Between Duty & Desire

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Between Duty & Desire

by house_of_lantis

Summary

As a rising sports journalist with a stubborn sense of ethics, Shane Hollander never meant to fall for Ilya Rozanov, the heir to a powerful Russian crime family trying to hold his territory together. What begins as heat and fascination spirals into a secret relationship filled with tenderness, danger, and impossible choices, as Shane's investigation into organized crime leads straight to the man he loves. With deadlines looming and enemies closing in, with Ilya's father demanding total obedience, and loyalties torn in two, Shane and Ilya are forced to decide what they're willing to risk for a life that might never be safe but could finally be theirs.

Notes

Author's Notes: Jesus Christ, I'm actually doing it. (Sorry, not sorry).

Chapter 1: The Interview

Shane Hollander had interviewed everyone from NHL legends to Olympic hopefuls in his five years at *The Ottawa Journal*, but he'd never needed to check the address three times before finding the right building. Konstantin's was nestled between a high-end art gallery and a private bank in the ByWard Market, its entrance so understated that Shane walked past it twice before noticing the discreet brass nameplate.

No gaudy signage. No velvet ropes or obvious security. Just a heavy oak door and the kind of quiet confidence that suggested the people inside didn't need to advertise.

Shane adjusted his messenger bag and pushed through the door.

The interior swallowed him in muted elegance, dark wood paneling, low amber lighting, and the hushed murmur of conversation that spoke of deals made over drinks worth more than his monthly rent. A blonde woman in an elegant black dress appeared before he'd taken three steps inside.

"Mr. Hollander?" Her accent was faint but unmistakably Eastern European. "Mr. Rozanov is expecting you. This way, please."

She led him past the main dining room, where Ottawa's power elite sat in leather booths, and down a corridor lined with black-and-white photographs of Moscow's architecture. Shane recognized the Kremlin, Saint Basil's Cathedral, and several brutalist Soviet buildings he couldn't name. At the end of the hall, she opened a door to a private dining room.

"Mr. Rozanov will be with you shortly. Would you like to start with something to drink?"

"Could I have a Ginger Ale, please? Thank you." Shane needed his head clear for this.

The room was intimate, a single table set for two, more of those architectural photographs on the walls, and a window overlooking a small courtyard garden that shouldn't have been possible given the building's location. Shane pulled out his notebook and recorder, reviewing his research while he waited.

Ilya Rozanov. Twenty-seven years old. The younger son of Grigori Rozanov, a Russian oligarch with interests in energy, real estate, and telecommunications. Ilya had been managing the family's North American holdings for two years, focusing on entertainment ventures and property development. He was part of the consortium that had recently purchased the Ottawa Senators, bringing both capital and controversy to the struggling franchise.

The controversy was what made this story interesting. There had been whispers, nothing concrete, just the kind of rumors that followed wealthy Russians abroad, about the Rozanov family's connections. Shane's editor, Marcus, only wanted a puff piece that humanized the new ownership, something to reassure fans that the team was in good hands. But Shane's instincts told him there was a better story here, something with more teeth.

He just had to find it without torpedoing the interview in the first ten minutes.

The door opened.

Shane stood automatically, and his prepared greeting died in his throat.

He'd seen photos of Ilya Rozanov, PR shots from business events, a few paparazzi captures from charity galas. None of them had prepared him for the reality of seeing him face-to-face. Ilya was tall, with the kind of build that suggested he hadn't abandoned athleticism for the boardroom. His dark blond hair was curly and swept back from a face that was all sharp angles and clean lines, and eyes so pale blue they were almost gray. He wore a black suit tailored to perfection, but no tie, the top buttons of his white shirt undone.

But it was the man's sheer *presence* that hit Shane hardest, a kind of coiled intensity that made the room feel smaller and made Shane hyper-aware of his own heartbeat.

"Mr. Hollander." Ilya's voice was deep, his Russian accent adding weight to each syllable. He extended a hand. "Thank you for your patience."

Shane shook it, feeling calluses that had no business being on the hands of a businessman who spent his days behind a desk. "Thank you for making time, Mr. Rozanov. I know you're busy with the transition."

"Please, sit." Ilya gestured to the table, taking the seat across from Shane with a fluid grace that reminded Shane oddly of a predator settling to watch its surroundings. "You've been writing about hockey for how long?"

"Five years professionally. Longer if you count high school and college journalism." Shane opened his notebook, trying to find his equilibrium. "Though I have to admit, I usually interview players and coaches. Owners are a new beat for me."

He held up his small digital recorder. "May I record our interview? It will only be used to help me write accurate quotes."

"It is fine."

Shane started the recording and set it on the table between them. He looked up and saw something that might have been amusement flickered across Ilya's face.

"And what do you think of that? The difference between the men who play and the men who pay?"

It was an unexpected question, more philosophical than the usual opener. Shane considered it while their waitress, a young woman named Polina, according to her name tag, entered the room discreetly with a tray holding a can of Ginger Ale and a glass with ice, and placed a tumbler of something amber in front of Ilya.

"Thank you," Shane said, looking up at her as she opened the tab on the can, pouring the fizzy drink into his glass.

“Thank you, Polina,” Ilya said, smiling at her.

Polina gave him a warm smile and nodded her head at Shane, leaving the room as quietly as she entered.

"As for your question, players are usually easier to read. Their relationship with the game is direct. Physical. They live and die by what happens on the ice." He paused, meeting Ilya's gaze. "Owners are more complicated. The game is business for them. Investment. Strategy. There's more distance between what they want and what happens on the ice."

"Distance." Ilya repeated the word like he was tasting it. "Yes. Distance can be useful. It allows for clearer perspective." He took a sip of his drink. "But it also means you cannot feel the thing directly. You are always watching from above, removed. There is a loss in that, I think."

Shane picked up his pen, scribbling a note. This wasn't the polished “corporate speak” he'd expected. "Is that how you see your role with the Senators? Watching from above?"

"I see my role as ensuring the right people have the resources they need to succeed." Ilya leaned back slightly, his posture relaxed but his attention sharp. "I am not a hockey expert, Mr. Hollander. I will not pretend to understand the game better than the coaches and managers we employ. But I understand structure. Resources. Creating conditions where excellence can flourish."

"And what drew you to hockey, specifically? Your family's other North American investments are mostly commercial real estate developments and entertainment venues."

"You've done your research."

"It's my job."

Another flicker of that almost-amusement.

"Hockey is..." Ilya paused, seeming to consider his words carefully. "In Russia, hockey is more than sport. It is identity. Pride. When Soviet teams faced North American teams during the Cold War, it was not just a game. It was ideology. Superiority. A way to prove something to the world." He rolled the tumbler slowly between his palms. "That intensity, that meaning, it makes hockey different from other sports. More honest, perhaps."

Shane's pen moved across the page. This was fantastic material, better than he'd hoped. "You grew up watching Russian hockey?"

"I grew up *playing* Russian hockey." Ilya's expression shifted slightly, something distant entering his eyes. "Until I was sixteen. Then my father decided my time was better spent learning business."

There was a story there, Shane could feel it. Some tension between the life Ilya had wanted and the life he'd been given. But before he could probe further, Polina and two servers appeared, pushing in a serving cart that was ladened with a dozen dishes.

"I took the liberty of ordering for us. Unless you have dietary restrictions?"

"No, this is...this is beautiful." Shane set down his pen, suddenly aware that this was more than just an interview. The private room, the carefully prepared meal, the way Ilya was watching him with those unsettling pale eyes. “I’ve never tried Russian food before so this will be great.”

The table became a small landscape before Shane – porcelain plates on white linen, silver catching light, and a drift of aromas so unlike anything he’d grown up with that he momentarily forgot to speak.

Cold air brushed his cheeks when the server lifted the final domed lid. Then warmth and steam scented with dill, sour cream, smoke, and vinegar, rose in waves. Somewhere beneath it all lingered the dark perfume of rye bread and butter already softening in its dish.

“Zakuski,” Ilya said, pleased, like someone unveiling a painting. “The beginning is always generous.”

Shane’s mouth curved into a smile and met Ilya’s gaze. “This is the beginning?”

“Da.” Ilya’s smile was small, private. “Pace yourself.”

He tried. He really did. There were jewel-bright pickles – tiny cucumbers and tomatoes the color of late summer, glistening with brine. A platter of mushrooms, glossy with oil and garlic, gave off an earthy, forest-after-rain smell. Paper-thin blini lay folded like handkerchiefs beside bowls of chilled sour cream and a mother-of-pearl spoon resting in black caviar that gleamed like wet midnight.

Shane leaned closer, inhaling. “It smells…clean and rich at the same time.”

“Preservation and indulgence,” Ilya said, chuckling throatily. “Russian cuisine remembers winter.”

He pointed, not touching. “This one?”

“Shuba,” Ilya replied, the Russian word soft in his mouth. “Herring under a fur coat.”

Shane took in the layered square with the violet beet top shining under a faint gloss, then pale potato, then something pearlescent and mysterious beneath.

“That might be the best name for a food I’ve ever heard.”

“Try,” Ilya urged, motioning for Shane to begin. “You will taste sweetness and the sea together.”

Shane forked a careful bite. The beet was cool and sweet, the potato soft as a sigh, and then the herring, a bit salty, smooth, but surprisingly gentle, rose through it. A faint whisper of onion and mayonnaise rounded it out. His eyebrows climbed before he could stop them.

“Ohhhh,” he hummed around the mouthful, then swallowed. “That’s…way better than my brain was prepared for.”

Ilya’s eyes warmed, watching Shane’s mouth. “More.”

Another dish drew him next: tiny golden buns, shiny-topped, exhaling warmth. The aroma of yeast and butter wrapped around him like a scarf. *“Pirozhki?”*

“Da.” Ilya selected one and placed it on Shane’s plate. “This is cabbage and egg. This, potato and mushroom. And this…this is meat that my grandmother would never fully explain.”

Shane laughed, tore one open, and watched pale steam curl upward, carrying cabbage sweetness and pepper

He noticed a narrow plate of open-faced sandwiches, dark rye beneath a gleam of fish and lemon. “And those?”

“Sprat buterbrodi,” Ilya said, accent tracing each consonant. “Smoked fish. Black bread. A little egg. The taste is…nostalgia.”

Shane picked one up, and felt the firmness of the rye crust. Smoke and salt hit first, then the mellow richness of egg and a bright flicker of lemon zest, heat bloomed down his throat, neat and clean.

“Wow.”

“Next time, we will eat with vodka. Vodka is the conversation.” Ilya said, watching him. “These,” he gestured to the crowded table. “These are the friends that keep it company.”

Shane smiled politely when Ilya said “next time” though he really didn’t put much thought in it. Most of the people he interviewed didn’t invite him out for “next times.” But he was certainly going to enjoy his first foray into Russian cuisine, especially with Ilya Rozanov as his guide. Shane looked at the crowded plates, at the riot of color and salt and sweetness and sour that didn’t apologize for any of it.

“You ordered everything you love,” he realized, looking at the selection of foods.

Ilya inclined his head, surprise etched on his face. “I wanted you to know where I come from without my father’s name in the room.”

They ate in silence for a moment, and Shane found himself hyperaware of every sound, the clink of silverware, the long stares from Ilya, and his own breathing.

"Your questions are different," Ilya said, finally. "From other journalists."

"Different how?"

"More direct. You ask what you actually want to know, not what you think you should ask." Ilya set down his fork and cocked his head slightly, focused on Shane. "Most people who

interview me are afraid. Not of me specifically, perhaps, but of saying the wrong thing. Offending me. Closing doors they might need to walk through later."

Shane met his gaze. "Should I be afraid of you?"

The question hung between them, more loaded than Shane had intended. Ilya's expression didn't change, but something shifted in the air, a charge, an acknowledgment of the subtext threading through their conversation.

"I think you're too smart to be careless," Ilya said, slowly. "But no. You don't need to be afraid of me, Shane."

The use of his first name felt deliberately intimate. Shane's pulse kicked up a notch.

"Then I'll keep asking direct questions." Shane said, checking that the recorder was still on. "The Rozanov Group's North American holdings have grown significantly in the past five years. Real estate, restaurants, and clubs. Some analysts suggest the growth has been too rapid for the revenue streams to justify. How do you respond to concerns about the source of your family's capital?"

He'd expected deflection, maybe irritation. Instead, Ilya smiled, a real smile that transformed his face from austere to beautiful.

"*Ahhhh.* You are not just a sports journalist with questions like that." Ilya raised his glass in a small salute. "That is a question everyone wants to ask but most are too polite to voice." He took a sip. "My father built his business during the privatization period in Russia. Was it always clean? No. The 1990s in Moscow was not a time for saints, Mr. Hollander. But everything we do in North America is legitimate. Audited. Transparent. We have lawyers and accountants whose only job is ensuring we operate within the boundaries of the law."

"Within the boundaries," Shane repeated, looking at him. "That's a lawyer's phrase."

"I have good lawyers."

"I'm sure you do." Shane made a mental note. "But that's not really an answer."

"No?" Ilya studied him. "What answer would *satisfy* you?"

"The truth."

"The truth." Ilya set down his glass. "The truth is complicated. My father did what was necessary to survive in a collapsing empire. Was some of it illegal? By whose laws? The Soviet laws that were crumbling? The new Russian laws that were being written by people doing the same things my father was doing?" He leaned forward slightly. "You want a simple story. Legitimate businessman or criminal. Good or bad. But the world doesn't work that way."

"Doesn't it?" Shane challenged. "At a certain point, we all have to decide what lines we won't cross. What compromises we won't make."

"Spoken like someone who has always had the luxury of choices." There was no heat in Ilya's voice, just observation. "Tell me, Shane. If you had grown up in Moscow in the 1990s, watching your mother worry whether there would be food, whether the apartment would have heat, whether the violence in the streets would reach your door, would you have been so concerned with lines?"

Shane held his gaze. "I'd like to think I would have found a way that didn't require hurting people."

"Would you?" Ilya's expression was unreadable. "I wonder."

Polina and a server returned with the main course, breaking the tension. They set down wide white bowls whose rims flared like open flowers and were edged in gold, and for a moment Shane simply stared. In each bowl, the liquid glowed a deep garnet red, so vivid it looked lit from within, shot through with thin curls of steam. Against that color, everything became dramatic: the pale swirl of sour cream, the tender green of fresh dill, the gleam of fine-shredded beet and cabbage beneath the surface.

It smelled like earth after rain and slow-cooked bones and something sweet he couldn't quite name.

"Borscht?" He said, feeling suddenly reverent.

"Da."

To the side, another plate was placed between them: a careful quenelle of mashed potatoes, impossibly smooth, crowned with a tiny shard of fried potato for height, as if even comfort food dressed up for this dining room. Butter pooled shyly at the base, catching the light. A small porcelain pitcher of dark rye croutons waited nearby, the scent of toasted bread and garlic drifting up whenever the server moved it.

"Please. Try," Ilya said, watching him.

He lifted his spoon.

The first dip broke the surface gently; vegetables and strips of beef showed themselves, glistening. He tasted the heat that spread through him almost instantly, not the sharp heat of spice, but the slow, marrow-deep warmth of something made to get you through winter. The sweetness of beets, the tang of vinegar, the softness of cabbage and potato, the richness of meat, everything layered and exquisitely balanced.

He exhaled without realizing he'd been holding his breath. Ilya watched him over the rim of his own bowl, eyes softer than the light could explain.

"My *babushka* made it thicker," he said, mouth curving faintly. "Not…restaurant beautiful. Always with a pot too small for how much she insisted on fitting inside."

Shane smiled. "Let me guess, no recipe written down."

“Of course not.” Ilya’s voice warmed with memory. “You learn by watching, by stealing pieces of carrot when she turns away, by listening to the spoon tap the side of the pot.” He paused, then added quietly. “On cold days, the windows would fog, and she would complain about the draft and then give me her shawl anyway.”

He took another spoonful. The sour cream melted into swirls, turning the red to rose, softening the sharp edges into something lush. He mixed a little of the mashed potatoes into the next bite at Ilya’s nod; it changed the soup entirely and made it thicker, heartier, like the restaurant briefly gave way to that fogged window, that crowded pot.

“It tastes like…” Shane searched for the word. “Like a story people keep telling because it gets them through the year.”

Ilya inclined his head, as if accepting both compliment and truth. “*Borscht* is survival that decided to be beautiful.” He gestured with his spoon. “More.”

They ate in charged silence, and Shane tried to regain his professional footing. He kicked himself mentally for getting poetic about food, rather than on the interview.

"What is your vision for the team?" Shane said, steering back to safer ground. "What does success look like for the Senators under your ownership?"

Ilya seemed to accept the redirect. "Success is a Stanley Cup. But more than that, it's building something for the future. A team this city can be proud of for generations, not just one lucky season." His passion was evident now, the careful control slipping slightly. "Ottawa deserves better than what they've had. The fans deserve better. Hockey in Canada is as sacred as in Russia. We don't take that responsibility lightly."

"We? Is your father involved in the day-to-day operations?"

"My father is involved in *everything* I do." Something complicated crossed Ilya's face. "But the Senators are my project. My responsibility."

Shane sensed another story there, a complicated father-son dynamic, but before he could explore it, Ilya shifted the subject.

"I've read your work," Ilya said, abruptly. "Your profile of the Gatineau midget team that lost their rink to the flood last year. The way you captured not just the hockey but what it meant to those kids, that community, it was excellent."

Shane felt heat rise to his face. "You read that? It was hardly my most high-profile piece."

"It was your best piece." Ilya's certainty was unsettling. "The others are good. Professional. Well-written. But that one had heart. You cared about those kids."

"I did." Shane wasn't sure what to do with this. "They deserved to have their story told."

"Yes." Ilya watched him with an intensity that made Shane want to squirm. "You care about the stories of people. Not just the byline or the career advancement. That's rare."

"How would you know what's rare in journalism?"

"Because I have been interviewed dozens of times in the past two years, and most of those journalists cared more about their editor's approval or their next promotion than about truth." Ilya paused. "You're different."

The weight of that assessment settled over Shane like a physical thing. He should deflect, should get the interview back on track. Instead he heard himself ask, "Is that why you agreed to this? Because you'd read my work?"

"I agreed because my partners insisted we do more media outreach." Ilya's mouth curved slightly. "But I chose you specifically, yes."

The admission hung between them, loaded with implications Shane wasn't ready to examine. He glanced at his notes, at the questions he'd prepared, and realized they'd barely touched half of them. They'd been talking for almost two hours, the conversation wandering through territory that would never make it into his article.

"We should probably get back to hockey," Shane said, though part of him wanted to keep wandering, to see where else this conversation might lead.

"Should we?" Ilya tilted his head. "I thought we were having a much more interesting discussion."

"We are. That's the problem." Shane set down his spoon. "I'm supposed to be writing about your plans for the franchise, not talking about traditional Russian cuisine."

"Why not both?"

"Because my editor wants a story that makes season ticket holders feel good about the new ownership."

Ilya studied him for a long moment. "You quote Margaret Atwood in your Twitter bio. *In the end, we'll all become stories.* Do you believe that?"

The shift caught Shane off guard. "You've been thorough in your research, too."

"I like to know who I'm talking to."

"Then yes, I believe it. Everything becomes narrative eventually. The question is who gets to tell the story, and whether they tell it honestly."

"Atwood also wrote that *a word after a word after a word is power*." Ilya leaned forward. "Do you feel powerful, Shane? When you write?"

"Sometimes." Shane was acutely aware of the way Ilya's attention felt like a spotlight. "When I get it right."

"And what will you write about me? What truth will you tell?"

Shane should say something professional, something about the pending publication and editorial process.

Instead, he said, "I don't know yet. You're harder to read than most people I interview."

"Good." Ilya's smile was slow, dangerous. He winked at Shane. "I would hate to be easy."

The double meaning wasn't subtle. Shane felt heat crawl up the back of his neck, awareness prickling across his skin. This was beyond professional interest, beyond the usual interview dynamic. Something was happening here, something Shane absolutely should not encourage.

"I should probably..." Shane gestured vaguely toward his notes. "I have enough for the article. I don't want to take up more of your time."

"You are not." Ilya's gaze hadn't wavered. "I've enjoyed this. It's rare that I get to have an actual conversation rather than reciting talking points."

"I'm sure you have plenty of people to talk to."

"People who work for me. People who want something from me. People who are afraid of me or my father." Ilya's expression shifted slightly. "Not many who simply want to talk."

The vulnerability in that admission caught Shane off guard. For a moment, he saw past the carefully constructed facade to someone young and uncertain. Someone lonely.

"I do want to understand," Shane said, honestly. "Though I'm not sure my article is going to capture even a fraction of what we've talked about today."

"Then perhaps we should talk again. Off the record."

It was an invitation and they both knew it. Shane should decline and should maintain professional boundaries. But the word that came out was: "Maybe."

Ilya's smile was worth the compromise. "I'll consider that a yes."

By the time Polina brought coffee, Shane had filled barely three pages of notes and felt like he'd learned more about Ilya Rozanov than any amount of standard questions would have revealed.

“May I have the check, please?” He said to her, politely.

She merely smiled and shook her head, looking at Ilya.

“It is taken care of,” Ilya said, nonchalantly.

"Thank you. Thank you for lunch, everything was delicious. I should let you get back to work," Shane said, reluctantly, checking his phone. Nearly three hours had passed. "Thank you for this. It was...illuminating."

"The pleasure was mine." Ilya stood when Shane did, that fluid grace again. "Maria, at the hostess stand, will validate your parking."

"I took the bus."

Something shifted in Ilya's expression. "Then let me have my driver take you home. It's late."

"It's only five."

"Nevertheless." Ilya's tone suggested this wasn't really a request. "I insist."

Shane should refuse, should maintain his independence. But he was curious, about the driver, about what Ilya's world looked like beyond this carefully curated restaurant.

"All right. Thank you."

Ilya led him back through the main dining room of the restaurant, one hand hovering near but not quite touching the small of Shane's back. Heads turned as they passed, recognition, curiosity, and something that might have been fear. People *knew* who Ilya was, Shane realized. And they reacted accordingly.

Outside, the late October air had a bite to it. The early dinner crowd was starting to arrive, well-dressed couples and business groups. Four black Mercedes SUVs were parked behind the restaurant in a private alley, and a man in a dark suit stood beside one, tall, broad-shouldered, with the kind of alertness that suggested military or security training.

"Dimitri will take you wherever you need to go." Ilya extended his hand again. "Thank you, Mr. Hollander. For the conversation. I will look forward to your article."

Shane shook it, that same awareness of calluses, of strength carefully leashed. "Thank you for your time, Mr. Rozanov."

Ilya nodded and then walked back towards the front of the restaurant. Shane was about to get into the SUV when voices rose from the side street adjacent to the restaurant. Shane turned instinctively, journalist reflexes kicking in.

Three men stood in the narrow alley, two in dark suits flanking a third man who looked like he'd rather be anywhere else.

“Mr. Hollander –” Dimitri said, beside the opened door to the backseats.

“Just a moment,” Shane said, following the voices and looking at the three men.

"I need more time," the short man was saying, his voice high with panic. "I told Viktor I just need another week –"

"Viktor is done with your excuses." The tank spoke in accented English. "You had two months. The payment is due."

"I can get it, I swear, I just need –"

"Mr. Rozanov is not in the business of charity, Mr. Mikhail." The first man's voice was quieter, more dangerous for its lack of volume. "You knew the terms."

Shane's stomach went cold. He glanced at Dimitri, whose expression had gone completely neutral, carefully blank.

"Get in the car, Mr. Hollander." Dimitri's voice was quiet, but unyielding.

"What's happening?" Shane already knew. His journalist brain was cataloging details, the way the men positioned themselves to block exits, the calculated threat in their body language, the way the shorter man was sweating despite the cool temperature.

"Nothing that concerns you, Mr. Hollander. Please. Inside the car." Dimitri said, politely. Underneath the politeness was command.

Shane looked back at the alley. The tank had moved closer to Mr. Mikhail, invading his space. No violence yet, but the promise of it hung in the air like smoke.

"Now, Mr. Hollander."

The edge in Dimitri's voice made Shane's decision for him. He got into the SUV, and Dimitri closed the door with a solid thunk. Through the tinted rear window, Shane watched as Dimitri whistled loudly, waving his hand with some kind of signal. The two men nodded, both grabbing Mr. Mikhail's arms, pulling him deeper into the alley and out of sight.

"Where to?" Dimitri asked from the driver's seat, his English barely accented.

Shane gave his address automatically, his mind racing. The restaurant, the private dining room, the food, the responses about legitimate business – it had all been *theater*. A pleasant facade covering something darker and dangerous.

He'd suspected, of course. You didn't grow up the son of a Russian oligarch without some shadows in your past. But suspecting and seeing were different things. Those men in the alley weren't lawyers or accountants. They were *enforcers*.

Shane pulled out his phone, started typing notes while the details were fresh. But his hands were shaking slightly, adrenaline and something else, not quite fear, but its cousin, making his fingers clumsy.

The conversation replayed in his head. *Within the boundaries of the law. My father did what was necessary to survive. The world doesn't work that way.*

Ilya had told him the truth, Shane realized. Not the sanitized version, not the PR spin. He'd given Shane enough breadcrumbs to follow to exactly this conclusion, if Shane chose to see it.

The question was: what was Shane going to do with this information?

He stared at his phone, at the half-written notes. His editor wanted a feel-good puff piece. The franchise needed positive press. And Shane had just spent three hours eating delicious

food and having a really good conversation with a man who was almost certainly a criminal.

Who said *perhaps we should talk again. Off the record* like he meant something far more than another interview.

Shane closed the notes app without saving. He needed time to think, to process. To figure out what the hell he was getting himself into.

Dimitri drove in silence, taking a route through downtown that avoided traffic with the kind of knowledge that came from knowing the city intimately. They pulled up outside Shane's apartment building in the Glebe, a converted Victorian that had been divided into six units, his a modest one-bedroom on the second floor.

"Thank you," Shane said, reaching for the door handle.

"Mr. Hollander." Dimitri's voice stopped him. Shane met his eyes in the rearview mirror, dark, assessing. "My advice is to not discuss what you think you saw in alley."

"I'm just writing about Mr. Rozanov and the Ottawa Senators," Shane said, carefully.

"Good." Dimitri's expression didn't change. "Have nice evening."

Shane got out of the car, watched it pull away. The October dusk began to deepen to a dark blue sky, the streetlights casting everything in amber. He climbed the stairs to his apartment, his mind still in that private dining room, still seeing the way Ilya's attention had focused on him like a physical touch.

Inside, his apartment felt small and cluttered after the elegant minimalism of Konstantin's. Shane dropped his bag on the couch and sat down, staring at his laptop. He should write the article Marcus wanted: safe, boring, effective PR for the new ownership. Give the fans something to feel good about.

But Shane had never been good at playing it safe.

He opened his laptop and started searching. *Grigori Rozanov. Rozanov Group. Russian organized crime in Canada.*

The rabbit hole was deep and murky, full of speculation and rumor and very few hard facts. But a picture emerged, one of a family that had built an empire in the chaos of the Soviet collapse, that had connections to the *Bratva*, the Russian mafia. Nothing proven in court, nothing definite. But smoke without fire was rare.

And Ilya was in the middle of it all. Managing the North American operations. The legitimate face of an illegitimate empire.

Shane's phone buzzed. An unknown number.

I enjoyed our conversation today. –IR

Shane stared at the message, his thumb hovering over the keyboard. He should ignore it. He should maintain professional distance and absolutely not encourage the unspoken flirtation that was building between them.

He added the number to his contacts and typed: *So did I. Though I'm not sure how much of it I can actually use.*

The response came quickly: *Then perhaps you should write the official story and save the truth for later.*

Shane texted: *Is that what you want?*

Ilya texted: *I want you to write what you believe is right. I also want to see you again.*

Shane's heart kicked against his ribs. This was dangerous on multiple levels, professionally, personally, possibly literally.

But he found himself typing: *Why?*

The pause before the response felt eternal.

Ilya texted: *Because you are fucking beautiful and I want you.*

Shane blushed and read the message three times. Then typed: *I think you are trouble.*

Ilya texted: *I think you like trouble.*

Leaning against the front windows that faced the street, Shane smiled despite himself. He should stop this now. But the memory of those pale blue eyes watching him, of the way Ilya had leaned forward like Shane's words were the most important thing in the world, made it impossible.

Shane texted: *I need to think about what I'm going to write.*

Ilya texted: *Of course.*

Shane set down his phone and looked at his laptop, at the search results about organized crime and oligarchs and violence. He thought about what he saw behind the restaurant.

He should be afraid. Any sensible person would be afraid and give Ilya Rozanov a wide berth. But fear wasn't what Shane felt when he thought about Ilya Rozanov. He'd write the article tomorrow morning. Tonight, he was going to try very hard not to think about pale blue eyes and the way Ilya had said his name as he jerked off.

Outside his window, the black Mercedes SUV was parked across the street, Dimitri barely visible through the tinted windows. Shane closed the curtains and wondered what the hell he'd just gotten himself into.

Chapter 2: Crossing Lines

Shane's article ran three days later, exactly as Marcus wanted it, a human-interest piece highlighting Ilya Rozanov's passion for hockey, his commitment to the Ottawa community, and his vision for the Senators' future.

Everything Shane had witnessed in that alley went unmentioned.

He told himself it was professional pragmatism. One incident didn't prove anything concrete, and accusing a team owner of criminal activity based on an overheard conversation would be career suicide without hard evidence. He'd written the story his editor assigned, fulfilling his professional obligation.

The fact that he'd spent the past seventy-two hours unable to stop thinking about Ilya Rozanov had nothing to do with it.

Shane stared at his laptop screen, cursor blinking in the search bar. At 11 PM on a Friday night, his apartment was silent except for the hum of his refrigerator and the occasional car passing on the street below. He should be sleeping. Instead, he'd been falling down research rabbit holes for the past four hours.

Rozanov Group subsidiaries. Property acquisitions Ottawa. Grigori Rozanov Bratva connections.

The searches yielded fragments, a Reddit thread speculating about money laundering, a five-year-old news article about a Rozanov associate questioned in a Moscow murder case, property records showing the family's rapid expansion into Ottawa real estate. Nothing definitive. Nothing that would hold up in court. But enough to paint a picture.

Shane closed his laptop with more force than necessary. This was obsessive behavior, the kind of thing that destroyed journalists' careers and relationships. He should drop it, write about hockey like he was supposed to, and stop checking his phone every ten minutes to see if Ilya had texted.

Except Ilya hadn't texted since that first night. No follow-up, no pressure, no *off-the-record conversation*. Just silence, which somehow made it worse. Shane couldn't decide if he was relieved or disappointed.

His phone buzzed. Shane grabbed it with embarrassing eagerness, then felt his stomach drop when he saw it was his ex-wife.

Rose texted: *Saw your Senators piece, got good pickup on ESPN. Proud of you.*

Shane stared at her name in his contacts. He typed back: *Thanks. How's filming? Where are you now?*

Rose texted: *Prague for two months then back to LA. Movie is going great. Talk this weekend? I miss you!*

Shane sent an affirmative and closed out of the texting app.

They married too young and had an amicable divorce two years ago, though they were quietly separated for a year before that. She took it well when he finally told her the truth, which had somehow made it worse. Like she'd known all along that he was gay, that their marriage was built on Shane's desperate attempt to be something he wasn't and Rose wanted the safety net of a marriage, just as her acting career kicked off into the stratosphere.

She deserved better.

Shane set down his phone and went to the kitchen, poured himself a glass of water he didn't want. Through the window, he could see the street below, quiet, empty except for that same black Mercedes SUV that had been parked there since Tuesday.

Shane had noticed it the second night, confirmed it the third. Different times, but always the same vehicle. Dimitri, or someone else, keeping tabs. Shane should be unsettled by the surveillance. Instead, he found himself wondering what Ilya was looking for, a threat assessment or something else?

Maybe it was time to find out *exactly* what Ilya Rozanov wanted from him.

Shane grabbed his brown leather jacket and his keys, leaving his apartment.

***

Club Troika was exactly what Shane expected from a Rozanov-owned nightclub, all dark sophistication and massive chandeliers and carefully curated exclusivity, tucked into a converted warehouse in Centretown. Shane had looked up the property records that afternoon, confirming his suspicion.

It was for research, he told himself.

He paid the cover charge, trying not to wince at the thirty-dollar price tag, and pushed through the entrance into a wall of sound and gyrating bodies. The music was techno-house with a hypnotic bass that Shane felt in his chest. The crowd was young, beautiful, and expensively dressed, with bottle service and designer labels and the kind of casual wealth that made Shane acutely aware of his off-the-rack leather jacket.

He found a space at the long bar, ordered a beer he couldn't really afford, and tried to look like he belonged. Around him, Ottawa's young elite played at decadence, pharmaceuticals sales reps doing shots with real estate developers, tech startup founders hitting on parliamentary interns, all of them spending money like it was nothing.

Shane sipped his beer and watched, his journalist instincts cataloging details. The security was more extensive than it needed to be for a nightclub, well-dressed guards with discreet earpieces, subtle positioning that covered all exits, the kind of coordination that suggested

military training. The three bartenders moved with efficiency that spoke of serious vetting. Even the music felt calculated, designed to encourage spending rather than actual dancing.

This wasn't just a club, it was an *operation*.

"You look out of place."

Shane turned to find a woman watching him, mid-thirties, long black hair, expensive red dress that clung in all the right places, and dark eyes that assessed him with uncomfortable precision. She had the kind of cheekbones that suggested Eastern European genetics and the kind of posture that suggested she was very good at hurting people.

"Hello. I'm just having a drink," Shane said, giving her a small smile.

"In a club where you don't know anyone, wearing a jacket that costs less than most people here spend on shoes." Her accent was faint, but present. "I think you are lost."

Shane took a chance. "Maybe I'm just curious about the owner's entertainment properties. Professional interest."

Something shifted in her expression, not quite amusement, but close. "You're the journalist. Mr. Shane Hollander."

"You have me at a disadvantage. Who're you?"

"Someone who makes it her business to know who shows interest in Mr. Rozanov's establishments." She signaled the bartender, who appeared instantly with a glass of red wine. "Does he know you're here?"

"Should he?"

"He will." She took a sip of wine, still watching Shane with that uncomfortable intensity. "Whether he *should* is your problem, not mine."

Before Shane could respond, she was gone, melting into the crowd with the kind of practiced ease that made Shane wonder if he'd imagined the entire conversation.

His phone buzzed. Ilya texted: *Come upstairs now.*

Shane's heart kicked. He looked around, trying to spot cameras, then gave up. Of course Ilya knew he was here. The woman had probably texted him the moment Shane walked in. Maybe before as the black Mercedes SUV followed him in his Uber ride to the club.

Shane should leave; he should just go home, jerk off, and stop playing with fire. He nodded once to himself, finished his beer, and left a reasonable tip for the bartender. He made his way through the press of bodies, towards the main entrance.

"Mr. Rozanov would like to see you now, Mr. Hollander," one of the security guards said, taking his arm firmly. It was not a request.

***

The upper level was quieter and lined with what were probably offices or private party rooms for VIP guests, though most of the doors were closed. The guard knocked on the second door on the left and pushed it open before Shane lost his nerve.

The room was smaller than he'd expected, decorated in the same dark sophistication as the rest of the club. Floor-to-ceiling windows overlooked the main floor below, one-way glass that allowed for observation without being seen. A black leather couch dominated the center of the room, facing the windows, and a small bar was set up against the far wall.

Ilya stood at the windows, hands in the pockets of perfectly tailored black pants, black shirt sleeves rolled to his elbows. He was very much like a prince looking over his kingdom. He didn't turn when Shane entered, giving Shane a moment to look him up and down, lingering on his full and round ass.

"You published your article," Ilya said, finally. "It was well-written. Diplomatic. Everything your editor wanted, I imagine."

The door closed quietly behind him, leaving him alone with Ilya. "That's the job."

"Is it?" Ilya turned and Shane felt the full weight of his attention. "Writing what people want to hear rather than what's true?"

"I wrote what I could verify. Everything else was speculation."

"You saw Mikhail in the alley with my men. You understood what that was."

"I saw a conversation I didn't have any context for." Shane held his ground. "I'm not going to accuse anyone of anything based on my assumptions."

Ilya crossed the space between them with three strides. Up close, Shane could smell his cologne, something delicious and expensive that made Shane want to press his nose against Ilya's neck and breathe him in.

"You're lying, Shane Hollander. You know *exactly* what you saw."

"And if I had written about that?" Shane challenged. "What would have happened then?"

"Nothing." Ilya's expression was unreadable. "Your article would have been killed by your editor before it ran, you would have been quietly fired, and someone else would have written the puff piece. You think you're the first journalist to notice things about my family's business?"

The casual certainty of it made Shane's stomach turn. "So why agree to the interview at all?"

"Because I wanted to meet you." Ilya said, simply, like it explained everything. "And because I was curious. Whether you'd be brave or practical."

"Apparently I'm practical."

"Are you?" Ilya stepped closer. "Then what are you doing here, Shane?"

Shane's pulse hammered. This close, he could see the faint shadows under Ilya's eyes, the tension in his jaw. "Research."

"Liar." The word was soft, almost gentle. He stepped closer to Shane, crowding him in, until Shane took a step back and another, Ilya matching him step for step. "You're trying to decide if I'm dangerous."

"I know you're dangerous." His back hit against the wall and he pressed his palms against the cool wood.

"Do you?" Ilya murmured, coming closer, his hand came up and gently cupped the side of Shane's neck. "Then why did you come up here? Why didn't you just leave?"

"I don't know," Shane admitted, feeling shy with Ilya pressed so close to him, touching him. "I should have stayed away. It would make more sense."

"But you didn't."

"No."

Ilya's hand dropped. He stepped back, putting a little distance between them. "You should stay away from me, Shane Hollander. From my clubs, my restaurants, my world. I am not safe for you."

"I know that, too."

"But I don't think you want to stay away."

The certainty in his voice should have been arrogant. Instead, it felt like acknowledgment of something inevitable, some gravity pulling them together despite every rational reason to resist.

"Why not just let me leave? I was leaving until one of your people stopped me."

Ilya breathed harshly, leaning his forearms against the wall, pinning Shane in place with his chest.

"Because I can't stop thinking about you. Because when Katya texted me that a lost lamb had wandered into my club, I told myself to let you go, and then I found myself texting you instead." He met Shane's eyes. "So yes, you should stay away. But I'm too selfish to insist on it."

The admission hung between them, vulnerable in a way Shane suspected Ilya rarely allowed himself to be.

"What do you want from me?" Shane asked, quietly.

“You know what I want. And you still came up here to me.” Ilya brushed his nose against Shane’s cheek, his breath warm on Shane’s skin.

"This is a terrible idea." He closed his eyes and leaned his head back against the wall, giving Ilya permission for more. His hands found Ilya’s waist, his fingertips hooking over the edge of his leather belt.

"Yes." Ilya moved closer, his hip pressing against Shane’s hard cock, making Shane whimper and shudder, moving his hips so that he could enjoy the friction. "Are you going to leave?"

Shane should say yes and walk out of this club, block Ilya's number, and write about hockey like his life depended on it.

"Are you going to let me?"

"I already said I'm too selfish for that."

The space between them felt electric. Shane could count Ilya's breaths, could see the tension in his shoulders, the way his control was fracturing at the edges.

"I am going to kiss you," Ilya said, each word deliberate. "But if I do, I am not going to want to stop."

Shane's heart slammed against his ribs. "Then maybe you shouldn't start."

"Is that what you want? For me to keep my distance?"

"I don’t know."

Ilya closed the remaining distance between them. His hand came up to Shane's face, thumb tracing along his jaw with a gentleness that contrasted sharply with the intensity in his eyes.

"Last chance, Shane Hollander. Walk away now and we will pretend this was just *research*. Stay with me and everything changes."

Shane knew what he should do. He'd always been good at making the sensible choice, at protecting himself, at staying in his lane.

He stayed.

Ilya's kiss was nothing like Shane expected, not tentative or exploratory, but consuming from the first moment. His hand slid into Shane's hair, tilting his head to deepen the kiss, and Shane felt his knees go weak. He grabbed Ilya's hips for balance, pulling him closer, and felt Ilya's sharp intake of breath against his mouth.

They broke apart, both breathing hard. Ilya's pupils were blown, his careful control completely abandoned, and Shane thought distantly that this version of Ilya, undone, wanting, was the most honest thing he'd seen yet.

"We should leave," Ilya said, voice rough. "I don't want to do this here."

Shane's brain struggled to form words. "Where?"

"My place. Unless, " Ilya paused, searching Shane's face. "Unless you've changed your mind."

"I haven't." Shane was surprised by the certainty in his own voice. "Let's go."

***

Ilya's penthouse occupied the entire top floor of a building Shane recognized, one of the new developments in LeBreton Flats, all glass and steel and architectural ambition. Dimitri drove them in silence, and Shane had been too distracted by the heat of Ilya's hand on his thigh to care about the implications of getting into a car with a man he knew was dangerous.

The elevator ride was torture. Ilya kept his distance, hands in his pockets, but his eyes never left Shane. The moment the doors opened into the penthouse, that control shattered.

Ilya crowded Shane against the wall, kissing him hard enough to bruise his lips. Shane made a sound he'd be embarrassed about later, fingers scrabbling at Ilya's shirt, desperate to feel skin. Ilya's hands were everywhere, in Shane's hair, sliding under his jacket, gripping his waist hard enough to leave marks, and hands curving over his ass and squeezing firmly.

"Bedroom," Ilya managed, pulling back just enough to speak. "Unless you want the first time to be against a wall or on the kitchen floor."

Shane was gratified that Ilya sounded as wrecked as he felt. "Bedroom."

They made it to the hallway before Shane pulled Ilya back, needing to kiss him again. Ilya made a frustrated noise and walked Shane backward until they stumbled through a doorway. The bedroom was all dark wood and floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the city, but Shane barely registered it. Ilya's hands were on his jacket, pushing it off, then working at the buttons of his shirt with fingers that knew what they were doing.

Shane caught his wrists gently. "Wait."

Ilya froze. "If you've changed your mind –"

"I haven't." Shane brought Ilya's hands to his mouth, kissed the knuckles, and then sucked in his thumb, licking the pad with the tip of his tongue as he met Ilya’s eyes. He let Ilya pull his thumb from his mouth, stroking along his bottom lip. "I, um, don’t have a lot of experience with sex…with men."

“I won’t hurt you.”

Shane reached up, started unbuttoning Ilya's black shirt slowly, revealing inches of skin. Ilya was built like he still trained seriously, defined muscles, broad shoulders, and he inhaled sharply when he saw the number of large, dark tattoos covering his chest, his belly, and his upper arms.

The shirt dropped to the floor as he let his fingertips trace the two large eight-pointed stars in front of his shoulders, the ornate cross over his heart and the name *Irina* spelled artfully on a ribbon. There was a large bear on his right side, roaring with his jaws open and sharp teeth showing, sitting up with his front claws in an attack pose. The Rozanov name was etched into the skin around the bear. Six small skulls were marked in neat rows of three on his left side. And peeking up from the waistband of his pants was another tattoo, smaller than the others, that looked like the top of a shield and a sword handle.

His research rabbit hole had taken him to words like *Bratva* and *Vory V Zakone* and a number of frightening things like the meanings of certain tattoos. Some of the Reddit posts called Ilya Rozanov the Prince of the Brotherhood.

"Do you dislike them?" Ilya said, though he didn't sound displeased.

"Ilya," Shane breathed, just to hear how it sounded.

The groan Ilya made went straight through Shane. They were kissing again, and Shane lost track of time, lost track of everything except the slide of skin against skin, the way Ilya's control kept fracturing into something desperate and real.

Ilya walked him backward to his King-sized bed, and Shane went willingly, letting himself be pushed down onto thick, soft sheets. Ilya followed, covering Shane's body with his own, and the weight of him was perfect, holding him down.

Ilya’s mouth dragged down Shane’s throat, slow and deliberate, as if savoring each inch of him. Shane’s breath caught when teeth grazed lightly at the base of his neck, then soothed away with a warm kiss that made his whole body tighten. Ilya’s hands slid beneath Shane’s shirt, pushing it up, baring him inch by inch. By the time it left Shane’s body entirely, he was already trembling.

Ilya sat back on his heels between Shane’s legs and looked down at him, hungry, intent, and reverent in a way that made Shane’s chest ache.

“Beautiful,” Ilya murmured, almost like he didn’t mean for Shane to hear it.

“You’re the one that’s beautiful,” he said, shyly.

“When you blush like this, I can see all of your freckles.”

Shane’s face burned, but the heat only deepened when Ilya bent again and kissed a path down his chest, his abdomen, his hips. Each touch felt like being claimed and marked, like Ilya was filing away every sound Shane made for later use.

When Ilya’s fingers curled into Shane’s waistband, Shane lifted his hips without thinking. His breath came sharp when Ilya slid his pants and briefs off, leaving him bare under that dark, knowing gaze.

“Relax,” Ilya murmured, smoothing a hand up Shane’s thigh. “I will make it good for you.”

He sucked in a shuddering breath, hips twitching when Ilya's fingers wrapped around his cock. He didn't stroke, not at first. He just held Shane's cock, thumb brushing teasingly along the underside as he leaned in and kissed the flushed head with infuriating gentleness.

Shane's entire body jolted. "Ilya –"

"I will taste you," Ilya whispered, and then his mouth was on him.

The shock of heat and the wet, deliberate suction made Shane's back arch off the bed.

"Ohmygod," Shane gasped, biting his bottom lip. His hands fisted in the sheets, helpless to do anything but feel as Ilya drew his cock in deeper, lips sealing tight around him. He could feel every controlled motion, every purposeful slide of Ilya's tongue, so skillful in a way that made Shane dizzy.

He was inexperienced, maybe a little embarrassingly so, and Ilya seemed to know exactly how to unravel him without pushing him too fast. The tip of his tongue flicked teasingly over the slit and he slurped noisily, moving up to spit directly on Shane's cock and then covering the head with his mouth, sucking hard.

"Oh fuck, Ilya –" Shane moaned, his voice cracking.

Ilya hummed around him, the vibration shooting straight through Shane's spine. He squeezed his eyes shut, the pleasure too sharp and too consuming. Every time he made a sound, Ilya rewarded him with something deeper, slower, more devastatingly thorough. It was so good that it made Shane's vision go white at the edges. Ilya took him deep, deeper than should've been possible, until Shane's hands flew to Ilya's shoulders, not pushing, just clinging.

He pulled back only to swirl his tongue along the sensitive ridge, then sank down again with maddening, deliberate control.

"Oh god, Ilya, I'm –" He broke into a trembling moan when Ilya hollowed his cheeks and sucked his cock harder, the sound obscene in the quiet room.

Ilya set a rhythm that was going to make him come sooner than later. Every time Shane thought he could breathe, Ilya changed the angle of his head or pressed his tongue differently, taking him deeper until Shane's thighs trembled uncontrollably. He felt the pleasure grow and build too fast, too intense, a hot coil pulling tight in his belly.

"Ilya – please! Oh fuck, I'm close –" Shane gasped, trying to pull back just enough to warn him.

Ilya's hands gripped his hips and held him in place and that was all it took.

The pleasure hit him hard, ripping through him in a bright, overwhelming rush. Shane cried out, hips jerking helplessly under Ilya's hands as he spilled into Ilya's mouth. Ilya didn't flinch, he swallowed everything, slow and deliberate, eyes lifted just enough for Shane to see the dark, satisfied heat in them.

Shane collapsed back onto his elbows, chest heaving, absolutely done. When Ilya finally let his cock slip free with a wet sound, Shane was shaking.

“That’s it,” Ilya said, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand before leaning down to kiss Shane again, letting him taste himself on Ilya’s tongue. “Good.”

Shane didn’t realize he was whining until Ilya caught his lower lip gently between his teeth.

“Tell me if you want more.”

Shane didn’t trust his voice yet, so he grabbed Ilya’s shoulders and pulled him closer, kissing him with a needy whimper.

“Yes, more,” Shane said, staring up at him.

Ilya licked the corner of his mouth, wiped a thumb across his lower lip like savoring the last of a decadent dessert, and rose to his feet. Shane was still sprawled on the bed, chest rising unevenly, lips swollen from the kisses Ilya gave him after swallowing every last drop.

Ilya rolled his shoulders as if shedding restraint. He reached down and tugged off his shoes, setting them neatly aside. The socks followed, revealing strong, veined feet and the easy, predatory grace of a man who never rushed unless he had a reason. Then Ilya’s fingers went to his belt. He slid it free in one smooth pull and coiled it slowly around his fist, the gesture casual but deliberate. He smirked, tossing it on the nearby armchair.

“Maybe for next time,” Ilya said, his voice low and playful.

Shane’s breath hitched, his eyes widening at the idea. He knew about BDSM but wasn’t sure if he was into anything like that. There must have been something on his face that caught Ilya’s attention.

“Don’t worry, Shane, I said I wouldn’t hurt you,” he murmured, reassuringly.

Ilya unbuttoned his black pants with that same unhurried confidence, pushing them down over narrow hips and strong thighs. The fabric fell to the floor, leaving him in nothing but a tight pair of black briefs doing absolutely nothing to hide how hard he was.

And god, Shane had known Ilya was big; he’d felt it pressed against him. But seeing it…the heavy, thick outline straining the fabric made his mouth go dry. Shane licked his lips, his eyes trailing down Ilya’s thick thighs, to the eight pointed star tattoos on his knees, to his pretty feet. Shane stared at the large bulge in his briefs, the outline of his hard cock pressing against the fabric.

Ilya noticed him staring. Of course he noticed. He smirked, not bothering to hide his own satisfaction as he hooked his thumbs into the waistband and pushed the briefs down. His cock sprang free, long, thick, and flushed a dark rosy pink at the tip, the kind of size that made Shane’s stomach clench with equal parts awe and anticipation.

Shane’s breath escaped him in a soft, involuntary sound. “Jesus Christ…”

Ilya didn't step closer, not yet. He let Shane look. Let him *take it in.* Standing there nude and utterly unhurried, he radiated smug, controlled heat, a man who enjoyed being admired by the person he was about to ruin.

Ilya reached over to the bedside table. He opened the drawer with an almost lazy flick of his fingers and retrieved a bottle of lube and a condom, casting a sideways glance back at Shane. He set the items on the mattress beside Shane, then leaned in just enough to drag a knuckle along Shane's inner thigh.

"Don't worry, it'll fit." He said as he got on the bed, moving between Shane's thighs and kneeing his legs further apart.

Shane gave a nervous smile and rolled his eyes. "You're such an asshole."

"Yes," Ilya said, chuckling.

Shane watched as he slicked his fingers with the lube. The first touch made Shane tense, breath stuttering. Ilya leaned down and kissed him again, grounding him, his free hand stroking Shane's hip.

"Slow," Ilya whispered. "Let me open you up."

The gentleness of it contrasted with the dark hunger in his eyes. He worked Shane open with steady patience, the stretch unfamiliar but steadily blooming into something hotter, something that made Shane spread his legs wider and gasp into Ilya's mouth.

By the time Ilya pressed deeper, adding another finger, Shane was panting, his whole body melting around the careful intrusion. He was surprised to find that he was getting hard again.

"Ilya…please – please," he begged, not even sure if he was ready for this but wanting it more than anything.

Ilya withdrew his fingers and slicked himself, then aligned their bodies with a control that made Shane feel hunted and held all at once.

"Look at me," Ilya said, softly. "Is still okay?"

Shane did, he couldn't look anywhere else. "Yes."

The first push stole his breath. He felt the slow stretch, the heat, Ilya's body claiming space inside him in a way that made his vision blur. Shane clutched at Ilya's shoulders, nails dragging across muscle as Ilya sank deeper, inch by inch, until their hips met and Shane could feel the tremor running through Ilya's body, too.

"Good," Ilya whispered, forehead pressed to Shane's. "So good for me."

The first thrust was slow, deliberate, testing. Shane's soft gasp broke into a moan, and Ilya's restraint snapped. He braced his hands on either side of Shane's head and fucked him into the mattress, deep, hard, and precise, each stroke finding a place inside Shane he hadn't known could feel like this.

Shane writhed beneath him, overwhelmed by sensation, by the sheer intensity in Ilya's eyes every time Shane cried out.

"More," Shane choked out. "Ilya, more –"

Ilya obeyed, driving into him with a force that made the bedframe shudder. But even then, even lost in the rhythm of it, he kept touching Shane, kissing his mouth, one hand sliding down to wrap around Shane's cock and pump him in time with each thrust.

Shane saw stars. He felt split open, remade, wanted in a way so fierce it was almost painful.

"Fuck, I'm gonna –"

"Yes, Shane, fuck," Ilya grunted breathlessly. "Come for me."

Shane shattered with a cry, pleasure tearing through him like heat lightning. His body clenched around Ilya's cock, and the dirty sounds Ilya made, a dark, broken groan, burned itself into Shane's memory. Ilya thrust once, twice, then came with a rough curse, burying himself deep as his whole body shook above Shane's.

They collapsed together, shaking, panting, and tangled in sweaty limbs and sheets that looked far less pristine. Shane had never felt so thoroughly taken apart and then put together. His thighs fell open and continued to quiver; he could still feel the throbbing of his hole around Ilya's cock.

"Ahhhh," Ilya let out a long exhale, gently pulling his softening cock from inside Shane, and moving up to brace himself on his elbows. "Good?"

Shane chuckled, feeling a burst of fondness for him. "Yes. Good."

Ilya slid against him, rolling to his side and then his back on the bed. "Fuck, Hollander, you're a good fuck. Give me an hour and I can fuck you again."

He laughed, rubbing his face with his hands. "Ohmygod, I don't think I can get hard again."

Ilya turned his head and grinned. "*Ahhh*…I do like a challenge."

Shane huffed out another laugh and shoved him with his elbow, turning on his side so that he was facing Ilya. His smile faded as he stared at the tattoos covering his body. He reached out slowly and traced the stars on his chest.

"Is that all this was, a challenge?" He asked, his voice soft and uncertain.

"I wasn't lying," Ilya said, finally, staring up at the ceiling. "When I said I couldn't stop thinking about you."

"When…when I was researching you and your family, I learned about tattoos and what they mean," he said, propping himself up on one elbow, his fingers tracing the cross and then down to the six skulls. "Can you tell me what these mean?"

“I was sixteen when my father inducted me into his organization as his enforcer,” Ilya said, his voice low and unemotional. “I have blood on my hands, Shane.”

“You were just a kid –”

“I am my father’s son.” Ilya took a deep breath and turned his head to look at Shane. “I am a killer. We should not pretend otherwise.”

“What am I doing? I should be running out of here as fast as I can.”

"It is not too late. I will let you go." Ilya pulled him down for a gentle kiss, this one slow and deep. When they broke apart, his expression had turned serious again. "Shane, I need you to understand what you're getting into. My life is not safe. The people I work with, the things I'm responsible for…"

"I'm still here."

Ilya was quiet for a moment. "I can't promise you anything. My father will eventually find out, and he will not approve. There will be complications, dangerous ones. You cannot be part of my business. My enemies will target you if they believe you are my weakness. There will *always* be secrets between us. You will grow to fear me and hate me."

He placed his fingers over Ilya’s mouth. “We could just be discreet. I don’t need…big public gestures. Just…don’t lie to me. I can keep secrets, too.”

Ilya wrapped his hand around Shane’s wrist, his hold gentle as he kissed Shane’s fingertips, pulling his hand away.

“Some secrets are very heavy to keep. You are a journalist –”

“A *sports* journalist.”

“-- a journalist who is curious for the truth. It is your heart and mind, it is who you are. I don’t want you to change.”

Shane frowned. “Do you think I would betray you?”

Ilya gave him a sad smile. “You…you would not…live long enough to betray me, Shane. Do you understand?”

“No, Ilya –”

“*Shh shhh shhh*. Stay with me tonight. Please. Dimitri can return you to your apartment in the morning. After breakfast…or maybe lunch. Let me just be with you and hold you. Please.”

Shane swallowed against the tightness in his throat, meeting Ilya’s eyes and seeing desire and regret in his steady gaze.

“Okay,” he whispered, pressing a kiss to Ilya’s shoulder, near the star tattoo. Ilya hissed through his teeth, curling his arms around Shane and holding him close.

“I will protect you as much as I can,” he said, kissing Shane’s forehead tenderly.

For a few hours, in the comfort of Ilya's bedroom, high above the city, Shane Hollander let himself believe in impossible things.

Chapter 3: The Double Life

Shane got good at lying to himself first.

He told himself that he and Ilya were just seeing each other. No labels. No expectations. He told himself he could maintain clean dividing lines—journalist here, lover there—as though the two halves of his life weren't bleeding into one another every time Ilya's name lit up his phone.

The first few weeks were intoxicating in their simplicity. They met in places the public didn't notice: that same private dining room in Konstantin's after closing, the penthouse of a luxurious hotel an hour away, an apartment in Wakefield under someone else's name. There was no hand-holding on sidewalks, no dinners in public places where they could be seen, nowhere that could be photographed and shared with anyone.

Shane learned to recognize cars by their silhouettes in the dark. He learned which of Ilya's associates just looked dangerous and which were lethal. He learned to read the tension in Ilya's shoulders when a situation had gone wrong somewhere in the city.

He also learned what it meant to be wanted like a problem someone refused to give up.

Ilya didn't do casual well.

He was attentive in a way that made Shane unsteady on his feet. He remembered what articles Shane had published, what coffee he preferred, the exact tone in his voice when he'd had a difficult interview.

Text messages arrived at odd hours: *Eat something* at three in the afternoon. *Home safe?* at midnight.

Then, sometimes, late enough that the city had gone quiet: *Come here. Dimitri will bring you.*

And Shane would go. Every time. He loved spending time with Ilya, but the sex was *indescribable.*

Sex with Ilya had reshaped Shane in ways he still wasn't sure how to name. Ilya had taught him things with his hands, his mouth, his voice – things Shane never imagined wanting, much less crave. With Ilya, he felt dirty in ways that thrilled him, felt used in ways that left him trembling and utterly satisfied afterward, floating on the edge of something raw and tender. His shyness was peeled away little by little under Ilya's low, explicit whispers, the filth and command in his tone making Shane melt instead of flinch.

And he still remembered the night Ilya traced the shield-and-sword tattoo on his hip and finally told him what it meant.

"Protector and enforcer in my father's organization," he said, calm and matter-of-fact. Then, with a dangerous smile. "And also that I am a sadist."

Shane had felt his heartbeat stop and then race, a flood of excitement braided with anxiety as he realized he was the focus of Ilya's hunger. But Ilya never hurt him. Not once. He only pushed him, devoured him, coaxed him into pleasure he never knew he could feel, and Shane had never wanted anyone the way he wanted Ilya.

"So, um, I've been seeing someone," Shane said, during his monthly call with Rose. "But I'd like to keep it private for now."

"Ohhh…is it someone famous?" Rose said, her voice warm with amusement.

"Well…yes. His name is recognizable in certain places," he said, then made a face at how that sounded.

"Could it be that gorgeous Russian billionaire who owns the Ottawa Senators?"

Shane widened his eyes and choked on his spit. "What? No! Uh, why would you say that?"

Rose laughed and Shane smiled, imagining the look on her face, how her eyes crinkled at the corners. "Ohmygod, Shane, we've known each other since we were teenagers. I think I know your type."

He sighed, squeezing the phone in his hand as he pressed it against his ear. "Would you keep that a secret? You know I'm not the kind of person who, you know."

"Of course, Shane," she said immediately, her voice serious now. "A weaker man would've capitalized on being married to me and sold our story to the tabloids. But you always kept our secrets. You're the only one I trust. Of course I'll keep your secrets, too."

"Thank you," he said, closing his eyes and rubbing his face with his free hand. Something eased in his chest; the burden of keeping Ilya a secret lessened a little. It was nice that someone else knew. "So tell me how things are going with your new project."

He learned the rhythm of Ilya's life: the calls at all hours from Moscow, men waiting outside doors with patient menace, sudden silences that meant something somewhere had gone catastrophically wrong. Violence existed around Ilya the way weather existed around the city: distant thunder on the horizon, a storm that broke overhead without warning.

Ilya kept his promise and never lied to him, not exactly. He simply spoke in the spaces between truth and omission.

"There was a meeting," he would say, with blood still drying at the cuff of his shirt.

"There was a disagreement." When Shane had already seen the headline about a warehouse fire in Vanier.

"There are people who *forget* their place." On nights when Ilya paced the penthouse like a caged animal, his phone buzzing constantly, Moscow lighting up Ilya's world from an ocean away.

Shane never asked for more details than he could bear to hear. But he asked enough. And when he did, Ilya answered him quietly, without excuses or justification.

"This bar is legitimate," Ilya said once, touching a floor plan spread across the dining table. "The company that owns it owns three others in the Market. That company launders money for one of my father's associates in Toronto."

Shane had swallowed, throat tight. "And you?"

"I make sure no one gets arrested," Ilya said simply, as though discussing quarterly earnings. "I ensure the paperwork is clean and the transactions untraceable."

He could read between the lines. Shane told himself he was only gathering context. That a good journalist understood the systems that shaped the world. That not everything he knew had to end up in print. That some knowledge could remain private, sealed behind the walls of discretion.

But he also knew the way his pulse quickened every time the phone rang and Ilya didn't answer. He knew what it felt like to stand at his apartment windows and watch headlights appear on the street below, relief hitting so hard it was almost painful when Dimitri's Mercedes SUV pulled up to the curb.

That wasn't research, that was attachment. That was something far more dangerous than any of Ilya's business dealings.

***

For Ilya, the shift was quieter but no less profound.

His life had always been a negotiation between what his father required and what he could stand to lose of himself in the process. People moved around him like pieces on a chessboard: allies, rivals, liabilities to be managed or eliminated. They wanted things from him: access, money, power, protection, favor. They feared him, respected him, or pretended to love him if it got them closer to Moscow's approval.

Shane didn't want anything but *him*.

That was the problem; that was his only salvation.

He found himself listening for Shane's voice the way other men listened for sirens. He let messages sit unanswered from men who owed him favors, but responded to Shane within minutes. He caught himself smiling at his phone during a negotiation with suppliers, and Katya had stopped mid-sentence once, eyebrows lifting before she politely looked away and continued her report.

"You're distracted," she'd said afterward, her tone carefully neutral.

"It is fine."

"Ilya." She'd used his first name, which she rarely did. "Be careful. Your father has eyes everywhere."

He hadn't asked what she meant because he already knew.

Grigori's calls came more frequently as autumn deepened into winter.

"You are twenty-seven," his father's voice rumbled through the speaker one Tuesday evening. "Old enough to understand obligation. Old enough to think beyond your own desires."

"I understand obligation, *Papa*." Ilya replied, watching the lights of Ottawa spill across the frozen river like scattered jewels.

"Then you will meet Svetlana Volkov in Montréal next month," Grigori continued without pause. "Her father and I have reached an agreement. The alliance will stabilize the eastern operations. Consolidate our position."

"I don't need a wife to stabilize my territory."

"You need heirs," Grigori said coldly, each word dropping like ice into water. "And you need to stop behaving as though your private *preferences* exist in a vacuum. What you do reflects on this family, on everything we've built."

He did not say Shane's name. He did not have to. The implication hung in the silence: *I know. I am watching. This ends when I say it ends.*

Ilya stood motionless for a long time. The city glittered below him, indifferent to his turmoil. His reflection in the window looked like a stranger's, a man caught between two worlds, belonging fully to neither.

Then he texted Shane: *Are you awake?*

He didn't write: *My father wants me to marry my childhood friend to strengthen a business alliance.*

He didn't write: *If anyone finds out about you, they will use you to hurt me, and I won't be able to stop them.*

He only texted: *Please come to my penthouse.*

Shane arrived forty minutes later with snow dusting his shoulders and concern etched across his features. Ilya pulled him from the private elevator without a word, kissed him against the wall, and tried not to think about expiration dates or the promises he couldn't make.

***

The assignment landed on Shane's desk like an opportunity wrapped in barbed wire.

Marcus leaned over the cubicle wall on a grey Wednesday afternoon, holding a coffee that smelled better than anything from the break room. "Got a minute? Catherine wants to see us."

Shane's pulse kicked up. Catherine Moreau was their managing editor, two floors up with a corner office, the kind of woman who decided which stories made page one and which reporters got promoted out of sports. She didn't usually summon beat writers unless something significant was happening.

"What's this about?" Shane asked, already saving his work on his laptop.

"City desk investigation. She'll explain."

The elevator ride felt like an audition Shane hadn't prepared for. He'd been trying to break out of sports for two years, pitching investigative pieces, volunteering for political coverage, anything that proved he could do more than interview hockey players about their playoff hopes. But the *Journal* was a small paper with limited resources, and positions on the news desk didn't open often.

Catherine's office had windows overlooking the Rideau Canal and a wall covered in framed front pages from major stories the paper had broken over the decades under leadership. She gestured them into seats without preamble.

"Shane, your Rozanov piece got excellent traction. ESPN picked it up, it's been cited in three other markets, and we've had inquiries from international outlets about syndication." She paused, studying him. "More importantly, you got access. An on-record interview and zero complaints from Rozanov and his people. That's more than any other journalist in this city has managed with the Rozanov Group."

Shane kept his expression neutral, ignoring the way his stomach tightened. "He was cooperative. The timing worked."

"The timing worked because the Senators ownership group wanted positive press," Marcus interjected. "But you built a rapport. He trusts you, or at least doesn't see you as a threat."

"City desk has been chasing something for six months," Catherine continued, sliding a thin folder across her desk. "Development deals, property acquisitions, shell companies with opaque ownership structures. A lot of money is moving through Ottawa real estate, and a good portion of it appears to have Russian origins. The Rozanov Group is one of several entities involved, but they're the largest and the most connected."

Shane opened the folder. Property records, corporate filings, transaction histories, all public information that Shane knew about, but the patterns were there if you knew how to look. Multiple purchases through numbered companies, rapid transfers of ownership, properties that changed hands for significantly more than their assessed values.

Classic money laundering architecture.

"We can't publish any of this," Catherine said, letting out a sigh. "It's all circumstantial. Legal would kill it in an hour and Rozanov would sue us into bankruptcy. But if someone could get inside, could get sources talking, could verify what's actually happening..." She looked at Shane directly. "That's a front-page story. Maybe a series. The kind of investigative work that wins awards and changes careers."

There it was. The thing Shane had been chasing since he'd started in journalism, a real story, a meaningful story, the kind that mattered beyond box scores and trade rumors.

All he had to do was betray the man he was sleeping with.

"You want me to use my access to Rozanov," Shane said, keeping his voice steady.

"We want you to investigate a story that you're uniquely positioned to report on," Catherine corrected, her brown eyes staring at him. "You have established contact, credibility in that world, and most importantly, you understand the context. The hockey angle gives you a legitimate reason to maintain the relationship, to ask questions, to be present in spaces other reporters can't access."

"This is exactly what you've been asking for," Marcus added, and there was something careful in his tone, like he was watching for Shane's reaction. "A chance to do real investigative journalism. To prove you're ready for the news desk."

Shane stared at the folder, and thought about the *years* of careful documentation by other reporters who'd hit a wall. He thought about the conversations he'd overheard in Ilya's penthouse, the floor plans spread across tables, the careful language Ilya used when describing his business operations. He thought about blood on shirt cuffs and men who disappeared into alleys.

He also thought about Ilya's hands in his hair, the way he said Shane's name in the dark, the texts that arrived at midnight asking if he'd made it home safely.

"I need to think about this," Shane said.

Catherine's expression didn't change, but something shifted in her eyes, a newfound respect, maybe, or at least acknowledgment that this wasn't a simple ask. "Take a few days. But Shane, this is time-sensitive. Other outlets are sniffing around this story. If we don't move on it first, someone else will, and you'll have lost your advantage."

"And if I say no?"

"Then you stay on the sports desk, and we assign this to someone else who'll have to build everything from scratch." She paused, raising an eyebrow. "But I don't think you're going to say no. I think you're the kind of journalist who wants to break real stories, who wants to make a difference. This is how you do that."

Back at his desk, Shane couldn't focus. The folder sat in his backpack like evidence of a crime he hadn't committed yet. Around him, the newsroom hummed with its usual energy, TVs were on various news channels, phones ringing, keyboards clattering, the low murmur of reporters chasing deadlines.

He opened his laptop and pulled up the Rozanov piece he'd written, the one that had opened this door. Every word was true. Every quote was accurate. He'd done his job professionally and ethically.

But he'd also left out everything that mattered.

His phone buzzed. Ilya texted: *I want to see you. Dinner tonight? Konstantin's. 8pm.*

Shane stared at the message. Six weeks ago, this would have been simple: an interview subject offering another conversation, a source providing deeper access. Six weeks ago, Shane would have said yes without hesitation because it served the story.

Now it served two stories, and he couldn't write either.

He thought of Ilya tracing idle circles on his back in the quiet after midnight, fingers moving in abstract patterns that felt like some private language. He thought of men in dark suits and darker silence, conversations held in Russian that ended when Shane entered the room. He thought of the obligation he had to his profession, to the readers who trusted him to tell the truth without fear or favor.

He also thought of what it meant to put a target on Ilya's back. To write words that could unravel lives, destroy carefully constructed facades, send people to prison or worse.

"Do you think I would betray you?"

"You…you would not…live long enough to betray me, Shane. Do you understand?"

Shane had spent five years on the sports desk waiting for a story that mattered. Now, he had one, and breaking it meant breaking the first person who'd ever treated him like he was something worth protecting.

This was the kind of opportunity that defined careers. The kind that didn't come twice.

For the first time in his professional life, journalism didn't feel like illumination. It felt like holding a blade to someone's throat and being asked to press down.

Shane texted: *See you at 8.*

***

The dangerous situation came on a Thursday in early December.

Ilya didn't tell Shane what was happening, he never did, at least not beforehand, but Shane could read the signs by now. Three missed calls in an hour.

Ilya texted: *Busy.*

Then nothing, just silence stretching into the afternoon like a held breath.

By evening, the news lit up social media and the *Journal*'s breaking news feed: shooting outside a Centretown club near Elgin Street, suspected gang involvement, two injured, no names released pending notification of families.

Shane's hands went cold despite the apartment's heat. He knew the club. He knew who owned it through a web of subsidiaries. He knew how thin the line was between rumor and the truth you could print in ink.

He called Ilya. No answer. He called again. Voicemail.

“Fuck,” he hissed, grabbing his navy blue peacoat and heading out of his apartment.

He took an Uber to Ilya's building, half-sick with fear and half-furious at himself for caring this much, for letting someone burrow this deep under his skin. The elevator ride to the penthouse felt eternal. His reflection in the polished brass looked pale, eyes too wide, like someone on the edge of discovering something they couldn't unknow.

The doors opened.

Ilya was there. Alive. Shirt sleeves rolled to his elbows, knuckles split and bruised, blood dried in a brown smear along one temple like he'd forgotten it was there or simply didn't care. Katya stood near the kitchen island, preparing a first aid kit, her expression sharp and watchful; two other men Shane vaguely recognized spoke quietly near the windows before slipping out when Shane stepped into view.

“*Ahh*…your little lamb has come,” Katya said to Ilya, smirking at Shane.

Ilya looked at him, and for a heartbeat, the careful composure cracked like ice over deep water.

"You should not be here, Shane," he said, voice low and rough.

"You didn’t answer my texts or your phone." Shane shot back, because anger was easier than relief, easier than admitting how terrified he'd been for the past six hours.

"I was busy."

"I saw the news."

"Yes."

The word was insufficient and infuriating in its calm dismissal.

Shane crossed the room, adrenaline still burning through his veins like voltage. "Someone could have died."

"No one did," Ilya said coldly, meeting his eyes without flinching.

That stopped Shane. The air between them thinned, became something harder to breathe.

"I warned them," Ilya continued, his voice low and calm. "They moved against us anyway. Against me. They thought I was weak, that my father's protection made me soft. They were wrong."

He stared at those bloodied knuckles, at the streak near Ilya's hairline. "Did you –"

"I gave an order," Ilya said, cutting him off. Not defensive. Not proud. Simply factual, like discussing the weather. "Because if I didn't, more people I am responsible for would be hurt. Would die. That's what this is, Shane. That's what I do."

Shane ran a hand through his hair, pacing toward the windows and back. "Do you hear yourself? You *'gave an order'*? What the hell is that, Ilya? That's –"

"A consequence," Ilya said sharply. "A world you walked into with your eyes open."

"That's not fair. I didn't walk into –" He swallowed hard. "Okay. Maybe I did. But that doesn't mean I don't get to be angry that the man I –"

He stopped.

The word hovered between them, half-born and terrifying: *love*.

Katya clicked her tongue. “This is like reality show. So much drama with your boyfriend, Ilya.”

“Shut up,” Shane said, glaring at her.

Katya said something in Russian, probably cursing Shane out, and Ilya took a deep breath, looking at her.

“Katya, you may leave now. Thank you for your assistance. Shane and I need to be alone.”

“Da,” she murmured, her stiletto heels clicking on the hardwood floor. She picked up her black fur coat from a nearby chair, holding it by a finger over her shoulder. *“Spokoynoy nochi.”*

“Goodnight,” Ilya said, nodding to her.

“Pizda!” She hissed at Shane as she stepped into the elevator.

“Hey! I know what that means, you know!” Shane said to her as she gave him a mocking smile as the elevator doors closed.

“Shane. Enough, *vozlyublennyy*.”

Ilya crossed the distance between them in two strides, movements controlled but urgent. His hands framed Shane's face, warm and steady despite the blood still clinging to his skin.

"Be angry at me, not at her," he said, searching Shane's face. "Be angry at me. I can survive your anger."

"I am! I’m so fucking –" Shane breathed, and he was shaking now from the release, the adrenaline, the sheer terror delayed until it had somewhere safe to land. "You could have died. You didn't call. You disappear into these rooms with these men and I –"

He broke off because the words were turning into something raw, something that would expose him completely.

“Ya tebya lyublyu,” Ilya whispered, leaning forward to kiss him.

Shane tried to move away. “Fuck you, Ilya.”

“Ya tebya lyublyu. Ya tebya lyublyu.”

“You can’t…you can’t use that against me, that’s not fair!”

“Ya tebya lyublyu.”

The moment tipped like a scale finding balance. Neither of them moved gently.

Ilya kissed him like a man who'd been standing at a threshold for too long and finally chose to step through. Shane kissed back with that same frantic edge, all the fear and fury and relief alchemized into heat and need. They stumbled backward, hit the wall, hands grasping for purchase and finding each other instead.

There was nothing careful in it, nothing tender. Not tonight.

Ilya's mouth was demanding and rough; Shane surged forward to meet him, answering in kind. Jackets fell without either of them remembering shrugging them off. Fingers pushed under fabric, found skin, held on like drowning men finding something solid to grasp.

"You're a fucking asshole." Shane murmured against Ilya’s mouth, his voice breaking around the words.

"You are here," Ilya said, his forehead pressed to Shane's, breathing hard. His voice shook. "You always come to me."

The words did something devastating to Shane's carefully constructed defenses.

He pulled Ilya closer as though closeness could anchor them both, as though proximity alone could protect either of them from the worlds pressing in on every side. The kiss deepened, turned desperate; neither tried to slow it. This wasn't tender, tender would come later, in the quiet hours before dawn. This was something more elemental, an insistence hammered out in touch and breath: *You're alive. So am I. Feel this. Remember this.*

Shane felt the wall solid at his back, the strength of Ilya's body against his, the way his own heart hammered helplessly against his ribs like something trying to escape its cage. He didn't think. He didn't analyze. For once, he just let himself want without qualification or excuse.

They didn't make it far before the urgency overwhelmed them.

“Take off your clothes and get on your knees,” Ilya said, his voice rough with desire and command. Shane watched as Ilya undid his pants, pulling out his cock and stroking it to full hardness.

Shane obeyed willingly. He stepped back and began to strip out of his clothes and shoes, folding each item neatly and pushing his shoes aside. He stepped towards Ilya and got on his knees, meeting Ilya's hard gaze.

Ilya's hand slid into Shane's hair the moment he knelt, fingers tightening just enough to make Shane's breath stutter. His cock was already heavy, flushed, the tip glistening as he stepped in close.

Shane didn't need to be told. He leaned forward, lips parting, breath warm against the head of Ilya's cock before he wrapped his mouth around him and sank down in a slow, practiced glide. His tongue pressed just right, he always remembered exactly how Ilya liked it, and the low curse above him was immediate.

"Fuck…that's it." Ilya's voice dropped, rough and approving as his fingers clenched. "You know how to take me."

Shane hummed around him, the vibration pulling another groan from Ilya's chest. He set a rhythm, deep, controlled, filthy in its devotion, but Ilya's restraint didn't last long tonight. Not with the tension running through him like wire, not with Shane's eager mouth swallowing him over and over.

Ilya's hips jerked, only once at first, but then he caught Shane's head in both hands and guided him firmly, pushing deeper. Shane's eyes fluttered, throat relaxing as he let Ilya use him. The wet sounds grew louder, slick and messy, Shane's fingers tightening on Ilya's thighs for balance as Ilya began to fuck into his mouth with short, hungry thrusts.

"Good," Ilya growled, breath breaking. "Take it. God, you look so fucking pretty like this."

Shane took him all, helpless, eager, and wanting more. Ilya had taught him well and Shane was a fast learner. His eyes were wet at the corners, spit running down his chin, but he didn't pull away. Every time Ilya thrust in harder, he opened for him, offering more, offering everything.

Ilya's grip tightened abruptly. His hips stilled. He was close.

Shane felt it, felt the tension in Ilya's thighs, felt the pulse against his tongue, and he pushed forward on his own, desperate to draw it out of him. But Ilya yanked him back with a sharp breath, pulling his cock from Shane's mouth with a wet pop.

Shane gasped, chest rising hard as he looked up, lips swollen, spit shining down his throat. "Fuck…"

Ilya's thumb dragged across Shane's lower lip, harsh but trembling faintly.

"Not like that," he said, voice thick with restraint he was barely holding. "I'm not coming in your mouth tonight."

Shane swallowed, pupils blown wide. "Why not?"

Ilya stepped closer until the head of his cock nudged Shane's damp chin, possessive and unmistakable. His hand slid back into Shane's hair, gripping, claiming.

"Because," he rasped, blue eyes nearly black with arousal. "I'm going to fuck you. And I want to come while I'm inside you."

Shane shivered, breath breaking open in a soft, aching sound as he nodded, already rising for him.Ilya didn't give Shane a chance to settle on his feet. He caught him by the hips, turned him, and pushed him down onto the mattress, flat on his belly, face-first, breath catching in a surprised little gasp that broke into a needy sound when Ilya dragged his hands down the back of his thighs.

"Stay there," Ilya muttered, already spreading him open.

Shane barely had time to brace on his forearms before Ilya's mouth was on his hole, hot, hungry, and unrestrained. His tongue pressed in first, thick and wet, sliding over him in a slow, deliberate stroke that made Shane's elbows buckle. He moaned into the bedding, hips jerking back involuntarily as Ilya licked deeper, harder, fucking him open with his tongue in a way that sent sparks racing up his spine.

"Ilya – fuck!" Shane choked out, wriggling helplessly.

Ilya just gripped his ass, pulled him wider, and buried his face between his cheeks. Every tongue stroke was filthy and Shane felt himself trembling, thighs shaking, breath breaking in loud, helpless noises he couldn't smother no matter how hard he pressed his face into the sheets.

When Ilya finally pulled back, Shane was panting, slick, and overstimulated. He heard the drawer open, heard the crinkle of foil, the click of the lube, and thick fingers, cold with slick, were pushing into him before he could even lift his head. Fast, efficient, and perfunctory. Ilya wasn't teasing him now; he was preparing him because he couldn't wait any longer.

A second finger pushed in, stretched him briefly, then withdrew. Ilya climbed onto the bed behind him, grabbed his hips, and pulled him back in one harsh, decisive motion as he thrust forward.

Shane's cry broke loud and raw into the mattress.

Ilya sank into him fully, setting a brutal rhythm from the very first thrust. The sound of his hips slamming into Shane filled the room, sharp and relentless. Shane clawed blindly at the sheets, fingers knotting in the bedding as he tried to hold on, his body rocking helplessly with every deep, punishing snap of Ilya's hips.

"Take it," Ilya grunted behind him, voice low, wrecked. "Fuck, listen to you. Begging without even saying a word."

Shane's moan tore out of him, high and desperate. He angled his hips back instinctively, searching for every jolt of pressure –

And then Ilya hit his prostate.

Shane's whole body jerked. His cock slapped against his belly, leaking and aching. He couldn't think, pushed back again, and again, hips arching so every thrust dragged right across that spot, molten and overwhelming. His toes curled hard against the hardwood floor, flexing with the effort to stay grounded as pleasure tightened in a white-hot coil deep in his belly.

"Look at you," Ilya murmured, almost disbelieving, breath hot against Shane's ear as he leaned over him. His hand came down on the back of Shane's neck, pressing him into the mattress, holding him there. "Gonna come on my cock, aren't you? Fuck, I knew you would."

Shane sobbed out a moan, body shaking as he pushed back against every brutal thrust. His stomach muscles cramped, his thighs burned, his body clenched tight, everything in his body was focused on coming.

"Ilya! Please please please I'm –"

"Come," Ilya growled, grabbing his hips and fucking him faster. "Come! Fuck come now!"

Shane broke. His orgasm tore through him, violent and overwhelming, his hips bucking into Ilya's hands as he spilled hot across the sheets, his ass clenching desperately around Ilya's cock. Shane grabbed onto the bedding, muffling the high pitched squeals into the fabric. He shuddered, so overwhelmed by the intensity of pleasure, his anger and fear and love crashing together.

"Ahh! Shane!"

Ilya hissed, his rhythm losing its precision as he thrust through Shane's orgasm, fucking him even harder, chasing his own. His hand tightened on the back of Shane's neck, holding him down on the bed. His breath came in ragged, deep grunts.

And then he shoved in hard, hips grinding flush against Shane's ass, a low guttural sound punched out of him. His cock pulsed inside the condom, his orgasm drawn out by the spasms of Shane's body milking him, taking every last drop he had to give.

For a moment, neither of them moved; there was just the sound of their breathing, rough and uneven, filling the room.

Then Ilya's hand eased on Shane's neck, stroking once, slow and possessive, tender now, affectionate. Ilya groaned as he pulled carefully out of Shane's sore hole and Shane just stayed on the bed, his body too heavy to move. He closed his eyes and just concentrated on breathing, listening to Ilya in the bathroom – the flush of the toilet, the water in the sink – and then the feeling of a warm damp cloth cleaning him.

"Get on the bed, *vozlyublennyy*."

Shane made a complaining noise as Ilya gently manhandled him so that he was laying on the bed by the pillows, the warm blanket and sheets being tugged from under his body.

“That’s a new one. *Vozlyublennyy*. What’s it mean?”

Ilya crawled into bed beside him, curled against his back, a large hand rubbing Shane’s back. “It means sweetheart.”

They lay tangled in sheets that smelled of sex and Ilya's cologne, bodies still touching at every possible point as if space itself had become dangerous. City lights painted pale stripes across the ceiling; somewhere below, sirens wailed and faded into the perpetual white noise of urban existence.

Shane felt Ilya breathe. Slow. Steady. Alive.

He closed his eyes against the sting of tears he refused to shed.

"I don't know how to do this," Shane said, voice rough and scraped raw.

Ilya's fingers traced idle lines along his arm, following old pathways worn into memory. "You don't owe me *anything*, Shane."

“Everything I know makes me complicit.”

“Yes,” Ilya said, simply.

Silence settled between them, not entirely comfortable, weighted with things neither of them knew how to say.

Shane stared at the window and felt the future rolling toward them like weather over the plains; it was inevitable and unstoppable. Investigation incomplete. Articles unwritten. Questions he would one day have to answer unsaid.

He also felt Ilya's hand find his and lace their fingers together, simple and unguarded in a way Ilya rarely allowed himself to be.

“Don’t be scared, Shane. I will let you go.”

Outside, snow began to fall across the city, covering everything in white.

Chapter 4: Dangerous Ground

Chapter Notes

> Author's Note: I hope everyone is enjoying this story! I wrote it so fast, just after I finished watching the tv show "Heated Rivalry" and became a bit obsessed. I'm editing the final chapter and I hope to post it soon. Honestly, I just needed to get this story out of my system, but I'm already planning my next Hollanov AU! LOL! Thanks for reading this fic!

Three months felt like three years.

Shane told himself he was fine. He went to work, covered games, interviewed players about their playoff hopes, and filed clean copy that made Marcus happy. He met friends for drinks, laughed at their jokes, and pretended the hollowness in his chest was just winter lingering too long.

He told himself he'd made the right choice. Most days, he almost believed it.

March in Ottawa was cruel in its volatility: bright sunshine one day, light snow the next, and rain turning snow into slush. The weather couldn't decide if it was ready for spring or clinging to winter's familiar embrace. Shane felt the same way, caught between moving forward and looking back at what he'd left behind.

Hockey helped. The Senators were having their best season in years, and the Canadian Tire Centre was packed for every home game. The diehard fans, the "Sens Army," showed up in painted faces and Roman centurion helmets and red jerseys, roaring their support through every period. The energy was infectious, and for two and a half hours at a time, Shane could lose himself in the game, in the clean narrative of goals and saves and the simple math of wins and losses.

Shane wrote about some amazing new trades, quoting Coach Travis Brown about his 400th game behind the bench, analyzing the team's incredible 7-0-1 run in March that had saved their playoff hopes. He didn't write about who was funding it all, who'd green-lit the budget for these acquisitions, who sat in the VIP owners box watching every home game with those pale blue eyes.

He didn't write about Ilya at all. But he thought about him constantly.

Late at night, Shane would catch himself opening news apps, scanning for Ilya's name. A new restaurant opening. A charity gala. A business meeting photographed from a distance. He told himself it was research, part of the investigation he was still building. But research

didn't explain the relief that flooded through him every time he confirmed Ilya was alive, unharmed, and still moving through the world.

In February, on Valentine's Day, there was an announcement of Ilya Rozanov's engagement to Svetlana Vetrova. He had to bite down on his jealousy. Shane obsessively Googled her; she wasn't just beautiful but also a respected senior sales representative for a high profile marketing firm in Boston. Shane stared at the reserved smile on Ilya's face.

The Mercedes SUVs had stopped appearing outside his apartment. No more shadows following him home from work. No more sense of being watched. Ilya had kept his word, he'd let Shane go.

Shane should have felt relieved.

Instead, he felt abandoned, which was irrational and unfair and entirely his own fault. He was the one who'd left. He was the one who'd said he couldn't do this anymore and he couldn't be complicit.

He was the one who'd walked away while Ilya stood in the doorway of his penthouse, watching him go without trying to stop him.

I will let you go.

And he had.

Shane threw himself into the investigation with a fervor that bordered on obsession. His apartment became a war room, walls covered with printouts, timelines, corporate structures mapped out in different colored markers. He built a comprehensive picture of the Rozanov Group's operations: shell companies, property transfers, money flowing through legitimate businesses to wash itself clean.

He had bank records obtained through public filings. He had property deeds showing a pattern of purchases at inflated prices.

He had everything except proof that would hold up in court.

And he had a growing file of news clippings about violence in Ottawa, shootings, assaults, and disappearances. None of them officially connected to Ilya, but Shane knew the patterns. He recognized the locations, the timing, the careful orchestration of intimidation and control.

Every headline made his stomach turn. Every report of violence near a Rozanov property made him reach for his phone before he remembered he couldn't call Ilya anymore.

"You look like shit," Marcus said one afternoon, dropping into the chair beside Shane's desk. "When's the last time you slept?"

"I sleep."

"When's the last time you slept more than four hours?"

Shane didn't answer.

"Is this about the Rozanov investigation? Catherine said you've been dragging your feet on turning in your findings."

"I'm not dragging my feet, I'm being thorough. It's going to have my name on it. I don't want to be wrong."

"Shane." Marcus's voice gentled. "I've known you for five years. You're one of the best reporters I've ever worked with. But you're also human, and whatever's going on with you and this story, it's eating you alive."

Shane stared at his laptop screen, at the half-written article he'd been revising for weeks. The words were all there, clean and factual and damning. All he had to do was file it. Turn in all of his research. Let Catherine and the legal team review it. He knew it would set in motion a chain of events that would end with federal investigators crawling through Ilya's life, his businesses, and his carefully constructed empire.

He'd mapped it all out in his notes, how the story would unfold once it went live. First would come the RCMP, their Financial Crime units already stretched thin but relentless when they had solid evidence. Then the Canada Revenue Agency, with their forensic accountants who could trace money through a dozen shell companies and offshore accounts. FINTRAC would feed them intelligence, connecting dots between transactions that looked clean on the surface. The Ottawa Police Service would handle the local angles, probably kick reports up to the Canadian Anti-Fraud Centre. Dozens of arrests would be made.

All he had to do was his job and write the truth.

All he had to do was destroy the man he loved.

"I need more time," Shane said, leaning back in his chair.

"How much more?"

"I don't know."

Marcus studied him for a long moment. "You know what they say about getting too close to a story."

"I'm not too close."

"Then what's the problem?"

Shane knew exactly what the problem was, even if he couldn't say it out loud without something in his chest giving way. He could still feel Ilya's hands in his hair, muscle memory that lived under his skin, ghost-touch that flared at the worst times. He woke reaching across the bed before he was fully conscious, fingers brushing cold sheets as if they might find him there anyway. And beneath the anger, beneath the hurt, there was the simple, terrifying truth: he didn't know how to be the person who ruined Ilya, who ended what they were, even when every rational part of him said he should.

"There's no problem," Shane lied, giving Marcus a tired smile. "I'll have something for you next week."

***

"I still can't believe you're here!" Shane said, grinning as he handed Rose her beer and a warm bag of popcorn.

They were in the nosebleed seats of the Canadian Tire Centre, surrounded by die-hard fans in Senators jerseys, the kind of seats Shane could actually afford on a journalist's salary.

Rose had texted him three days ago: *In Ottawa for a break. Want to catch a game?*

Shane had immediately said yes, grateful for the distraction.

Rose Landry, formerly Mrs. Rose Hollander, looked nothing like the glamorous movie star who graced magazine covers and red carpets. She wore a Senators jersey over a hoodie, her light brown hair pulled back in a ponytail and minimal makeup, showing off a clear and beautiful face. People still recognized her. Shane had seen at least a dozen fans doing double-takes, whispering to their friends, pulling out phones for surreptitious photos.

"The press tour was brutal," Rose said, taking a long sip of her beer. "I needed to be somewhere normal for a few days. And you know I love hockey."

"How's the movie doing?"

"Amazing, apparently. I don't read reviews anymore, it makes me neurotic." She bumped his shoulder with hers. "How are you? You look tired."

"I'm fine."

"Shane." Her tone was gentle but insistent. "I know what 'fine' looks like on you, and this isn't it."

The puck dropped before he had to answer, and they turned their attention to the ice. The Senators were playing Detroit, a crucial game with playoff implications. The arena was electric, 17,000 fans on their feet, the roar of the crowd drowning out everything else.

Shane lost himself in it for a while, the speed of the game, the precision of the passing, the collective gasp when Detroit's goalie made an impossible save. Beside him, Rose cheered and cursed with the same enthusiasm as the fans around them. This was why Shane loved hockey: the simplicity of it, the way it demanded your full attention and gave you permission to forget everything else.

The Senators scored first and the arena erupted. Shane was on his feet with everyone else, high-fiving Rose, caught up in the pure joy of the moment.

Then, during the first intermission, the Kiss Cam started.

Shane had been to hundreds of games. He knew how this worked. The camera would pan across the crowd, landing on couples who would kiss for the entertainment of thousands. He'd always found it slightly embarrassing and entirely avoidable by not sitting next to someone you might kiss.

He was not prepared for the camera to land on him and Rose.

Their faces filled the jumbotron showing Rose Landry and an unidentified handsome man in the cheap seats, looking cozy together. The crowd started cheering, chanting "Kiss! Kiss! Kiss!"

"Oh my god," Rose said, laughing. "This is amazing."

"Rose, we don't have to –"

"It's just a kiss, Shane. For the fans." She was already leaning in, grinning like this was the most fun she'd had in weeks.

Shane felt his face heat, but he leaned in too, meeting her in a quick, friendly peck on the lips that satisfied the crowd. The camera lingered for a moment before moving on to the next couple, and the arena's attention shifted away.

But Shane's attention snapped upward, toward the VIP boxes.

He found Ilya immediately.

Even from this distance, Shane knew exactly where he was. Private box, second tier, surrounded by men in dark suits. Ilya stood at the glass, looking down at the ice or maybe looking down at the crowd. At Shane.

Their eyes met across the arena, across thousands of people and hundreds of feet of distance, and Shane felt the impact of it like a physical blow.

Ilya's expression was unreadable from here, but Shane could imagine it: that careful blankness, that control that slipped only in private, only in moments when they were alone and Ilya allowed himself to be vulnerable.

Did he see the kiss? Does he think –?

Shane looked away first, his heart hammering. Beside him, Rose was saying something, but he couldn't focus on her words. All he could think about was Ilya watching him kiss someone else, watching him move on, watching him exist in a world where they weren't together anymore.

He had never told Ilya he was divorced, he had never said the words out loud, never offered the story of being high school sweethearts, gold rings and paperwork, and the quiet collapse afterward. Did Ilya know? Of course he knew. A man like that didn't walk blind into anything; he probably had Shane's life mapped out in neat lines before they'd even met, every public record and private ache cataloged.

"Shane?" Rose touched his arm. "You okay?"

"Yeah. Yeah, I'm fine." He forced a smile. "Just...thinking about something."

"About someone, maybe?" Her tone was knowing, gentle. "The Russian billionaire you're definitely not dating anymore?"

"I'm not – we're not –" Shane ran a hand through his hair. "It's complicated."

"It always is with you." She squeezed his hand. "Do you want to talk about it?"

"No. Maybe. I don't know. Definitely not here." He glanced back at the VIP boxes, but Ilya had moved away from the glass, back into the shadows of his private world.

The second period started, and Shane tried to focus on the game. But his attention kept drifting upward, wondering if Ilya was still watching, wondering what he was thinking, wondering if he'd felt anything at all seeing Shane with someone else.

Stop it. Shane made his choice. He was the one who walked away.

The Senators won 4-2, and the crowd filed out in high spirits, chanting fight songs and debating MVP performances. Shane and Rose got caught in the crush of bodies heading for the exits, moving slowly toward the parking lot.

"That was exactly what I needed," Rose said as they stepped out into the cold March night. "Thanks for coming with me."

"Thanks for getting me out of my apartment. I've been..." Shane trailed off.

"Obsessing?"

"Researching."

"Shane." Rose stopped walking, turning to face him. Her expression was serious now, the playful energy from the game replaced by genuine concern. "Whatever you're working on, whatever story you're chasing, is it worth what it's costing you?"

"It's my job."

"No, your job is writing about hockey. This is something else. This is personal."

She was right, of course. She'd always been able to see through him.

"I don't know how to walk away from it," Shane admitted. "It matters. What I'm investigating, it matters. People deserve to know the truth."

"Even if the truth destroys someone you care about?"

"Especially then." But his voice lacked conviction.

Rose studied him for a long moment, then pulled him into a hug. "Be careful, Shane. And not just physically. Be careful with your heart."

"My heart's fine."

"Liar." But she said it with affection, pressing a kiss to his cheek before unlocking her rental car. “Come on, I’ll take you home.”

“Actually, I kind of need to clear my head. I’m going to take the bus.”

She looked at him for a long moment and then smiled, nodding. She always did understand him best, giving him space when he needed it.

"Call me if you need to talk. Anytime."

“Drive safe.”

Shane watched her drive away, then pulled out his phone. No messages. No missed calls. Just the usual work emails and group chat notifications.

His thumb hovered over the keyboard.

He wanted to text: *Did you see me tonight? Does it feel like agony for you, too? Did it hurt you the way it hurt me, seeing you in that box, so close but so far away?*

He didn't send any of the texts. Instead, he pocketed his phone and started walking toward the bus stop with the other fans, pulling his jacket tighter against the cold.

A black Mercedes SUV pulled out of the VIP parking area, headlights cutting through the darkness before turning in the opposite direction.

Shane didn't look back.

***

Ilya stood at the window of his penthouse, watching the city lights blur through the spring rain. His reflection in the glass looked like a stranger's, drawn, tired, and older than twenty-seven had any right to be.

Three months without Shane felt like walking through his life with a vital organ missing. He functioned. He worked. He made the necessary decisions and gave the necessary orders. But everything felt and tasted muted, colorless, like watching the world through dirty glass.

But he kept his promise. He let Shane go without following, without calling, without sending Dimitri or any of his men to watch over him. It had been the hardest thing Ilya had ever done, harder than his first kill, harder than facing his father's rage and disappointment, harder than any of the violence that shaped his life.

But he'd done it because Shane had asked. Because Shane deserved to make his own choices, to build his own life, to exist outside the shadow of Ilya's world.

Even if it meant Ilya had to watch from a distance, gathering scraps of information like a starving man hoarding crumbs.

Shane was still writing for the *Journal* and covering hockey. He was alive and safe and moving through the world without needing Ilya's protection.

But he was also still investigating the Rozanov Group.

Ilya knew about the research, the files Shane was building, the sources he was cultivating. He knew because it was his business to know, because the men who worked for him reported everything that might pose a threat.

Shane was a threat.

Not because Ilya feared prison or federal investigation, he had lawyers and accountants and carefully constructed escape plans. Shane was a threat because Ilya couldn't bring himself to stop him. He couldn't make the call that would end the investigation, silence the journalist, and eliminate the problem the way his father would have without hesitation.

You have made him your weakness, Katya had said three weeks ago, her voice carefully neutral. *That's dangerous.*

I know.

Then do something about it.

But Ilya didn’t move against Shane. He watched Shane from a distance, monitoring his movements, his research, his life, and did nothing to interfere.

Last night, seeing Shane on the Kiss Cam with that woman, Rose Landry, the beautiful, famous, someone from Shane's world who could give him a normal life, Ilya had felt something crack in his chest. The kiss had been brief, friendly, nothing romantic. But it was a reminder that Shane was building a life without him, that eventually, Shane would find someone else, someone safe, someone whose touch wasn't stained with blood.

He should want that for Shane. He *did* want that for Shane.

But the wanting felt like a part of him was dying.

His phone buzzed. His heart lurched, hoping that it was from Shane.

A text from Dimitri: *Situation at Troika. You need to come now. Car will be downstairs.*

Ilya read the message twice, dread settling in his stomach. *Situation* was code for violence, for territorial challenges, for the kind of problem that required his immediate attention.

He texted back: *On my way down. Call in reinforcements.*

Twenty minutes later, Dimitri pulled up to the club. The street was in chaos: police lights, ambulances, crowds behind barricades. Ilya's stomach turned.

"Volkov's men. They came in shooting, targeted the VIP section. Four are critical."

"Fucking Volkov." The name was poison in Ilya's mouth. Viktor Volkov, a lieutenant in a rival organization, had been pushing against Rozanov territory for months. This was an escalation, a direct challenge that couldn't be ignored.

"They're sending a message," Dimitri continued as they walked through the club. Inside was a scene of controlled chaos, Ilya's men securing the area, police taking statements, blood on the floor that made Ilya's hands shake with rage. "They want you to know they're not afraid anymore."

"Where is Katya?"

"Coordinating with our people. She's already identified the shooters."

“Good. Send our best and have the shooters eliminated. Tonight.”

“Yes, sir.”

I have blood on my hands, Shane.

He was in the secret back office, reviewing security footage, when Dimitri appeared in the doorway looking grim.

"We have a problem."

"Another one?"

"Shane Hollander was nearby when the shooting started. He's outside, being questioned by police."

“What the fuck was he doing?” Ilya's blood went cold. "Was he hurt?"

"No. He was coming out of that café down the street, he claims to have seen enough. Police are taking his statement."

“Fuck.”

Every instinct screamed at Ilya to go to him, to make sure he was safe, to pull him away from the police and the crime scene and everything dangerous. But he couldn't. Not without drawing attention, not without confirming suspicions, not without making Shane even more of a target than he already was.

"Make sure he gets home safely," Ilya said, voice carefully controlled. "Discreetly."

Dimitri nodded and disappeared.

Ilya watched the security footage again, tracking the shooters' movements, identifying patterns, and planning retribution against the Volkov family. But part of his mind was outside

with Shane, wondering what he'd seen, what he was thinking, and whether this would be the final piece that convinced him to publish his investigation.

His phone buzzed.

A text from his father: *I am coming to Ottawa tonight.*

Ilya closed his eyes, dread settling like lead in his stomach. Grigori coming to Ottawa meant one thing: Ilya had lost control of his territory, and his father was coming to take it back.

***

Shane watched the paramedics loading someone into an ambulance when Shane spotted Dimitri across the street. Their eyes met for a brief second before Dimitri looked away, melting back into the crowd.

The officer from Ottawa Police was asking him more questions when Dimitri reappeared, this time approaching the police line with the kind of confidence that suggested he belonged there.

"Mr. Hollander? I am supposed to make sure you get home safely."

The police officer frowned. "And you are?"

"Security for the establishment." Dimitri produced identification that the officer studied carefully before nodding.

"Mr. Hollander, you're free to go, but we may need to follow up with additional questions. Please stay in town for the next few days for the investigation."

"I will, thank you," Shane said, waiting until the officer moved away before turning to Dimitri. "What do you want?"

"I have instruction to take you home, Mr. Hollander."

Shane wanted to refuse, wanted to insist he could get home on his own. But Dimitri's expression was implacable, and Shane was still shaking, adrenaline making his legs unsteady.

"Okay."

Dimitri led him to a black Mercedes SUV parked a block away. Shane got in without protest, too tired to argue, too rattled to care about the implications.

They drove in silence for several minutes before Dimitri spoke. "You were not hurt?"

"No."

"Good."

More silence. The city passed by outside the window, familiar streets that suddenly felt foreign, dangerous.

"Does Ilya know I was there?"

Dimitri's eyes met his in the rearview mirror. "Yes."

"Is he..." Shane swallowed. "Is he okay?"

"He was not in the club."

That wasn't what Shane had asked, but it was all the answer he was going to get.

They pulled up outside Shane's building. Shane reached for the door handle, then stopped.

"Tell him..." Shane trailed off, not sure what he wanted to say.

Tell him he was sorry. Tell him that Shane loved him and hated him in equal measure. Tell him that he didn't know how to live with what he knew, and didn't know how to live without him.

"Tell him I'm glad he's safe," Shane said, finally.

Dimitri nodded once and Shane got out of the car.

Inside his apartment, Shane stood at the window, watching the Mercedes SUV pull away. His hands were still shaking. He'd been so close to making a decision to send the article, so ready to make the choice that would end everything.

Then gunfire. Violence. A reminder of exactly what Ilya's world looked like, what it cost and what it destroyed. Shane should feel *more* certain now; he should feel vindicated in his decision to walk away, relieved that he wasn't part of this anymore.

Instead, he felt terrified **for** Ilya in a way that made his chest ache.

He opened his laptop, staring at the article that had consumed his life for months. His finger hovered over the send button.

Do your job. Tell the truth.

But tonight, the truth felt less like illumination and more like a weapon he wasn't sure he could bring himself to use.

He closed the laptop without sending anything and curled up on his couch, pulling the soft couch blanket over him as he trembled.

***

Three days later, Shane came home from work to find his apartment door slightly ajar. His heart stopped. He stood in the hallway, every instinct screaming at him to run, to call the

police, to do anything except go inside.

But he went inside anyway.

The apartment had been professionally searched. Not trashed, nothing was broken, nothing was obviously disturbed. But Shane knew immediately that someone had been through everything. Drawers were opened, papers were shuffled, his personal laptop was gone from his desk.

His research that he had pinned on the walls, all of it was gone. It was done cleanly and methodically, not a single piece of tape was left.

Shane stood in the middle of his living room, stomach churning. His filing cabinet had been emptied. Every flash drive, every backup, every piece of documentation he'd spent months collecting, all fucking gone.

On his dining table, a single piece of paper with a message typed in clean, professional font:

DROP THE STORY. THIS IS YOUR ONLY WARNING.

Shane's hands shook as he picked up the paper. No signature. No attribution. Just a clear, unambiguous threat.

Ilya did this. He had broken into Shane's apartment and stolen his research.

That knowledge cut deeper than any physical violence could have. Three months ago, Ilya had promised he would never hurt Shane. He had looked him in the eyes and said *I will protect you as much as I can.*

Was this how he protected him? By stealing his work? By fucking threatening him?

Shane pulled out his phone with shaking hands. He should call the police and report the break-in, he should…His finger hovered over Ilya's contact, the one he'd never deleted, the one he looked at late at night when he couldn't sleep.

He pressed call.

The phone rang once, twice, three times.

"Shane." Ilya's voice was low, guarded. "Are you all right?"

"Did you do this?" Shane's voice cracked. "Did you break into my apartment and take my research?"

Silence on the other end. Long enough that Shane had his answer.

"I am trying to protect you –"

"Protect me?" Shane's voice rose. "You threatened me! That's not protection, Ilya, that's –"

"Shane, listen to me –"

"No!" Shane was pacing now, fury and hurt warring in his chest. "You promised. You said you'd let me go. You said you'd never hurt me. You said you understood!"

"I do understand. But you do not understand what you walked into. If you publish that story, if you draw attention –"

"Then what? You'll have me killed? Is that the next step?"

"Nyet!" The word was sharp, pained. "Never. I would never –" Ilya took a breath, and when he spoke again, his voice was controlled but barely. "My father is in Ottawa. He knows about you, about your investigation. I did not send anyone to your apartment. I did not take your research."

Shane stopped pacing. "Your father?"

"He arrived two days ago. The shooting at Troika was a territorial challenge and he came to...handle it." Ilya's voice was tight. "He knows about us. He has decided you are a problem that needs to be handled."

The words hung in the air, heavy with implication.

"Handled," Shane repeated, his mouth dry.

"I won't let him hurt you. But Shane, you need to drop this story. Not because of me, but because my father will not stop with a warning. He does not make threats, he makes examples."

Shane sat down hard on his couch, the reality of the situation crashing over him. "So what am I supposed to do? Just forget everything I know? Pretend I didn't spend months documenting criminal activity?"

"Yes." Ilya's voice was quiet, resigned. "If you want to stay alive, yes."

"And if I can't? If I can't just...forget?"

The silence stretched between them, heavy with everything they'd left unsaid three months ago.

"Then I can't protect you," Ilya said, finally. "Not from him. Not from this."

Shane closed his eyes. "I don't want your protection, Ilya. I never did. I just wanted –" His voice broke. "I just wanted you to be someone different. Someone I could love without destroying myself in the process."

"I know." Ilya's voice was raw. "I wanted that, too."

They stayed on the line, neither speaking, just breathing together across the distance that had grown between them.

"I need to see you," Ilya said, finally. "One more time. Please."

Shane should say no. He should hang up, change his number, and leave Ottawa entirely. Every rational part of him knew this was dangerous, that seeing Ilya again would only make everything harder.

"Okay," he whispered. "One more time."

***

Ilya arrived at Shane's apartment an hour later. Shane heard the knock and opened the door to find him standing there, looking more disheveled than Shane had ever seen him, his curly hair was messy, his black shirt was wrinkled, his eyes were shadowed with exhaustion.

They stared at each other for a long moment. Then Shane stepped back and Ilya came inside.

"Your father really took my research?"

"Yes. Without my knowledge or consent. I only found out this evening when Dimitri reported seeing unfamiliar vehicles near your building." Ilya ran a hand through his hair. "I am sorry, Shane. I promised I would let you go and then…"

"Then your world followed me anyway." Shane's voice was bitter. "Because that's what happens, isn't it? You can't escape this. I can't escape this. It's everywhere, touching everything, destroying everything."

"Yes."

The simple agreement cut deeper than any excuse would have.

"I finished the article. Before your father's men took it, I'd already emailed a copy to my personal account. I could still send it. I could still publish."

Ilya went very still. "And will you?"

"I don't know." Shane's voice cracked. "I've spent three months trying to figure out the right thing to do. The ethical thing. The thing that serves the public interest and upholds my professional integrity. And I still don't know."

Ilya moved closer and Shane's breath caught. They were standing inches apart now, close enough that Shane could smell his cologne, could see the faint stubble on his jaw, could feel the heat radiating from his body.

"I want you to have a choice," Ilya said, quietly. "You deserve that much. If you publish the article, I will not stop you. I will face the consequences. But Shane, you need to understand that those consequences will also include my father. And he will come for you."

"Even if you tell him not to?"

"Especially then. To punish me. He will see it as proof that I am weak, that I have been compromised. He will remove both of us from the equation." Ilya's hand came up, cupping Shane's face with a gentleness that made Shane's chest ache. "I can't save us both. Not from him. But I will do my duty and save you."

Shane leaned into the touch despite himself. "Is your duty also to marry Svetlana?"

Ilya's expression darkened. "Yes. To strengthen the alliance, produce heirs, and forget about you. He has already made arrangements. The wedding is supposed to happen in Moscow this summer."

"Are you going to do it?"

"I do not want to." Ilya's thumb brushed across Shane's cheekbone. "But if it keeps you safe –"

"Stop." Shane grabbed Ilya's wrist. "Stop making this about protecting me. I'm not some damsel in distress who needs saving. I'm a grown man who makes his own choices, and I chose to walk into your world with my eyes open."

"You did not know –"

"I knew enough." Shane's voice was fierce. "I knew you were dangerous. I knew your world was violent. I knew getting involved with you was the worst professional and personal decision I could make. I knew all of that and I fell in love with you anyway."

The words hung between them, finally spoken aloud after months of silence.

Ilya's expression cracked, all that careful control shattering. "Shane…"

"I love you." Shane said again, letting the words fill the space between them. "And I hate you a little bit, too. And I don't know how to live with either of those truths. I don't know how to publish a story that will destroy you. But I also don't know how to live with myself if I don't."

"Then don't." Ilya pulled him closer. "Don't publish it. Choose me. Choose us. We'll figure out the rest."

"The rest being your father? Being your secret side piece after you marry? The people you'll hurt protecting your territory?"

"Yes. All of it. We'll find a way –"

"No! There is no way!" Shane pushed back, putting distance between them even though it hurt. "That's the point, Ilya. There's no world where this works. Where I can love you and keep my integrity. Where you can be with me and fulfill your duties. Where we both get to be happy without someone getting hurt."

"I know." Ilya's voice broke. "I know. But I'm too selfish to let you go. I tried, Shane. For three months I tried to stay away, to let you build a life without me. And I can't. Watching

you on that Kiss Cam, seeing you with someone else, with **her**, knowing you were moving on, it broke something in me."

“Are you seriously jealous about Rose? You’re the one engaged to another woman!”

“Svetlana is my friend! We are both trapped! But you moved on fast, didn’t you!”

"Rose is my ex-wife."

Ilya blinked. "Your...you were married?"

"For about three years. We got divorced two years ago when I finally accepted that I'm gay." Shane managed a bitter laugh. "I never told you because it didn't seem relevant. Because we weren't supposed to be anything serious."

"I did not know."

"You…you didn’t check on me? Do a background check or something?"

"You never gave me a reason to suspect anything. Shane, I don't want you to be anything except exactly who you are."

"Even if who I am means I have to destroy you?"

"Even then."

They stared at each other, the weight of impossible choices crushing them both.

Then Shane moved first, closing the distance, pulling Ilya into a kiss that tasted like cigarette smoke and alcohol. Ilya responded immediately, hands tangling in Shane's hair, body pressing close, kissing him like he was drowning and Shane was air.

They broke apart, both breathing hard.

"I need you. Just…one more time," Shane whispered, pressing his forehead against Ilya’s. "Then we say goodbye for real."

"Shane…"

"Please. Just…let me have this. You. One more time."

Ilya searched his face, then nodded, and they came together again with desperate intensity.

Clothes disappeared in a trail to his bedroom. Ilya's hands were everywhere, relearning the geography of Shane's body with fingers that trembled. Shane arched into the touch, memorizing the feel of Ilya's skin, the taste of his mouth, the way he said Shane's name like a prayer and a curse. Shane’s hand hit the bedside table as he grabbed the lube and condoms, dropping them on the bed.

"*Ya tebya lyublyu*," Ilya whispered against Shane's throat. "*Ya tebya lyublyu, vozlyublennyy*."

Shane always knew what the words meant. *I love you. I love you, sweetheart.* Ilya had been saying it all along, in Russian, in the language of his heart where it was safe to speak truths too dangerous for English.

"I love you, too," Shane gasped as Ilya's lubed fingers found him, opened him, prepared him with a care that made tears prick at his eyes. "God, Ilya, I love you so much."

When Ilya finally pushed his cock inside him, they both went still for a moment, foreheads pressed together, breathing each other's air. This wasn't the wild, desperate fucking of their early days, or the playful intensity of their stolen nights together. This was something slower, deeper, and more devastating in its gentleness.

Ilya moved inside him with careful precision, each thrust hitting exactly right, wringing sounds from Shane that he couldn't control. His hands were everywhere, gripping Shane's hair, on his face, holding his hip, wrapping around his cock, touching him like he was trying to memorize every inch, every response, every way Shane came apart under his hands.

"Look at me," Ilya commanded softly, and Shane did, meeting those pale blue eyes that had haunted his dreams for months. "I want to see you."

Shane couldn't look away. He was pinned by more than just Ilya's body, pinned by the intensity of his gaze, by the raw emotion on his face, by the way Ilya was looking at him like he was something precious and breakable and worth destroying the world for.

"Ilya," Shane's voice cracked. "I'm close –"

"Come for me, *vozlyublennyy*. Let me see you."

The orgasm hit Shane like a wave, pleasure crashing through him so intensely that he couldn't breathe, couldn't think, couldn't do anything except feel. He came with Ilya's name on his lips, body clenching around him, and heard Ilya's answering groan as he followed Shane over the edge.

They collapsed together, sweaty and trembling. For a long moment, neither of them moved. Shane felt Ilya's heart hammering against his chest, felt his breath warm on his neck, felt the weight of him solid and real and present.

"Stay," Shane whispered. "Please. Just for tonight. Stay with me."

"Okay," Ilya said, kissing Shane’s neck. "Just for tonight."

Under the covers, Ilya pulled Shane against his chest, one arm wrapped protectively around him, the other hand stroking through his hair with a gentleness that made Shane's throat tight. Shane fell asleep in Ilya's arms, warm and safe and loved.

When he woke in the morning, Ilya was gone.

On the pillow beside him was a note in Ilya's neat handwriting:

Forgive me. My father is handling the Volkov situation today. I need to be there. I will protect you however I can. Whatever you decide, I will live with it. I love you. Always. Ilya

Shane stared at the note for a long time and then fell back against the pillows, fighting back the tightening of his throat.

Chapter 5: All In

Chapter Notes

> Author's Note 1: I feel like this story exists because one of the first scenes I wrote was between Ilya and his father Grigori. The scene went through so many changes and rewrites! I hope you have fun reading that scene. This was so much fun to write! Thank you all for reading it!
>
> Author's Note 2: I'm kind of sad that it's over and maybe it might be fun to visit the boys, over the years, to see what they're up to. There are so many future dramatic stories to tell: Svetlana is getting married, but it's in Moscow, can Ilya ever go back to Russia? If a former rival returns and hurts Shane, will Ilya go "John Wick" on them? Would Shane even want him to? Do David and Yuna finally get to be grandparents? I think Ilya would like a dog, but Shane doesn't.

Rock bottom didn't announce itself with sirens or spotlights. It arrived quietly, like the way oatmeal turned heavy in the bowl when it cooled, the way it sat in Shane's stomach after another sleepless night, the way his apartment felt too silent when he didn't fill it with hockey podcasts or the low murmur of news radio.

Shane used all of his saved vacation days and hid away in his apartment for almost two weeks. He wrote for hours until the words blurred together on his screen, then deleted entire paragraphs because they weren't sharp enough, weren't true enough, weren't *something* enough. Then he rewrote them again because doing nothing hurt worse than doing it badly.

He rebuilt the story from memory.

It was almost mechanical at first: property transactions, shell companies, numbered accounts, timelines stretching back years. All the invisible infrastructure beneath a city, turned inside out and laid bare on his laptop screen. The architecture of money laundering, written in careful, factual prose that would satisfy legal review and destroy lives.

Sometimes, he stopped mid-sentence, hands hovering over the keyboard, ambushed by sense memory. The smell of Ilya's cologne. The weight of his hand behind Shane’s neck. The way he said *vozlyublennyy* like it was a secret language only they spoke. Then the air would go thin in his chest, and he'd have to close his eyes and breathe through it.

He would keep typing, because if he didn't, he would start thinking. *Overthinking.* And that often led to remembering, and remembering led to the image of Ilya's face the last time they'd been together, the rawness in his expression when he'd whispered *I love you* in Russian like it was both confession and curse.

What he didn't rebuild was the most damaging information from the printed folders stolen from his apartment, the scribbled arrows and marginalia connecting names to places to dates, the messy, human part of journalism that lived in coffee stains and late-night revelations. Those were gone, taken by men who worked for Grigori Rozanov.

He would survive this.

He kept saying it until it almost sounded true.

***

On the other side of the city, Ilya's world was a series of fires he put out with gasoline.

There were meetings in windowless rooms that smelled of bleach and gun oil and barely suppressed violence. There were men who expected him to respond to blood with blood, who measured strength in bodies and territory, who thought him weak for hesitating even a moment before giving the order that would end someone's life.

There were spreadsheets, too. Financial skeletons of an empire built on fear and opportunity, numbers that needed scrubbing before they rotted the entire structure from within. Accountants with careful eyes and lawyers who spoke in euphemisms, all of them trying to make legitimate what had been born in the chaos of Soviet collapse.

And then there was Grigori.

His father had taken over the penthouse with the casual authority of a man who owned everything he touched. He held court from Ilya's own living room, surrounded by men whose loyalty ran deeper than blood, whose presence turned the space into something foreign and dangerous.

"Weakness invites attack," Grigori said, his Russian accent thick and deliberate. He stood at the windows overlooking the city, hands clasped behind his back. "You indulge yourself with distractions and the city notices. Rivals notice. *Police* notice."

Ilya stood near the kitchen, maintaining careful distance. "I'm handling the rivals."

"You are not handling *yourself*." Grigori turned, his pale blue eyes, so like Ilya's own, assessing him with the cold precision of a man who had built an empire on reading weakness. "The Volkov situation should have been resolved weeks ago. Instead, it escalates. Violence in the streets. Police investigations. *Journalists* asking questions."

The word hung in the air like an accusation.

"The journalist is not the problem," Ilya said, keeping his voice level.

"No." Grigori's mouth curved in something that wasn't quite a smile. "**You** are the problem."

That was the heart of it.

"Then why did you target him?" The question came out quieter than Ilya intended.

"You refused to do what needed to be done," Grigori said, simply. "So I did. The journalist was building a case that would have drawn federal attention. RCMP. FINTRAC. The kind of scrutiny that destroys decades of careful work. I handled the threat."

"He is not a threat. He is –" Ilya stopped himself.

"What? A lover?" Grigori's voice was flat, dismissive. "He was a distraction you indulged because you have forgotten what it means to be *Rozanov Bratva*. To be *Vory v Zakone*!"

"I have forgotten nothing." Ilya's hands curled into fists at his sides. "I have honored the Code and existed in the Zone since I was sixteen and you put a gun in my hand and told me to prove my loyalty."

"And you did." Grigori moved closer, each step deliberate. "You proved yourself again and again. You became what I needed you to be. Strong. Ruthless. Worthy of the Rozanov name." He paused in front of Ilya, close enough that Ilya could smell the expensive tobacco on his clothes. "And now you want to undo it all for a man who writes stories about hockey."

The contempt in his voice made Ilya's jaw tighten, but he kept tight control over his anger.

"Your feelings for that boy will fade in time," Grigori continued, staring at him. "You have forgotten how we survived. The compromises we made. The blood we shed. You think you can build something clean on a foundation of violence and pretend the past doesn't exist."

"No." Ilya met his father's eyes. "I remember everything. I remember hunger. I remember men with guns and rules written in chalk that washed away in the rain. I remember what you became to make sure we lived." His voice dropped. "I remember who **you** sacrificed for this life."

Grigori's expression flickered, just for a moment. The mention of Irina, of Ilya's mother, hung between them like a ghost neither of them could name.

"And now you want to throw it away," Grigori said, his voice hard again. “After such a sacrifice?”

"No." Ilya took a breath, straightening his shoulders. "I want to choose who I become next. I want to take the Rozanov Group in a different direction. Out of the shadows and into something that doesn't require men to disappear in alleys or innocent journalists to be threatened in their own homes."

"*Pffft!* You want legitimacy." The word was half-sneer, half-question.

"I want a life that doesn't end with me in prison or Shane dead in the street." Ilya's voice was steady now. "I want to build something that lasts longer than fear. That's not weakness, *Papa*. That's the only future that matters."

The silence between them felt like standing at the edge of a cliff.

"You are my son," Grigori said finally, each word hard-edged and deliberate. "You do not get to choose *light* without considering the men who built the ground you stand on. Without

honoring what we sacrificed to get here."

"I *am* your son," Ilya agreed and then reached up and unbuttoned the buttons of his black shirt, pulling the fabric aside to reveal the tattoos covering his chest. The two eight-pointed stars. The skulls. The cross bearing his mother's name. "I took these marks because I am your son. I earned every one of them with blood and obedience and years of my life I will never get back. I have stars on my knees to remind me to never kneel, not to authority, not to God, and not even to you, *Papa*."

He watched as Grigori's eyebrows flinched, his eyes focused on Ilya.

"But I am also my mother's son." Ilya's voice rasped solemnly, in the memory of a woman who had escaped the only way she knew how, worn down by the weight of being married to a man like Grigori. "And she would want me to choose something better than this. Something that doesn't destroy everyone I touch."

Grigori stared at him for a long moment. When he spoke, his voice was quieter, reverent. "She was too soft for this world. It killed her."

"No." Ilya's voice was firm. "You killed her. This life killed her. But I won't let it kill me, too."

He stood taller, meeting his father's pale gaze without flinching. He felt the change between them, from the way that his father leaned slightly away from him, the look of surprise on his face when he did it.

"You can give the American territories to Alexei. But I will run the Canadian operations," Ilya said, his voice taking on a confident and measured tone. "Better than anyone else you could send. I will stabilize Ottawa. I will clean the channels, make the businesses legitimate where they can be made so. I will increase profits through legal means and expand into markets that don't require violence to maintain." He paused. "And I will not give up Shane."

"Then you will live with the consequences," Grigori said, each word a warning.

"I have *always* lived with the consequences, *Papa*. Every day since I was sixteen." Ilya's voice was steady. "This time, I'm choosing which consequences to accept."

It wasn't quite defiance. It was something more complicated: acceptance spoken in a young man's voice that had learned to sound older than its years, weighted with violence and loss and a stubborn hope that something better might be possible.

For a long moment, father and son simply looked at each other across years of expectation and disappointment and the fragile, stubborn love that had been warped by circumstance but never quite broken.

Then Grigori stepped back. "I will return to Moscow tonight."

In his language, in the careful code they'd both learned to speak, it meant the conversation was not over, only postponed. It meant Ilya had bought himself time, but not complete

freedom. It meant his father would be watching, waiting to see if Ilya could actually build what he promised or if he would fail and prove Grigori right.

"I will send my monthly reports as usual," Ilya said, calmly.

"See that you do." Grigori moved toward the elevator, his guards falling into formation around him. At the doors, he paused. *"Ilyich."*

"Papa?"

"If you fail, if this experiment of yours costs us territory or money or respect, I will not be so understanding next time. Russia will be closed to you forever." Grigori's voice was almost gentle, which somehow made the threat more absolute. "And I will not protect your journalist from the consequences of your choices."

"Da, ya ponimayu, Papa."

"I hope you do, *moy malchik*."

The elevator doors closed, taking Grigori and his shadow of violence with him.

When they were gone, Ilya sagged against the kitchen counter, hands shaking with the adrenaline he'd been suppressing. He laughed once, a broken sound without humor, and pressed his palms against his wet eyes.

"Etot chertov biznes menya prosto ub'yet, chert voz'mi!" He cursed, rubbing a hand over his head and letting out a choked laugh.

***

Shane used the code Ilya had once given him, punched into the elevator panel while they'd been discussing Margaret Atwood and Russian literature and whether *The Handmaid's Tale* had a happy ending. The code still worked and the doors opened into Ilya's penthouse, the lights dimmed and quiet.

Ilya stood at the windows, silhouetted against the city lights. It made Shane remember that night at Club Troika, all those months ago, when he thought Ilya held himself like a Prince looking over his kingdom.

He was wearing just a pair of low slung black sweatpants. Shane couldn't help himself as he stared, his eyes following the lines of muscle across his back, the shape of his arms, the straight line of his spine, the perfect dip at the small of his back, his slim waist, and the roundness of his ass.

"You always come to me," Ilya said, stripped of the careful armor he wore for everyone else. He turned so that he faced Shane, letting him see Ilya as he was: exhausted, worried, burdened with his world.

"Yes," Shane replied, equally bare. "Where else would I want to go?"

They stood like that for a moment that felt like the whole story: what they'd been, what they were, what they might become if they stopped lying to themselves and each other.

“Did you want me to stay away?”

“I don’t ever want you to ever stay away.”

Shane crossed the wide living room slowly. “I’m sorry about what I said before, that I hated you a little. I don’t hate you at all.”

“I thought…" Ilya ran a hand through his curly hair, the careful control fracturing. "I thought losing me would be easier if you hated me. That if you published your story and I went to prison, at least you would be free of me."

"That's not how this works," Shane said, voice rough. "That's not how *love* works, Ilya. You don't get to make decisions for me. You don't get to martyr yourself because you think I deserve better."

"You *do* deserve better."

"Maybe." Shane closed the distance between them until they were standing close enough to touch. "But I don't want better. I want *you*. Complicated, dangerous, infuriating you. The man who makes me tea and argues with me about Dostoevsky and keeps trying to make his world a little less bloody, one corner at a time."

Ilya's breath caught. "Shane."

"I wrote the article and then I deleted it." The words came out rushed, like if Shane didn't say them quickly, he'd lose his nerve. "All of it. The research, the evidence, everything I spent months building. It's gone. No backup copies. Nothing is left."

Ilya went very still. "Why?"

"Because I don't want to destroy you." Shane's voice was steady now, certain. "Not because of what you could do to me. Not because I'm scared of your father or his threats. But because you asked me to choose you. I want a life where we figure out how to make this work, where you become the man I believe you can be and you really want to be, where we don't have to hide from each other or anyone."

"These are not small things to give up," Ilya said, quietly. "Your career, your integrity –"

"My integrity isn't in the story I publish," Shane interrupted, a small smile on his lips. "It's in the choices I make about who I want to be. And I don't want to be the person who ruins someone's chance at redemption just because I can. That's not journalism, Ilya. That's using you to get ahead in my career. That’s not the kind of man I want to be."

"And if I can't change? If I'm too damaged by what I've done, what my father made me into –"

"Then we'll figure it out together." Shane reached up, cupping Ilya's face in his hands. "But you don't get to decide that for me. You don't get to push me away because you think you're protecting me. I'm choosing you. I know what you've done. I know what you're capable of. And I'm still choosing you."

Ilya's composure shattered. He pulled Shane into a kiss that tasted like desperation and relief, like coming home after years of being lost. Shane kissed back with the same intensity, pouring months of loneliness and fear and stubborn, aching love into the contact.

When they broke apart, breathing hard, Ilya pressed his forehead against Shane's.

"I told my father I was going legitimate," he said, voice rough. "That I was going to clean up the businesses, walk away from the violence. That I wouldn't give you up, no matter what he threatened."

Shane's heart stuttered. "Holy shit, Ilya. What did he say?"

"That I would live with the consequences." Ilya's laugh was bitter. "He will give me time to prove myself. A few months, maybe a year. Then he'll expect results, profits through legitimate means. If I fail –"

"You won't." Shane said it with a certainty he didn't quite feel. "We won't."

"We?"

"You think I'm letting you do this alone?" Shane smiled, despite the fear curling in his stomach. "I'm a journalist, Ilya. I know how to research, how to find information, how to build a story. If you're serious about going legitimate, I can help. I want to be by your side."

Ilya stared at him like he was precious. "*Ya tebya lyublyu*. God, Shane, I love you so much."

"I love you, too." Shane kissed him again, softer this time. "So let's figure out how to build something that doesn't destroy us both."

“Okay,” Ilya said, his Russian accent rolling over the word. “I need something from you first.”

Shane nodded, his eyes widening. “Yes, anything.”

He watched as Ilya took a couple of steps back, hooking his thumbs into the waistband of his black sweatpants. The movement was unhurried, deliberate, as though he had all the time in the world to strip bare while Shane remained fully dressed in jeans and a t-shirt.

The sweatpants slid down Ilya's hips, revealing the thick muscles of his thighs, the sharp cut of his hip bones, and finally pooling at his feet. Ilya stepped out of them and stood completely naked in the low lamplight, utterly unself-conscious about his body or the ink that covered so much of it.

Shane's gaze traveled down, past the stars on Ilya's chest and the skulls on his ribs, following the path of dark hair that led downward until he reached Ilya's knees. The eight-pointed stars

there seemed to catch the light differently, darker and more stark against pale skin.

"You never explained those," Shane said, his voice rougher than he intended. "The ones on your knees."

Ilya glanced down at them, then back at Shane with an expression that was both serious and teasing.

"They mean I kneel for no one." He paused, the corner of his mouth quirking. "It is one of the most sacred marks in the *Bratva*. To kneel is to submit, to show weakness."

"And you never submit," Shane said, softly.

"Never." Ilya's smile widened slightly as he moved closer to Shane. "Except for you."

Before Shane could process what he meant, Ilya was sinking down onto his knees on the living room floor between Shane's legs, hands sliding up his thighs with confident possession. Shane's breath caught in his throat, the symbolism of it hitting him like a physical blow.

Ilya Rozanov, who wore permanent reminders that he bowed to no one, was on his knees for *him*.

"Ilya," Shane started, but the words died when Ilya's fingers found his belt buckle.

"Let me," Ilya murmured, already working Shane's jeans open with practiced efficiency. "I want to."

Shane stood still as Ilya tugged his jeans and briefs down just enough to free his already hardening cock. The air felt cool against his heated skin for only a moment before Ilya's warm hand wrapped around him, stroking once, twice, drawing him to full hardness.

"God," Shane breathed, watching Ilya's pale eyes darken with hunger.

Ilya didn't tease. He leaned forward and took Shane into his mouth in one smooth glide, lips sealing tight around him, tongue pressing along the underside. The wet heat was overwhelming, perfect, and Shane's hips jerked involuntarily at the sudden intensity of it.

"Oh fuck!" Shane's hands flew to Ilya's curly hair, fingers tangling in the soft strands but not pulling, just holding on as Ilya began to move his mouth.

There was nothing tentative about it. Ilya sucked him with the same focused intensity he brought to everything else, hollowing his cheeks and taking him deeper with each bob of his head. The obscene wet sounds filled the quiet room, mixing with Shane's ragged breathing and the low hum of pleasure Ilya made around his cock.

Shane had never been so turned on in his life. The visual alone was almost too much, Ilya on his knees on the hardwood floor of his own penthouse, naked and marked with violent history, those eight-pointed stars visible as he braced himself on Shane's thighs, choosing this moment of submission because he *wanted* to, because it meant something.

"Ilya, I'm –" Shane tried to warn him, but his voice broke on a moan as Ilya took him deeper, throat relaxing to accommodate him. "I'm not going to last – *fuckfuckfuckfuck* –"

Ilya didn't pull away. Instead, he pressed forward, nose brushing against the dark hair at his groin and *swallowed*.

Shane came with a choked cry, hips jerking as pleasure crashed through him in devastating waves. His legs shook and he held onto Ilya's strong shoulders, bent over him as he shuddered. Ilya stayed with him through it, swallowing around him, pulling every last pulse of release from his body until Shane was trembling and oversensitive and utterly wrecked.

When Ilya finally pulled off with a wet sound, he wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and looked up at Shane with dark satisfaction in his eyes.

"*Vkusno*," he said, voice rough. "Delicious."

Shane stared down at him, chest heaving, unable to form words. Ilya on his knees was the most erotic thing he'd ever seen, and the fact that Ilya had chosen it, had broken his own sacred rule for Shane, made something fierce and possessive unfurl in his chest.

"Come here," Shane finally managed, gently tugging on Ilya's arms as they both landed on the large sectional.

Ilya rose fluidly and settled over Shane, straddling his lap with easy grace. Shane pulled him into a kiss, tasting himself on Ilya's tongue, not caring about anything except the weight of him, the warmth of his skin, the way he smiled against Shane's mouth like he'd just won a prize.

"Thank you. I understand what that meant," Shane murmured against his lips.

"Yes," Ilya agreed, kissing him again. "Only for you, *vozlyublennyy*."

Shane blushed and smiled at the endearment. Ilya looked at him with a pleased expression on his handsome face, his hands stroking over Shane's head gently.

"*Ahhh*…there are the pretty freckles that I love."

"Shut up," Shane said without any heat. He rubbed his hands over Ilya's back. "Will you really be okay?"

"It will not be easy," Ilya said, resting his forehead against Shane's. "I will need to divest from anything questionable, even if it means taking on short-term losses. It will not make my father happy."

"What can you keep?" Shane said, his fingers moving over Ilya's shoulders and down his back to curl over his round ass.

"My accountants have been working on it. There are businesses we can salvage such as my restaurants, clubs, and real estate holdings. They can be cleaned up and restructured. And I made sure that my ownership of the Ottawa Senators was through clean money, so there will

not be any blowback on that. But the others…" He paused, exhaling deeply. "My other businesses make the majority of the profits. I will have to shut them down entirely."

"Can you sell them back to your father in a legitimate way?"

Ilya met his eyes and smiled. “I think you are a genius. Yes. I will discuss options with my accountants and lawyers.”

"And Svetlana?" Shane had to ask, had to know.

"I will not marry her." Ilya shifted so he could look at Shane directly, cupping his hand on the side of Shane’s neck, thumb caressing his jaw. "She is my friend, someone I've known since childhood. She doesn't want to marry me any more than I want to marry her. We were trapped by our fathers' expectations, but I'm not doing that anymore. I can't build something new if I'm still chained to the old ways."

Relief flooded through Shane, so intense it made him lightheaded. "Will she be okay with it?"

Ilya's hand found Shane's, their fingers lacing together. "Yes. She will understand and she will be relieved. She has her own life, her own career, in Boston. She doesn't need a husband from a criminal organization weighing her down."

"Will your father see that as some kind of betrayal? Hold it against you?"

"I am done living for his approval – for anyone’s approval. I am done being the son he wanted instead of the man I want to be."

They stayed curled on the couch in silence, processing the weight of what they were committing to. Outside the windows, Ottawa sparkled in the March darkness, indifferent to the lives being reshaped within her boundaries.

"I told my editors that I’m dropping the investigative research into the Rozanov Group.”

"Will it hurt your career?"

"Probably." Shane shrugged, trying for casualness and not succeeding. "I'll stay on the sports desk, cover what I'm good at, and build my reputation through other stories. Maybe someday, when you are completely legitimate, I'll write about that. Not as an exposé, but as a profile. The oligarch's son who chose redemption."

"That sounds boring, Hollander. No one will want to read that. It’s a fairy tale."

Shane smiled, running his fingers through Ilya’s hair. "But I've always liked fairy tales where the monster gets to become human."

***

Six months later, winter had made its usual return to Ottawa, transforming the city into something clean and cold and beautiful in its harshness. The past six months had been harder than either of them had anticipated.

Legitimacy, it turned out, wasn't a switch you flipped. It was paperwork and accountants with worried expressions and lawyers who spoke in carefully coded language about regulatory compliance and criminal liability. It was walking into back rooms that smelled of old violence and saying *no*, again and again, until the word stopped echoing with fear and started sounding like policy.

It was also, sometimes, two steps backward when a rival saw an opening or when someone from the Old Guard decided Ilya's reforms were a weakness to be exploited. But instead of picking up a gun, Ilya enjoyed siccing his team of mean and heartless lawyers at them.

But slowly, incrementally, things changed.

Profits dipped and Grigori made his displeasure known through terse phone calls that left Ilya shaking in Shane's arms. But the numbers slowly stabilized, then began to climb again, this time through legal channels that could withstand scrutiny.

Shane helped where he could, using his journalist's skills to research precedents, find examples of other organizations that had successfully transitioned from criminal enterprises to legitimate businesses. He introduced Ilya to consultants who specialized in corporate restructuring, to financial wizards who understood how to navigate the complicated transition from shadow economy to legitimate marketplace.

"How do you know such people?" Ilya said, his eyes narrowing suspiciously.

*Shane laughed. "My dad works for the Treasury Board of Canada. He knows **everyone**."*

"I think you should introduce me to your parents. I am your boyfriend."

"Boyfriend, huh?"

He kept writing, covering junior hockey and immigrant stories and small-town rinks that became community centers. He started expanding his interest in the Professional Women's Hockey League and pitched a weekly spotlight on the PWHL. He built his reputation on work that mattered, stories that gave voice to people who were rarely heard. Marcus had been disappointed when Shane dropped the Rozanov investigation, but he'd understood, or at least accepted, that some stories weren't worth the cost they demanded.

Catherine had been less understanding. She'd reassigned the investigation to another reporter, someone who spent months chasing leads that went nowhere because the evidence had been scrubbed clean by lawyers and accountants before the new reporter could access it. Eventually, the story died from lack of verifiable information, relegated to the same rumor-and-speculation file where so many organized crime stories ended up.

Shane told himself he didn't feel guilty.

***

It took him a while to understand that he and Ilya would never have an ordinary life. They fought sometimes, and Shane discovered that he kind of enjoyed it, verbally sparring with

Ilya, his book smarts going head-to-head with Ilya's street smarts. He suspected that Ilya enjoyed their fights, too. Shane remembered their first fight as boyfriends:

"Move in with me," Ilya said, setting down his wine glass with a definitive clink on the marble kitchen counter.

Shane looked up from his laptop, caught off guard by the sudden intensity in Ilya's voice. They'd been dating for four months, officially boyfriends for two, and the conversation had been inevitable. But the way Ilya said it felt less like a question and more like a decision already made.

"I want to," Shane said, carefully. "But I'm not sure about the penthouse."

"What is wrong with the penthouse?"

"Nothing's wrong with it." Shane closed his laptop, buying himself time. "It's just...intimidating. The whole top floor of a luxury building? Floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the entire city? That's not really my speed, Ilya."

"It has space. Privacy. Security."

"It also costs more per month than I make in six months." Shane ran a hand through his hair. "I want us to live together, but I want it to feel like ours. Not like I'm moving into your space, sleeping in your bed, using your things."

Ilya's expression tightened. "I bought this penthouse five years ago. There is no mortgage, no debt. The cost is irrelevant."

"It's relevant to me." Shane stood, needing to move. "I can't contribute equally here, Ilya. I can't pay half the utilities or maintenance fees or whatever it costs to live in a place like this. That matters."

"Why?" Ilya's voice rose slightly. "Why does it matter when I do not care about money? When I want you here, with me, and the cost means nothing?"

"Because I care!" Shane turned to face him. "Because I don't want to be the boyfriend who lives rent-free in a penthouse while you pay for everything. That's not a partnership, that's...that's something else."

"So you would rather live separately because of pride?" Ilya stood now too, frustration evident in every line of his body. "Rather than accept that I have resources and want to share them with you?"

"It's not pride, it's –" Shane stopped, trying to find the right words. "I need to feel like an equal in this relationship. And living here, in this space that screams wealth and power, it's a constant reminder that we're not equal. That you're Ilya Rozanov with your empire and your security and your billions, and I'm Shane Hollander who writes about hockey and takes the bus to work."

"I have never made you feel less than equal."

"I know you haven't. Not intentionally." Shane's voice softened at the startled look on Ilya's face. "But this place does it for you. Every time I walk in here, I'm reminded of the gap between our lives. And I don't want to live with that reminder every day."

They stared at each other across the living room, both frustrated, both right in their own ways.

"What do you want, then?" Ilya asked, his accent thickening with emotion. "To find apartment we can afford together? Split everything exactly in half like roommates?"

"Maybe. Yes. Something that feels like it belongs to both of us."

"This can belong to both of us."

"No, it can't." Shane said it gently, but firmly. "Because I didn't choose it. I didn't help build it. It's yours, Ilya, and it always will be."

Ilya moved closer, that dangerous grace in his movements that always made Shane's breath catch. "Then I will make it yours."

"That's not how this works –"

"I will put your name on the deed. Make it legally ours." Ilya was close enough now that Shane could smell his cologne. "Whatever you need to feel like this is your home, too."

"Ilya –"

"We can buy new furniture. Replace everything so it is what we choose together." His hand came up, cupping Shane's face. "Or paint the walls. Hang up your boring sports posters. Whatever makes you feel like you belong here."

Shane wanted to argue, wanted to explain why it wasn't that simple, but Ilya's thumb was stroking his cheekbone, and his body was close enough that Shane could feel the heat radiating from him.

"You're trying to seduce me into saying yes," Shane said, even as his pulse kicked up.

"Is it working?" Ilya's voice dropped lower, intimate. "Moy lyubov."

"No." But Shane's hands had found Ilya's waist without his permission.

Ilya leaned in, mouth brushing against Shane's jaw. "Pozhaluysta, vozlyublennyy." His lips traced down Shane's throat. "Please. I want to wake up with you every morning. I want your things mixed with mine. I want to come home and know you are already here."

"That's not fair," Shane breathed, tilting his head to give Ilya more access even as he tried to hold onto his argument. "Using your mouth and your Russian against me."

"I use every advantage I have." Ilya's teeth grazed Shane's pulse point. "Say yes."

Shane's hands tightened on Ilya's hips, and for a moment he considered just giving in because being this close to Ilya made it hard to remember why he was fighting. Then he stepped back, putting distance between them even though it physically hurt.

"No," he said, firmly. "My answer is still no."

Ilya's expression shifted from seductive to shocked. "Shane!"

"I love that you want me here. I love that you're willing to compromise." Shane's voice was steady despite his racing heart. "But I need you to hear what I'm actually saying. This isn't about the penthouse specifically. It's about needing to feel like an equal partner in our relationship, and I can't feel that way living in a space that constantly reminds me of the power imbalance between us."

"There is no power imbalance."

"Yes, there is." Shane said it without heat, just the truth. "You have money, connections, security, an entire organization. I have a journalism degree and a bus pass. And that's fine, Ilya. I'm not ashamed of who I am. But I need our home to be something we build together from equal ground, not something you provide for me."

Ilya ran both hands through his hair, frustration and confusion warring on his face. "I do not understand. You want to live with me, but not here. You want us to be partners, but you do not want me to share what I have. What am I supposed to do?"

"Find a place together," Shane said, simply. "Not your penthouse or my cramped apartment. Something new that we both choose. That we both have a say in. Where I can contribute to the rent or mortgage, even if it's not half, even if the split isn't perfectly equal. Just...something that doesn't make me feel like I'm living in your space by your generosity."

The silence stretched between them, tense and uncertain.

"This is stupid," Ilya said, snorting. "We both want same thing. We are fighting because we want it in different ways."

"Yeah," Shane agreed, feeling the ridiculousness of it settle over them. "We're being pretty stupid."

"I am Russian. I am allowed to be stupid about love." Ilya's mouth quirked. "What is your excuse?"

"I'm in love with a Russian. That makes me stupid by association."

They looked at each other, and despite everything, Shane felt laughter bubbling up in his chest. Ilya cracked first, a small huff of amusement that turned into a real laugh, and then they were both laughing, the tension breaking like a fever.

"We are very bad at this," Ilya said, moving closer again, this time without the seductive intent. "At being boyfriends."

"We're learning." Shane let himself be pulled into Ilya's arms. "That's what fighting is, right? Learning how to disagree without destroying each other."

"I do not like disagreeing with you."

"I don't like it either." Shane pressed his face into Ilya's shoulder. "But I'd rather fight with you and find a real solution than just give in because it's easier."

Ilya's arms tightened around him. "So we look for a place together. Something new."

"Yeah."

"And you will let me pay more because I have more?"

"I'll let you contribute proportionally to our incomes," Shane said, smiling at him. "Which, yes, means you'll pay more. But I get to pay my share, too."

"This is compromise?"

"This is partnership."

Ilya pulled back enough to kiss him, soft and sweet and free of the earlier seduction. "Okay. We find a place together. As partners."

"Thank you," Shane murmured against his lips.

"But when we are old and settled and have been together for many decades," Ilya said, his eyes gleaming with mischief. "I am going to remind you that you made us apartment-hunt instead of just moving into a perfectly good penthouse."

"When we're old and settled, you can say 'I told you so' as much as you want."

"I will hold you to that, vozlyublennyy."

They stood like that for a while, holding each other in the penthouse that Shane wouldn't be moving into, learning how to fight and make up and build something neither of them had quite figured out yet.

***

The townhouse on Pentry Lane wasn't what Shane had imagined when they'd started house-hunting, but the moment they'd walked through the door, something had clicked into place. It was tucked on a quiet cul-de-sac in Old Ottawa South, close enough to the Rideau River that Shane could hear water when the windows were open, far enough from Bank Street's bustle that their mornings felt peaceful rather than hurried.

The pale hardwood floors creaked in a way that felt lived-in rather than worn, and the open-concept main floor meant Shane could write at the kitchen table while Ilya cooked, their conversations flowing easily across the space. The working fireplace became their anchor point on cold nights – Ilya had strong opinions about proper fire-building technique, learned

from childhood winters in Moscow, and Shane had learned to let him fuss over the logs while pretending not to find it endearing. Upstairs, four bedrooms gave them more space than two people needed: one that was their private sanctuary, one for Shane's office where his research materials finally had room to spread out, one for Ilya's private workspace where he took calls Shane didn't need to hear, and one as a guest room for family and friends.

Saturday mornings, Shane made coffee while Ilya read Russian news on his tablet, both of them comfortable in silence. Evenings, they walked along the river path, sometimes talking through Ilya's business challenges or Shane's latest article, sometimes just existing side by side while the city moved around them.

Dimitri showed up occasionally, a quiet presence that reminded them both that Ilya's past wasn't entirely past, but increasingly those visits were social rather than security-related, cups of tea shared at the kitchen table instead of terse updates delivered in hallways.

They hosted Rose when she was in town and Shane kind of regretted introducing Rose to Ilya. They clamped onto each other immediately, and Shane had to deal with his jealousy. He was actually glad when Katya came by, especially with *pierogies*, and gave them unsolicited relationship advice that made Ilya roll his eyes and Shane laugh.

Most surprising of all, Shane's parents, Yuna and David, took to Ilya and basically adopted him from their first meeting.

"I think it would be nice if you had a summer wedding," David said, kindly.

Shane coughed out a laugh. "Dad, we've only been dating for…uhhh…six months?"

He wasn't even sure how to calculate how long they were together. Did he count the time before the break up? Or did he count the time when they officially became boyfriends –

"Over a year," Ilya said, confidently. He winked at Shane unabashedly. "And I think summer weddings are beautiful."

"How do you feel about adopting, Ilya?" Yuna said, her lips curving into a wide smile.

"Jesus Christ, I'm going to have a panic attack," Shane muttered, feeling his face flush.

Ilya rubbed the back of his neck and just laughed softly against his ear, kissing his cheek. "Look at those freckles."

Shane glanced up at his parents to see them grinning fondly. "All three of you are the worst."

***

Shane stood at the kitchen counter, laptop open to a news article about a new Rozanov Group acquisition. His coffee had gone cold an hour ago, but he kept gripping the mug like it might anchor him.

"You said you were going legitimate," he said when Ilya walked in from his morning run, still breathing hard, sweat dampening his gray t-shirt.

Ilya glanced at Shane's face and sighed. "I am going legitimate."

"Then explain this." Shane turned the laptop around. "You just bought a restaurant in Hull. The previous owner is under investigation for labor violations and possible trafficking connections."

"Which is why I bought it." Ilya grabbed a water bottle from the fridge, twisting it open. "The staff were being exploited. Underpaid. Some without proper documentation, which made them vulnerable. Now they work for me, with proper contracts and legal protections."

"And you don't see how that looks?" Shane's voice rose slightly. "How buying a business with that kind of history undermines everything you're trying to build?"

"I see how it looks to someone reading a headline." Ilya's tone was measured, patient in a way that made Shane's jaw tighten. "But the reality is more complicated. Those workers needed help immediately. If I had waited for some perfect, clean acquisition that wouldn't raise questions, they would have suffered for months more."

"There are other ways to help people without –" Shane stopped, running a hand through his hair. "You could have reported the violations and let the authorities handle it."

"And then what?" Ilya set down his water bottle, crossing his arms. "The restaurant closes. The workers lose their jobs and possibly get deported because their immigration status is questioned. The owner declares bankruptcy and walks away. Is that justice?"

"That's how the system works, Ilya."

"The system is broken." Ilya's voice stayed calm, but there was steel underneath. "You know this. You have written about it. About how vulnerable people fall through cracks, how enforcement is inconsistent, how the people with the least power suffer the most."

Shane closed the laptop, frustrated because Ilya wasn't wrong, but he also wasn't entirely right. "I know you want to help. But every time you step in like this, every time you use your money and influence to solve problems outside legal channels, you reinforce the idea that you're above the law. That the rules don't apply to you."

"I am not above the law. I am working within it, just from a different angle than you would prefer." Ilya moved closer, leaning against the counter. "Tell me, what would you have done? If you knew people were being exploited, if you had the resources to change their situation immediately, would you have chosen bureaucracy over action?"

"That's not fair."

"Why not? Because it exposes that your principles are easier to maintain when you are not the one responsible for making difficult choices?"

Shane felt the hit of that, the accuracy of it. "My principles aren't the problem here. The problem is that you can't build a legitimate business on a foundation of morally gray decisions. Eventually, someone will look at the pattern and see what I see, that you're still operating like you did before, just with better PR."

"And what do you see?" Ilya's voice was quiet now, hurt.

Shane met his eyes. "I see someone trying to do the right thing but who can't quite let go of the old methods. Someone who wants legitimacy but also wants control. And I'm scared that you can't have both, Ilya. Eventually, you'll have to choose."

The silence stretched between them, heavy with things neither wanted to say.

"I am choosing," Ilya said, finally. "Every day. But my choices are not going to look like yours, Shane. I did not grow up with the luxury of believing systems work. I grew up knowing they fail, that people with power exploit those without it, that sometimes the only way to help is to step outside comfortable boundaries."

"I know that. I do." Shane's voice softened. "But I'm asking you to consider that even good intentions can create patterns that look like something else. That perception matters when you're trying to build trust."

Ilya was quiet for a long moment, then nodded slowly. "I will think about it. About how things appear, not just how they are. But I need you to trust that I am trying. That every decision I make, I am weighing what is right against what is effective. It is not always clear which should win."

"I know you're trying," Shane said, nodding.

Ilya moved around the counter and pulled Shane into a hug. Shane resisted for a moment, still frustrated, then let himself sink into it.

"We are good at this," Ilya murmured against his hair. "At making each other angry."

Shane laughed despite himself. "Yeah. We really are."

“Do you want to fuck now? I have heard sex after a fight is hot.”

“Want to fool around in the shower?”

Ilya smiled. “Yes.”

***

The kitchen smelled of sautéed garlic and fresh bread. Ilya was in the kitchen, doing something elaborate with mushrooms and pasta while Shane finished his article. Music played low from the speakers, something instrumental and Russian that Ilya claimed helped him think.

"Don't burn those.”

"I do not burn mushrooms," Ilya said, mock-offended. "I am not a monster."

Shane smiled, pulling off his reading glasses. "Debatable."

The domesticity of it still caught Shane off guard sometimes, the simple reality of sharing a life with someone who'd once seemed impossibly distant and dangerous.

Ilya glanced up, caught him staring, and smiled. The expression transformed his face, made him look younger, lighter, like the man he might have been if different choices had been made for him when he was sixteen.

"Dinner is almost ready," Ilya said, wiping his hands on a towel. Then he paused, reaching into his pocket. "But first, I have something for you."

He held out his hand, palm up, revealing a thick metal fob. It was a set of modern looking keys attached to a worn leather tag that looked like it had been carried for years.

Shane's heart kicked. "What's this?"

"The keys to my cottage," Ilya said, voice careful but his pale blue eyes warm. "On Lake Muskoka. I had it built five years ago for myself. Before my father sent me here to manage the North American operations." He pressed the keys into Shane's hand. "I want you to have a set. It's private. No cameras. No security team. No cell service unless you climb the hill behind the house and wave your phone at a particular tree."

"That sounds very romantic," Shane said, smiling despite the tightness in his throat.

"It is not –" Ilya paused, searching for words. "It is not a proposal. Not yet. But it is...a sanctuary. For when the world is too loud, when we need to remember why we are together. I have never invited anyone to my cottage. But I always dreamed that it would be a special place to go with someone that I loved. I would like for it to be a place that's ours."

Shane closed his fingers around the keys, the metal warm from being in Ilya’s pocket. He imagined quiet mornings with snow on a deck, Ilya in wool sweaters he'd pretend not to enjoy wearing, the kind of silence that wasn't empty but full of possibility.

He also imagined the reality they couldn't escape: the phone calls that would come eventually, the threats that would resurface, the violence that still lived at the edges of Ilya's world even as he tried to push it back. The constant balancing act between who Ilya was trying to become and who he'd been forced to be.

"Okay," Shane said softly, stepping closer to press a kiss to Ilya's jaw. "Let's go to the cottage."

"Tomorrow?" Ilya asked, hope flickering across his face like sunlight through leaves.

"Tomorrow," Shane agreed. "After lunch. After we make a packing list and get groceries. After you promise me you're not bringing work with you."

"I promise nothing," Ilya said, but he was smiling. "Maybe a *little* work. Between all the sex we will have, yes?"

"Ilya."

"Fine. No work. Only us." He pulled Shane closer, wrapping his arms around him. "*Vozlyublennyy*."

They stood like that for a while, holding each other in the kitchen while dinner finished cooking. The future was still uncertain, still dangerous in ways they couldn't fully predict. Grigori was in Moscow, watching and expecting results that would justify his son's unusual choices. The past still left scars that ached in cold weather.

But there was also this: warmth and safety and the stubborn belief that love could survive in the spaces between violence and hope. That transformation was possible, even for people who'd been marked by blood and bound by loyalty to things that should have destroyed them.

"Do you ever regret it?" Shane asked, softly. "Choosing this life instead of the one your father wanted for you?"

Ilya was quiet for a long moment, thinking.

"Sometimes," he admitted, exhaling softly. "When things are difficult, when I question whether I'm strong enough to maintain this course. But then I look at you and I know I made the right choice. Even if it's the harder one."

"It won't always be this hard," Shane said, though he wasn't sure he believed it.

"No?" Ilya's voice was gently teasing. "You think we will wake up one day and everything will be okay?"

"No. But maybe we'll wake up one day and realize we've built something that we love because we didn’t give up. And because it was the harder choice, that’s what made it extraordinary." Shane turned in Ilya's arms, meeting his pale blue eyes. "Because you chose something better."

Ilya kissed him, slow and deep and full of promise. When they broke apart, he rested his forehead against Shane's.

"I think my mother would have loved you. As I love you."

The End.

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