

He turns. It's Coach LeClaire, arms crossed, face unreadable.

"Coach."

"My office. Now."

The walk to the coach's office feels like a death march. Ilya's done this walk hundreds of times — for game prep, for one-on-ones, for strategy sessions. Never like this.

LeClaire closes the door behind them. Doesn't invite Ilya to sit.

"I'm going to be straight with you," LeClaire says. "The front office wanted me to bench you for the rest of the season. Said you're a distraction."

Ilya's stomach drops. "And you?"

"I told them that's bullshit. You're one of the best players we have. But—" LeClaire leans against his desk. "I need to know if you can handle it. The media attention, the scrutiny, the comments from other teams."

“I can handle.”

“Can you? Because it’s going to be brutal, Rozanov. Every game, every interview, every time you’re on the ice. People are going to say things. Some of your own teammates are going to say things.”

“I know.”

“Do you?” LeClaire studies him. “I’m not going to pretend I understand what you’re going through. I don’t. But I need to know you’re here to play hockey, not fight battles about your personal life.”

“Hockey is all I have left,” Ilya says quietly. “Russia took everything else. NHL wants to take this too?”

“The NHL isn’t taking anything. But they’re also not going to make it easy.” LeClaire sighs. “Look, I’ll play you. I’ll play you as much as I always have, because you’ve earned it. But you need to keep your head down, play your game, and ignore the noise. Can you do that?”

“I can do that.”

“Good. Get out there.”

Practice is worse than the locker room. Ilya’s line mates barely pass to him. When they run drills, guys are slower to rotate, leaving him exposed. During scrimmage, someone — Malow, he thinks — hits him late, hard enough that Ilya goes down on the ice.

No whistle.

Ilya gets up, skates to his position, says nothing.

After practice, the media’s waiting. They always wait for Boston practices, but today there’s twice as many cameras, three times as many recorders shoved in his face.

“Ilya, how does it feel to be back?”

“Fine. Is good to be back.”

“Are you concerned about how your revelation will affect team dynamics?”

“I am here to play hockey. That is all.”

“Have you spoken to anyone in Russia since the video leaked?”

Ilya’s jaw tightens. “No comment.”

“Is it true you’re in a relationship with Shane Hollander?”

“No comment.”

“Shane confirmed it last week. Are you saying he lied?”

“I am saying is private. Next question.”

“The Russian government has called you a disgrace to-”

“Interview is over,” Ilya says, and walks away.

He calls Shane from his car, hands shaking on the steering wheel.

“Hey,” Shane answers immediately. “How was it?”

“Bad.”

“How bad?”

“Very bad. Team hates me. Coach says I am distraction. Media is-” Ilya breaks off. “How was your practice?”

“About the same.” Shane’s voice is carefully neutral. “I told the guys. About us.”

“And?”

“And they’re processing. Hayden’s great. A few other guys are supportive. The rest are ... complicated.”

“Complicated how?”

Shane hesitates. “They think I’ve been throwing games against Boston.”

For a moment, Ilya can’t breathe. “What?”

“Yeah. Apparently, the fact that we’ve lost our last three games against you guys, combined with you and me dating, equals me purposely losing to help your playoff chances.”

“That is—that is insane. You would never-”

“I know that. You know that. But they’re looking for explanations, and ‘Shane Hollander is in love with the enemy’ is apparently a good enough explanation.”

“I am not enemy.”

“You are to them.” Shane sounds exhausted. “Montreal-Boston rivalry is basically a religion here. And I just admitted I’m sleeping with a Bear.”

“We do more than sleep-”

“Ilya.” But Shane’s laughing a little. “Not the point.”

“Sorry. I just—I cannot believe they think you would throw games. You are most competitive person I know.”

“Second most competitive. You’re first.”

“Tied for first.”

“Deal.” A pause. “It’s going to get worse before it gets better, isn’t it?”

“Da,” Ilya says quietly. “I think so.”

It gets worse.

Boston loses their next three games. Ilya plays well — scores in two of them — but it doesn’t matter. The local sports radio starts calling for his trade. Fans hold signs at home games: KEEP RUSSIA IN RUSSIA and BOSTON BEARS, NOT BOSTON QUEERS.

The team doesn’t defend him. Not publicly, anyway.

In the locker room, guys start avoiding him more actively. No one sits next to him during video sessions. No one invites him to team dinners. When they travel, Ilya rooms alone.

Hammersmith corners him one day after practice. “For what it’s worth,” he says, “I don’t give a shit who you fuck. You’re a good player and a good teammate.”

“Thank you.”

“But the young guys — they’re listening to their parents, their podcasts, whatever. They think being gay is catching or something.” Hammersmith shrugs. “Give it time. They’ll get over it.”

Ilya’s not sure he has time.

Montreal’s not much better for Shane. The whispering campaign about thrown games continues. Someone leaks to the media that Shane and Ilya have been seeing each other for years, which means every loss to Boston gets re-examined, analyzed, picked apart.

“This is ridiculous,” Shane tells Ilya on one of their nightly calls. “I’ve scored against you. I’ve had game-winning goals against Boston. But suddenly none of that matters because we’re together?”

“People need villain,” Ilya says. “We are convenient.”

“I’m so tired of being convenient.”

They see each other when they can — Shane comes to Boston for a game in early April, and they steal an hour in Ilya’s apartment before Shane has to get to the arena. It’s desperate and quick, both of them clinging to each other like they’re drowning.

“I miss you,” Shane says afterward, face pressed into Ilya’s neck. “I miss waking up with you.”

“Two more months. Then off-season, and we have whole summer.”

“Can’t come fast enough.”

Boston makes the playoffs — barely. They lose in the first round to Tampa Bay. Ilya has two goals and three assists in five games, but it’s not enough. In the handshake line, one of the Tampa players mutters “faggot” as he skates past.

Ilya pretends not to hear.

Montreal goes further — makes it to the second round before getting knocked out by the Scouts. Shane plays like he’s possessed, racks up points, gets named player of the game twice.

The Montreal media still questions his loyalty.

May brings sunshine and the end of the season, and Ilya drives to Ottawa — to the cottage, to Shane, to the only place that feels like home anymore.

Shane’s already there, sitting on the dock with his feet in the still-cold water. He looks up when he hears Ilya’s car, and the smile that breaks across his face makes everything else worth it.

“Hey,” Shane says.

“Hey yourself.”

Ilya sits next to him, close enough that their shoulders touch. For a while, they don’t talk, just watch the sun set over the lake.

Finally, Shane says, “I can’t do another year like this.”

“I know.”

“I mean it. The constant questions, the accusations, the way my own team looks at me like I’m a traitor. I can’t.”

Ilya takes Shane’s hand. “What do you want to do?”

“I don’t know. My contract’s up in three years. I could ask for a trade, maybe. Go somewhere that’s not Montreal, not Boston.”

“You love Montreal.”

“I love you more.” Shane turns to look at him. “What about you? Boston’s not getting better.”

“No. Is getting worse.” Ilya’s been thinking about this for weeks. “My contract is up in July. I am—I am not signing again with Boston.”

“Where will you go?”

“I don’t know. Whoever wants me.” Ilya tries to smile. “If anyone wants me.”

“Everyone will want you. You’re one of the best players in the league.”

“I am also scandal. Teams think twice about scandal.”

Shane’s quiet for a moment. “Ottawa’s looking for a center.”

“Ottawa?”

“Yeah. The Centaurs. They’ve been rebuilding for years, finally have a good core. They could use someone with your skill and experience.” Shane squeezes Ilya’s hand. “And they’re close to Montreal. Two hours instead of five.”

“You want me to go to Ottawa?”

“I want you to go wherever you’ll be happy. But, yeah. Ottawa would be nice. We could see each other more. Could-” Shane stops. “Could build something here. Really build it, not just steal weekends when we can.”

Ilya thinks about it. About leaving Boston, the team he’s played for his entire NHL career. About starting over somewhere new.

About being two hours from Shane instead of five.

“Okay,” he says. “I talk to my agent. See if Ottawa is interested.”

“They will be,” Shane says confidently. “You’re Ilya fucking Rozanov.”

Ottawa is interested.

Very interested.

Ilya’s agent calls in early June with an offer that’s actually better than what Boston was paying. “They want you,” his agent says. “And they’re willing to put their money where their mouth is.”

“What about-” Ilya hesitates. “What about the publicity? The controversy?”

“They said, and I quote, ‘We’re more interested in Rozanov’s goals per game than his personal life.’ So. That’s refreshing.”

Ilya signs with Ottawa on the first day of free agency. The press conference is smaller than he expected — just local Ottawa media, a few national outlets. The Centaurs’ GM, a blunt woman named Jessica Spooner, handles it perfectly.

“We’re thrilled to have Ilya joining the Centaurs,” she says. “He brings experience, skill, and leadership. That’s what we care about. Everything else is noise.”

A reporter raises his hand. “Ms. Spooner, are you concerned about how Ilya’s personal life might affect-”

“No,” she cuts him off. “Next question.”

After, in her office, she tells Ilya, “I’m not saying everyone in the organization is going to be perfect about this. Some of the older scouts, some of the coaching staff — they’re set in their ways. But I won’t tolerate discrimination. You report anything, anything at all, directly to me. Understood?”

“Understood. Thank you.”

“Don’t thank me. Just score goals.” She grins. “And maybe help us actually make the playoffs for once.”

Ilya likes her immediately.

Shane’s thrilled when Ilya tells him. “Two hours,” he keeps saying. “You’re going to be two hours away. I can drive up after games. We can have actual weekends together.”

“You might get tired of me.”

“Never.” Shane pulls him close, kisses him thoroughly. “This is good. This is really good.”

“Da,” Ilya agrees. “Is good.”

For the first time in months, he feels hopeful.

July brings heat and humidity and a letter from the Russian Embassy.

Ilya’s at the cottage when it arrives — forwarded from his Boston address, official-looking with Russian seals all over it. His hands shake as he opens it.

It’s in Russian, formal and cold:

Dear Mr. Rozanov,

You are hereby notified that your Russian citizenship has been revoked pursuant to Federal Law № 62-FZ, Article 22, Paragraph 1. You are no longer a citizen of the Russian Federation and have no right to Russian consular services, protection, or return to Russian territory.

All Russian documents, including your passport, are void. You have 30 days to surrender your passport to the nearest Russian consulate.

This decision is final and not subject to appeal.

Ilya reads it three times. Then once more in English, making sure he understood correctly.

He did.

He's stateless now. No longer Russian, not yet anything else. A man without a country.

Shane finds him an hour later, still sitting at the kitchen table, staring at the letter.

"Hey, I got that wood you wanted for the-" Shane stops. "What's wrong?"

Ilya hands him the letter.

Shane reads it, his expression darkening with each line. "Those fuckers."

"Is done. I am not Russian anymore."

"Ilya-"

"Is okay." And strangely, it is. Ilya thought this would hurt more — the final severing of ties to his homeland. But mostly he just feels relieved. "I don't want to be Russian if being Russian means being them. Means agreeing with their laws, their hate."

Shane sits down next to him, pulls him close. "I'm sorry anyway."

"Me too." Ilya leans into him. "What do I do now?"

"Now you call Olivier. The Canadian Global Affairs woman. She said they'd fast-track citizenship, remember?"

"Da. I remember."

He makes the call that afternoon. Olivier's sympathetic but efficient. "I'm sorry it came to this, but honestly, it makes the process easier. You're stateless, you're employed in Canada, you have no criminal record, and you're facing persecution in your former country. That's basically a perfect asylum case."

"How long will it take?"

"Normally? Years. But given the circumstances and the media attention, I can probably push it through in four to six months. Maybe faster."

"That fast?"

"That fast. I'll need some paperwork from you, but I'll email the list. We'll get you Canadian citizenship, Mr. Rozanov. I promise."

After he hangs up, Shane asks, "Four to six months?"

"Da. Maybe faster."

"That's—wow. Okay." Shane's quiet for a moment. "How do you feel about becoming Canadian?"

Ilya considers. He's lived in North America for nine years. He speaks English fluently, even if his accent never faded. He knows hockey night traditions and Tim Hortons orders and the words to "O Canada" because you can't play in the NHL without learning it.

And Shane is Canadian. The cottage is in Canada. His new team is in Canada.

"I feel good," Ilya says. "I feel like maybe is where I supposed to be all along."

"Yeah?" Shane's smiling now, soft and fond.

"Yeah." Ilya kisses him. "Besides, if I am Canadian, I can finally beat you at being Canadian."

"I'm literally an Olympic gold medalist for Canada."

"And I will be Russian-born Canadian who chose Canada. Is better story."

"That's not how it works."

"Is exactly how it works."

They bicker about it for the rest of the evening, light and easy, and Ilya thinks maybe losing Russia isn't losing everything. Maybe it's just making room for something better.

August brings training camp and Ilya's first official practice with Ottawa.

The Centaurs' facility is smaller than Boston's but newer, and the locker room is bright and clean. Ilya's been assigned a stall between Zane Boodram, a Trinidadian left wing, and Nate Holmber, a rookie forward who looks about twelve years old.

"Hey," Zane says, smile wide. "Welcome to team."

"Thank you."

"Don't worry about the guys," Zane continues, lowering his voice. "Some might be weird at first, but they get over it. We have good room here. Good people."

Ilya wants to believe him.

The coach, Brandon Wiebe, addresses the team before they head out to the ice. "We've got a lot of new faces this year," he says, making eye contact with each new player. "Doesn't matter where you came from or why you're here now. You're a Centaur. That means we play for each other, we support each other, and we leave everything else off the ice. Got it?"

A chorus of agreement.

"Good. Let's have a great season."

Practice is ... normal. Actually normal. Guys pass to him. They run drills properly. During scrimmage, there's the usual chirping and competitiveness, but nothing mean-spirited. Nothing that makes Ilya feel like he doesn't belong.

After, in the locker room, Evan Dykstra leans over. "Hey, Rozanov?"

"Da?"

"My sister's a huge fan. Could you—would you sign something for her sometime?"

"Of course."

"Thanks. She's going to lose her mind." Evan grins. "Also, welcome to Ottawa. It's not Boston or Montreal, but the food's pretty good."

"I like food."

"Great. There's this shawarma place we all go to after games. You should come."

"I will."

It's such a small thing — an invitation to shawarma — but it makes Ilya's chest warm anyway.

That night, he calls Shane. "Practice was good."

"Yeah? Tell me."

Ilya tells him everything — the drills, the guys, the way no one treated him like a pariah or a scandal. "Is different," he says. "Good different."

"I'm so glad." Shane sounds genuinely happy. "You deserve a team that appreciates you."

"How was your practice?"

"Fine. Same as always." But there's something in Shane's voice.

"Shane?"

"It's nothing. Just—someone asked if I was planning to throw games against Ottawa now that you're there."

"Fuck them."

"Yeah, that's what I said. Got fined by coach for cursing." Shane laughs, but it's hollow.

"Three more years, Ilya. Three more years and I'm done with Montreal."

"You don't have to wait. You could ask for trade—"

"No. I signed a contract. I'll honor it. But after?" Shane pauses. "After, I'm going wherever you are."

“What if I am in Ottawa still?”

“Then I’m coming to Ottawa.”

“They might not want you. You are Voyageur. Is like asking Yankee to play for Red Sox.”

“They’ll want me. I’m Shane fucking Hollander.”

Ilya grins. “You learn that from me?”

“I learn everything from you.”

September means pre-season games, and Ilya’s first game in an Ottawa jersey is against Toronto. They win 4-2, and Ilya gets two assists. The crowd at Canadian Tire Centre is enthusiastic, chanting his name when he’s on the ice.

After the game, a reporter asks, “How does it feel to be playing for a Canadian team?”

“Feels good,” Ilya says. “Ottawa is good city. Team is good. I am happy to be here.”

“Do you miss Boston?”

“I miss some players. But I am excited for new start.”

“And what about the rivalry with Montreal? Any concerns about facing Shane Hollander this season?”

Ilya’s prepared for this question. Has practiced the answer with Shane.

“Shane is one of best players in league,” he says carefully. “Will be tough to play against him. But is hockey. On ice, we are competitors. Off ice-” He shrugs. “Off ice is different story.”

“Are you saying you and Shane are still together?”

“I am saying is none of your business,” Ilya says pleasantly. “But yes.”

There’s a moment of shocked silence, then a flurry of follow-up questions. Ilya waves them off. “That is all. Thank you.”

His phone rings five minutes later. It’s Shane.

“Did you just confirm our relationship on national television?”

“Was regional television. Not national.”

“Ilya!”

“You said we are not hiding anymore. So I don’t hide.”

Shane's quiet for a moment. "Okay. Okay, you're right. We're not hiding."

"Are you angry?"

"No. I'm—actually, I'm proud of you. That took guts."

"Or stupidity."

"Little bit of both, maybe." Shane's smiling; Ilya can hear it. "I love you."

"I love you too."

The regular season starts in October, and Ottawa plays Montreal in their third game.

Ilya and Shane don't talk much in the days leading up to it — a mutual decision to keep things professional. But the night before the game, Shane texts: Good luck tomorrow. I'm going to kick your ass.

Ilya replies: You can try.

The game is brutal. Fast, physical, competitive in the way Montreal-Boston games always were, but now with Ottawa in the mix. Ilya and Shane are on the ice together for several shifts, and they play hard against each other — no favors, no pulling punches.

In the second period, Shane checks Ilya into the boards hard enough that Ilya sees stars. Ilya gets up, skates to the face-off circle, and says, "That's all you got?"

Shane grins behind his face guard. "Just warming up."

Ottawa wins 3-2. Ilya scores the game-winner in the third period — a snap shot from the slot that goes top shelf over the Montreal goalie's shoulder.

In the handshake line, Shane grabs Ilya's hand and says, "Nice goal."

"Thank you. Nice try."

"Fuck you," Shane says, but he's smiling.

"Later," Ilya promises quietly, and moves on before anyone can notice.

They meet at the cottage that night — both of them driving on their own, arriving within minutes of each other. They barely make it inside before they're kissing, rough and desperate, still high on competition and adrenaline.

"That hit in the second period," Ilya says between kisses. "Was dirty."

"It was clean. You just can't take a check."

"I can take anything you give."

“Prove it.”

They don’t make it to the bedroom. The couch is right there, and they’re both too impatient. After, lying tangled together in the narrow space, Shane says, “I fucking hate playing against you.”

“Liar. You love it.”

“Okay, I love it. But I also hate it. Because I want to win, but I also want you to do well, and those two things can’t coexist when we’re on opposite teams.”

“In three years, we are on same team. Then you can want both.”

“Can’t come soon enough.”

October becomes November, and Ilya gets a call from Olivier.

“Good news,” she says. “Your citizenship application is moving faster than expected. We’re looking at December, possibly even late November.”

“That fast?”

“That fast. There’s a lot of public support for your case, and frankly, the government likes the optics. Russian hockey star chooses Canada? That’s a good story.”

“I am not doing for story.”

“I know. But it doesn’t hurt.” A pause. “You’ll need to take the citizenship test and attend a ceremony. I’ll send you study materials.”

The study materials arrive two days later — a thick packet about Canadian history, government, symbols, and values. Ilya spreads it out on the kitchen table and starts reading.

Shane finds him an hour later, surrounded by papers, looking confused.

“What are you doing?”

“Studying. For citizenship test.”

“You need to study? I thought you already knew this stuff.”

“I know hockey and Tim Hortons. I don’t know who is first Prime Minister or what is Saskatchewan’s capital.”

“It’s Regina.”

“See? I need to study.”

Shane sits down next to him, picks up one of the sheets. “Okay. Quiz you. What are the three parts of Parliament?”

Ilya closes his eyes, tries to remember. “The Crown, House of Commons, and ... Senate?”

“Correct. When did Canada become a country?”

“1867. July first. That one I know because is holiday.”

“Good. What’s the population of Canada?”

“Is this on test?”

“Says here it is.”

“Fuck. Um. Thirty-seven million?”

“Close enough. Thirty-eight.” Shane flips through more pages. “Jesus, there’s a lot here. Do you really have to memorize all of this?”

“Da. If I want to be Canadian, I must know Canada.”

“You already know Canada.”

“Is different. Before, I was visitor. Now, I want to belong.”

Shane sets down the papers, looks at him seriously. “You already belong. Citizenship doesn’t change that.”

“Maybe. But will be nice to have paper that says so.”

They study together for the next few weeks — Shane quizzing Ilya on Canadian trivia between games and practices. Ilya learns about the Group of Seven and residential schools and the Charter of Rights and Freedoms. He learns about peacekeeping and bilingualism and the importance of hockey to Canadian identity.

“I already knew that last one,” he tells Shane.

“Yeah, but now you know it officially.”

The test is in mid-November, in a bland government building in Ottawa. Ilya’s more nervous than he expected — hands sweating, heart racing. But the questions are straightforward, and he knows the answers.

He passes.

“Congratulations,” the official tells him. “Your citizenship ceremony is scheduled for December 15th. You’re officially going to be Canadian.”

December 15th. Less than two weeks before Christmas.

Ilya calls Shane immediately. “I passed.”

“Of course you passed. You’re brilliant.”

“Ceremony is December 15th. Will you come?”

“Are you seriously asking if I’ll come to your citizenship ceremony? Ilya, I wouldn’t miss it for anything.”

“Good. Because I want you there. You and your parents, if they want to come.”

“They’ll want to come. Trust me.”

December arrives with snow and cold and anticipation. Ilya’s been in Canada for so long, but this feels different. Momentous. Like he’s finally admitting what’s been true for years — that this is home, that this is where he belongs.

The ceremony is in the morning, in a large room filled with other soon-to-be Canadians from dozens of countries. Ilya’s the only one who’s famous, and people keep staring at him, whispering.

Shane’s in the audience with his parents, all three of them dressed up. Yuna waves at Ilya, and David gives him a thumbs up.

The ceremony itself is surprisingly moving. They recite the oath of citizenship, and Ilya’s voice catches on the words. “I swear that I will be faithful and bear true allegiance to Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II, Queen of Canada, her heirs and successors, and that I will faithfully observe the laws of Canada and fulfill my duties as a Canadian citizen.”

When it’s done, when they’ve signed the certificates and shaken hands with the presiding judge, Ilya walks out of the room as a Canadian citizen.

Shane hugs him immediately, tight and hard. “Welcome home.”

“Thank you.” Ilya’s eyes are burning. “Thank you for being here.”

“Always,” Shane promises.

Yuna hugs him next, then David, both of them congratulating him and taking approximately a thousand photos. Other ceremony attendees want photos too, and Ilya obliges, grinning with his citizenship certificate held up like a trophy.

They go to lunch after — a nice restaurant downtown that Yuna picked out. David orders champagne to celebrate.

“To Ilya,” he says, raising his glass. “Canadian citizen, world-class hockey player, and the best thing that ever happened to our son.”

“Dad,” Shane protests, but he’s smiling.

“It’s true.” David clinks his glass against Ilya’s. “Welcome to the family, officially.”

“Officially?” Ilya raises an eyebrow.

“Well, you know. You and Shane aren’t-” David stops. “I mean, not that you have to be, it’s just-”

“What my husband is trying to say,” Yuna interrupts smoothly, “is that you’re family whether there’s paperwork or not. But if you two ever want to make it official-official, we’d be very happy.”

Shane chokes on his champagne. “Mom!”

“What? I’m just saying.”

“Can we not talk about this right now?”

“Why not? You’ve been together for years. You clearly love each other. What’s wrong with discussing the future?”

“Nothing’s wrong with it,” Shane says, face red. “But maybe we could discuss it not in front of you and Dad?”

Ilya’s watching this exchange with amusement. The truth is, he’s thought about it. About marrying Shane, about making it official. But marriage is complicated — legally, financially, emotionally. And Shane’s still under contract with Montreal for three more years. They’re still figuring out how to be together across team rivalries and media scrutiny.

But still. The idea’s appealing.

“Actually,” Ilya says slowly, “maybe is not terrible idea.”

Shane stares at him. “What?”

“Marriage. Maybe is good idea.”

“Are you—are you serious right now?”

“Why not? I am Canadian now. You are Canadian. We love each other. We want to be together. Marriage makes sense.”

“Ilya, you can’t just-” Shane stops. “Are you proposing? Right now? In front of my parents?”

“No. Is not proposal. Is just ... observation.”

“Observation,” Shane repeats flatly.

“Da. I observe that marriage would be logical next step.”

Shane’s parents are watching this exchange like a tennis match. Yuna looks delighted. David looks like he’s trying not to laugh.

“Logical,” Shane says. “You’re saying we should get married because it’s logical.”

“And because I love you.”

“Oh, well, as long as you love me.”

Ilya frowns. “You are being sarcastic. Why are you being sarcastic?”

“Because you just casually suggested we get married over lunch with my parents like you’re suggesting we grab groceries!”

“Is not good time?”

“It’s-” Shane stops. Takes a breath. “Ilya, if we’re going to talk about getting married, can we please do it in private? Without an audience?”

“Oh.” Ilya looks at David and Yuna, who are both grinning now. “Sorry. Was rude of me.”

“It’s fine,” Yuna assures him. “But Shane’s right. This is a conversation you two should have alone.”

They finish lunch with less explosive topics — Ilya’s ceremony, Shane’s upcoming game against Tampa, David’s new project at work. But the marriage comment hangs in the air, unresolved.

Later, in Shane’s truck on the way back to the cottage, Shane says, “Did you mean it?”

“Mean what?”

“The marriage thing. Were you serious?”

Ilya thinks about it. “Da. I was serious. Not proposal, but serious about wanting it. Eventually.”

“Eventually,” Shane echoes. “Like, in a few years? Or sooner?”

“I don’t know. When feels right.” Ilya looks over at him. “Does idea scare you?”

“No. Maybe. A little.” Shane’s hands tighten on the steering wheel. “I want to marry you. I’ve wanted to marry you for a while now. But with my contract in Montreal and your first year in Ottawa and everything being so public already-”

“You think is bad timing.”

“I think it’s complicated timing.”

“Everything with us is complicated.”

“Yeah,” Shane agrees. “It really is.”

They drive in silence for a while. Then Ilya says, “What if timing doesn’t matter? What if we just do what we want, when we want it?”

“That’s very idealistic.”

“Is also very us. We don’t do things normal way. Why start now?”

Shane pulls into the cottage driveway, puts the truck in park. Turns to look at Ilya properly.

“Are you actually proposing right now?”

“No,” Ilya says. “But if I was to propose, what would you say?”

“That depends on the proposal.”

“Shane.”

“Ilya.” Shane reaches over, takes his hand. “If you propose to me — really propose, not hypothetically — I’ll say yes. Obviously I’ll say yes. But I want it to mean something. I want it to be special. Not rushed or logical or because we’re feeling sentimental after your citizenship ceremony.”

“Okay,” Ilya says. “Okay. I can do special.”

“Good.”

They get out of the truck, head inside. Shane starts making dinner while Ilya changes out of his dress clothes. Everything feels normal, comfortable, domestic.

But Ilya’s mind is racing.

He wants to marry Shane. Wants it more than he realized until today. And Shane said yes — or would say yes, if Ilya asked properly.

So he needs to ask properly.

He disappears into the bedroom while Shane’s chopping vegetables, closes the door quietly. Starts searching through his things — duffel bag, closet, dresser drawers.

Finally finds what he’s looking for, tucked in the back of his sock drawer where he put it six months ago and forgot about it.

A small velvet ring box.

He’d bought it in April, during the worst of the Boston nightmare. Had gone into a jewelry store in downtown Boston on a whim, seen a simple platinum band in the case, and thought that’s Shane’s ring.

He’d bought it without really thinking about when or how he’d use it. Just knew he wanted it, wanted to have it ready for when the moment was right.

Maybe the moment is now.

Ilya opens the box. The ring is still there, exactly as he remembers — clean lines, no stones, just quality metal that catches the light. Very Shane. Very them.

He takes a breath. Then another. His hands are shaking slightly, which is ridiculous. This is Shane. Shane who loves him, who already said he'd say yes. There's nothing to be nervous about.

Except everything.

Ilya closes the box, slips it into his pocket, and heads back to the kitchen.

Shane's at the stove, stirring something that smells incredible. He looks so perfectly domestic — barefoot in jeans and a worn t-shirt, humming under his breath. Ilya's hit with a wave of love so strong it nearly knocks him over.

This. He wants this forever.

"Shane."

"Yeah?" Shane doesn't turn around. "Can you grab the—"

"Shane, look at me."

Something in Ilya's voice makes Shane turn, spatula still in hand. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing is wrong." Ilya crosses the kitchen, takes the spatula from Shane's hand, sets it on the counter. "Everything is right. That is problem."

"I don't understand."

"I know. Is okay." Ilya takes both of Shane's hands in his. "You said you want special proposal. You want it to mean something."

Shane's eyes widen. "Ilya—"

"Let me finish." Ilya's heart is pounding so hard he can feel it in his throat. "I am not good with words. Not in English, not in Russian. I am good with hockey. With action. But for you, I try words."

"You don't have to—"

"I do. Because you deserve words." Ilya squeezes Shane's hands. "When I meet you, I think you are annoying. Too confident, too Canadian, too everything. I think I hate you."

Shane laughs wetly. "Great start to a proposal."

"Shh. I am talking." Ilya smiles. "But then I get to know you. And I realize you are not too much, you are exactly right. You are kind and funny and so competitive it makes me crazy."

You make me want to be better player, better person. You make me want to be brave.”

“Ilya-”

“When video leaked, when everything fell apart, you stayed. You could have run, could have said is too much, too complicated. But you stayed. You held my hand at airport. You told your team about us. You chose me over everything else.” Ilya’s voice cracks. “No one ever chose me before. Not like that.”

Shane’s eyes are shining with tears. “Of course I chose you. I’ll always choose you.”

“I know. And I choose you too. Every day, every time, I choose you.” Ilya lets go of Shane’s hands, reaches into his pocket. “So I ask you-”

He drops to one knee on the kitchen floor.

Shane makes a sound that’s half-laugh, half-sob.

Ilya opens the ring box. “Shane Hollander, will you marry me?”

For a moment, Shane just stares at him. At the ring. At Ilya’s face. Then he’s dropping to his knees too, grabbing Ilya’s face with both hands, kissing him so hard they both nearly fall over.

“Yes,” Shane says against Ilya’s mouth. “Yes, obviously yes, you ridiculous man-”

“Is that yes?”

“It’s the biggest yes in the history of yes. Yes, I’ll marry you. Yes to everything.”

Ilya’s grinning so hard his face hurts. He fumbles with the ring box, manages to extract the ring with shaking hands. “Give me your hand.”

Shane holds out his left hand. Ilya slides the ring on, and it fits perfectly — of course it does, because Ilya had stolen one of Shane’s other rings months ago to get the size right.

“Perfect,” Ilya says.

“You’re perfect.” Shane’s looking at the ring, then at Ilya, then at the ring again. “When did you even—how long have you had this?”

“Since April. I bought it and then chickened out about proposing.”

“You? Chickened out?”

“Is very scary, proposing. What if you said no?”

“I would never say no. Never.” Shane kisses him again, slower this time, deeper. “I love you so much.”

“I love you too. So much I marry you.”

“We’re getting married,” Shane says, like he’s testing out the words. “Holy shit, we’re getting married.”

“Da. We are engaged now. Is official.”

“Very official.” Shane stands up, pulling Ilya with him. “We should celebrate.”

“We should finish cooking dinner-”

“Fuck dinner.” Shane’s backing Ilya toward the living room, kissing his jaw, his neck.
“Dinner can wait.”

“You were very excited about that dinner-”

“Ilya, I just got engaged. Food is the last thing on my mind.”

They stumble into the living room, still kissing, Shane working at the buttons of Ilya’s dress shirt. Ilya’s hands are already under Shane’s t-shirt, mapping the familiar terrain of his stomach, his chest.

“Couch,” Shane says, pushing Ilya down onto the worn leather sofa.

Ilya goes willingly, pulling Shane down on top of him. “Bossy tonight.”

“You like it when I’m bossy.”

“Da. I like it very much.”

Shane strips off Ilya’s shirt, tosses it somewhere behind him. His hands are everywhere — Ilya’s chest, his shoulders, tracing the lines of muscle and old scars. “Mine,” Shane says, voice rough. “You’re mine now. Officially.”

“Was yours before.”

“I know. But now everyone will know.” Shane’s working at Ilya’s belt, gets it open, starts on the zipper. “Now you’ll have my ring, and I’ll be your husband, and—fuck, I can’t believe we’re doing this.”

“Having sex? We have sex many times-”

“Getting married, idiot.” But Shane’s laughing, and then he’s not laughing anymore because Ilya’s got his hand down Shane’s jeans, stroking him through his boxers.

“Take these off,” Ilya orders.

Shane complies, standing up just long enough to strip completely. Ilya does the same, and then they’re both naked in the living room in the middle of the afternoon, winter light streaming through the windows.

Shane's staring at him, and there's something different in his expression. Something deeper than just want.

"What?" Ilya asks.

"Nothing. Just ... you're going to be my husband. And I get to see you like this forever."

"Is very romantic. Also, we are both naked and I am very hard. Maybe we can be romantic later?"

"You're such a romantic," Shane says dryly, but he's pushing Ilya back down on the couch, settling between his legs. "Fine. Less talking, more celebrating."

He takes Ilya in his hand, stroking slowly while maintaining eye contact. Ilya's breath catches.

"You like that?" Shane asks, even though he knows the answer.

"You know I do."

"Say it anyway."

"I like when you touch me. I like your hands on me. I like, ah—" The words dissolve as Shane's mouth replaces his hand, hot and perfect and exactly what Ilya needs.

Shane's always been good at this — knows exactly how to use his tongue, knows when to speed up and when to slow down, knows how to take Ilya apart piece by piece. But tonight there's an extra intensity to it, like Shane's trying to prove something. Trying to mark him.

Ilya tangles his fingers in Shane's hair — not pushing, never pushing, just holding on.

"Shane, I need—I want—"

Shane pulls off, lips slick and red. "What do you want?"

"You. Inside me. Now."

"Yeah?" Shane's eyes are dark with want. "You want me to fuck you on this couch?"

"Da. Yes. Please."

"Since you asked so nicely." Shane's already reaching for the side table drawer where they keep supplies — lube, condoms, all the necessities. They've fucked on this couch enough times that everything's within easy reach.

Shane slicks up his fingers first, works one inside Ilya carefully. Ilya spreads his legs wider, one foot on the floor, the other hooked over the back of the couch. It's not the most comfortable position, but it's good, it's them.

"More," Ilya demands.

Shane adds a second finger, then a third, stretching him open with practiced efficiency. Ilya rocks down on his fingers, chasing the feeling, the burn that edges into pleasure.

“Ready?” Shane asks.

“Always ready for you.”

Shane positions himself, pushes in slowly. The stretch is intense, perfect, everything Ilya wanted. He wraps his legs around Shane’s waist, pulling him deeper.

“Fuck,” Shane breathes. “You feel so good.”

“Move. Please move.”

Shane does, starting with slow, deep thrusts that make Ilya’s toes curl. But slow doesn’t last long — it never does with them. Soon Shane’s fucking him hard and fast, the couch creaking under them, both of them gasping.

Ilya’s hand is on his own cock, stroking in time with Shane’s thrusts. It’s almost too much, sensation overwhelming, but he never wants it to stop.

“Look at me,” Shane says, and Ilya does. Shane’s face is flushed, sweat beading on his forehead, mouth open as he pants. “Love you. Love you so fucking much.”

“Love you too. My, ah, my fiancé.”

Shane groans at that, his hips stuttering. “Say it again.”

“My fiancé. Mine.”

“Yours. All yours. Always.” Shane’s hand covers Ilya’s on his cock, helping him stroke. “Come for me. Want to feel you come.”

It doesn’t take much more — just a few more thrusts, Shane’s hand on his, the look in Shane’s eyes. Ilya comes with a shout, spilling over their joined hands.

Shane follows seconds later, burying himself deep and biting down on Ilya’s shoulder to muffle his own sounds.

They stay like that for a long moment, both breathing hard, Shane’s weight pressing Ilya into the couch. Eventually Shane pulls out carefully, and they’re both sticky and gross and completely satisfied.

“Couch is dirty now,” Ilya observes.

“Good thing it’s leather.” Shane’s still catching his breath. “We can clean it.”

“Later. Don’t want to move now.”

“Me neither.”

But the couch is only so big, and they're both hockey players, and it's getting uncomfortable. Shane extracts himself, offers Ilya a hand up.

"Carpet?" Shane suggests, nodding toward the plush rug in front of the fireplace.

"You are insatiable."

"You just agreed to marry me. I'm celebrating."

They move to the carpet, which is softer but also means rug burn is inevitable. Ilya doesn't care. He pulls Shane down on top of him, and they kiss lazily, hands wandering.

"My turn," Ilya says after a while.

"Your turn for what?"

"To fuck you."

Shane grins. "On the carpet?"

"Why not? We already dirty the couch."

"Fair point."

Shane rolls onto his stomach, pillowing his head on his arms. Ilya takes a moment just to look at him — the long line of his back, the curve of his ass, the muscles in his shoulders. His fiancé. His soon-to-be husband.

"Are you going to stare all day or actually do something?" Shane asks, voice muffled.

"I am appreciating view."

"Appreciate faster."

Ilya laughs, reaches for the lube they'd brought over from the couch. Takes his time prepping Shane, working him open with care. Shane pushes back on his fingers, impatient as always.

When Ilya finally pushes inside, they both groan. This angle is deeper, more intense, and Ilya has to pause for a moment to get his bearings.

"Move," Shane demands, so Ilya does.

He sets a steady rhythm, one hand on Shane's hip for leverage, the other braced on the floor beside Shane's shoulder. Shane's making those sounds he makes when it's really good — little gasps and curses and Ilya's name.

"Touch yourself," Ilya says.

Shane gets a hand under himself, and Ilya can feel the movement of Shane's arm as he strokes himself. It's obscenely hot, watching Shane fall apart beneath him.

“Harder,” Shane pants. “Come on, Ilya, harder-”

Ilya obliges, picking up the pace until he’s slamming into Shane with enough force that they’re both going to feel it tomorrow. Shane’s sounds get louder, less controlled, and Ilya knows he’s close.

“Come on,” Ilya urges. “Come for me.”

Shane does, shaking apart with Ilya’s name on his lips. Ilya follows right after, the pleasure whiting out his vision for a moment.

He collapses on top of Shane, both of them boneless and wrecked. The carpet is definitely going to need cleaning. Possibly replacing.

“Worth it,” Shane says, like he can read Ilya’s mind.

“Da. Worth it.”

They lie there for a few minutes, until the stickiness gets uncomfortable and Ilya’s pretty sure his knees have rug burn.

“Shower?” Shane suggests.

“In minute. Still can’t move.”

“Same.”

But eventually they do move, stumbling toward the bathroom like drunk people. The shower is big enough for both of them — one of the first renovations Shane made to the cottage — and they clean each other with gentle hands.

They finally get dressed — soft clothes, sweatpants and t-shirts — and Shane finishes making the dinner he’d started before Ilya proposed. They eat at the kitchen table, occasionally stopping to just stare at Shane’s ring, both of them still slightly disbelieving.

“When should we get married?” Shane asks around a mouthful of pasta.

“I don’t know. Summer?”

“Next summer? That’s like seven months away.”

“Is too fast?”

“No. Maybe. I don’t know.” Shane sets down his fork. “Is there a reason to wait?”

“Not really. We already live together half the time. Everyone knows we are together. Getting married just makes official.”

“So summer.”

“Summer,” Ilya agrees. “Small wedding. Just family and close friends.”

“Sounds perfect.”

They call Shane’s parents after dinner. Yuna answers on the second ring.

“Did he propose?” She asks immediately.

“How did you-”

“Mother’s intuition. Plus you both left here with very specific looks on your faces. So? Did he?”

Shane looks at Ilya, who nods. “He did. I said yes.”

Yuna’s shriek is loud enough that they have to hold the phone away from their ears. David’s voice comes through a moment later. “Congratulations, boys. We’re thrilled.”

“Thanks, Dad.”

“When’s the wedding?”

“Summer. We’re thinking something small at the cottage.”

“Perfect. Your mother will want to help plan.”

“I’m right here,” Yuna says. “And yes, I want to help plan. This is very exciting. My baby is getting married!”

They talk for another twenty minutes, Yuna already making lists of things they’ll need to do, David offering to help with logistics, both of them clearly delighted.

After they hang up, Shane says, “That went well.”

“Your mother is very excited.”

“She’s been waiting for this. I’m pretty sure she has a binder already prepared.”

“Is little bit scary.”

“Very scary. But also nice? That she cares so much.”

“Da. Is nice.” Ilya leans against Shane’s shoulder. “We should tell Hayden too. And managers.”

“Tomorrow. Tonight is just us.”

So they curl up on the couch — the now-thoroughly-christened couch — and watch hockey highlights on TV. Shane keeps playing with his ring, twisting it around his finger, holding it up to the light.

“Stop fidgeting,” Ilya says.

“I like it. It feels good.”

“Good. Is supposed to feel good.”

“Do you want a ring too?”

Ilya hadn't thought about that. “I don't know. Maybe?”

“We can get you one. Something that matches mine.” Shane turns to look at him. “Or something completely different. Whatever you want.”

“I want-” Ilya stops. “I want one that says I am yours. That I belong with you.”

“Then we'll find one. We'll go shopping together.”

“Okay.”

They fall asleep on the couch, TV still playing quietly, winter wind rattling the windows. Ilya's last thought before sleep takes him is that this — this moment, this life, this man — is everything he never knew he needed.

And he gets to keep it.

Forever.

Chapter 4: golden

Chapter Notes

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

The final buzzer sounds, and for a moment, Ilya can't process it. Can't process that they won. That Canada won. That he won an Olympic gold medal wearing a maple leaf instead of the Russian tricolor he'd dreamed about as a child.

Then Shane crashes into him, nearly knocking them both over, and reality hits.

"We fucking did it!" Shane's yelling, arms around Ilya's neck. "Olympic gold, baby!"

The rest of the team piles on — Hayden, J.J. Wyatt, younger guys whose names Ilya's still learning. They're all screaming, crying, laughing. The crowd at the Wukesong Sports Centre is deafening.

Ilya looks up at the scoreboard: Canada 3, Sweden 2.

He scored the game-winner. A power-play goal in the third period, a one-timer from Shane's pass that went bar-down. The kind of goal that will be replayed forever.

"You good?" Shane asks, pulling back to look at him. His face guard is fogged up, but Ilya can see he's crying.

"I'm—" Ilya's voice cracks. "Da. I'm good. I'm very good."

Ilya lost at PyeongChang — or rather, Ilya lost his chance at PyeongChang. Russia forfeited, and he fled, and his Olympic dreams died on that tarmac.

But now-

"We won," Ilya says, like he's testing the words.

"We won," Shane confirms, grinning so wide it has to hurt. "Together."

"Together."

The team does their victory lap, waving to the crowd. The Canadian fans are going absolutely insane, a sea of red and white. Ilya skates past them, and someone's holding a sign that says WELCOME HOME, ROZANOV.

He has to stop skating for a moment because his eyes are blurring.

Shane skates back to him. "You okay?"

"Sign says 'welcome home.'"

Shane looks, finds the sign, waves at the person holding it. “Well, they’re right. You are home.”

“I know. Is just-” Ilya gestures helplessly. “Is lot.”

“I know.” Shane takes his hand — right there on the ice, in front of thousands of people and millions watching on TV — and squeezes. “But we’ve got time to process. Right now, we celebrate.”

The medal ceremony is surreal. Standing on the top podium, listening to “O Canada” play, feeling the weight of the gold medal around his neck. Shane’s next to him, their shoulders touching, and Ilya thinks this is what I was supposed to have all along.

Not Russia. Not the shame and fear and hiding.

This. Shane and Canada and a team that celebrates him instead of tolerating him.

The media scrum afterward is massive. Every reporter wants to talk to Ilya — the Russian-born player who won gold for Canada. The narrative is too good to resist.

“Ilya, how does it feel to win gold for your adopted country?”

“Feels incredible. Is dream come true.”

“Do you think about what might have been? If you’d been able to play for Russia in 2018?”

Ilya doesn’t hesitate. “No. I am where I supposed to be. With Canada, with this team. I have no regrets.”

“What does this gold medal mean to you?”

He glances at Shane, who’s doing his own interview a few feet away. Shane catches his eye and winks.

“Means everything,” Ilya says. “Means I am home.”

The team decides to go out — properly out, to a club in downtown Beijing that someone’s cousin’s friend recommended. It’s exclusive, supposedly, with VIP booths and bottle service and the kind of atmosphere that screams “Olympic celebration.”

They pile into a fleet of taxis, all of them still buzzing with adrenaline. Ilya’s sitting between Shane and Hayden, gold medal still around his neck because he refuses to take it off.

“You’re going to sleep in that thing, aren’t you?” Hayden says.

“Da. Maybe shower in it too.”

“That’s disgusting.”

“Is gold medal. Is allowed to be disgusting.”

The club is called Eclipse, and it’s everything promised — dark and loud, with lights that pulse in time with the music. There’s a section already roped off for them, VIP booths with a view of the dance floor and Beijing’s skyline through floor-to-ceiling windows.

The drinks start flowing immediately. Champagne, vodka, something blue that tastes like gasoline and regret. Ilya doesn’t care. He’s drinking with his husband and his teammates, celebrating the biggest win of his career.

Shane keeps touching him — a hand on his lower back, fingers tangled with his, lips brushing his temple. They’ve been married for eight months, and Shane still can’t keep his hands to himself.

Ilya loves it.

“Speech!” Someone yells. Ilya thinks it’s Wyatt. “Rozy, give us a speech!”

“I am not good at speeches-”

“Don’t care! Speech!”

The whole team starts chanting: “Speech! Speech! Speech!”

Ilya stands up, nearly trips over Shane’s feet, grabs his champagne glass for moral support. “Okay, okay. I give speech.”

The team cheers.

“When I come to Canada,” Ilya starts, “I am running away. I am scared. I think maybe my life is over, maybe I lose everything.” He pauses, looking around at the faces of his teammates — some he’s known for years, some he just met weeks ago. “But I was wrong. I didn’t lose everything. I found everything. I found home. I found family. I found team that accepts me, that fights for me. And tonight, we win gold medal together. So-” He raises his glass. “Thank you. Thank you for being my brothers. Thank you for making me Canadian.”

“You were always Canadian!” Someone shouts. “You just had the wrong passport!”

Everyone laughs, raises their glasses. They drink, and the music gets louder, and people start dancing.

Shane pulls Ilya aside, into the corner of their VIP booth. “That was a good speech.”

“Was terrible speech. I forgot half the words.”

“It was perfect.” Shane kisses him, soft and sweet despite the chaos around them. “I’m so proud of you.”

“We won together.”

“Yeah, but this is your first gold medal. Your first Olympics representing Canada. That’s huge.”

“Is huge,” Ilya agrees. Then grins. “You know what else is huge?”

“Don’t-”

“My dick-”

“I hate you,” Shane says, but he’s laughing.

“You love me. You married me.”

“Worst decision of my life.”

“Second worst. First worst was extending with Montreal after entry contract.”

Shane’s expression darkens slightly. “Five more months.”

“Then you are free.”

Shane’s contract with Montreal finally expires in July. He’d stuck it out — three more years of subtle hostility, of questions about his loyalty, of playing for a team that never quite trusted him after he came out. But he’d honored his contract, played his heart out every game, and now he’s done.

And he’s already signed an extension that will follow him through a trade to Ottawa, though they haven’t announced it yet. Will be playing on the same team as Ilya starting next season.

“Can’t wait,” Shane says. “Same team, same city, same house. No more long-distance hockey.”

“Will be strange, playing together instead of against each other.”

“Will be amazing.” Shane’s hand slides to Ilya’s thigh, higher than is probably appropriate for a public setting. “We’ll finally be on the same side.”

“We have always been on same side. Just different jerseys.”

“You know what I mean.”

Ilya does. He also knows that Shane’s hand is getting dangerously close to inappropriate territory, and they’re surrounded by teammates, and this is not the time or place-

“Get a room!” Hayden yells from across the booth.

“Maybe we will!” Shane yells back.

“Not yet,” Ilya says, grabbing Shane’s wrist before his hand can move higher. “Is too early to leave. We just got here.”

“Fine. But later-”

“Later, yes. Now, we celebrate with team.”

They rejoin the group, do more shots, sing along to songs Ilya doesn’t know the words to. Someone orders food — dumplings and noodles and things that are probably terrible for their training diets but taste incredible.

Ilya’s in the middle of explaining to one of the younger players why Russian vodka is superior to all other vodkas when he notices one of the TVs mounted above the bar. It’s set to a Russian news channel — probably for the handful of Russian athletes still in Beijing — and there’s a familiar face on screen.

His face.

“Shane,” Ilya says, tugging on his husband’s sleeve.

“What?”

“TV. Russian news.”

They both turn to look. The sound is off, but the chyron is clear even from this distance:
ПРЕДАТЕЛЬ РОЗАНОВ ВЫИГРЫВАЕТ ЗОЛОТО ДЛЯ КАНАДЫ

Traitor Rozanov Wins Gold for Canada.

There’s footage of Ilya celebrating on the ice, wearing his Canadian jersey, holding the maple leaf flag. The Russian anchor is clearly saying something scathing — his expression is contemptuous, disgusted.

“Fuck them,” Shane says immediately.

“Da,” Ilya agrees. “Fuck them.”

But he keeps watching. Can’t help it. The segment continues — they’re showing old footage now, from PyeongChang. The video. The one that started everything. Ilya had thought he was numb to it by now, but seeing it on Russian TV, being used to shame him, still makes his stomach clench.

Then the footage changes to something else. His brother.

Ilya’s breath catches.

He hasn’t seen his brother in four years. They’ve exchanged a few emails — stilted, formal — but Alexei refused to visit Canada, and Ilya can’t go to Russia. After Ilya’s citizenship was revoked, his brother had sent one last email. *You have brought shame to our family. I have no brother.*

That was it. No contact since.

But now his brother is on TV, being interviewed about Ilya's gold medal. The sound is still off, but Ilya can read his lips well enough. He's saying something about disappointment, about betrayal, about how Ilya abandoned his homeland.

"Ilya," Shane says quietly. "Don't watch this."

"I have to."

"You don't. This is—they're trying to hurt you. Don't let them."

The interview ends. The anchor says something else — probably something about how Russia is better off without traitors like Ilya. Then they move on to another story.

Ilya turns away from the TV.

"You okay?" Shane asks.

"Da." And he is. That's the strange part — he's actually okay. "I thought seeing him would hurt more. But it doesn't. He is stranger to me now."

"He's an asshole to you now."

"That too." Ilya touches the gold medal around his neck. "I have this. I have you. I have team that loves me. What does he have? Anger and bitterness and nothing else."

"Damn right."

"So fuck Russia. Fuck my brother. Fuck anyone who thinks I am traitor for being happy."

"Now that's what I like to hear." Shane grabs two shots from a passing tray, hands one to Ilya. "To being happy."

"To being happy," Ilya echoes, and they drink.

The night continues. More drinks, more dancing, more celebration. Ilya forgets about the Russian TV, about his father, about everything except the weight of gold around his neck and Shane's hand in his.

Around midnight, Ilya leans in close, lips brushing Shane's ear. "Want to go back to Village."

"Now? It's still early-"

"Want to take you back to room and celebrate properly." This time it's Ilya's hand on Shane's thigh, higher this time, dangerous. "Want to peel you out of clothes and remind you why marrying me was good decision."

Heat pools in Shane's stomach. "Ilya-"

"Please? Been thinking about it all night. Thinking about you under me, thinking about all the ways I want to make you feel good."

Shane's resolve crumbles. "Okay. Yes. Let's go."

They make their excuses — Shane claiming they're both exhausted, Ilya nodding along even though he's never been more awake. Their teammates see right through it.

"Use protection!" Hayden yells.

"We're married!" Shane yells back.

"Still! Those Olympic Village beds are flimsy!"

"We'll be careful!"

They are not, in fact, going to be careful.

The taxi ride back to the Olympic Village is torture. Ilya's hand is on Shane's thigh the entire time, thumb rubbing circles that are absolutely not innocent. Shane trying to think about hockey stats, about their schedule tomorrow, about anything except how badly he wants his husband.

"Stop squirming," Ilya murmurs.

"Then stop touching me."

"No."

They make it to the Village, through security, to their building. Canada's staying in one of the high-rises, and Ilya and Shane are sharing a room like they have been all Olympics. The perks of being married — you get to room together.

The elevator ride up to their floor is interminable. The second they're alone, Ilya crowds Shane against the wall, kissing him hard enough to bruise.

"Fuck," Shane gasps. "Ilya, the elevator—"

"Don't care." Ilya's working at Shane's belt, gets it open just as the elevator dings for their floor.

They stumble out, Shane trying to rebuckle his pants, Ilya laughing against his neck. Their room is at the end of the hall, and they barely make it there without causing a scene.

Shane fumbles with the key card. Drops it. Picks it up. Drops it again.

"Give me that," Ilya says, taking the card and swiping it efficiently.

The door opens, and they practically fall inside.

The room is small — two of those infamous cardboard beds that the Olympic organizers insisted were "sturdy enough for any activity." Shane's pretty sure they're about to test that claim.

Ilya's already pulling off his shirt. "Medal stays on."

"What?"

"The medal. It stays on. Want to fuck you while you're wearing gold medal."

Heat shoots straight to Shane's groin. "That's a very specific fantasy."

"Been thinking about it since ceremony." Ilya's hands are on Shane's shirt now, pulling it over his head. "My husband, Olympic gold medalist, wearing nothing but medal."

"You're insane."

"You love it."

"I love you," Shane corrects, but he's keeping the medal on.

They shed the rest of their clothes frantically — pants, boxers, socks, everything ending up in a pile on the floor. Ilya pushes Shane down onto one of the beds, and immediately there's an ominous creaking sound.

"Careful," Shane warns.

"I'm always careful."

"You're never careful."

"Fair point." Ilya settles between Shane's legs, running his hands up Ilya's thighs. "Look at you. Olympic champion. Mine."

"Yours," Shane agrees breathlessly.

Ilya takes him in hand, stroking slowly while maintaining eye contact. Shane's hips jerk up involuntarily.

"Patience," Ilya says.

"Fuck patience. We've been waiting all night."

"Good things come to those who wait."

"Ilya, I swear to God, if you don't—"

Ilya takes him in his mouth, cutting off whatever threat Shane was about to make. Shane's hand flies to Ilya's hair, fisting in the curly strands.

Ilya's really, really good at this. Years of practice, and he knows exactly what Shane likes — the pressure, the speed, the way to use his tongue that makes Shane see stars. The gold medal is cold against Shane's chest, a reminder of what they accomplished, what they won together.

"Ilya, I'm—I'm close—"

Ilya pulls off, lips slick and red. “Not yet. Want to be inside you when you come.”

“Then hurry up.”

“So demanding.” But Ilya’s already reaching for their bag, pulling out lube. They’d brought supplies to the Olympics — figuring they’d need them at some point — and thank God for that foresight.

Ilya slicks up his fingers, works one inside Shane. Then two. Shane spreads his legs wider, one foot braced on the bed frame, the other hanging off the edge.

There’s another creak from the bed.

“Ilya, the bed is breaking-”

“Is fine-”

CRACK.

The bed frame literally splits in half, the cardboard giving way under their combined weight. They drop about six inches, landing in a heap of tangled limbs and broken bed.

“Fuck,” Ilya says.

“I told you the bed was breaking!”

“Is fine, is fine-” Ilya’s trying not to laugh. “We can work with this.”

“The bed is broken!”

“So we use floor.” Ilya hauls Shane off the wreckage of the bed, positioning them on the floor instead. “Problem solved.”

“The floor is hard.”

“I’m also hard, thanks for noticing.”

Shane can’t help it, he laughs. The absurdity of it all, the broken bed, Ilya’s terrible jokes.

“You’re ridiculous.”

“You married me.”

“Worst decision of my life.”

“You keep saying that.” Ilya’s positioning himself again, pressing into Shane slowly. “But you’re still here.”

“Because I love you, even though you break Olympic furniture.”

“In my defense, beds are-” Ilya bottoms out, and they both groan. “-fragile.”

“Less talking, more fucking.”

“Yes, moy chempion.”

Ilya sets a punishing pace, and Shane matches him, meeting each thrust. The floor is hard and uncomfortable, but Ilya doesn't care. They've had sex in worse places — against trees, in rental cars, once memorably in a supply closet at an arena.

This is nothing.

Ilya's hand wraps around Shane's cock, stroking in time with his thrusts. The gold medal is swinging with the movement, catching the light, and Ilya's watching it with fascination.

“So fucking beautiful,” Ilya pants. “My champion. My husband.”

“Ilya-” Shane's close, can feel the orgasm building at the base of his spine.

“I love you. I love you so fucking much.”

“I love you too. I'm-”

“Come for me. Want to see you come wearing medal.”

That does it. Shane comes hard, spilling over Ilya's hand and his own stomach. Ilya follows seconds later, burying himself deep with a groan.

They lie there on the floor, both breathing hard, Ilya's weight pressing Shane into the carpet. The gold medal is digging into Shane's chest, and one of his legs has gone numb, and he's pretty sure there's rug burn on his ass.

He's never been happier.

“We broke the bed,” Shane says after a while.

“I noticed.”

“They're going to charge us for it.”

“Worth it.”

Shane laughs, finally pulling out and rolling to the side. “Yeah. Totally worth it.”

They lie there for a few more minutes, catching their breath. Then Ilya says, “We should probably clean up.”

“Probably.”

Neither of them moves.

“Shane?”

“Yeah?”

“Thank you.”

“For what?”

“For everything. For staying with me when everything fell apart. For supporting me. For helping me become Canadian. For-” Ilya gestures around the room. “For this. All of this.”

Shane props himself up on one elbow, looking up at Ilya seriously. “You don’t have to thank me. You’re my husband. It’s not something I did for you. It’s just us. Together.”

“Together,” Ilya echoes.

“Always.” Shane leans down, kisses him softly. “Olympic champions together. What’s next?”

“Stanley Cup?”

“Already have three of those.”

“Another Stanley Cup?”

“Greedy.” But Shane’s smiling. “I like it.”

They eventually get up, clean themselves off with the provided towels. Survey the damage to the bed.

“It’s really broken,” Shane observes.

“Very broken.”

“Think they’ll believe us if we say it collapsed on its own?”

“After they made big deal about how strong beds are? No.”

“Worth a shot.”

They push the broken bed frame to the side, pile the mattress and blankets on the floor instead. Make a nest that’s actually more comfortable than the bed was.

Ilya’s phone buzzes with texts — their teammates asking if they made it back okay, Hayden sending eggplant emojis, J.J. asking if they’re coming back to the club.

Ilya texts back: We’re good. Staying in. See you tomorrow.

Hayden: I BET YOU’RE STAYING IN

J.J.: use protection

Ilya: We’re married.

Hayden: STILL

Ilya: Goodnight.

He shows Shane the texts. Shane's laughing so hard he has to lie down.

"They know," Shane says.

"Of course they know. We left to 'celebrate properly.' Is not subtle."

"I don't care." Shane pulls Ilya down next to him, curling around him. "Let them know. Let everyone know. I'm married to an Olympic gold medalist, and I'm very proud of that fact."

Ilya touches the medal, still around Shane's neck. They probably should take it off to sleep, but he doesn't want to. Not yet.

"When I was young," Ilya says quietly, "I dreamed about Olympic gold. But in dream, I was wearing Russian jersey. Playing for Russia. Making my father proud."

Shane's quiet, listening.

"I thought that was only way. That Olympic gold meant Russia, meant making my country happy. I didn't understand that I could have different dream."

"And now?"

"Now I have better dream. Gold medal for Canada. Husband who loves me. Team that accepts me. Is not dream I knew I could have. But is dream I needed."

Shane's arms tighten around him. "I'm so fucking glad you're here. That you're Canadian. That you're mine."

"I am glad too." Ilya turns in Shane's arms, kisses him. "Thank you for being my better dream."

"That's really sappy."

"You love sappy."

"I love you."

They fall asleep like that, tangled together on their makeshift floor bed, gold medal still around Shane's neck. Outside, Beijing is still celebrating — fireworks in the distance, crowds in the streets. But in their small Olympic Village room, with its broken bed frame and questionable carpet, everything is perfect.

The next morning, Ilya wakes to sunlight streaming through the window and Shane's face inches from his own.

“Morning,” Shane says.

“Morning.” Ilya stretches, winces. “Ow. Floor is not kind to back.”

“Yeah, mine hurts too. Worth it though.”

“Always worth it with you.”

There’s a knock on their door. “Breakfast!” Someone yells. “Team meeting in an hour!”

“We’ll be there!” Shane yells back.

They untangle themselves, survey the room in daylight. The broken bed frame looks even worse — cardboard split completely in half, one corner collapsed entirely.

“We’re definitely getting charged for this,” Shane says.

“Add it to bill. Olympic gold is expensive.”

They shower together — quick and efficient, no time for anything else — and get dressed. Ilya finally, reluctantly, helps Shane take off his gold medal and puts it carefully in its box.

“You can still wear yours,” Shane promises.

“I wear it always.”

“Even to team meetings?”

“Especially to team meetings.”

So Ilya wears his gold medal to breakfast, and no one comments because half the team is also still wearing theirs. They eat together, laugh about the night before, make plans for the closing ceremony.

Jessica Spooner, who’s also helping manage the Olympic team, pulls Ilya aside after breakfast.

“How are you doing?” She asks.

“Good. Very good.”

“I saw the Russian coverage last night.”

Ilya’s smile falters slightly. “Oh.”

“Wanted to make sure you’re okay. That kind of vitriol can be hard to deal with.”

“Is fine. I am used to it now.”

“That doesn’t make it okay.” She crosses her arms. “For what it’s worth, you made the right choice. Coming to Canada, playing for us. And winning gold proves it.”

“Thank you.”

“Also-” Her expression turns wry. “-maintenance says you broke your bed.”

Ilya’s face heats. “Was accident.”

“I’m sure it was.” She’s trying not to smile. “Don’t worry about the charge. Consider it a gold medal celebration expense.”

“You don’t have to-”

“I do. You brought Canada an Olympic gold medal. Breaking one bed frame is the least of our concerns.” She pats his shoulder. “Congratulations, Ilya. Really. You deserve this.”

After she walks away, Shane sidles up. “What was that about?”

“She knows we broke the bed.”

“And?”

“And she’s not charging us.”

“Told you Olympic gold gets you privileges.”

“Is not privilege, is mercy.”

“Same thing.”

They spend the rest of the day doing media appearances — interviews with CBC, TSN, even a video call with a morning show in Toronto. Everyone wants to talk about the win, about the team, about what it means for Canadian hockey.

And everyone wants to talk to Ilya specifically.

“How does it feel to win gold for your adopted country?”

“What would you say to people in Russia who are criticizing your choice?”

“Do you have any regrets about leaving Russia?”

Ilya answers patiently, honestly. No regrets. Canada is home. Gold medal is vindication of his choice.

In one interview, they ask about Shane specifically.

“You and Shane Hollander have been married for a little over half a year now. What’s it like competing with your husband?”

“Is best,” Ilya says simply. “We push each other to be better. We celebrate wins together. We support each other through losses. Having Shane on same team makes everything better.”

“And next season, you’ll be teammates at the club level too. Shane’s seven year extension and trade to Ottawa were just announced this morning.”

Ilya grins. “Da. Finally, we are on same team all the time. Is dream come true.”

“Two dream come trues in one week. Must feel pretty good.”

“Feels incredible.”

That night, there’s a smaller celebration — just the hockey team this time, in one of the common areas in the Olympic Village. Someone brings a guitar. Someone else brings more champagne. They sit around sharing stories, singing off-key, soaking in the last few days of Olympic magic.

“Speech!” Someone yells again, and this time it’s directed at Shane.

“Oh, no-”

“Speech! Speech! Speech!”

Shane stands up reluctantly. “Okay, fine. But mine’s going to be short.”

“Boo!”

“When I was a kid,” Shane says, “I dreamed about Olympic gold. But I never dreamed I’d get to win it with my-” He pauses, looking at Ilya. “With my husband. With the love of my life. This whole Olympics, I got to room with him, play with him, celebrate with him. And that’s better than any gold medal.”

“The gold medal is pretty good though,” someone interjects.

“The gold medal is fucking amazing,” Shane agrees. “But having Ilya next to me makes it perfect.”

The team awws, someone throws a pillow at Shane’s head, and Ilya’s grinning so hard his face hurts.

Later, when they’re back in their room (on their makeshift floor bef, since the real bed is still broken), Shane says, “I meant it. What I said.”

“I know.”

“This is everything I wanted. Everything I needed.”

“Me too.” Ilya pulls Shane close. “Four years ago, I thought my life was over. I thought losing Russia meant losing everything. But I was wrong.”

“You gained everything.”

“I gained you. I gained Canada. I gained this.” Ilya gestures to the gold medal, still hanging around his neck. “Is more than I dreamed possible.”

“Good.” Shane kisses him. “Because you deserve more than you dreamed possible. You deserve everything.”

They make love again — slower this time, careful of their bruises from the floor, mindful of the fact that they have early morning obligations. It’s sweet and tender, the kind of sex that’s more about connection than release.

After, lying in the darkness with Shane’s head on his chest, Ilya thinks about the Russian news broadcast. His brother’s face, full of disappointment and anger.

He feels nothing but pity.

His brother chose bitterness over love. Chose hatred over acceptance. And now he’s alone, angry at Ilya who’s thriving without him.

Ilya, meanwhile, has everything.

A gold medal. A husband. A home. A country that celebrates him. A team that loves him. A future that’s bright and open and full of possibility.

“Shane?” Ilya says quietly.

“Mm?”

“Thank you for finding me. Four years ago, in Olympic Village. Thank you for being reason I ran.”

Shane lifts his head. “You ran because of the video.”

“I ran because I had reason to run. Because I had you waiting. If I didn’t have you — if I was alone — maybe I give up. Maybe I let Russia win.”

“You would never give up.”

“Maybe. Maybe not.” Ilya touches Shane’s face. “But I didn’t have to find out, because you were there. You are always there.”

“Always will be,” Shane promises. “Olympic gold, Stanley Cups, random Wednesday nights in Ottawa — I’m there for all of it.”

“Good. Because I am keeping you.”

“You better. We’re married. Divorce is expensive.”

“Then is lucky I have no plans to divorce you.”

“Very lucky.”

They fall asleep like that, wrapped around each other, gold medals nearby, Beijing lights twinkling outside their window. Tomorrow they'll pack up, attend the closing ceremony, fly back to Canada. Back to their real lives, their regular season, the mundane day-to-day that comes after Olympic glory.

But tonight, they're Olympic champions. Together. And that's everything.

The closing ceremony is beautiful — a spectacle of lights and performances and athletes from every country mingling together. Ilya walks in wearing his Canadian gear, waving to cameras, Shane right next to him.

They run into some Russian athletes — figure skaters, cross-country skiers. The skaters are friendly, congratulating Ilya on his gold. The skiers ignore him completely.

Ilya doesn't care.

He's too busy taking it all in — the pageantry, the celebration, the sense of accomplishment. He competed in the Olympics. For Canada. And won.

As they file out of the stadium, headed back to the buses, a reporter catches them.

"Ilya! Shane! One more question!"

They stop, wait.

"Ilya, any message for people watching in Russia?"

Ilya thinks about it. About his brother, about the people who called him a traitor, about the country that rejected him for loving who he loves.

"Yes," he says finally. "I hope someday Russia can be place where people like me don't have to run. Where we can love who we love, be who we are, without fear. Until then-" He touches his gold medal. "I am happy being Canadian."

The reporter thanks them, and they continue to the bus.

"That was a good answer," Shane says.

"Was honest answer."

"Those are usually the best ones."

The flight home is long — Beijing to Vancouver to Ottawa. But Ilya doesn't mind. He's got Shane next to him, gold medal in his carry-on, and a home to return to.

When they finally land in Ottawa, there's a crowd waiting. Fans, media, Jessica Spooner with a bottle of champagne.

"Welcome home, champions," she says, popping the champagne right there in arrivals.

Home. The word settles in Ilya's chest, warm and right.

He's home. Finally, completely, undeniably home.

And it's perfect.

Chapter End Notes

And so we've reached an end! I can't lie, I teared up writing this because of how attached I became to this story. Thank you all for joining me on this journey (my first Heated Rivalry fic) ❤️

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