

Protected Person

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Protected Person

by [chinesebakery](#)

Summary

Shane finds out on Twitter.

Not from a lawyer or a teammate or even one of the journalists who've been calling nonstop since the FanMail video went viral. He finds out at 6:47 am, still in bed, that Russia is coming for Ilya. Propaganda charges. Passport revocation. Return to the Russian Federation required.

What follows is weeks of watching everything fall apart. Ilya's career. Their safety. The system that was supposed to protect them. Shane keeps playing while Ilya can't. The lawyers file paperwork and say to wait. Montreal demands silence.

Shane faces a choice: keep his head down and trust the process, or burn down his career and force the world to pay attention.

He chooses fire.

Notes

Me: Two WIPs. That's the hard line.

Also me: Forgoes sleep, slacks off work, neglects all commitments in favor of starting a third one because my stupid brain won't let me think or do *anything* else, goddamnit.

I'm not a lawyer and Crazy Ex-Girlfriend taught me it really, really sucks. The legal info in this story is only as accurate as my search history led me to believe. Please take this with a ladle of salt.

~~No beta. I'll just drive myself insane for shits and giggles hahahaha this is fine.~~ Nevermind that.

Massive thanks to **Frankie** for her *excellent* beta-reading! Much appreciated.

Chapter 1

A week after Shane and Ilya stormed out of Commissioner Crowell's office, in the aftermath of their accidental outing, Russia made its move. He'd been so consumed by damage control, PR statements, lawyer meetings, trying to mend bridges with his teammates, he hadn't realized this was a real, immediate threat. And if Ilya knew, he hadn't said a word.

Shane found out on Twitter.

Not from Ilya's lawyer or the league. Not even from one of the journalists who'd been calling nonstop since the FanMail video went viral. He found out at 6:47 am, doomscrolling in bed while Ilya slept beside him and Anya snored at their feet.

BREAKING: Russian authorities announce administrative case against Ottawa Centaurs captain Ilya Rozanov under Article 6.21 of the Code of Administrative Offenses. Passport revocation pending.

Everything in him went cold and still. With a white-knuckled grip, he skimmed through the article twice, hoping he'd misunderstood. Checked the source: Globe and Mail. Not satire.

Administrative case. Propaganda law. Passport revocation. Individually, he understood each word. Strung together, they meant nothing.

"Hey." His heart was pounding in his ears. "Ilya, wake up."

Ilya stirred, one arm still draped around Shane's waist. "Shh. Is too early."

"You need to see this." He shakily held out his phone.

Ilya registered the panic in Shane's voice and quickly sat up and began reading. Shane watched his face, searching for fear or anger. Instead, Ilya's expression went blank.

"Okay," he said quietly.

"Okay? That's it?" Panic edged in, sharp and insistent. Shane stood and began pacing while Anya watched and whined from the bed. "What does that even mean? Passport revocation?"

Ilya sat up. The careful neutrality on his face solidified further. "They take passport. I cannot travel. Cannot get new one."

Deportation. The word crashed into Shane's consciousness and wouldn't leave. They could send Ilya back. Back to Russia. Back to face charges, prison, god knew what else. All while Shane was stuck in Canada, completely useless to him.

"Can they..." Shane couldn't finish the question.

"Deport me?" Ilya's voice was calm. Too calm. "I don't know."

Shane's phone buzzed. Then again. And again. His agent, Montreal's GM, his mother, their publicist, three journalists, a Toronto number he didn't recognize. Within minutes, both phones were vibrating nonstop.

"Right. We need to call your lawyer," Shane said, already pulling up the contact. "Right now."

"Shane." Ilya groaned. "Is 7 in the morning."

"So?"

Ilya's hand covered his. He watched Shane with resignation. It was as if he'd been waiting for this, and Shane was just now catching up.

"Coffee first." Ilya scrubbed a hand over his face and sighed. "Then lawyers."

The law office was in downtown Ottawa, all glass and steel and uncomfortable modern furniture. Every angle felt too sharp with fluorescent lighting that was too harsh. Shane had been here once before, when they'd set up the legal structure for the Irina Foundation. That visit had been routine. Boring, even.

This meeting was *very* different.

"Article 6.21," Paula Bunch said, sliding a printed document across the conference table, "is Russia's federal law against propaganda of nontraditional sexual relations. The administrative code allows for fines, but in cases involving public figures... The consequences can be more severe."

"Like passport revocation," Shane said.

"Like passport revocation," she confirmed. "Which has already happened."

Ilya sat beside him, staring at his folded hands. He'd barely spoken since they arrived. Shane wanted to reach for his hand, but he wasn't sure whether that would help or only serve to convey his own anxiety.

"So what do we do?" Shane asked.

Paula's colleague, Darryl Plimsen, who'd joined them via video call from the firm's Toronto office, leaned forward on screen.

"First, the good news," Darryl said. "Canada will not deport you to Russia. Full stop. That's not happening."

Suddenly, he could breathe again. "Okay. Good."

"However," Paula continued, "your current work visa is tied to your Russian passport. Without a valid passport, the visa becomes... problematic."

"Problematic how?" Ilya asked. His first words in ten minutes.

"It means IRCC –that's Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada– may require you to regularize your status. We'll need to file a claim for protected person status immediately."

Shane's phone buzzed against the table. Montreal's GM, fourth time. He silenced it.

"Protected person status," Ilya repeated slowly, his blank expression deepening into a frown. "Like refugee?"

"It's similar." Darryl nodded. "You'd be claiming that returning to Russia would put you at risk of persecution based on sexual orientation. Which, given these charges, is clearly the case."

"And once he has that status?" Shane asked. "He can keep playing?"

"It's not automatic," Paula said prudently. "There's a process. Applications, hearings, processing times. In the interim, we'll apply for a temporary work permit, but..."

"But it might not be approved," Darryl finished. "IRCC can be... cautious, with high-profile cases."

The air felt thin suddenly, like they'd climbed too high too fast. Shane's lungs worked but nothing was getting through.

"How long?" Ilya asked.

"For the protected person claim? Four to six months for a hearing. Temporary work permit could be a few weeks, or it could be..."

"Months," Shane finished flatly.

Paula's expression was sympathetic. "We'll do everything we can to expedite. But yes, potentially months."

"And if we got married?" Shane said suddenly. "Like, today?"

It felt wrong to reduce what should be a celebration into administrative currency, but they needed every advantage they could get. Besides, they could always hold a real ceremony later. Something that was theirs, not the government's.

Ilya's head snapped up. "Oh, so we get married and paperwork for residency will magically be filed and completed?" His voice was sharp, brittle. "I don't think so."

Shane was thrown by the anger in Ilya's tone. "I'm just trying to..."

"I know what you are trying to do." Ilya's gaze dropped back to his folded hands, but his jaw was tighter, and spots of color now darkened his cheeks.

"I'm afraid that wouldn't solve the immediate problem," Paula said gently, cutting through the tension. "Spousal sponsorship in Canada takes at least a year to process. Ilya would still need valid status while the application is pending, and without a passport, his current work permit..."

"...is tied to documentation he no longer has," Darryl finished. "Plus, IRCC would scrutinize the timing very closely. A marriage immediately after these charges surface could actually harm Ilya's case rather than help it."

Shane's stomach dropped lower still. He'd been ready to turn anything, even their *wedding*, into an immigration strategy, and it still wasn't enough. Nothing he could offer would be enough.

"I know you want to fix this, Shane," Paula's tone was kind and placating. "But the protected person route is faster and more appropriate given the circumstances. Right now, we need to focus on the persecution claim."

Shane's phone lit up again. A text from Montreal's head coach. *"Need to talk. Today."*

Fuck Theriault for pretending Shane didn't have more pressing matters than hockey. Fuck all of them.

"There's one more thing," Darryl said, and Shane really, really hated his tone. "The league may have concerns about Ilya playing while his immigration status is pending. They'll want to avoid any appearance of..."

"Of what?" Shane's tone came out sharper than he intended. "Employing someone Russia doesn't like?"

"Of legal liability," Darryl said evenly. "If Ilya's work authorization lapses, even temporarily, the team and the league could face significant penalties."

Ilya stood abruptly, his chair scraping back with a rasp. Everyone looked at him.

"Excuse me," he said, and walked out of the conference room.

Shane started to follow, but Ilya turned and held up his hand. "I just need a minute."

The conference door shut softly behind him, and the silence pressed in.

"He shouldn't be alone right now. I should probably..." he said to no one in particular.

"Let him process," Paula said gently. "This is a lot."

Shane sank back into his chair. Through the glass wall, he could see Ilya in the hallway, phone to his ear. Probably calling Svetlana, or maybe his therapist.

"What are his chances?" Shane asked quietly. "Really."

Both lawyers looked hesitant to answer. Then Paula said, "Honestly? The protected person claim should succeed. The propaganda charges make a strong case for persecution. But the timing, the work permit complications, the league's reaction..." She spread her hands. "There are a lot of variables we can't control."

"So we just wait."

"We file the paperwork, we make our arguments, and yes, we wait."

Shane's phone buzzed again. Montreal. Always Montreal.

"One more thing," he said. "The press is already running with this. What do we tell them?"

"Nothing," Darryl said immediately. "Let us handle all public statements through your publicist. Any comment you make could affect Ilya's case."

"Montreal's going to want a statement from me."

"Then you refer them to us. They can call me directly. But you both need to be very cautious right now. The league will be watching how you handle this."

Like he gave a fuck what the league wanted. Crowell could go to hell. But Ilya couldn't afford for Shane to make this worse.

"Okay," Shane said. "I'll be careful."

Through the glass, he watched Ilya end his call and lean against the wall, eyes closed. He looked so utterly untethered, it broke Shane's fucking heart.

The apartment was silent except for Anya's soft snoring from her fluffy carpet and the quiet crackling of the fireplace. Shane sat on the couch with Ilya's head resting on his lap, neither of them speaking as they watched the flames.

They'd made it through the rest of the lawyer meeting, the drive home, and too many missed calls and unread text messages. Somehow, it was Shane's conversation with his mother that had disturbed him the most. It was the first time he'd heard her sound so helpless. If even Yuna Hollander was at a loss for what to do, they were in even deeper shit than he'd previously thought.

"Sveta is scared," Ilya said finally.

"Of course she is."

"She wants me to be careful. To not... not make things worse."

"You haven't done anything wrong in the first place."

"I know. But Russia does not care about that. They care about example." Ilya's tone was flat. Matter-of-fact. "I am example now. What happens when you are queer and public."

"Nothing's going to happen to you. The lawyers said—"

"Lawyers said maybe I cannot work. Maybe I cannot play. Maybe I wait months!" The frustration bled through before Ilya caught himself, forcing his voice back down into something measured and controlled. "Maybe the league decides I am too much trouble."

"They won't do that. Wiebe's on your side."

"Ottawa is one team. League is bigger."

Shane's phone buzzed. He'd been ignoring it for an hour, but this time he looked. Theriault again. *"9 am tomorrow. My office. Non-negotiable."*

"Montreal wants to meet tomorrow morning."

"What will you say?"

"I don't know. What can I say? That my boyfriend's being persecuted by his home country and I'm going to focus on hockey like none of this matters?"

He had to concentrate just to keep his knee from jittering under Ilya's head. The effort of staying still felt enormous.

"Shane." Ilya looked up, catching his gaze. "You need to be careful. Don't make the league think you are problem too."

"I need to be there for you."

"You are here." Ilya squeezed his knee. "That is enough."

It wasn't. Shane wanted to fix this, wanted to call every contact he had, to hold a press conference and dare Russia to come and get Ilya over his dead fucking body. All things Paula would absolutely not approve of.

The league will be watching.

"I hate this," Shane said.

"I know."

"I hate that you're going through this and I can't—" His voice cracked. He pressed his palms against his eyes. "Fuck."

Ilya didn't respond. A few moments later, he shifted in Shane's lap and reached for Shane's belt.

"What are you doing?" Shane's voice came out strangled. "You can't seriously be thinking—"

"You're too stressed," Ilya said, working his way into his fly. "You'll give yourself high blood pressure."

"You can't *give yourself* high blood pressure."

"Other people, maybe. But you?"

"*Ilya*," he said more forcibly. "I don't need you to distract me. I want..." For the first time since the morning, Shane's frustration and dread were giving way to intense sadness. His eyes were welling up and he didn't think he could hold himself together much longer. "Can you just..." The words stuck. "I need you."

Ilya's arms came around him and held on tight. "Is okay," he murmured, tracing circles on Shane's back. "We will be okay."

"You don't know that."

"No," Ilya admitted. "But I have good lawyers. I have you. And a team that supports me. Is a lot more than I had before."

Shane wanted to believe it, too. That Canada's laws and processes would protect them. That the lawyers' confidence wasn't misplaced, that this would all resolve itself in a few days and they could get back to normal. To playing hockey and just... being together. God, could they had just one fucking minute of peace?

His phone buzzed one more time. He didn't look.

Outside, the cold March evening had turned to night. In Russia, morning was breaking. And somewhere, in some random bureaucratic office in Moscow, people were deciding Ilya's fate.

The email arrived the next day at 11:47 am.

Ilya had barely slept. He'd spent the night staring at the ceiling, brain spiraling, each possibility worse than the last. Shane had gotten up early to drive back to Montreal in time for his meeting with Theriault. After he left, the silence had quickly become unbearable. Ilya spent the morning in the team gym. His body needed something to do, even if his mind wouldn't quiet.

Until his phone buzzed.

The subject line was in Russian: OFFICIAL NOTIFICATION - ADMINISTRATIVE CASE NO. 6.21-047839

The document was a PDF. Official seal of the Russian Federation at the top. Dense blocks of Cyrillic text. Ilya's eyes caught on familiar words. *Propaganda. Public dissemination. Administrative violation. Passport invalidation.*

He read it again, slower the second time, making sure he understood every word.

Public promotion of non-traditional sexual relations. Violation of Article 6.21, Code of Administrative Offenses of the Russian Federation.

The penalty section was brief: fine of 100,000 rubles, passport revoked effective immediately, return to Russian Federation required for administrative hearing.

Return to Russian Federation. An invisible noose was tightening around his neck, blocking his airway. Ilya set his phone down on the bench. Picked it up again. The email was still there.

"Rozanov!" Coach Wiebe's baritone echoed across the gym. "You good?"

Ilya looked up. Wiebe was standing in the doorway, a deep frown etched on his face. The man was annoyingly perceptive when one of his players was struggling, and he'd been watching Ilya all morning.

"Yes, Coach," Ilya said automatically. Then, because lying felt pointless at this point, "No. Not so good."

Wiebe crossed to him. "What happened?"

Ilya held out his phone wordlessly, while Wiebe squinted at the Cyrillic text.

"I can't read that, son."

"Official charges," Ilya said. He sounded strange to his own ears, distant and weak. "From Russia. They want me to come back for hearing."

"Fuck that." There wasn't an ounce of hesitation in Wiebe's voice. "You're staying right here."

"My passport is revoked."

"Good. Means you're not going anywhere." Wiebe pulled out his own phone. "I'm calling the GM. We're getting ahead of this."

"Coach..."

"No arguments. You're part of this team, Rozanov. We protect our own." Wiebe was already dialing. "Go get changed. Don't talk to the media. Don't talk to anyone except your lawyer. Understand?"

Ilya nodded, though he wasn't sure what he was agreeing to. Everything felt very far away suddenly, like he was watching this happen to someone else. He made it to the locker room, then into the shower. Let the hot water run over him while he stared at the tile wall and tried to make his brain work.

Return to the Russian Federation. They wanted him back. Of course they did. An example, just like he'd told Shane. The hockey player who got too visible, too careless. Who let himself be seen.

His phone was buzzing when he got out. Five missed calls: Shane twice, his lawyer Paula, a Toronto number, and Svetlana. *Shit*. He called her back first.

Svetlana answered immediately. "Ilyusha." She already knew.

"I was officially charged," he said in Russian.

"It's on the news. Russian news, international news, everywhere. What are you going to do?"

"Stay here. Lawyers say Canada will not send me back."

"Good. That's good." She took a shaky breath. "I have been calling my family in Moscow. Making sure they understand you're safe, and you're not coming back."

Gratitude rushed through him, sharp-edged with guilt. Svetlana still had aunts and uncles in Russia, cousins, people who could be questioned or pressured. "You should not have. But thank you."

"Your brother called me." She did *not* sound happy about that. "He wanted to know if I had heard from you. If I knew where you were."

"What did you tell him?"

"That I had not spoken to you in months. That I did not expect to." A pause. "He did not believe me, but what is he going to do?"

"Did he say what he wanted?"

"Who cares what he wants?" Svetlana was quiet for a long moment. When she spoke again, it was in earnest. "I am proud of you. You know this, yes? For being brave. For being yourself."

Ilya's throat closed. "I am not brave. I am just—"

"You are brave," she said firmly. "And you are loved. By me, by Shane Hollander, by so many people. Promise me you'll call, anytime, day or night. Anything you need. *Anything*."

"I promise."

After they hung up, Ilya sat in the empty locker room for a long time. The email was still open on his phone. He checked it one more time. Still real.

Then, his phone buzzed.

Shane: *Where are you? Been trying to call.*

Ilya: *Training. Coming home soon.*

Shane: *Is everything okay?*

Ilya: *Talk when I get there.*

He should call Paula. Should do a hundred things he didn't have the energy or strength for right now. Instead, he unlocked his phone and scrolled down until he reached Galina's contact.

His therapist answered on the third ring. "I was wondering when you would call."

"You saw the news."

"I saw." She sounded as calm and professional as ever. "How are you feeling?"

How was he feeling? Ilya looked at the official notification on his phone screen, at the Russian seal and the cold bureaucratic language that reduced his entire life to an administrative violation.

"Scared," he admitted. "And also... not surprised. Does that make sense?"

"Perfect sense. You have been waiting for this, yes? Waiting for Russia to respond."

"Yes."

"And now they have. So the waiting is over, and the next phase begins." She paused. "This is not comfort, I know. But sometimes the thing we dread is less terrible than the dreading itself."

"You think this will be less terrible?"

"Listen to me. You survived losing your mother. You survived your family's rejection. You survived building a life in a new country on your own. You will survive this too."

After the call, Ilya finally stood up, got dressed and gathered his things. His teammates would be finishing lunch by now, probably talking about their next game against Toronto. Normal hockey things. He wondered how long until normal stopped existing for him entirely.

His phone buzzed again. This time it was Paula: *Got your message. Can you come to the office this afternoon? Need to discuss next steps.*

Next steps. Legal strategy. Protected person claims and work permits and all the things that were supposed to keep him safe. He deleted the email from his screen. It didn't matter. He'd memorized every word anyway.

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

Extra thanks to Michelle for the quick and efficient SpaG check!

Shane's meeting with Coach Theriault was scheduled for 9 am at the CN Sports Complex in Brossard. When he got behind the wheel, the sun was still rising over Ottawa and saying goodbye to Ilya had felt more heart wrenching than it should have.

His phone sat silent in the cupholder. On any other drive, Ilya would've called by now. Rambling about Anya stealing his breakfast, complaining about something meaningless, just filling the car with his voice. Hopefully, he'd managed to fall back asleep after he left, and was finally getting some rest after spending all night tossing and turning.

The silence had Shane running through scenarios. Best case: Montreal's management would back them publicly, maybe even pressure the league or the Canadian government to speed things up. Worst case...

He wasn't ready to think about the worst case.

The speedometer crept higher. Shane knew he should slow down, that getting pulled over would only make him late, but his hands needed something to grip. Watching the car eat up the highway felt better than sitting still.

Without the usual buzz of activity, the CN Sports Complex felt strangely hostile. Shane had been here hundreds of times for games, practices and team events. But today, walking through the quiet corridors at 8:45 in the morning, the building felt less like home and more like a tribunal.

When Shane reached the head coach's office, Theriault was already there, sitting behind his desk with Montreal's GM, Laurent Moreau. Shane hadn't expected Moreau to be there. That wasn't a good sign.

"Close the door," Theriault said.

"Sit," Moreau said, gesturing to the empty chair. He was a broad man in his sixties, with silver hair and cold eyes, and an expression on his face that looked endlessly disappointed. "We need to talk about your situation."

"My situation," Shane repeated flatly.

"Don't be dense. The Russian charges against Rozanov. The media circus. Your relationship being public knowledge. We need to discuss how this affects the team."

"How it affects the team? Ilya's passport was revoked. He could be deported. I think that affects him a bit more than Montreal's playoff chances."

"No one's saying it doesn't," Theriault cut in. "But we have to think about the broader picture here. The playoffs start in two weeks. The media's already camped outside the practice facility, demanding a comment from the team..."

"So tell them we support Ilya," Shane said. "It's not complicated."

Moreau and Theriault exchanged a look.

"We're not making any public statements," Moreau said. "Not now, anyway."

The chair creaked under Shane's grip. "Are you serious?"

"This is an international political situation," Moreau said. "We're a hockey team. We don't take sides in geopolitical conflicts."

"This isn't a geopolitical conflict. It's..." Shane's voice rose before he caught himself. He forced it back down. "Russia is charging him for being queer. That's not politics, that's basic human rights."

"Which is exactly why we're staying out of it." Moreau's expression remained impassive. "The league has Russian ownership stakes. Russian players and sponsors. If we make a statement supporting Rozanov, we're picking a fight with the Russian government. Do you understand what that would mean for us?"

Shane understood perfectly. He understood that Moreau cared more about sponsorship deals than about Ilya being deported to a country where he'd face prison time, or worse. He understood very clearly that Montreal's management was willing to throw them under the bus to protect their profit margins.

"What about me?" Shane asked. "Can *I* make a statement?"

"No," Moreau said immediately. "Absolutely not."

"I'm not really asking for permission."

"Then let me be clear." Moreau's voice went ice cold. "You are under contract with the Montreal Metros. Anything you say publicly reflects on our organization. If you make a statement without our approval, *especially* one that could damage our relationships with international partners, there will be consequences."

Shane's blood reached boiling point at that. What consequences could possibly be worse than what they were already up against?

"Is that a threat?" He seethed.

"It's a *reminder*. Of your contractual obligations to this team." Moreau sat back in his chair. "You're a professional athlete. That means you represent the Metros, 24/7. Everything you do

or you say, who you associate with... it all matters."

"Who I *associate* with," Shane repeated. If they were in the rink, he would have spat on the ice.

Behind the two men in suits, the brightly colored banners mocked him. Shane had personal memories tied to many of them. And sure, hockey had given him an extremely comfortable life, but how much money had he and Ilya brought the league? Their so-called rivalry had been a major draw for a decade. Their jerseys were bestsellers, their faces plastered across every ad campaign. They helped sell posters, water bottles, video games, hats. Anything that could be branded with their face or number.

But now that they needed the kind of support that may cost something down the line, everyone was suddenly very comfortable throwing them under the bus.

"Hollander," Theriault chimed in. "No one's saying you can't be with him. But right now, you need to keep your head down. Focus on hockey. Let the lawyers handle the legal stuff. That's what they're paid for."

"And if they can't?"

Neither of them answered. Shane waited until it became clear they had nothing else to offer.

"We have a playoff run ahead of us," Moreau said. "The team needs you to be focused. Not distracted by things you can't control."

Oh, the things he couldn't control. Like watching the person he loved face deportation while you played hockey and pretended everything was fine.

"Is that all?" Shane asked.

"One more thing. We're aware that you and Rozanov have been seen together frequently. We'd prefer if you... maintained some distance. Publicly. Until the situation is resolved, at the very least."

Shane laughed. It came out bitter and sharp. "You want us to hide." *Again*. As if it wasn't enough that the Russian government was trying to intimidate them back into the closet.

"We want you to be smart," Moreau said. "The video's already out there. You can't take it back, it is what it is. But you don't need to fan the flames. Keep things quiet until this blows over."

Shane stood. His legs felt unsteady, but he forced them to hold. "I need to get back to Ottawa."

"You're excused from practice today," Theriault said. "But I expect you on the ice tomorrow morning. Ten sharp."

He was halfway to the door when Moreau spoke again.

"Hollander. Don't make this harder than it needs to be. For Rozanov's sake, if not your own."

Shane didn't turn around. He opened the door and walked out, forcing himself to keep his steps measured, his shoulders level. It took everything he had not to slam the door. Not to turn back and tell them exactly where they could shove their sponsorship deals and international partnerships.

But he didn't. He closed the door quietly behind him and kept walking, jaw clenched so tight his teeth ached. Careful, just like he'd promised Ilya. Small victories.

Ilya sat in Paula's office and tried to focus on what she was saying. Words kept slipping past him, so he hung on to those that sounded the most foreboding. Work permits. Processing times. Immigration hearings. Too much English made his head hurt on a good day and he was tired. So fucking tired. He wished Shane was here to help fill in the language gaps.

His phone sat on the table between them, dark and motionless. The meeting with Theriault had to be over by now, but Shane hadn't responded to his texts yet.

"Which brings us to the immediate concern," Paula was saying. "Now that your passport's been revoked, IRCC may consider your current work permit invalid."

Ilya forced himself to focus on Paula. "What does that mean?"

"It means that technically, you may not have legal authorization to work in Canada right now."

"So I cannot play." Something very cold settled over him.

"We're going to file for a temporary work permit immediately. We'll argue that your protected person claim is in process and that you should be allowed to continue working while your case is pending. Our case is solid."

Ilya suppressed a grunt. Paula's cautious language made him increasingly nervous. He couldn't tell if it was the language barrier, or subliminal lawyer-talk to let him guess he was probably screwed.

"Do you think it will work?"

"It should," Paula said carefully. "But IRCC moves slowly. And with a high-profile case like yours, there may be additional scrutiny."

"How long?"

Neither Paula nor Daryl looked eager to answer that question. The silence hung there, heavy and damning.

"Standard processing is four to six weeks," Darryl said from the video call. "We'll request expedited processing, but there's no guarantee they'll grant it."

Four to six weeks. The playoffs started in two. Unless they managed to speed up the proceedings to a miraculous degree, the season was over for him. After that, he would be unemployable until everything was sorted out.

Leaving Boston for Ottawa had been a major demotion, but it was his *choice*. Being benched indefinitely over bureaucratic proceedings felt much more harrowing.

"I should tell my coach. Let the team know I can't play."

"Yes, we need to inform them. Today," Paula said. "They'll have to decide how to proceed."

"They are going to bench me."

"Probably, yes," Paula conceded. "Until your work permit is resolved, they can't risk playing you. They'll likely suspend you to avoid any league-imposed penalties."

So there it was. All his fears were coming true. Russia had filed charges, revoked his passport, and now he couldn't even play hockey. His relationship was under a microscope, and he wanted to believe that Shane was strong enough to bear it, but... he worried.

"Ilya." Paula's voice was gentle. "I know this is overwhelming. But we're going to fight this. The protected person claim is strong. You have a legitimate fear of persecution. Canada's courts recognize that."

"But the work permit..."

"This is a temporary setback," Darryl assured him. "Once you're granted protected person status, you'll be eligible for a new one, and full legal authorization to work in Canada."

"How long until the hearing, then?"

"We don't have a date yet," Paula said. "We'll file the claim today, and they'll schedule a hearing. But realistically? Three to six months."

Six months. Half a year. The rest of the season, possibly the start of the next one, sitting at home while his team played without him. While Shane was in Montreal and he waited idly in Ottawa for bureaucrats to decide his future.

His phone buzzed. Shane. *Finally*.

Shane: *Meeting done. Driving back now. How did yours go?*

Ilya stared at the message. How could he even begin to explain? Four to six weeks before he could *maybe* play again. Six months before he'd know if he could stay at all. He wasn't looking forward to all this forced downtime with nothing to do but ruminate.

Ilya: *Will tell you when you get here. Drive safe.*

"I want to call Coach Wiebe," Ilya said. "Tell him myself."

Paula nodded. "That's fair. Do you want us on the call?"

"No. I should... I will call him now," he said and cleared his throat before stepping into the hallway.

Ilya's head was spinning. Everything was unraveling so fast he could barely track it. Twenty-four hours ago, he'd still held on to hope that this could be managed. That the lawyers would file papers and then the system would do what systems did and everything would be fine. Now, he knew better.

Wiebe answered on the first ring. "Rozanov. How did it go?"

"Not good, Coach." Ilya's voice sounded steadier than he felt. "My work permit. Is... complicated."

"How complicated?"

"Lawyers say because Russia revoked my passport, work permit is not valid. They are filing for new one, but..." He didn't finish. Didn't need to.

Wiebe was quiet for a long moment. "How long are we talking?"

"Four to six weeks. Probably longer."

"Jesus fucking Christ. You know what this means, right? For the playoffs?"

"Yes. Sorry." The guilt was immediate and crushing. He hated knowing he was letting them all down.

"I need to talk to management. To the league." A muffled curse. "Your lawyer will call my office?"

"Yes. She will explain everything."

"Okay. Sit tight. Don't talk to the media. We'll figure this out. And Ilya?" Wiebe's voice softened. "The team's got your back. Whatever happens."

After they hung up, Ilya stood in the empty hallway and let himself feel the weight of what was happening. His career suspended. His future uncertain. His relationship scrutinized and judged by any holder of an internet connection. Now, the rest of his life hung in the balance, to be determined by nameless, faceless bureaucrats he would never even meet.

His phone vibrated in his hand. Not a text this time: a notification from Twitter.

@HockeyInsider: Sources say Ottawa's @IlyaRozanov81 may be unable to play due to immigration issues stemming from Russian charges. Team meeting with league officials today. #MLH

And there it was. Out of his hands now. Already leaked and fully public. By the evening, every sports outlet in North America would be running the story of Ilya Rozanov's

disgraceful exit from the playoffs, and there wasn't a damn thing he could do to stop it.

Ilya deleted the notification and shoved his phone back in his pocket. Then he walked back into Paula's office, so they could figure out what the hell came next.

Shane got back to the apartment in the early afternoon. The drive from Montreal took longer than usual due to bad traffic, road work, the usual bullshit. But really, he'd been driving slower, putting off the moment when he'd have to look Ilya in the eye and tell him what Montreal had shamelessly said to him.

The apartment was quiet when he first opened the door, then he heard movement and Anya came careening toward him, her tail wagging wildly.

"Hey, girl." Shane crouched down to scratch behind her ears. "Where's your daddy?"

"Here." Ilya appeared at the foot of the stairs. He was wearing sweatpants and an old Raiders hoodie that looked too baggy on him. His hair was messy, like he'd just woken up from a long nap. "You took your time."

"Sorry. Bad traffic."

Ilya pulled him into his arms without a word. Shane held on tight, breathing him in. They stayed like this a long time, soaking in each other's warmth. When Ilya let him go, he took a step back to look at him and frowned. Shane didn't like how exhausted he looked. How worn out.

"I will make some tea," Ilya said. "Do you want?"

"Sure."

Ilya busied around while Shane made himself comfortable. When he joined him in the kitchen, Ilya was pouring two mugs from the kettle on the stove.

"Ugh." Ilya made a grossed out face after the first sip. "Tastes like boiled grass and sad old flowers."

"Why are you drinking it, then?"

"Sveta had it delivered. She says it helps with anxiety."

Shane's cheeks heated up with embarrassment. He wished he'd thought to get him something to help with the stress, or just to make him smile. The past 24 hours had been such a whirlwind, Shane hadn't had a moment to think about any of it. His head was a noisy, busy mess and he couldn't process anything, much less plan ahead.

They sat on the couch with their steaming mugs, their legs tangling together while Shane tried to figure out where to start.

"So," Ilya said, not looking at him. "Montreal."

"Yeah."

"What did they say?"

Shane took a breath. "They told me to keep my head down, focus on hockey. No public statements supporting you. No public anything." He couldn't keep the bitterness out of his voice. "They don't want to risk losing sponsors."

Ilya nodded slowly, still not meeting his eyes. "Makes sense. Is good business."

"It's bullshit."

"That, too. But not surprising." Ilya took a sip of his tea and grimaced again. "What else?"

Shane hesitated. "They would like us to... not be seen together. Maintain some distance. Until it blows over."

That got Ilya's attention. His head snapped up to look at Shane, wide-eyed. "How much distance?"

"I don't know. How much would it take for people to forget they saw us kissing on video, you think?"

"So we have to hide. Like before."

"Yeah." Shane set his mug down harder than he meant to. "Basically."

Ilya was quiet for a long moment, staring into his mug before setting it down. "What did you say?"

"I didn't agree to anything. But I didn't tell them to fuck off either." Shane rubbed his face. "I just... I left. I needed to get out of there before I said something I couldn't take back."

"That was smart."

"Do you really think so?" Shane looked at him. "'Cause right now I feel like a goddamn coward."

"Not a coward." Ilya finally met his gaze. "Is what you have to do. You must not give them reason to punish you, too."

"I guess." Shane kissed Ilya's temple and cheekbone before he asked, "What did the lawyers say?"

Ilya's jaw tightened. "I cannot play. Not until work permit is resolved. Four to six weeks, maybe longer," he said matter-of-factly. "Ottawa will suspend me. League rules."

"Fuck." Shane felt something break in his chest. "Ilya—"

"Is fine."

"No, it's not fucking fine! If we didn't..." He stopped, shook his head. "If I hadn't been so careless..."

"Don't." Ilya's voice was sharp. "We were not careless. Hayden posted video without watching like the idiot he is. Is not our fault."

"But if we hadn't been together in the first place..."

Ilya's eyebrows shot up to his hairline. "So you wish we were not together? That would make life easier?"

"No. Fuck, no." Shane reached for him. "That's not what I meant."

Ilya let Shane pull him in, but his body was stiff. "What do you mean?"

"I just..." Shane's voice cracked. "I hate that there's nothing I can do to fix this. And I'm furious people are telling me to act like it doesn't matter. You're the *only* thing that fucking matters."

Ilya softened slightly, his forehead dropping to Shane's shoulder. "I know."

They sat like that for a while, Shane's arms wrapped around Ilya, neither of them speaking. Anya whined softly from her bed in the corner.

"I have to go back to Montreal tomorrow," Shane finally said. "Practice at ten."

"Okay."

"But I can stay tonight. If you want."

Ilya pulled back enough to look at him. His eyes were tired, red-rimmed. "Of course I want."

"We'll figure this out," Shane said, trying to believe it. "The lawyers will fix it. It will be okay."

"Maybe." Ilya didn't sound convinced.

"Definitely."

"Shane." Ilya cupped his face with both hands. "Don't promise things you cannot control."

"I can try."

He leaned in, meaning for the kiss to be soft, comforting, but Ilya wasn't having it. He pressed forward with insistent little nips that sent jolts of heat racing down Shane's spine, demanding more, deeper, until everything else began to fall away. The world narrowed to just the room, the couch, the two of them yanking each other's clothes off, greedy for more skin against skin.

It wasn't until later, lying in bed with the lights off and Ilya curled against his chest, that Shane let himself feel the terror that had been looming all day. Ilya's breathing had already evened out, exhaustion finally catching up to him. But Shane stayed awake, staring at the ceiling, his thoughts spiraling through the many ways this could all go terribly, terribly wrong.

Chapter 3

The Centaurs played their first game without their captain four days after his suspension was made official. Jittery and restless, Ilya couldn't decide what to do with himself.

He could go to the gym, but he'd already gone through a long and punishing training at the auxiliary rink Wiebe arranged for him. Watching a movie wasn't a good option when sitting still felt impossible and his blood was running hot with the need to move. Cooking didn't appeal to him either, since he wasn't even a little hungry.

The problem, he realised, was that all his friends in Ottawa were teammates or staffers. The people who might have invited him for a beer, who would have distracted him from the fact that his team was playing without him, were all at the arena right now. Suiting up, going through pregame routines, preparing for puck drop. And Shane was in New York for an away game.

Ilya checked his phone. Still nothing. He'd sent Shane a good luck text hours ago and gotten back a thumbs up and a short, to the point *'ILY'*. That was it. But Shane would be focused now, locked in. And although he didn't talk about it much, the strained atmosphere in the locker room made it that much harder for him to channel his energy inward.

Ilya put the phone down and looked around. The house had never felt so empty.

Regretfully, he turned on the television for noise, and there it was. His team, carrying on without him.

His replacement was Luca Haas, bumped up to the first line. The youngest player on the team. A future star, supposedly, who right now only looked terrified. The commentators narrated around Ilya's absence with minimal fanfare. Only once did someone slip. *"Real shame about Rozanov. Whatever your opinion on the situation, the guy can play."*

Ottawa lost 4-2. Ilya turned off the television and sat in the semi-darkness. Anya climbed onto the couch and sat half-next to, half on top of him. She was warm and heavy and blissfully unbothered by any of it.

His phone buzzed with a group text from Boodram, Dykstra and Barrett.

Barrett: *Tough loss. Missed you out there tonight.*

Dykstra: *Haas is fine but he's not you. Come back soon.*

Bood: *We're all pulling for you brother. Whatever you need.*

Three messages from three guys who owed him nothing beyond locker room camaraderie. Ilya didn't respond. Not because he wasn't grateful, but because he didn't trust himself to type anything that wasn't mushy and pathetic.

When Shane scored for the second time against Tampa Bay, he felt like a fraud.

That wasn't fair to himself and he knew it. They were good goals, hard-earned, the kind of clever plays he'd built a reputation on, but the celebration felt hollow. The public cheers, the bear hugs from his teammates meant nothing. Underneath it all, a low-grade guilt was settling in.

In the locker room afterward, Theriault clapped his shoulder. "That's what I need from you, Hollander. Keep it up."

"Thanks, Coach." Shane felt bile rise in his throat.

He showered, changed, and checked his phone. Three texts from Ilya: a chaotic string of emojis after each goal, then, *"Not bad for guy with weak backhand. I am impressed."* That got a smile out of him.

More notifications. He scrolled past the messages from his agent, his mother, Paula's daily non-update regarding the progress of Ilya's case, and a forwarded email from Ilya's agent asking to discuss the Irina Foundation budget. That one gave him pause.

He called Ilya on the drive home.

"Good game," Ilya said. The warmth was there, even if it sounded tired around the edges. "Wrist shot not so bad after all."

"Fuck you," Shane said, but his smile was more genuine than anything he'd managed that day. They hadn't seen each other for too long, and he would give up a lot just to have Ilya insult him to his face.

"Mmh. I wish." Low and lazy, the tone he'd heard a million times.

Shane's face went hot on the spot. Even now. Even after all these years. He had to redirect. "How was your day?"

The ensuing pause was long enough for Shane to understand how much Ilya was editing for his benefit.

"Fine. Trained hard at the secret facility for queer players no one wants. Anya caught a baby rabbit on her walk and it was gross. Exciting stuff."

Shane merged onto the highway, swerving harder than necessary. "Every time I'm on the ice, I keep thinking about you sitting at home and I feel like shit."

"That is not useful for you or for me."

"I know. I just—"

"You play hockey. I sit at home with my beautiful dog. We are both doing our best, yes?"

Shane exhaled something that was almost a laugh. He could tell Ilya was keeping it light so he wouldn't spiral, and he let him. What else could he do, say what he was actually thinking? That Shane got to keep playing and living his life while Ilya was frozen in carbonite? That no amount of phone calls or overnight drives could close that gap? What good would that do?

"Viktor emailed me about the Foundation budget," Shane finally told him.

A sigh. "Yes. Two sponsors pulled out this week. Sports drink and athletic wear company. There will be more."

"Shit. Why didn't you tell me?"

"You were preparing for Tampa Bay and I didn't want to distract you." He paused. "Also because it is embarrassing and I did not want to talk about it."

"It's not embarrassing."

"Is a little embarrassing. Brands are dropping out because I become liability." He didn't even sound angry. Shane would have preferred that to this matter-of-fact, hollowed-out tone. "The Foundation will lose almost forty percent of operating budget. Viktor is looking at alternatives but it will take time."

"We can cover the gap ourselves. Out of pocket, until—"

"Until what? Until my career magically starts again?" The bitterness surfaced for just a moment before Ilya pulled it back down. "Is not safe for sponsors to associate with me right now. It will not be for a long time."

Shane's grip on the steering wheel tightened. "What do you want to do?"

There was an uncomfortably long silence on the line. "Viktor says we scale back programming for the summer. Cancel the second camp session. Maybe the third."

"Ilya..."

"Kids who signed up will have to be told. Some of them..." His voice caught. "Some of them are like me when I was young. Camp is only good thing in their summer."

"Then we don't cancel. We figure it out."

"With what money?"

"Mine. Yours. I don't care!" The burst of rage had nowhere to go. It wasn't meant for Ilya, just... all of it. Everything. He had no target for it, no outlet. "We. Will. Figure. It. Out."

"You cannot fix things by refusing to accept they are broken."

"Nothing's fucking broken." Shane took a breath, steadied himself. "Let me talk to my mom. She'll reach out to my sponsors, have some of my endorsements hang in the balance if she has to."

After they hung up, Shane lay in his Montreal apartment in the dark. He couldn't stop thinking about Ilya, alone in his house, doing the math on what he was losing. Ottawa had never felt so far away.

"I feel like I'm being erased," Ilya told his therapist the next day. It wasn't a scheduled session, he'd asked for one, and she'd fit him in without question. The word had been circling in his head for days and he was tired of holding it back.

"What does that mean for you?"

"First, they took my passport. Then hockey. Now, we're losing sponsors and damaging the Foundation. Every piece of my life here," he made a gesture, fingers opening, "is being pulled apart, bit by bit. People are very sorry, very sympathetic. Most of them, anyway. But the result is the same. I am less. Every day, I am less."

"Who is 'they'?"

"It started with Russia, then everyone followed. The league says I am a risk, brands think I am too controversial. My work permit was taken away. Everyone has their own motives, but together?" He shook his head. "It feels like a steamroller."

Galina was quiet for a moment. "When you were younger, you told me about learning to be invisible."

"Yes." The stab of unease was instant.

"How does this feel compared to that?"

Ilya considered. "When I was young, I chose to be invisible because it was safer. At home, it was always better to not be noticed. This is different. Other people are making me disappear. I didn't choose it, and I can't stop it."

"That's an important distinction."

"Important how? The result is the same. I am disappearing."

"The result is not the same." Galina leaned forward. "You have lawyers, teammates, loved ones, a public that largely supports you. The boy in Moscow had no support, no one fighting for him."

"Yeah well, the boy in Moscow also had a passport."

Galina nodded. She'd never been the type to flinch. "Yes. He did. And losing that passport is a real, concrete loss. I'm not minimizing it. But I want you to be careful about the story you're telling yourself. If you believe you're disappearing, you may stop fighting to stay visible."

"I'm not fighting anything. I'm sitting in my house waiting for lawyers and bureaucrats to decide my future. That's not fighting, that's just... waiting."

"And how are you waiting? Are you isolating?"

Ilya thought about the past week. Training alone, dining alone. Evenings in bed or on the couch with Anya curled beside him, watching TV, not retaining anything. "Maybe."

"Have your teammates reached out?"

"Yes. They text. They..." He stopped. "They invited me to a team dinner. I'm not going."

"Why not?"

"Because watching them be a team without me is..." He pressed the heel of his hand against his eye. "Fuck. It's too hard. They would be nice and supportive and feel sorry for me, and I would sit there pretending I'm fine watching them on TV."

"So the kindness is the hard part."

"Yes." The word came out scraped. "People being angry at me, I can handle. I have been handling that my whole life. But people being kind to me because they feel sorry for me... That, I can't take."

"What if kindness isn't pity? What if it's just... kindness?"

Ilya didn't have an answer. Kindness always felt unearned to him.

"I think you should go to the next team dinner," she said. "Not because you have to. Because isolating is the thing your fear is dictating you to do, and I think you're strong enough to do the opposite."

Chouinard picked him up at six. The drive to the restaurant was mercifully light on conversation since Chouinard, who'd always been on the quieter side, seemed content to let the radio fill the silence. When they arrived, Boodram and Dykstra jumped up from the corner table where they were sitting with Haas, Dillon, and Barrett.

"Rozanov!" Boodram pulled him into a hug that was slightly too tight. "About fucking time."

"I was busy," Ilya replied.

"Busy doing what? You're literally unemployed."

"You should try it. I do more from my couch than you do on the ice."

"There he is." Boodram grinned and pushed a beer toward him.

It went much better than Ilya had expected. No one mentioned Russia. No one asked about work permits or suspensions or what came next. They just... talked. About the playoffs. About Haas' promotion to the first line. About the goalie coach who kept trying to make

everyone do yoga. Chouinard told a baffling story about his kid's school project and an escaped hamster. Boodram got genuinely heated about poutine.

Normal, stupid things. Ilya hadn't realized how badly he'd been missing normal and stupid.

Only once did the real world intrude. Toward the end of the evening, as the table was settling the bill, Boodram leaned in. "We had a team meeting yesterday. About you."

Ilya went still. "What kind of meeting?"

"The kind where Wiebe tells twenty guys that one of their teammates is in trouble and asks who's willing to speak up if needed." Boodram met his gaze. "It was unanimous. Every guy in that room raised their hand. We're all on your team."

Ilya looked down at his empty plate. His eyes were burning and he refused, absolutely refused, to shed a single tear out here in public. The team would never let him hear the end of it.

"Okay," he managed. "That's... Thanks."

Boodram clapped him on the shoulder and immediately resumed arguing with Dillon, this time about the best post-game burger spot in Vancouver. All in all, it was a good night.

A few days went by without any notable events until the next Wednesday, when a quote from Comeau went viral on Twitter. Shane was in the weight room working out his frustration with, well, *everything*, when he got a rapid-fire string of texts from Hayden.

Hayd: Did you see the shit Comeau said?

Hayd: *Fuck, Shane*

Hayd: *It's really not cool*

Hayd: *I'm sorry man*

Hayd: *Want me to talk to him?*

Comeau was a third-line forward in his second season with Montreal. He was nice enough, though not particularly friendly. Since the FanMail video disaster, Shane had noticed he was significantly more distant than usual in the locker room, but then again, they all were except for Hayden, so he didn't think too much of it.

The clip was short, under thirty seconds long, cut from what looked like an ambush interview outside the practice facility. Comeau was in his warmup clothes, his gearbag thrown over his shoulder, and looked deeply uncomfortable.

"Look, what other players do off the ice isn't something I worry about. But when it starts affecting the team, and there's all this media attention on stuff that's got nothing to do with

hockey... At some point you gotta ask yourself if it's really worth the distraction. We're trying to make the playoffs here. That's what I'm focusing on, not off ice drama."

The words weren't overtly hateful, which made it even worse. Comeau wasn't saying anything a reasonable person couldn't say in public and get away with. He'd just reframed Ilya's persecution as an inconvenience. Stuff that's got nothing to do with hockey. A distraction.

Shane wanted to hurl, scream and punch someone, possibly all at once.

By the end of his workout, the clip had hit a million views. Shane made himself wait until the locker room emptied to call Ilya. It wasn't long enough for him to calm down, not even close, but at least he'd have some privacy.

"Have you heard?"

"Yes." Ilya's voice was wary.

"I'm going to cross-check him into the boards at practice."

"Don't. Unless you can make it look like accident."

"He just told a million people your safety is less important than our playoff seed."

"He told a million people he is an asshole who does not think before he speaks." Ilya sounded controlled, but the effort was audible. "You cannot do anything about it. It will only make things worse."

"You're probably right but I still want to punch him." Shane exhaled. "I love you."

"I love you, too. Stay off Twitter."

He tried, he really did, but his phone kept buzzing. His publicist, his agent, Montreal's PR department, armed with a pre-emptive gag order. Don't comment. Don't engage. Don't make it worse. Shane silenced it and shoved it at the bottom of his bag.

Thankfully, Rose didn't need anyone's permission.

A few hours after the Comeau clip went viral, she posted an unscripted video to her Instagram. No filter, no lighting, no PR consult, just Rose in an oversized sweater that shouldn't look flattering but somehow looked effortlessly glamorous on her. She was sitting in a makeup chair, her hair piled into a messy bun, and was looking directly into the camera.

"So. Hi. I wasn't going to say anything because, honestly, what do I know? I am not an authority on immigration law or international politics or, like, anything. I was kidnapped in a bunch of movies and I once played a ghost who solves crimes with a dog. My only qualifications to speak up about this are that I'm a hockey fan, and I dated Shane Hollander for a while, which... I know, the irony, right? The point is, I know Shane. I've never actually

met Ilya Rozanov, but I know what they mean to each other, and that their Foundation is doing some truly fantastic work. Anyway. There's a clip going around of a hockey player calling this whole thing a distraction and I just..."

She paused, and for a second the breeziness dropped.

"A person's safety isn't a distraction. It's not drama. Ilya's in trouble because his home country decided he shouldn't love who he loves, and some people are debating whether that's too much of a bother. I don't know about you, but to me? That's seriously messed up. If caring about someone's safety is a distraction, then I don't want to be focused. Okay. That's it. Go watch hockey. Adopt a dog. Bye!"

It reached 8 million views before midnight, with Hayden and JJ both reposting it. Hayden's story relaying Rose's reel was captioned: *"Anyone who thinks a player's safety is a distraction can come say it to my face. Standing with Shane and Ilya."*

Alone in his Montreal apartment, Shane burst into tears. It was the first time he truly broke in the two weeks this nightmare had been going on, and it was strangely freeing to finally allow himself to feel it.

He'd barely managed to get himself under control by the time he picked up his phone.

"Hey." His voice came out rougher than he'd intended.

"Shane!" Rose's warmth came through the line. "It's good to hear your voice."

The relief was instant. They hadn't talked in a while, although they texted often, and he kept forgetting how much better he felt every time they did. How easy she was to talk to.

"I saw your post." Tears were pooling in his eyes again, but he didn't have the strength to pretend otherwise. "I just wanted to say thank you. It means a lot."

"Don't mention it." Her tone shifted, becoming gentler. "How are you? How is he?"

"I..." He paused, pressed the heel of his hand against his forehead. "It's fucking awful."

"I'm sure it is." Rose waited, giving him space.

"I don't know what to do." He dragged a hand over his face. "If there's anything I can do."

"You're supporting him the best you can, right?"

Shane nodded, then remembered she couldn't see him. "Yeah."

"Then you're doing something," she said firmly. "You're not alone in this, you know. Even if it feels like it."

The response to Rose's public statement was enormous and mostly supportive, but the pushback was loud enough to fuel sports talk radio for the rest of the week.

Pundits were still debating whether athletes should keep politics out of the locker room. Some retired players gave cautious, noncommittal interviews that didn't say much but noticeably failed to express support. Anonymous league sources were cited calling the situation 'complicated' and 'unprecedented', as if that justified withholding an official response.

Comeau issued a statement through his agent, claiming his comments were taken out of context and apologizing if he'd offended anyone. A non-apology that satisfied no one. By then, the news cycle had already moved on. The damage was done and would keep being done, in comment sections and locker rooms and quiet corners where some people now felt entitled to say what they *really* thought.

Montreal's PR department emailed all players and staffers soon after: "*Any public statements regarding teammates or associates must be cleared by the organization.*"

Shane typed five different responses that would all have gotten him either fined or suspended. In the end, he deleted all of them and shut down his phone.

When Paula called with what she described as 'a development', all Ilya could feel was dread. Even in lawyer-talk, good news was just good news, never a 'development'.

"The temporary work permit application was denied." There was a pause. "I'm sorry, Ilya."

"Denied," he repeated numbly. Of course. Everything that could go wrong already had. Why not this, too?

"Yes. IRCC cited insufficient evidence of irreparable harm. They're requesting additional documentation supporting the protected person's claim before they'll consider issuing a work permit."

Ilya sank deeper into the couch. "But you said that would take much longer."

"Exactly. They don't like to authorize work permits until protected person status has been granted. At minimum, they want the claim to be further along in the process, but your hearing isn't scheduled until June."

"Okay." What else was there to say? The playoffs would be over by June. The entire season would be over. He'd be sitting in this apartment for three more months while the rest of the hockey world moved on without him.

"We're refiling immediately with supplementary evidence. We're gathering expert testimony on LGBTQ persecution in Russia and statements from human rights organizations." She paused. "And we'll need a personal declaration from you. A detailed statement about the threats you face. IRCC will want to hear it in your own words."

"Right." They would never stop stripping him bare, would they? "What if the refiling is also denied?"

"Then we look at escalation. We might solicit ministerial intervention by going directly to the immigration minister's office. It's uncommon, but not unheard of in high-profile cases."

"Why would a politician help me?"

"Because politicians respond to pressure. Media attention, advocacy from public figures, that sort of thing. Then, it becomes more politically costly to ignore you than to help."

Public pressure. Not accidentally viral clips and hot takes on Twitter. A deliberate campaign. The kind that meant Shane would have to step in front of cameras and put his career on the line.

"No. I am not dragging Shane into this."

"We're not there yet," Paula added quickly. "But you need to know that it might become necessary down the line."

After they hung up, Ilya stood in his kitchen and let the anger move through him. Not the dull dread of the previous weeks. This was bright and hot and righteous fury.

What more could he do? He'd done everything right. Hired the lawyers, filed the forms. Been patient and quiet and cooperative, exactly as instructed. And the system had looked at all of it and said, not enough.

The anger lasted about ten minutes, then it drained out of him like someone had pulled a plug, and what was left was worse. He sat on the kitchen floor with his back against the cabinets and Anya pressed against his leg, and waited for the darkness to relent.

He didn't call Shane until he was sure his voice would hold.

"Hey." Shane's voice had an immediate soothing effect on Ilya's fraught nerves. "How'd it go with Paula?"

If only they were on a video call, he could stare at his freckles while he broke the news. But then, holding himself together on camera would take more energy and strength than he had left.

"Not great. Temporary work permit was denied."

For a moment, there was nothing but the faint sound of Shane's breath on the line, sharp, like he'd been hit. Then he said, "Okay. Okay. I'm driving to you."

"No." As tempting as it was to spend the night together with their brains turned off, Ilya didn't trust himself to keep it together well enough for Shane not to unravel. Not tonight. And then what? They'd bawl together until morning? "You should come on Friday as we planned."

"Ilya—"

"What are you going to do here? Sit on my couch and be angry? I can do that all by myself, thanks." It came out colder than he intended. Meaner. He closed his eyes. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean..."

"Don't. Don't apologize."

"I'm just..." He brushed a hand across his face. "I'm so tired, Shane."

"I know." There was a long pause. "What did she say about the next steps?"

Ilya heaved an exhausted sigh before responding. "Refiling. Get more testimonies. I have to write a personal declaration about why Russia wants to put me in jail, so that will be fun."

"And if that doesn't work?"

"Paula says we are not there yet."

"When will we be there?" Shane snapped. "When they put you on a plane back to Russia?"

Ilya shut down the first three things he wanted to say. "Refiling might work."

"And if it doesn't?"

That was a conversation he definitely wasn't ready to have. "We talk about it then, yes?"

There was another long silence, cut only by sharp intakes of breath. He could picture Shane folding in on himself with his eyes closed, trying to smother the fear.

"Come on Friday. Please," Ilya said, quieter now. "No lawyer-talk. I need Friday to be normal. I need one thing this week to be good and normal. We can have dinner and watch the game or a movie or just fuck until we both pass out. Okay?"

"Okay." Shane's voice cracked on it, just barely. "Friday."

That night, after Shane hung up and the house was quiet again, Ilya sat at the kitchen table and opened the document Paula had emailed.

Describe the specific threats or risks you face if returned to your country of origin. Be as detailed as possible.

It felt as though nothing he could say or do would ever be enough. They would always need more details. More proof. More pieces of him.

He stared at the blinking cursor for a long time. Outside, the late March wind was blowing against the window, rattling the glass with a low, whistling moan. Anya was asleep at his feet, snoring softly, unbothered by life's troubles as always.

He began to type.

I, Ilya Grigoryevich Rozanov, declare that I am a citizen of the Russian Federation and that I face persecution in my home country on the basis of my sexual orientation.

Seeing it written down like that made something twist in his gut. After twenty years of desperately fighting to blend in, Ilya had become a master of concealing his true self with careful erasure. All of his hard work was thrown away with a single sentence.

He kept typing. The words came haltingly at first, then faster. He recounted growing up in Moscow as best he could: his unyielding father and powerless mother, knowing from a young age that something fundamental in him didn't match what everyone expected.

He did his best to convey the careful performance of boyhood, becoming an athlete, throwing himself into hockey until he not only conformed to, but exceeded every measure of strength and aggression and masculine excellence. Meeting Shane when he was barely entering adulthood. And then, the slow understanding that what he felt wasn't something he would grow out of. Not an experiment, this time. Not mere curiosity.

The Russian Federation filed administrative charges against me under Article 6.21 of the Code of Administrative Offenses. My passport was revoked. I was ordered to return for an administrative hearing. My lawyers have advised that returning to Russia would put my safety and freedom at immediate risk.

Not to mention losing his relationship, his career, his freedom. Being forced into rehabilitation programs, likely targeted by hate groups with the authorities' blessing.

I am asking Canada to protect me, because my own country will not.

Anya stirred under the table, whined softly and pressed her nose against his ankle. Ilya reached down to rest his hand on her head, and stayed like that for a while.

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

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

The Metros locker room used to feel like home. Shane had spent over a decade here, won championships, shed blood, sweat, and tears on the ice with these guys. He'd built a career, a reputation, and a life inside these walls. Now, it felt like enemy territory.

When Shane arrived at the practice facility on Friday, the parking lot was still mostly empty. He sat in his car for a few minutes, staring at the building and gathering himself, before he grabbed his gear and headed inside.

The locker room was quiet when he walked in. Hayden was already there, lacing up his skates. He looked up when Shane entered and gave him a nod.

"Morning, cap."

"Morning." Shane made his way to his stall through a thick and uncomfortable silence.

Comeau was three stalls down, talking quietly with Drapeau and Gagnon. They stopped when Shane sat down. Comeau glanced over, then away. It had been like this since the clip of him calling Ilya's situation 'a distraction' and 'drama' went viral: the locker room had split into camps. The division felt like a fault line running through the middle of the room.

Well, not quite the middle. Hayden and JJ were on his side, with Hayden being the most vocal about it. The rest were either quiet or aligning themselves with Comeau's 'focus on hockey' bullshit philosophy.

"How's he?" Hayden asked, keeping his voice low.

"Same. Waiting."

"Fuck, man."

Shane didn't respond. It had only been three weeks since Russia had filed charges and their lives had shifted into something scary and unpredictable. It felt like months. Years. And yet, the protected person hearing was still ages away. The refiled work permit application was stuck somewhere in IRCC's processing queue.

From across the room, Shane could feel Comeau's eyes on him.

The rest of the team filtered in gradually. JJ arrived and immediately came over to clap him on the shoulder. It wasn't much, but the tiniest sign of support felt momentous in this room.

Coach Theriault walked in. "On the ice in five. Let's make it a good one."

Practice was brutal. Not because of the drills: those were standard. But the energy was *off*. Every line change felt pointed, the missed pass deliberate. When Shane called for the puck and Comeau skated right past him to dump it to Mitty instead, it was too obvious even for their coach to ignore.

Theriault blew his whistle. "Comeau, what the fuck was that?"

"Misread the play, Coach."

"Misread, my ass. Run it again."

They ran it again. This time Comeau passed, but it couldn't have been less enthusiastic. Shane caught Hayden's eye across the ice. Hayden shook his head, jaw clenched. At least, it wasn't just Shane going crazy.

After practice, he was one of the first in the showers. He had five missed calls from Ilya, but he could hardly call him back with the rest of the team within earshot. He was anxious to get out on the road and back to Ottawa. But as he was toweling off, he heard voices from the locker room.

"...can't keep doing this." Comeau's voice was low but audible. "It's affecting the team."

"You think he doesn't know that?" Hayden. He sounded furious.

"Then maybe he should make a choice. We're days away from playoffs—"

"His boyfriend could be deported, you asshole."

"That's not *our* problem."

Shane's hands clenched around the towel. He forced himself to breathe, deep and slow. Stopped himself from walking back in there and give Comeau an actual reason to resent him

"Yeah, it *is* our fucking problem," Hayden countered, "because he's our teammate and our captain. Or did you forget that part?"

"I didn't forget shit. I just think some things are bigger than one guy's personal problems."

"Enough." Theriault's voice cut through. "This conversation is over. Everyone get dressed and get out."

Shane stood in the shower room, water still dripping from his hair, until the locker room went completely silent. When he got dressed and walked back into the locker room, everyone but Hayden and JJ was looking pointedly anywhere but at him.

"Hollander." Theriault was waiting by the door. "My office. Now."

Shane followed him down the hall. In the office, Theriault closed the door and gestured to a chair.

Theriahult leaned against his desk, arms crossed. "I'm going to level with you. The room's fractured. You know it, I know it, everyone knows it."

"It's not my fault Comeau's an asshole."

"I don't care whose fault it is. I care about winning hockey games. And right now, this team is more focused on taking sides than playing hockey."

"So what do you want me to do? Apologize for having a personal life?"

"I want you to compartmentalize, like every other professional athlete who's ever had shit going on in their personal life. Let the team know you're fully focused on hockey."

Theriahult's tone softened slightly. "Look, I'm not heartless. What Rozanov's going through is not right. But you can't help him by bombing the playoffs."

Shane stood. "Is that all?"

"That's all. See you at practice."

Shane left without another word.

He was in his car, about to start the engine and head back to Ottawa, when his phone rang. The call came from an unknown number with a Toronto area code.

"Mr Hollander? This is Officer Hicks with CBSA. I'm calling regarding Ilya Rozanov."

"Yes, it's me." Shane's blood went instantly cold. "Did something happen?"

"Mr Rozanov was detained this morning under the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act. He's currently being held at the Ottawa Immigration Holding Centre pending a detention review."

"Detained?" The world stopped. Shane couldn't breathe, couldn't think. "Why? He didn't do anything wrong. He's been complying with everything!"

"I can't discuss the details of the case, sir. I'm calling because Mr Rozanov listed you as an emergency contact. His detention review hearing is scheduled for Monday morning at 10 am."

"Monday? That's three days away! I need to see him now. Where is he?"

"Ottawa Immigration Holding Centre. Visiting is restricted to immediate family members only. You'll need to—"

"I'm his fiancé."

"Do you have documentation of your relationship?"

"We just..." Shane stopped and started over. "Can I speak to his lawyer? Paula Bunch?"

"Ms. Bunch has been notified. She'll be visiting Mr Rozanov this afternoon."

Shane was already pulling up directions on his phone, hands shaking. "I'm coming right now. I'm in Montreal but I'm on my way."

"Sir, as I mentioned, only immediate family..."

"I don't care. I'll be there in two and a half hours."

He ended the call and immediately dialed Paula.

"Shane, I just heard," she said before he could say anything. She sounded *pissed*. "I'm on my way to the facility. This is clearly an overcautious detention decision."

"What the fuck does that mean?"

"Ilya's last check-in with the CBSA wasn't logged in properly and triggered an automatic flag. An officer who wasn't familiar with his situation reviewed his file and jumped to detention without looking at the full picture. It's textbook bureaucratic overcaution."

"But he's been doing everything right!"

"I know. And that's exactly what I'm going to argue at the detention review. This should never have happened. Considering Ilya a flight risk is ludicrous. There are no legal grounds for this detention."

"So they can just grab him for a mistake *they* made?"

"CBSA has broad discretion. Sometimes, it's exercised poorly. But the IRB will review it as soon as possible. They'll see that Ilya has been fully compliant and cooperative, and will order his release. I'm very confident about that."

"He tried to call me." Shane's voice started to break and didn't stop. "Five times. I didn't—"

"Shane, listen to me. This is not your fault. This is a bureaucratic failure by CBSA. We're going to fix it, okay?"

"I need to see him."

"They won't let you in, I'm afraid. It's immediate family only, and they're strict about it."

"Then I'll wait outside. I don't care."

He ended the call and pulled out of the parking lot, tires squealing. His phone immediately started buzzing again. His mother, then Hayden, then a bunch of numbers he didn't recognize.

He ignored them all and drove.

Ilya was finishing his morning coffee when they knocked on his door. He'd been getting ready to head to the auxiliary rink for another sad, solitary workout. Past that, he had no plan for his day other than waiting for Shane to finish practice and come to Ottawa. He was in desperate need for the 'good and normal' time they'd promised each other.

Anya started barking before the first knock. Through the peephole, Ilya saw two people in CBSA uniforms. His stomach instantly dropped.

He opened the door. "Hello?"

"Ilya Rozanov?" The woman showed him a badge. "We have an order for your detention under the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act. You need to come with us."

"Detention?" The words felt like ice water down his spine. "No, is a mistake. I have lawyers, I have been doing everything they told me to do."

"We're aware of your legal situation, Mr Rozanov. The detention order has been issued. You have the right to speak with your lawyer, and you'll have a detention review hearing as soon as possible. But right now, you need to come with us."

"I don't understand." His heart hammered against his ribs. "Why?"

"It's a precautionary measure, sir. You'll be able to discuss the details with your lawyer."

This wasn't supposed to happen. Paula had said Canada wouldn't deport him, that he'd be safe if he followed the rules, and he had. Every single one of them.

"Can I... can I make phone call?"

The male officer nodded. "You have a few minutes to gather essentials and make a call. But then, we need to go."

With unsteady hands, he grabbed his phone and immediately called Shane. It rang several times and went to voicemail.

No. Please pick up.

He tried again. And again. Voicemail.

"Mr Rozanov, we need to move."

"Please, just one more try."

He tried again and each time, it went to voicemail.

Shane probably was at practice or in a meeting, with his phone stashed in his locker and no other way to reach him. Paula would have to explain what was going on.

"My dog." Ilya's voice came out choked. "Can I call someone to take care of her?"

"You can make arrangements from the facility. We need to leave now."

Ilya knelt down, wrapped his arms around Anya. She whined, sensing something wrong. He whispered to her, "Is okay, devochka. Shane will come. He will take care of you."

They let him grab his wallet, a few clothes, and told him to leave everything else. One of them waited while Ilya put on his shoes, his hands shaking so badly he could barely tie the laces. Then they walked him outside, where a vehicle was waiting. From across the street, his neighbors watched him being pushed in the back of the car.

They didn't put him in handcuffs, but the doors didn't open from the inside. The drive was silent. If the officers spoke to each other, Ilya didn't notice.

He stared numbly out the window as they drove him to the holding center.

The facility was different from what he'd imagined. Not a jail, more like a hospital crossed with a dormitory crossed with a prison. Something institutional and cold, with security checkpoints, metal detectors, and too many forms to fill out. They took his phone, his wallet, his watch. He had to empty his pockets, be searched for dangerous items. It was all 'standard procedure', they said.

In return, they gave him a badge with a photo and an ID number, and walked him through a series of locked doors, each one buzzing open and clanging shut behind him.

His living unit consisted in a small room with four narrow beds, a desk and a chair. Two of the beds were already claimed. A middle-aged man who introduced himself as Rajan had taped a row of photographs above his pillow. The other hadn't looked up when Ilya came, he'd just rolled toward the wall and hadn't moved since. There was a shared bathroom down the hall. The fluorescent lights hummed over his head. Everything was beige and worn out, designed to be wiped clean with disinfectant.

The door only locked from the outside.

Ilya sat on the edge of his beige bed and tried to remember how to breathe. How to think in complete sentences. Didn't succeed.

He pulled his knees up, wrapped his arms around them and let it all wash over him.

When he was young, his father used to lock him in the closet when he misbehaved. Hours in the dark, listening to his mother crying on the other side of the door, too afraid to let him out. He hadn't felt like that since he'd left. So trapped and powerless.

Time moved strangely. Without his watch or phone, he couldn't tell if an hour or five had passed. Eventually, someone knocked on his door and brought him lunch. Sandwich, apple, bottle of water. The bread was stale, but he didn't know when they'd feed him again, so he ate it anyway.

When Paula finally came to meet with him in the afternoon, they put them in a room with a metal table and plastic chairs. A guard stood by the door.

"Ilya." She gave him a quick hug before sitting down across from him, concern written plain on her face. "This is bullshit. Complete and utter bullshit."

"What happened? Why did they do this?"

"It's nothing you did. There was an administrative error after your last check-in and an overzealous CBSA officer made a bad call."

"But I have been complying. With everything they asked!"

"I know. This detention is unwarranted. The IRB will see that and order your release."

"When?"

"The review is set for Monday morning, 10 am. That's as soon as possible after the 48-hour requirement"

Three days. Three whole days in this place. "Can Shane visit?"

Paula's expression turned apologetic. "I'm sorry. Visitation is for immediate family only. But he knows, I spoke to him. He's on his way from Montreal right now."

"He's coming here?"

"Yes. He won't be able to get in, but... he's coming anyway."

Ilya closed his eyes as relief crashed through him. Shane was coming.

"What do I do?" His voice came out small. "Until Monday?"

"Stay calm. Don't give them any reason to argue you're uncooperative." Paula reached across the table and squeezed his hand. "We're going to get you out. I promise."

After she left, they took him back to his unit. The door closed behind him with a loud click. Rajan wasn't around, but the younger guy in the other bed was still lying in the same position as before, facing the wall.

Ilya lay down on the narrow bed. The mattress was thin and the pillow almost completely flat. He stared at the ceiling and tried not to think about all the things that could *still* go wrong. About Monday's hearing not going their way, or Canada figuring out he was more trouble than he was worth. They'd send him back to Russia, where he'd face charges and...

Don't think about that.

But the fear was crushing, physical, like hands closing around his throat.

Ilya turned onto his side, pulled the blanket over his head and closed his eyes. He tried to find that place in his mind where his mother lived and was proud of him. Where everything was okay.

By the time Shane reached the holding centre, it had been more than four hours since they'd taken Ilya. He parked his car in the front and started marching to the entrance. A journalist materialized next to him, microphone in hand.

"No comment," he spat, and his glare must have been so potent, his energy so menacing, she reeled back of her own accord.

Paula had warned him they wouldn't let him see Ilya, and she was right. It didn't matter that they were in love, that Ilya had no family in Canada, that he was his emergency contact, or that given the choice, he was the only person Ilya would want to see. All that mattered was that their relationship wasn't documented. It hadn't been stamped as valid by a government official.

He got back in his car and sat there, engine off, staring at the building. After a while, the hopelessness subsided enough for Shane to pull out his phone and call Paula.

"They won't let me see him."

"I know. I'm sorry. We'll get him out on Monday," Paula assured him. "I saw him earlier. He's okay. Shaken, but okay. He knows you're here, Shane. He knows you're coming."

It wasn't enough, but it was all Shane had.

Just before dinner, Ilya was finally granted a phone call. An officer escorted him through the common area, which was also beige, to a restricted room where detainees were allowed 5 minutes supervised personal calls. Ilya picked up the receiver, wondering how much collective trauma had been told through this device.

He dialed in Shane's number. This time, the answer was immediate.

"Ilya, thank fuck, *finally!* Are you okay?"

"I'm okay." Ilya could have wept just hearing his voice. "I'm at facility. I tried calling you this morning but they didn't let me try again."

"I know. I'm so sorry, I was..." Shane heaved a breath that sounded like a sob. "I'm here now. Right outside. They won't let me in, but I'm here."

"You came." The relief he felt knowing Shane was near was massive and instant. He could picture him seated in his car, staring furiously through the windshield. It was better than imagining him in tears. Anger always looked good on him.

"Of course I came. Jesus, Ilya, did you think I wouldn't?"

"I don't know what I thought." Ilya closed his eyes and felt tears run down his cheeks. "I am having a very weird day." He tried going for a small laugh, but it came out wet and strangled.

"How is it, in there? Are you comfortable? Do you want me to bring anything?"

"I'm okay for now. I will need more clothes, if..." If they brought him back here after the hearing. But he couldn't make himself say the words out loud. "For now I have enough. I wish Anya was here."

"Shit, I almost forgot. I was planning on sitting in this parking lot until they let you out, but I guess I'll be more useful to her than to you."

"Please don't let my adorable dog starve. It would make me very mad."

"I won't, I promise." Shane paused. "Paula says she'll get you out on Monday."

"She also said there was no chance I would be arrested. Maybe we don't get our hopes up."

"If you're not out by 10:02 on Monday, I'll break you out myself."

"I don't think they like jokes like that here."

"Shit. Sorry. Nevermind. It was a bad joke."

"All your jokes are bad."

"Fuck off." Shane let out a long exhale. "It's good to hear your voice."

"Yours, too."

The officer tapped his shoulder. Time was almost up.

"I have to go," Ilya said. "They only give five minutes."

"Okay. I'll stay at your house. Take care of your girl." Shane's breathing hitched again. "Call me tomorrow, please? If you can?"

"Yes. Thank you for being here. I love you."

"I love you, too."

Ilya managed not to break for the entire walk from the phone room to his unit, which he thought was impressive. He held on until the door closed behind him with a loud click.

Rajan was reading on his bed. The younger one was asleep, or pretending to be. Ilya lay down on his own narrow bed, facing the wall, and stared at the beige paint until his eyes stopped burning. He clung to Shane's voice, and tried to make himself believe this would be over soon. But Monday felt forever away.

There were 17 other detainees in the men's unit of the IHC, with five more joining over the weekend. The nights were the worst, frequently interrupted with cries, screams or nightmares. People shouted in languages he didn't recognize. The guards' heavy steps echoed

during their rounds. Ilya's roommates were quiet enough, although the young one sometimes whimpered in his sleep.

In the morning, they escorted Ilya to the communal bathroom, where he was instructed to wash quickly among three other men, then to the common area. There, he sat numbly in a plastic chair while the TV played news coverage of him.

"Russian MLH star detained amid diplomatic tensions."

They showed his face, his name, clips from his games. Shots of the detention center's front entrance. Blurry footage of him and Shane kissing, zoomed in beyond recognition, with FanMail's logo stamped in the bottom corner. How much free publicity had they gotten from this, he wondered?

An older man sitting nearby looked up at the television, then at him. "That's you," he said in heavily accented English. "Ice hockey."

Ilya nodded.

"Saw you play last year. My grandson is fan."

He tried to smile but it didn't work.

When it was deemed he'd been allowed enough entertainment, a guard escorted him back to his unit, where he would wait in silence while his thoughts spiraled for the rest of the day.

He felt nauseous, restless. His body, used to constant motion, twitched with the need to move. And the antidepressants, *fuck*, he'd forgotten about them entirely. The doctor had warned him to never stop taking them suddenly. Just another reason for him to feel so damn off.

He should move. Do something. Anything. Push-ups, maybe. But the weight of everything was settling into his bones, pinning him to the mattress. Somewhere, in a dark corner of his mind, his father sneered. *Look at you. So weak. So lazy.*

Shane didn't think he was lazy. Shane believed he was worth fighting for. Ilya closed his eyes and tried to hold on to that instead.

It was absurdly early on Monday morning when Shane parked outside the facility. He'd wanted to come here first, even though the hearing was at a different facility downtown, on the off chance he could see Ilya when they moved him, even for a second.

There were more cameras this time. A few reporters jogged his way. "Mr Hollander, do you have a statement?"

He pushed by them and walked through the parking lot, where Paula was already waiting for him. "How is he?" Shane asked.

"As well as can be expected." Paula looked tired, with dark circles beneath her eyes. "The hearing's at 10 at the Immigration Court on Laurier. We should get there early."

"Is he going to be okay?"

"Yes. The arguments are overwhelming. This detention should never have happened."

They transported Ilya separately. Shane didn't get to see Ilya before the hearing. He had to wait in the courtroom, sitting in the gallery with his parents, who had driven up that morning. They all kept their eyes on the door until finally, *finally*, Ilya walked in.

Shane's breath caught.

He looked exhausted. Hollowed out. His hair was messy, his face pale, dark circles under his eyes. When their eyes met across the courtroom, Ilya's expression cracked for just a second before he forced it back to neutral.

The hearing lasted about an hour. Paula argued that Ilya had been fully compliant with all conditions, that he had strong ties to Canada, that detention was unnecessary and unwarranted. The CBSA lawyer tried to argue flight risk, but once the check-in mixup was cleared couldn't point to a single instance of non-compliance or concerning behavior.

The judge asked questions, looked at documents, made notes. Shane struggled to breathe.

Finally, the judge spoke. "Mr Rozanov has demonstrated full compliance with the conditions of his release. He has strong ties to the community, has legal representation, and poses no demonstrable flight risk. The decision to detain appears to have been made without sufficient consideration of these factors. I find that continued detention is not warranted. Mr Rozanov will be released immediately on the following conditions..."

Shane's mother grabbed his hand. He could barely feel it. Oxygen was rushing back into his body as if he'd been holding his breath for three days straight.

The rest was a haze. Requirements for reporting, regular check-ins with CBSA. But Shane's brain was stuck on one word. *Released*.

Across the room, Ilya dropped his hand into his hands.

They processed him out. Returned his phone and wallet to him. Shane waited in the foyer, pacing back and forth, until the door opened and Ilya fell into his arms.

They walked out together, Shane's arm around Ilya's shoulders. The media was waiting outside with cameras and microphones and questions shouted from every direction.

Shane kept his head down and steered Ilya toward the car. His parents ran interference, putting themselves between the two of them and the crowd of reporters.

"Shane, do you have a comment?"

"Mr Hollander, over here!"

"Mr Rozanov, how does it feel to be released?"

Shane got Ilya into the passenger seat, closed the door, and turned to face the cameras.

"The detention of Ilya Rozanov was unjust, cruel, and a disgrace to Canada's immigration system," he said. "He's not a criminal. He's a refugee fleeing persecution. If this is how Canada treats people seeking safety, then we need to do better."

Ignoring the barrage of questions and raised microphones, he got in the car and drove them both home.

When they went back to Ilya's house, Anya nearly knocked them over. From the moment Ilya walked through the door, she was jumping and spinning and whining with joy. Ilya dropped to his knees, let her lick his face, and Shane saw him finally break. Quiet tears at first, then full sobs, his face buried in Anya's fur.

Shane knelt beside him and held them both.

"You're safe," Shane said. "You're home. I've got you."

But even as he said it, he knew it wasn't entirely true. Nothing was resolved and now, with media attention at an all-time high, there was a target on Ilya's back. The deportation threats were still looming over everything.

Shane led Ilya to the couch, got him a glass of water. Then, he let him sit in silence while Anya pressed against his knee.

"I couldn't stop thinking," Ilya said, "that maybe they were right. That I don't belong here. That I should just..."

"Don't." Shane's voice sharpened in an instant. "Don't you dare finish that sentence. You belong here and I'm not letting them take you. Not ever."

"How?" Ilya looked at him. "How do you stop them?"

Shane didn't know, but as he sat there with his arm wrapped around the man he loved, watching Ilya's hands shake as he tried to take a sip of water, something finally clicked into place.

Fuck the lawyers. Fuck the process. Fuck the Metros and their ultimatums and their sponsorship deals. If the system wasn't going to protect Ilya, Shane would have to find another way. Whatever the cost.

I'm sorry. It wasn't much fun to write either. Better stuff is coming soon, though.

The Ottawa Immigration Holding Centre is fictional. There's no IHC near Ottawa which means he'd likely be taken to a provincial jail which... hard nope.

Chapter 5

On his first night home, Ilya slept for twelve hours straight. Shane knew, because he was awake for most of them.

He lay on his side with Anya snuggled against the backs of his knees and watched the slow rise and fall of Ilya's chest. He was okay. He was home. Shane had been telling himself that for hours, and his body still wasn't buying it.

Around 4 am, he gave up and carefully slid out of bed. In the kitchen, he poured some coffee he didn't drink and went to stand by the window. With his palm flat against the cold glass, he thought about the three days he couldn't get to Ilya save for a short, monitored phone call. How he could not see him or touch him or do anything useful to help. And now they were in limbo again, with the protected person's hearing still two months away. If nothing else went wrong.

Eventually, the cold coming through the glass drove him back upstairs. He climbed in beside Ilya, who stirred without waking and shifted in his sleep. Shane looked at the back of his neck, at the bump of his vertebrae, barely visible in the blue glow of the alarm clock. He smothered the urge to trace it with his finger.

"You're watching me sleep again," Ilya said. "Is creepy."

"I thought you were asleep."

"I was. Now I'm not." He drifted closer. "Come here."

Ilya's arm came around him, heavy and warm, and pulled him in close. The tension in Shane's shoulders eased a fraction.

The day after he took Ilya home, Shane was placed on administrative leave by the Metros.

The email, sent from the front office and evidently written and approved by a team of lawyers, cited Shane's *"repeated unexcused absences from team obligations and their impact on operations during a critical period of the season."*

Shane's agent called within minutes. "It's a holding measure," Declan said. "They're not terminating your contract, but they're giving themselves room to maneuver."

"Because I missed practice," Shane said, with sarcasm so thick he could taste it.

"And also because you made a statement on camera calling Canada's immigration system a disgrace." There was a pause, and Shane could picture Declan pulling on his thinning hair. "They're only citing the absences because that's cleaner. But the press comment—"

"I'm aware of what this is really about."

"Your union rep is already looped in. You have rights here, the absences were communicated in advance, and there were extenuating circumstances..."

"How long?" Shane asked, cutting to the chase.

"Officially?" Declan exhaled loudly. "Undefined. Realistically, though, they're waiting to see how Ilya Rozanov's situation resolves."

Well. Weren't they all?

Shane thanked Declan and ended the call.

The thing was, he wasn't even surprised. It had been building for weeks, probably from the moment the FanMail video made the rounds on Twitter. That day, he'd stopped being the Metros' golden boy and became an embarrassment, the magnitude of which depended on who you asked. It was plain in the way management had been watching his every move, the way Theriault's check-ins had become less about hockey and more about optics. He'd known it was coming.

That didn't make it land any softer, though.

Shane went downstairs, where Ilya was on the couch with Anya, scrolling on his phone. He looked up when Shane came in, and whatever he could read on his face had him sitting up right away.

"Montreal put me on administrative leave."

"Ah." Something flickered across Ilya's face. "Both benched, then."

"Yep."

Ilya set Anya down on the cushion next to him and held out his arm. Shane immediately melted into him on the couch with his head on Ilya's chest.

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be." The sound of Ilya's heartbeat next to his ear was grounding. "I was ready for it."

"Maybe," Ilya said while his fingers combed through Shane's hair. "It still sucks."

"I know."

"Any advice on what to do with yourself?"

"Daydrinking helps," Ilya joked. "And petting cute dogs is a must, of course."

Shane hummed in response. His mind was already working through it.

"I'm going to call Paula. Figure out if there's anything we can do about the timing. Push harder on the work permit."

Ilya's brows furrowed. "I think your priorities are out of order."

"What do you mean?"

"Think about it." Ilya's hand slid from his hair to the back of his neck. "We are both home. No practice, no games, no meetings." His fingers traced a slow path down Shane's spine. "No obligations whatsoever."

Shane took a second to catch up. "Oh."

"Yes." Ilya's mouth curved. "Oh."

The next morning, Shane called his parents. He'd been putting it off, for reasons he still had trouble articulating. The problem was that he'd never quite figured out how to separate Yuna Hollander, the mother, from Yuna Hollander, the manager. While he was fairly certain of the first one's unconditional support, he suspected the second would be deeply upset.

He knew they'd seen the news and were waiting for him to reach out. His mother had sent a carefully worded text the previous day, saying: *"Thinking of you. Let us know if you need anything. We're here."* His father had followed up with a simple request to call when he could which, from his dad, meant approximately the same thing.

His mother picked up on the first ring.

"Hi, sweetheart," she said, and the warmth in her voice undid something in him.

It took a few seconds before he trusted his own. "Hi, Mom."

They talked for a long time. He told her about the leave, about the latest on Ilya's situation, or the lack of it. He tried to convey how fragile and brittle everything felt right now. She listened, asked careful questions and didn't offer empty reassurance.

"How's Ilya holding up?" she asked.

"I don't really know," Shane said. "He's... he's Ilya. He doesn't want me to know how bad it really is."

"That sounds familiar," she said dryly, and Shane laughed despite himself.

"Your dad wants to say something," she said. There was a rustle on the other end of the line.

"Hey, son." His father's voice sounded more serious and deliberate than he'd heard it in a long time. "I just want you to know. Whatever you decide to do, we're with you."

"Thanks, Dad."

"No matter what," he repeated. There was a pause before he added, "That clear?"

"Yeah. Clear." Shane's voice came out rough. "Thanks."

He sat with the phone in his hand for a few minutes after they hung up. No matter what.

He filed it away.

Hayden reached out, too. The locker room was still as tense, he said, and as Shane's closest friend in the team, he was catching some of it by association.

"Just so you know," he told Shane. "JJ went to Theriault to ask him to reverse the administrative leave. He got shot down in about twenty seconds, but... he tried."

Shane had to press the heel of his hand to his eye. He hadn't expected that to hit as hard as it did. He told Hayden to pass along that he'd call JJ soon.

"He'd like that," Hayden said.

Shane was in the shower when Ilya's phone lit up with a shared link, and his brother's face in the thumbnail. He clicked it before he could think better of it.

The clip was about two minutes long, with a state television logo in the corner. Alexei sat opposite a smooth-faced interviewer in a dark green suit, hands folded on the desk. He looked stiff and sweaty under the studio lights.

The interviewer opened gently, as if breaking sad news. "Your brother has become the center of an international controversy. How has your family received this?"

"With great pain," Alexei said. "This is not something we expected. Not something any family expects." He cleared his throat. "I have a daughter. I will not have her grow up thinking this is something to celebrate or defend. A man must stand for something. I am standing for her."

The interviewer nodded with practiced sympathy. "That must be especially painful given the nature of the charges against him."

Alexei nodded gravely. "Russia has laws for a reason. They exist to protect our society, our children, our values. No one is above them. My brother has made his choices. They are not the choices of our family, our culture or our country. I can't support them, and I can't support him."

"Would you say he has betrayed Russia?"

Alexei's answer came without hesitation. "I couldn't speak to his intentions, but Russia certainly hasn't betrayed him. He has made himself into something unrecognizable. I wish for him what God wills."

As if Ilya were already gone. As if there was nothing left to wish for.

The shower was still running. Ilya could hear it through the wall. He looked at the ceiling and made himself breathe.

He'd known it was possible. Likely, even, so much so a part of him had been waiting for it. Alexei had always been the one who cared most what their father thought, and now he was gone, it was up to him to uphold his legacy.

They'd never been close. Even as children, they'd understood each other poorly. Ilya had learned young not to expect anything from his brother but demands and contempt. Never kindness, nor support.

But even after a lifetime of knowing better, watching Alexei denounce him publicly still hollowed him out completely.

The shower shut off, and Ilya knew he had until Shane finished toweling off to gather himself. He pressed his palms against his eyes, breathed, and put his phone in the nightstand drawer.

The door opened and Shane emerged in a cloud of steam, rubbing the back of his head with the towel. He took one look at Ilya and asked, "What happened?"

"My brother, Alexei. He gave an interview to state television."

Shane went still. "What did he say?"

"What you'd expect." Ilya's voice was as steady as it could be. "That he doesn't support me. That I'm shaming our family's name."

Shane sat down next to him on the edge of the bed. "Ilya."

"It's fine."

"It's fucking not."

Shane's hand found his and held on.

"I'm trying not to make this bigger than it is. He and I were never..." He stopped. "We were never really brothers. Not the way the word should mean."

"Okay."

Shane pulled him in. Ilya closed his eyes and, for a moment, let himself be held by the only family that had ever chosen him.

The subtitled version of the clip went viral almost immediately.

Their phones kept buzzing. After a while, Ilya took Anya out back with a tennis ball. Shane watched from inside as Anya ran back and forth to the gate, tail wagging, while Ilya sat on the steps and threw for her.

Ilya's phone lit up again. Sveta.

"Hi," Shane said. They hadn't even met in person yet, and he'd been hoping to meet her under better circumstances. But here they were.

"He told me." She didn't sound surprised to hear Shane's voice. "Actually, he texted me. Just the clip, nothing else."

"He looks okay," Shane said. "He's managing."

There was a sound on the other end, not quite a sigh. "He's good at that. Managing." She was quiet for a moment. "Tell him I called. Tell him I'm proud of him. Tell him... tell him he's not alone."

"I will."

"Are you taking care of him?"

"I'm trying to."

"Good. Take care of yourself too. You're no use to him if you're not."

Outside, they were done playing ball. Ilya was leaning forward with his forearms on his knees and Anya's head in his lap. Shane went outside and sat down on the step beside him, close enough that their shoulders touched.

"Sveta called," he said. "She says she's proud of you."

Something moved across Ilya's face. "I haven't done anything."

"You're still here. Doing your best." Shane looked at the side of his face. "I think that's what she means."

Ilya was quiet. Anya sighed heavily and repositioned her head on his thigh.

"What he told the world," Ilya said, breaking the silence. "The way people will read that, Russia pointing to it as proof of... the right response. I keep thinking about the others. Kids in Russia who are like me, who have been watching this. They are going to see the interview and think... This is what happens. You come out, your family denounces you on television. Your career ends. You get detained." He stopped. "Is not a very hopeful story."

"Not yet. But it could be. Maybe we just have to get through our part first."

He turned to him, eyeing him curiously. "What is that?"

"Not giving up." He held Ilya's gaze. "Making so much noise that they can't ignore it."

There was a silence, then, "Shane."

"I'm just thinking," Shane said. "I'm allowed to think."

"Depends on what you are thinking about."

"About..." He stopped to search for the right words. "About what it would take to force a response."

"You know what it would take."

"Yeah."

Ilya looked at him for a long time. "Don't be stupid," he finally said.

"I'm not being stupid."

"You're thinking about torching your career."

"I'm thinking about the fact that when they detained you," Shane said, "I sat in a parking lot being careful and polite and not making waves, and it didn't matter at all. The judge agreed with Paula's arguments, but nothing's resolved. Nothing's happening. Careful and polite isn't doing fucking anything." He stopped. "So maybe we should try something else."

Ilya looked away first.

"I can't ask you to do that."

"You didn't ask for anything. Not once."

Ilya's jaw tightened.

"I've been thinking about it for a while," Shane said. "The administrative leave kind of decided some of it for me. I'm already benched. They're already punishing me, so... If I'm going to get punished anyway, it might as well be for doing something that matters."

"That is the worst logic I have ever heard from you."

"Is it wrong, though?"

A long silence.

"No," Ilya said softly. "It is not."

Shane's shoulder was still pressed against his. He gave Ilya's a light shove. "I need to think about it properly," Shane said. "Talk to Paula, Declan, Farrah. My parents. I'm not going to do anything without thinking it through." He looked at Ilya. "But I want you to know I'm thinking about it."

Ilya nodded. "Okay."

It wasn't quite permission, more like acknowledgement. Neither of them spoke for a while. Anya had fallen asleep across their feet and the yard had gone very quiet. Somewhere out there, Alexei's interview was still spreading.

A couple of days later, Paula set up a call with the both of them.

"I want to be honest about where we are," she said. "The hearing is eight weeks out, the work permit is stalled, and we've run out of expedited options. What's left is political. We need public pressure, MPs on record and media attention."

"I'm considering making a public statement." Shane carefully said. "Would it help?"

"There's no guarantee. Ministerial intervention is discretionary. But it's also political, and politicians respond to political pressure. So, yes. If the message is clear, it would help."

Shane looked at Ilya.

Ilya was looking at the table.

"Thank you, Paula," Shane said. "We'll call you back."

After she hung up, they sat together in silence for a moment.

"Well," Ilya said.

"Yeah."

"You've already decided."

"I want to know what you think."

Ilya looked at him then. "I think I am terrified of what happens to you, after. And whether it works." He held Shane's gaze. "But you're probably right that you are going to lose a lot either way. So it should at least do something."

Shane reached across the table. Ilya's hand turned to meet him.

"Okay," Shane said.

"Okay," Ilya said back.

"There's something else we need to discuss." Shane exhaled. "I asked Paula and Daryl if they still thought getting married could harm your case. If we did it right away."

Ilya's eyebrows shot up and he went very still. "Oh?"

"Yeah. They say they don't think so. Given the..." He searched for the word. "Recent developments."

Ilya was quiet for a moment, turning his mug in his hands. "I really hate the idea of us getting married because we have to."

"I get that, but..." Shane had thought about how to say the next part. He reached over and stilled Ilya's hands around the mug. "I don't want to sit in a parking lot with walls and guards between us ever again. Just because I don't have official documentation of what you are to me. We can still have the real ceremony over the summer, with everyone. This would be just for us."

"And the government."

"And the government." The corner of his mouth lifted slightly.

Ilya looked at him for a long moment. Something in his face shifted, settled. "Okay."

"Really?"

"You're stuck with me, Hollander." He said it quietly, like it was just a fact.

"No fucking shit." Shane let out a short laugh, small and unsteady. Then he leaned in and kissed him like they had all the time in the world. Like nothing was chasing them.

That night, Shane let his parents know what he'd decided to do. His mother's silence lasted exactly four seconds. Then, her expression turned to the razor sharp focus that made Yuna Hollander so scary and efficient.

"Tell me what you need," she said.

He spent the next day discussing everything with Declan and Farrah. They went through contracts, implications, the union angle, what could be contested and what couldn't. He talked to Paula again, mapped out what his statement needed to say and not say.

He practiced the final version out loud in the bathroom at 2 am, to make sure it sounded like a human being and not a press release. A sleepy Ilya appeared in the doorway, squinting.

"Are you talking to yourself?"

"Practicing."

Ilya listened to him read the rest of it. Then he was quiet for a moment.

"Is good," he said. "It sounds like you."

"Is that a good thing?"

"Yes." Ilya looked at him with one of the softest expressions he'd ever seen on him. "That's the point."

Ilya watched the press conference from his couch.

The room was full of cameras and reporters. Not just the regular Montreal press pool, but a number of national and international outlets, too. Shane stood at the podium in a dark blue shirt and no tie. He looked tired. He also looked completely steady.

Shane read the prepared statement first. Ilya had already heard several versions of it while it was being vetted by Declan, Farrah and the lawyers. He still listened to every word.

It spoke about Ilya, about the past five weeks, the detention and work permit issues. The protected person's claim and how slow and uncertain the entire process felt. What Russia had set in motion and what Canada wasn't doing in response. Shane's account of events was factual, measured, and he didn't spare anyone. Not Russian authorities, not the CBSA, not league management, and certainly not the Metros. After he announced that he'd been placed on administrative leave and had no intention of contesting it, he looked up from the statement.

"I'm removing myself from playoff consideration," he said. "Not because I don't want to play. Because I can't, in good conscience, show up and compete like none of this is happening. Like the man I love isn't sitting at home, waiting on a bureaucratic process to decide whether he gets to stay in the country where we're building a life together."

He paused, and his eyes shone under the intense light of the press room.

"I will no longer be quiet about this. I'm making this choice with full knowledge of what it will cost me. And I am asking publicly for the Minister of Immigration to exercise the discretionary power available under the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act and intervene directly in this case. Not as a favor to me or Ilya Rozanov, but because it is the right thing to do. And to anyone watching, if you agree that no one should face persecution, imprisonment or exile for who they love, I am asking you to make that known to your elected representatives. Call them. Write to them. Tell them this matters because it does."

The room erupted.

On his couch, in Ottawa, Ilya had Anya's ears in his hands without remembering reaching for her. He watched Shane field the first wave of questions, not taking the bait on the inflammatory ones, not backing down on anything he'd said.

Ilya's phone was vibrating continuously. Sveta, Boodram, David and Yuna, numbers he didn't recognize. He set it face-down on the cushion next to him.

On the screen, Shane was wrapping it up. Ilya sat with Anya in the quiet living room and stared at the empty podium. There it was, the thing Ilya had always wanted, and Shane had always feared. He hadn't imagined it would look like this. Shane had just said the words out loud, on camera, with his name attached, in front of every sports journalist in the country, and now there was no taking it back. And he'd looked, the whole time, like he was completely sure.

'The man I love'.

Ilya pressed his face into Anya's fur and let himself not be okay. Not about any of it. Shane had just walked away from everything he'd worked for, and did it so calmly. So certainly. Like there had never been another choice. The fear of what that would take from him sat like a stone in Ilya's chest. The gratitude was worse. And underneath both of them, this enormous, terrible tenderness he didn't have a word for. The sheer overwhelming fact of being loved like that.

Chapter 6

Shane watched Montreal's game one from the couch with Ilya and Anya.

The Metros had terminated his contract hours after the press conference, arguing conduct detrimental to the team. He was at peace with it. Declan handled the negotiations with Moreau's office until they reached a settlement. Shane kept his salary in exchange for signing an NDA preventing him from speaking about the team, but not Ilya's case, which was the only thing he truly cared about.

Still, it was a little surreal to watch his team tackle round one with a newly minted captain and his name not listed on the roster. Eleven seasons, three Stanley Cups, and it was as if he'd never existed. Never been part of the team.

Or it did, until the broadcast cut to the crowd in the packed arena and he took in the signs. LOVE IS LOVE. I SUPPORT HOLLANOV. MAKE HOCKEY GAY AGAIN. Near the back, a group held up signs in Russian Shane couldn't read, along with pictures of Ilya and Shane in their respective team's jerseys. There were also a few that read BRING HOLLANDER BACK and one, caught briefly by a camera before the broadcast cut away, said MOREAU COWARD in large black letters.

Beside him, Ilya had gone very still.

"Sveta sent me this," he said, passing his phone.

It showed a photo of a young woman with the numbers 24 and 81 painted on each side of her face, holding a hand-lettered sign that read, I CONTACTED MY MP, DID YOU?

Shane handed it back without a word.

During the first period, every Montreal penalty drew extended booing, which, in itself, wasn't that uncommon. But then, in the second, a fight broke out near the blue line. When Montreal's player came out ahead, loud and persistent booing rose from a section of the home crowd. Their own fans.

Part of Shane was mortified for his former teammates.

At this point, even the commentators stopped pretending nothing odd was going on. *"It's been an emotional week for this franchise. Montreal fans are making themselves heard. We'll see if the team can channel that energy as we head into the third..."*

He reached over and touched Ilya's shoulder. Ilya took the hint, shifting down until his head was in Shane's lap, their hands tangled together. They didn't talk much for the rest of the game.

Shane's phone mostly went to voicemail. He checked notifications in batches, which was the only way to stay functional. Journalists, former sponsors, a producer from a morning show he'd never heard of... They all wanted a soundbite, a reaction, a quick quote. The press conference clips were still circulating, picking up new commentary every few hours.

Hayden called the morning after game one and they talked for twenty minutes, which helped more than Shane expected. It was mostly Hayden talking, building him up, affirming his support.

In the evening that same day, JJ called. It was the first time they talked, really talked, since their falling out after the video leaked.

It was shorter. JJ wasn't much of a talker, not when it came to difficult stuff, but whatever he'd needed to work through, he'd done most of it on his own. They talked around the edges of it for most of the call. The firing, the contract, whether Shane was at peace with everything. And then JJ went quiet for a moment and said, "You did the right thing."

His tone was flat and definite, like he'd debated it for a while and reluctantly came to that conclusion.

"I'm not done being pissed at you," JJ said. "Just so you know."

"I get it."

"Eleven years, Hollander." There was another pause on the line. He cleared his throat. "But yeah. You did the right thing."

Shane had to look at the ceiling for a moment. When he trusted his voice again, he said, "Thank you."

"Don't thank me. Just... Take care of yourselves. Both of you." A beat passed, then he added, "We'll talk, you and me, yeah? After."

"I'd like that," Shane croaked.

"Yeah. Okay."

He hung up before Shane could say anything else.

The protest wasn't organized by anyone in particular, which was maybe the reason it kept growing organically. People were posting screenshots of their MP contact confirmations. A law professor in Toronto wrote a thread about protected person status that had been shared three hundred thousand times. Someone had put together a step-by-step guide to contacting your representative that Rose reposted to her six million followers. The fanart was everywhere too. Shane and Ilya in their jerseys. Ilya wrapped in a Canadian flag. By the time game two started, it was the second trending topic in Canada.

And then, Shane got a voicemail from Brandon Wiebe.

He'd met him maybe twice when he played against Ottawa, and didn't know much about him other than what Ilya had told him, which were only good things. The voicemail sounded like a man who knew the right thing but wasn't practiced at saying it to strangers. "Hollander. It's Wiebe, Ottawa. I just wanted you to know the team's behind Ilya. Has been from the start. And for what it's worth, the way you handled this was, uh." He seemed to be scraping for words. "Really impressive. Okay. Take care of yourselves."

After listening to it, Shane went to find Ilya. He was in the living room with Anya across his legs, phone face-down beside him. Shane held out his own phone with the voicemail pulled up. Ilya listened carefully, a small smile playing on his face, before he handed the phone back.

Shane didn't comment on it further, but an idea that was lodged in the back of his mind was solidifying. He needed to have another chat with Declan.

Ottawa facing Montreal was always going to be a big deal. With public support growing stronger and faster than anyone had anticipated, and the story gaining massive traction in the media, their round one game carried the pressure of a Final.

Ilya was watching the pregame broadcast alone while Shane was on a call with Paula. Twenty minutes in, he came to the bedroom doorway.

"Come look at this," he said.

On the screen, the Centaurs were warming up. Every player on the ice had a white armband on their left wrist. It was plain, unofficial, the kind you could make at home with medical tape. The broadcast caught it in close-up when Boodram skated to the boards for water.

It read the number 81 in black marker.

Ilya's eyes were wide. A sudden warmth spread in Shane's chest as he watched the emotion playing on his face. And somewhere underneath, a touch of envy.

"Did you know?" Shane said.

"No." His voice was shaky. "Bood texted me today. Said he hoped I will watch."

On screen, Wiebe was behind the bench. He was wearing a '81' armband, too, the white tape stark against the dark sleeve of his suit jacket.

Neither of them moved when the warmup ended. At the sound of the horn, both teams retreated to their dressing rooms. Shane didn't know what he expected. Probably that they would quietly peel it off, now the gesture had been visibly made. But the Centaurs came out for the first period still wearing Ilya's number on their wrist.

He heard Ilya exhale slowly beside him.

The broadcast didn't make a big thing of it. The commentators mentioned it only once, early in the first period. But the cameras kept finding the armbands anyway. A wrist on the bench. A glove toss after a whistle. Boodram's forearm raised to block a shot in the second.

The league would issue a statement the next day, stating unauthorized uniform modifications were a violation of equipment regulations. Teams were reminded of their obligations. It was four sentences long and carefully avoided mentioning what the armbands said, and why anyone had worn them.

The Centaurs' equipment manager replied to a reporter's follow-up that the items in question had been disposed of after the game, which was true. It was also true that the armbands had been worn for sixty minutes of game time, that the image of Boodram's wrist had been the most shared hockey photograph of the playoffs' first week, and that no fine was announced. No suspension threatened.

There was no further comment from the league regarding the matter.

Shane looked at Ilya, who was still watching the broadcast long after the final buzzer.

"You've got a good team," Shane said.

Ilya didn't answer right away. On screen, Boodram was doing a post-game interview. He wasn't wearing the armband anymore, but he wasn't pretending it hadn't happened either.

"Yes," Ilya said, like he was only now letting himself fully believe it.

It wasn't only Ottawa or Montreal. That was the part Shane was still catching up with.

Cliff Marlow posted an old photo from some Boston team event years ago, that showed Ilya laughing at something Marlow had just said. In a caption that didn't sound PR-approved, he dubbed Ilya the best linemate he ever had. He said he'd been watching this play out for weeks while keeping his mouth shut, and he was done with that. He didn't care what Russia thought of who Ilya slept with, and neither should anybody else. Anyone who disagreed could come find him personally. Which, given Marlow's build and record for knocking out opponents, including Shane, quickly became a bit of a meme.

The MLH Players' Association issued a carefully worded statement about monitoring the situation. It was slightly stronger than Shane expected, which still didn't mean much. They called the situation 'a matter of serious concern' and said the association was 'actively engaged' with the league on Ilya's behalf. No mention of homophobia. No mention of Russia.

The league still said nothing, and its stubborn silence was becoming a news story of its own.

Scott Hunter texted him. He said he'd been following since the FanMail video and was sorry for not speaking publicly sooner. He was ready to do it now. Later that same day, he published a long text post to his Instagram. It was measured and precise in a way Marlow's

hadn't been, and twice as damaging for it. He knew how to say things that couldn't easily be dismissed. He'd had years of practice.

Beyond Hunter and Marlow, three other players made statements within forty-eight hours of each other. A goalie from Tampa. A defenceman from Calgary. A rookie from Detroit who'd been in the league eleven months and apparently didn't know he was supposed to keep his head down. His statement was the bluntest, and also the most shared.

The signs started appearing at games that had nothing to do with either of them. Tampa. New York. Vancouver. Fans holding up hand-lettered signs or wearing their numbers. It was an odd thing, being a stranger to so many people who apparently cared what happened to you, enough for them to go out of their way to show their support.

Paula called with measuredly good news. "The minister's office has been contacted. MPs, mostly, but also journalists, members of the public. The Ukrainian-Canadian Congress reached out, which I didn't anticipate."

Ilya made a sound close to a laugh.

"What does that mean, practically?" Shane asked.

"It means someone in that office is paying attention. Ministerial intervention is a political act, they need political cover to do it, and right now..." She paused. "Right now, it looks like they might be getting it."

It was the first genuinely hopeful thing anyone had said in weeks and Shane didn't trust it, not yet. But across the table, Ilya's face had changed. Not hope exactly, more like alertness. Like he'd heard a sound in the distance and was listening to find out what it was.

They got married on a Thursday afternoon, in a government office off Elgin Street with faded burgundy carpeting and on the wall, a watercolor of tulips someone had clearly bought at a craft fair.

The two witnesses were Shane's parents, who drove up from the west end and parked in a two-hour spot down the street. Yuna had brought flowers from a grocery store, something yellow and loosely bundled. In the waiting area, she picked the two nicest ones and tucked one into each of their chest pockets. She squeezed Ilya's arm once before letting go.

The ceremony took eleven minutes.

While the officiant read from a laminated card, they held hands through the whole thing. Shane hadn't planned to, but once he'd reached for him, he couldn't let go, and only did when they were instructed to sign the paperwork.

His eyes were full of tears that wouldn't shed. Whatever happened now, no one could say this wasn't real. He thought about how elated and terrified he'd been, that summer before their rookie season, when he'd kissed Ilya for the first time. How perfect and impossible it all felt.

He wished the deeply closeted boy he used to be could see the two of them now, exchanging vows while his parents beamed in the background.

Shane kissed his new husband before the officiant was even finished saying they could, and with perhaps more enthusiasm than was appropriate for a government office.

Behind them, his mother made a muffled sound and his father laughed, short and warm. He pulled Yuna into his arms and kissed the top of her head while her shoulders shook.

They found a fancy Japanese restaurant a few blocks away, got a table in the back and ordered too much food. Yuna told an embarrassing story about an eight-year-old Shane trying to convince her to let him practice skating on the immaculate kitchen tiles. Shane couldn't remember ever hearing that one before, and Ilya laughed like he didn't have a care in the world.

His parents left after lunch and they drove home in companionable silence, for the most part.

"It still counts, yes?" Ilya asked after a while. His eyes were straight ahead, but his expression had gone serious.

Shane had to remind himself to keep his eyes on the road. "It still counts." He reached across and grabbed the hand resting on his thigh. "Of course it fucking does."

"Good." Ilya squeezed his hand and it felt as though he'd squeezed his heart directly. Shane squeezed back.

Around Ilya's neck, his mother's cross hung alone again. The ring Shane had given him in January was now on his finger, where it would stay. They'd had it resized and engraved with their names and today's date, like Shane's own.

Once Anya was done greeting them, the house went quiet. Shane found a glass in the kitchen and put their pocket flowers into water. When he turned back, Ilya was watching him from across the kitchen with that soft, private look that made his heart stutter every time.

"Hi," Shane said.

"Hi." Ilya's eyes were twinkling. "We should probably, what is word... consummate the wedding?"

Shane looked at him like he hadn't heard correctly. "Sorry?"

"Is tradition!" Ilya's expression was entirely too earnest. "Is how you make it official."

"Is this Victorian England?"

"Is mandatory! For legal purposes."

"This is not how legal purposes work."

"How do you know? You are a lawyer now?"

"I know several lawyers. I could call one right now."

Ilya considered this. "They will probably say we must consummate."

"They would absolutely not say that. We signed the papers, that's it. We're legally married. No additional steps required."

"Your lawyers are even more boring than you."

"We started hooking up eleven years ago. Whatever needed consummating has been consummated. Extensively."

Ilya made a pouting face, but the lopsided smile threatening to break through betrayed him. "Okay," he said, "but I am carrying you over the threshold."

"We walked through the threshold ten minutes ago."

"It was not official then." He was already moving.

Shane had approximately half a second to decide whether to be dignified about this or not. In the end, he was. *Mostly*. Ilya got him off the floor with the ease of someone who'd worked out several hours a day for their entire life, carried him through the living room and deposited him on the couch.

"There," Ilya said, satisfied. "Can I fuck my husband now?"

Shane rolled his eyes. "You're unbelievable."

"But you love me," he countered, grinning wide and bright.

"Inexplicably." Shane reached up and pulled him down by the front of his shirt. Ilya came willingly and they ended up tangled on the couch, with Shane's face pressed into Ilya's neck. What was there for him to do but kiss him? Ilya's breath hitched when Shane sucked at the pulse point down his throat. He did it again, harder.

"Is that a yes?" Ilya asked, his voice low and breathy and unbearably hot.

Shane let out a sigh, making a poor job of sounding annoyed. "I guess." His hands were already working on his husband's belt.

The next day, they posted a single photo to both of their Instagram accounts. It was in classy black and white and showed both of their hands side by side, with Ilya's yard in the background. Their wedding bands gleamed in the bright morning sun. No caption.

By noon, it was the most shared post either of them had ever made. A startling number of hockey players had extended their congratulations in the comments, with varying degrees of sincerity, no doubt, but the result was the same.

Shane's phone became unusable within the hour. He turned off notifications and left it face-down on the counter. Ilya sat cross-legged on the couch with Anya in his lap, scrolling with the expression of someone watching a storm from indoors. Not quite safe, but under a roof.

The sports media took most of the day to catch up but by evening, it was everywhere. Two MLH players, married, in the middle of a deportation crisis: unprecedented didn't quite cover it. The takes ranged from genuinely moving to plainly political to completely unhinged. Hayden texted Shane a screenshot of someone calling them the most iconic married couple in sports history, with seventeen question marks for caption. Shane replied with a promise to have him as his best man when they could do it right.

A new clip had started circulating. Someone had filmed it from the Montreal crowd during a game, Shane couldn't tell which. It showed a small group, maybe thirty people, standing with their signs until security came over, twice. Both times, the people sat down, waited, and stood back up.

The caption said, *"They can't make us all sit down."*

Darryl's text came after 11 pm the next evening. Ilya had gone to bed early, claiming married life was exhausting and his husband would be the death of him. To be fair, they'd done very little but made their marriage extra official for the past couple of days. However, Ilya's complaining was significantly undermined by the fact that he'd instigated at least half of it.

"The Minister's Office is requesting a private briefing on Ilya's case on Tuesday. Paula has details. This is a good sign."

For weeks, every text from Darryl had been another door closing. Shane had stopped expecting anything else. He stared at it for a moment, not quite believing he'd gotten it right. Finally. A good sign.

Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

My apologies for the delay! And much thanks to kallisto_k for beta reading this chapter.

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

Hockey players were, notoriously, a superstitious bunch. Lucky underwear, unchangeable pregame meal, left-hand double knocks on the boards, they all had their thing.

Ilya did not indulge in magical thinking. Whether he played well or not was on him and him alone. He believed in *something*, some curated, less punishing version of what he'd been taught as a child, but not in an interventionist higher power tracing his life's trajectory for him.

So when Darryl said there was a sign, and it was good, he didn't know what to do with that.

He'd been promised good signs before. The protected person's claim, the lawyer's measured confidence, the mounting public pressure... all good signs. And still, the permits were denied, the hearing delayed, and CBSA had shown up at his door. So he was not going to let himself trust this yet.

Something had shifted and it was the closest they had come to a positive outcome, but there were still a number of ways that it could all go wrong. That some guy in an office somewhere would decide that Ilya Rozanov, a queer hockey player who'd done nothing in his life but shoot pucks and cause trouble, definitely wasn't worth picking a fight with Russia. It happened to people with stronger cases than his so, why not?

He did *not* say any of this to Shane who was, in the peculiar way of someone who was finally running out of worst-case scenarios to rehearse, cautiously optimistic.

Over the past decade, Ilya had become somewhat of an expert at decoding Shane's moods through the subtle changes in his expression. By now, he could read his entire thought-process playing on his face, in the way his eyes shifted and narrowed, and the corners of his mouth lifted and dropped in rapid succession.

So, watching Shane soften and give in to hope, Ilya felt two things simultaneously. The first was a tenderness so acute it was almost painful, and the second was pure terror.

If this didn't work, Shane would have given up his career and reputation for nothing. The two of them were tied for second and third out gay and queer MLH players in the history of the league, and if the way Scott Hunter had been treated this past year was any indication, circumspect tolerance was the best they could expect from now on. The signs, the flags, the

face paints were the work of a vocal minority, Ilya was fairly sure of that. The hockey world as a whole was far from ready to embrace queerness.

Since the press conference, he'd expended a formidable amount of energy trying not to imagine what the rest of Shane's career would look like now his standing as a world-class athlete was crumbling. Which major team would take the risk to bring him on now? He couldn't see a path but down. Every time the thought presented to him straight-on, he felt like the floor had dropped from under him.

If the Minister's Office reviewed his file and shrugged it off, Shane would be out of a job, and Ilya's situation still as grim. The worst part was, Shane would swear he'd made the right call either way.

But Ilya would know better, and he'd have to live with that.

During their Monday session, Galina listened to the same things he'd been telling her for weeks, the guilt, the waiting, the fear, and she said, "You are doing it again."

"What?"

"Treating Shane's choices as your responsibility. His agency as your burden."

"He made those choices because of me."

"He made them because of who he is," she said. "There is a difference. You did not make him stand up in front of cameras. He decided that was what he was willing to do. Taking ownership of that decision away from him is its own kind of disrespect."

Ilya thought about it on the walk home. He was still thinking about it when he got back and found Shane asleep on the couch with Anya across his legs, one hand resting on her back. The sight hit Ilya all over again, right in the soft and mushy place he'd spent his entire life trying to conceal. He could no longer deny how vitally, wholeheartedly he needed this specific person. It was the strength of that need that had scared him off for so long, the potential for devastation that came with it. He was still learning to accept it.

Time passed slowly.

They didn't talk much past the mundanity of everyday life. Ilya looked like he had nothing he could safely say, and Shane knew not to push him. Over the past months, he'd developed a clearer understanding of what Ilya could and couldn't withstand, the same way he'd learned not to trust even his most convincing reassurances about his state of mind.

They were both in the kitchen when the call came, cooking some fancy omelette for breakfast to keep themselves busy. It was the day after the briefing, and while they'd been warned not to expect immediate feedback, the wait was agonizing. So, Shane focused on chopping veggies while Ilya whisked away with far more intensity than necessary, and Anya ran from one to the other to beg them in turn in case there was cheese.

Shane looked up when his phone buzzed and caught Paula's name on the screen. His stomach did that Pavlovian tightening thing it always did nowadays when lawyers called.

He picked up. "Hold on, let me put you on speaker." He set the phone between them on the counter. "Hi Paula. Ilya's here, too."

"Hello," Ilya called out in confirmation.

"Good. I wanted to talk to you both." There was a pause, during which Shane braced for impact. "The Minister's Office just issued a statement. They're intervening in your case on humanitarian grounds."

Ilya went very still across the counter.

"This is the outcome we've all been hoping for," Paula said. "Ilya's being granted expedited protected person status. An emergency work permit should be issued in a few days."

The silence stretched for a few seconds. "I want to make sure we're understanding this correctly," Shane said, his heart in his throat. "Is there a catch? A downside of some sort?"

"There's no catch," Paula said gently. "This is it. The pathway to permanent residency is open. We'll be filing spousal sponsorship on top of the protected person claim. Citizenship is a much longer process, but until it's cleared, no one is removing Ilya from this country. That door is closed."

Paula kept talking. Next steps, paperwork timelines, what they'd be filing and when. Shane listened and absorbed as much as he could while his mind spun faster than he could follow. When he finally ended the call, the kitchen was very quiet.

Ilya was still standing at the counter with the whisk in his hand, staring at the phone like he was waiting for the part he'd missed. The moment stretched, along with the silence.

"Ilya."

"Yes." His voice came out flat. "I heard."

His expression hadn't changed. No relief, no joy, no undoing of grief. Just blankness, as if the two of them had been given completely different news. Shane looked at him for a moment, eyes burning, and then came around the counter and put his arms around him.

Ilya stood rigid while Shane's heart pounded so hard it might as well bruise his ribs. Then the stiffness faded and Ilya's hands pressed against his back.

It was Shane who broke.

He didn't mean to. It came up suddenly, with no warning or foresight. One moment he was fine, and then his face was pressed into Ilya's shoulder and he was sobbing. The lawyers, the waiting, the multiple disappointments and disillusion, the look on Ilya's face when they finally released him, all the things Shane had so carefully held in for weeks, it all came crashing down.

One of Ilya's hands came up to the back of his head, started drawing circles against his scalp.

"Okay," Ilya said, low and even. "We are okay."

With a sound somewhere between a sigh and a moan, Shane pulled back and rubbed his palm over his eyes. "Sorry, I didn't mean to—"

"No." Ilya's thumb traced a slow path up his neck, along his jaw. He cradled his face with his large hands, cooling his tear-stained cheeks. The skin-to-skin contact anchored him back into himself. He continued holding him until the last whimper subsided.

"Are you okay?"

Shane let out a sound that was almost a laugh. "No."

"But you will be." Ilya inhaled and exhaled slowly and Shane followed until his breathing was almost back to normal, with a hitch here and there.

"You're not..." He looked at Ilya carefully. "Are *you* okay?"

Ilya considered this. Save for traces of concern for him, he looked unaffected, still. "I don't know yet," he finally said with a one-sided shrug. Ilya looked at him for a moment longer, thumbs still at his jaw. Then he let go and turned back to the counter. "Sit," he said. "I will finish."

Shane sat on one of the stools, not entirely trusting his legs. He watched Ilya resume whisking with the same focus he brought to everything, like the past ten minutes had been a minor interruption and breakfast was all that mattered. The pan hissed when Ilya poured the eggs in, and Anya appeared from wherever she'd been, as if summoned by the sound of cooking. Shane reached out and scratched her ear.

"Better now?" Ilya said, not looking up.

"I think so, yeah," Shane replied.

Ilya nodded and reached for the vegetables.

Ilya woke at half past three with no particular reason. He'd become accustomed to fragmented nights, his sleep frequently interrupted with inescapable spirals of thoughts. He lay there for a while, staring at the ceiling. Shane was asleep beside him, one arm flung across Ilya's side of the bed. When it was clear he wouldn't find sleep again, Ilya got up silently and went downstairs without turning on any lights.

He sat on the couch in the dark with his forearms on his knees and waited to feel... *something*. He wasn't sure what, but he should be feeling something. It was real, he knew that. The danger had passed. And yet, sitting here, he couldn't muster any gratitude or relief. A simple phone call felt like too small a way to put an end to weeks of dread. He'd been so

afraid for so long that he couldn't remember what it felt like not to be. He didn't know how to unlearn living with it.

He was still on the couch twenty minutes later when he heard Shane's footsteps down the stairs.

He sat in the small remaining space beside Ilya, close enough that their knees were touching, and looked at him. He didn't say anything. He didn't ask what was wrong or whether he was okay or how he was feeling, all of which Ilya was deeply grateful for. They stayed like that for a while.

"I think," Ilya said finally, "I forgot how to want things."

Shane didn't respond, just laced their fingers together and held on.

"Every time I tried to think about *after*, there was this thing. Like a wall. Like the future did not exist." He wasn't sure he knew how to explain it in Russian, let alone in English. "I stopped trying."

"I know," Shane said. "I noticed."

"I think I don't know how to start again."

"Give it a minute," Shane said, and bumped his knee against Ilya's. "You can't undo all that in a day." Then he let out a long yawn.

The corner of Ilya's mouth lifted. "You should get some sleep."

"What about you?"

"I don't think I can."

"Come back to bed anyway," Shane said. "We'll find some way to kill time."

The corner of Ilya's mouth lifted properly this time. He followed Shane upstairs in the dark and got back into bed. Shane was already pulling him close before he'd finished settling, warm and solid and refusing to let him be anywhere else.

The best thing about the days after, Ilya found, was that they were quiet. Not the petrified silence of the past few weeks, just ordinary quiet. Spring mornings. Coffee. Anya demanded her walk with the relentless persistence of a dog used to getting her way.

Ilya was walking her along the river path, early in the morning, when he first felt that something had changed. It was strange, how much of himself he'd given over to fear without even realizing it. It had been everywhere, in the texture of things, the bland taste of the food he ate, hanging like smoke in the air around him. And now it was lifting.

Galina had explained that this kind of trauma needed time processing, that it would be moving to the forefront and back for some time. But this morning, on the path by the river, with cold rising off the water and Anya pulling him eagerly toward a scent she wanted to investigate, he felt better than he could remember feeling in a long time. Lighter.

When they got home, Shane was in the kitchen, cooking breakfast. Anya dashed to her bowl and took a long drink before flopping happily in a corner.

"How was she?" Shane asked.

"Unbearable. She found something dead near the second bridge."

"Did she eat it?"

"I was fast."

"Good reflexes." Shane slid a plate toward him across the counter. "Sit."

Ilya sat and started digging in. Across the table, Shane was scrolling through his phone, looking absurdly attractive with his glasses on and messy bedhead. Ilya was content just looking at him.

"Paula's sending more forms today," Shane said.

Ilya rolled his eyes. "Of course she is."

"Some spousal sponsorship stuff we need to sign."

"Okay." He ate another bite. "We should also update our wills."

Shane looked up from his phone. "That's a little dark for nine in the morning."

"Is practical," he shrugged. "We are married now. Married people update wills."

Shane set his phone down and looked at him, really looked at him, like he was trying to figure something out.

"What?" Ilya asked.

"Nothing." He shook his head slightly. "You seem... different. More like yourself."

Ilya thought about it and nodded. "I think I am getting there," he said.

Reaching across the counter, Shane touched his hand briefly. Then he picked up his phone again, Ilya finished his eggs, and the morning moved on, easy and uncomplicated. Ilya let himself enjoy it.

The last time Ottawa had made it to the playoffs was in the late 2000s. To say they were underdogs was a major understatement. And yet the Centaurs had torn through round one

without their captain, risked fines by wearing his number on their arms, and won the series anyway. Incidentally, they'd taken half the country's heart with them in the process.

Ilya's work permit was cleared on a Saturday, and he was back on the ice the next day.

When he walked out for warmups in game three, the arena was already loud. By the time he'd completed his first lap, it was deafening. In the stands, armbands were everywhere, white tape, '81' written in black sharpie. Ilya kept his head down, his shoulders loose, and skated, because that was what he knew how to do. He waved to the family section, where Shane was seated with the girlfriends, boyfriends and spouses.

The game was close through two periods. Tampa had come prepared, with two men shadowing Ilya at all times, crowding the ice between him and the net. He let them, kept moving around and drew pressure away from Boodram so one of them could move. Then, late in the second, Ilya got through Tampa's defense and shot.

The building erupted. Boodram reached Ilya first, then Haas, then the whole line was piling in. Around them, eighteen thousand people were on their feet, with Shane being the first of them.

Ottawa won 4-2, tying the series.

Ilya came out with his hair still damp from the shower, wearing his post-game suit and his gear bag over his shoulder. It took three seconds for him to find Shane, cross the room and pull him in. With one hand at the back of his neck and an arm around his waist, he held on.

Shane held him back. He was aware, distantly, of other people around them, couples reuniting, changing room banter, but he didn't particularly care.

"Good game," he said into Ilya's shoulder.

Ilya made a sound that wasn't quite a laugh. "Yes," he said. "It was."

The hand at the nape of his neck tilted his head to the side and then Ilya was kissing him, unhurried and completely unbothered, right there in front of the rest of the team. Shane's pulse spiked in alarm for about half a second before the rest of him caught up, and he melted into Ilya's arms. There were a couple of cheers. Someone whistled. Then, the chatter picked up around them as if nothing of significance had just happened.

The run lasted two more rounds, until Ottawa lost game seven 4-3 in overtime. It was a goal nobody saw coming, a point shot that found its way through three guys and hit the back of the cage before Petrov could get there. The horn went and, for a moment, the arena was simply stunned, eighteen thousand people registering the same information at different speeds.

Ilya sat on the bench with his stick across his knees. Around him, players were moving, celebrating at the far end and, on their side, dragging their skates and clearing the ice with

their heads hung low. He watched them skate by without quite seeing. His legs ached, his shoulder was sore from a hit in the second period that would leave a bad bruise. They had given everything this series had asked for, and they'd still come short. One goal. That was all it took.

He didn't move until Bood sat down beside him and said nothing. Then a couple of the younger guys came and sat with them, too. They stayed on the bench together while the arena emptied, slowly. The Ottawa crowd was the last to go.

Shane was waiting for him in the corridor when he exited the changing room. He opened his arms and Ilya walked straight into them.

"Next year," Shane said.

Ilya exhaled, his breath warm into Shane's neck. "Next year."

Shane pulled back just enough to look at him. "We'll be unbeatable."

Ilya held his gaze. "Yes," he said, his smile shy, like he could still barely believe it. "We will be."

No contract was signed yet, nothing official had been announced, but the rumors were there, stubborn and unrelenting. In a few weeks, they would be playing together, and going home to *their* house at the end of the day, with nothing left hanging over their heads. It was all in the open now. The whole world knew about them, and it was still spinning.

Shane nodded, leaned back in, and Ilya held him tighter.

Epilogue

Shane had been here since six in the morning. He'd personally signed off on the catering delivery for the day and carried twelve cases of water bottles from the parking lot because the camp coordinator had thrown out her back.

Ilya arrived at fifteen-to-eight with two large coffees and no apology for being late.

"You look terrible," he said, handing Shane a cup.

"I've been here since six."

"Yes," Ilya said. "I know. I was sleeping."

This was their life now. It still surprised Shane sometimes, how quickly that had become a sentence he could say without thinking twice. *Our life.*

The interseason was split between Shane's cottage, his old apartment in Montreal, and Ilya's house in Ottawa, which was officially their home now. It was more than spacious enough for the two of them and Anya, and probably for more than that, someday. They hadn't seriously talked about it yet. But every time Shane watched Ilya interact with kids, talking to them with infinite patience and earnestness, his chest threatened to burst open with tenderness.

But they had time. For the first time this summer, they could truly be together, out in the open. No hiding, no fear of being caught. They might as well make the most of it.

Moving in together hadn't come without its share of bickering. Ilya had strong opinions about Shane's designer-approved belongings, and Shane had strong opinions about everything else. They were both, according to Hayden, "so disgustingly obsessed with each other they made everybody around them uncomfortable," which Shane took as a compliment.

Although sharing a home was an adjustment, it came with a few perks, including the new shared trophy room they had not come around to christening yet. They were saving it for a special occasion, like celebrating a third successful summer of Game Changers Hockey Camp.

The Foundation had added nine new corporate sponsors since the spring, the ones who'd pulled their money replaced three times over by companies that had never acknowledged hockey before March. Private donors had started sending cheques with handwritten notes, post-its with rainbows and hearts drawn on them. They kept those in a drawer in the office.

Neither of them had properly processed their accidental gay icon statuses, but they were getting there.

The morning session was skating drills. Shane ran the general proceedings while Ilya worked the offensive zone with a patience that continued to unsettle Shane after eleven years. He'd always suspected that, deep down, Ilya was a bit of a people pleaser. That he was only so good at pushing their buttons because he could read them so readily. He hadn't understood

how much until he'd watched him crouch to a kid's eye level and say something that would have them immediately stand up straighter.

Hayden was coaching too, helping with goaltending drills at the far end, along with JJ, who had no coaching qualifications per se, but was tall and charismatic enough that several kids had already asked for his autograph. The camp depended on the time and goodwill of pro players turned would-be coaches, and after everything, there had been an endless influx of friends and acquaintances willing to spare a week of their downtime, or two.

The afternoon was less structured. Skills competitions, some scrimmaging, a long stretch of free time that Shane consistently feared would turn into chaos, but tended to resolve peacefully, into small clusters of kids sprawled on the bleachers with their phones. Shane was standing at the boards, scribbling on his clipboard when one of the kids broke away from the bleacher group and came toward him.

He was thirteen, maybe, small for his age, with a Montreal Metros jersey that had clearly been through one too many washes and was on its way to splitting at the shoulder seam.

"Can I ask you something?"

"Sure," Shane said.

The kid looked at the ice, then back up. "I watched all of it happening in the spring. Like, the press conference and everything. I was..." He took a deep breath. "I came out to my parents in April. Like, right in the middle of everything happening. And I told them it wasn't because of you, like, I wasn't copying you or whatever. But also..." He looked at his shoes. "I don't know. I guess I kinda was. Not *copying* copying, but, you know."

Shane didn't say anything right away, for fear of saying the wrong thing. He felt like he'd just been punched in the stomach in the best possible way.

"That's not nothing," he said finally, while his eyes burned.

"Yeah." The kid looked up. "I just thought maybe you'd want to know."

With that, he jogged back to the bleachers. Shane watched him go, focusing on breathing properly before he did something embarrassing. His clipboard seemed very heavy suddenly, or his hands weren't working the right way. He looked out at the ice where Ilya was demonstrating something to a small group of kids who were watching him with naked adulation.

That was the whole thing. That was what the Foundation was and why Ilya had named it after his mother, and why Shane had stood at a press conference and blown up every commitment he'd made for his entire adult life. Because a thirteen-year-old had watched it happen and decided he could tell his parents.

The closing dinner was a busy, noisy affair. By the time the kids were loading onto the buses with their bags and their gear, it was past eight and the sky had gone a pale shade of gold. Hayden found them in the parking lot and made a show of standing six feet away.

"I just want to say," he called out, "for the record, that I saw you two make out behind the equipment cart at lunch, in the proximity of children, like a couple of teenagers."

"We were not making out," Shane said.

Ilya considered this. "Little bit."

"We were discussing the afternoon schedule."

"With your *mouth*," Hayden stressed, and finally risked walking his way to them.

"Go away," Shane said.

"JJ saw it, too. He says you two are ruining his life, and he's going to need therapy. Seriously, Shane." Hayden was visibly delighted with all of this. "I've known you for years, and I never thought you could be so..." He waved a hand in Ilya's general direction. "Whatever this is."

"Is because I am very sexy," Ilya said. "And irresistible."

"You're very *something*," Hayden clapped Shane on the shoulder and walked back toward JJ, who was indeed watching from across the parking lot with the expression of someone who had witnessed something that could not be unwitnessed.

Shane glanced at Ilya, caught him staring at him with unmistakable fondness, and melted on the spot. Okay, maybe 'disgustingly obsessed with each other' wasn't that far off.

"Come on, let's go home," Ilya said. "I will drive."

"It's my turn to drive. You just want to control the radio."

"Because you force me to listen to terrible things."

"It's just a podcast."

"About hockey statistics," Ilya groaned. "You want me to die of boredom? Is it why you married me? For inheritance?"

"If you shut up and let me listen, I'll make it up to you when we get home."

Ilya's eyes lit up, and the next moment, he was in the passenger seat, adjusting his seatbelt. Once the podcast was on, he managed to keep quiet for a whole thirty seconds before he started sighing loudly.

"It is not enough that he is the most boring podcast host in the world," he lamented. "He is also wrong about power play efficiency."

"I know," Shane said. "That's why I'm listening. I'm going to send him an email."

"You are going to send an email to podcast host." Ilya looked at him. "You, Shane Hollander, second best hockey player in the world."

"I thought we agreed it was the other way around."

"You only made me agree by using unfair methods," Ilya accused.

The corner of Shane's mouth ticked up. "That was a perfectly fair tactical choice."

"Unfair *and* unethical."

"Anyway." Shane threw him an exaggerated eyeroll. "He's spreading misinformation. I have to say something."

"You," Ilya said, his intonation falling somewhere between astoundment and adoration, "are a very strange person."

"Maybe, but I think you're into it."

"Oh no," Ilya deadpanned, "what gave it away?"

Shane took in the gleam in Ilya's eye and groaned. "Don't start, or we'll never make it home."

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for making it to the end! It's my first finished piece in this fandom/in a very long time and it's been a ride. More on the way.

Thanks again to Frankie, Michelle and kallisto_k for beta reading.

I'm (tentatively) back on tumblr because I *need* Heated Rivalry injected directly into my eyeballs every moment of every day and all the other places are terrifying to me, so come say hi if you're bored sometime, idk – [@chinesebakery](#).

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!