



Rule #3: Never Fake Marry the Coach's Son (Hockey Rules #3)

Author: *Portia Blake*

Category: LGBT+

Description: Oskar

I've spent three years keeping my crush on Dmitri Volkov strictly professional. I can't afford to think about his wicked smile or the way his dark hair falls over his eyes. He's my father's most troublesome player and definitely straight.

But when Dmitri bursts into my apartment needing a green card marriage, I suddenly find myself engaged to the team's notorious bad boy—the same player who's been starring in my fantasies since the day he arrived from Russia.

My father, the team's head coach, will explode when he finds out. But saying no to Dmitri isn't a thing I can do. Now I just need to pretend to the world that we're madly in love and pretend to Dmitri that I'm totally not.

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Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:48 am

D mitri

“Dmitri!” Coach’s voice bellows through the locker room. He’s had decades of practice at making himself heard over twenty loud athletes, and he’s putting his vocal cords to use. If he ever retires, he can always go into opera.

My hands clench. My knuckles whiten. My stomach does not tumble because that would be something scared people do, and I never get scared.

After all, I am Dmitri Volkov.

Oskar must have told Coach. Or did Vince?

“Dmitri?” Noah blinks at me from his leather bench, his green eyes wide.

He’s not the only person staring. The locker room isn’t full, but it sure isn’t empty. Half-naked men halt slipping on their pads and jerseys. Someone drops his tape.

“Where the fuck is he?” Coach hollers.

Noah’s mouth drops. “Did Coach just swear?”

“Yes.” I tumble against the fancy leather seating and lean against the tasteful wooden walls. The Boston Blizzards takes care of us very well.

Noah’s forehead scrunches. “Why is Coach swearing?”

Coach may have initially pegged Noah as trouble, but he's anything but. Even the sweetest golden retrievers would scoff when they see him and his husband Finn, flopping to their sides and huffing at the sudden influx of wholesomeness and devotion.

My teammates' eyes narrow, and I hate it. I hate that they're thinking of all my past infractions. And let's face it, the list isn't short.

They won't guess this. No way.

I inhale and exhale.

This is...Well, it's not fine, actually. And I can see why Coach would be upset. He has every right to be. I just didn't think he would be so upset. That might have been a miscalculation.

I grimace. I don't like miscalculating. But I'm a hockey player, not a mathematician.

The door swings open. Coach is alone. I guess I should be grateful Oskar isn't here to witness this.

Coach glares at me. His thin blond hair sticks up in odd directions, and his pale blue eyes seem to be busy seeing whether they can turn into lasers. His face has achieved a shade of red I've never seen on a human being.

How did he find out?

Coach storms toward me, his footsteps echoing. A horrible thought surfaces...

No.

Coach wouldn't.

No way.

But his fist is tight, and my muscles instinctively tense.

“Get up, Volkov!” Coach barks.

I spring to my feet.

Too late it occurs to me that maybe I should have tried to hide.

But that won't work. Because the thing is, Coach and I are family now.

I throw him my most dazzling smile and wink. “Hi, Daddy.”

Gasps sound from the locker room. Eyes bulge. Pads drop.

Coach's fist comes out, and I topple down when it collides with my jaw.

I could take him.

But I'll give him this win.

After all, I did just marry his only son.

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Three days earlier

Oskar

Daniela pokes her head through the door of our office, her long hair swinging. “It’s time.”

I give a curt professional nod and hope that the tension shooting through my body isn’t obvious. A middle-aged man in a suit worthy of the high price the team is paying him stands behind her.

“There’s nothing to be done?” I ask Vince.

“Nothing.” He shoots an apologetic smile, and I’m probably supposed to say something like ‘I understand.’ I stay silent.

The team paid his firm astronomical sums to find a solution. He was supposed to fix this.

“You tried,” Pappa tells him. “We appreciate all your help.”

Vince and Pappa talk about the team’s upcoming games in Canada. Pappa is the Head Blizzards Coach.

I’m silent. This sucks so hard.

Dmitri is going to hate this.

I press my lips together and march to the conference room. I smooth my hair, even though it doesn't matter.

Dmitri doesn't care what I look like. There's no Newbury Street hairdresser, no compilation of designer garments that could ever possibly make a difference.

Dmitri is straight.

Most of the team has figured out my feelings for him by now. I see it in their pitying glances, the way their eyes go soft and sad when I look at him too long, like I'm some heartbreaking shelter commercial.

"He's already here," Daniela whispers, and my stomach drops. Dmitri is never early for anything.

But he's been glum for weeks. He's been withdrawn and quiet and all the things he never is.

I clutch the manila folder and all the awful things inside.

We march toward the conference room. Daniela's heels click against the floor, and her hips wriggle, hot girl style, as her hair bounces. I try not to notice how she's exactly Dmitri's type: confident, beautiful, experienced.

I follow my father, Vince, and Daniela into the conference room. They take their seats on the expensive German chairs. Fresh carafes of cucumber-infused water have been set out, and clinks sound as ice cubes topple into glasses.

I sit down gently, my heart pounding, staring at the manila folder.

I don't want to meet Dmitri's eyes.

Because then he'll know the answer. He'll know there's nothing the Boston Blizzards can do for his particular problem. And God, I don't want him to know yet. I want him to still have hope.

"Well...?" Dmitri asks, his tenor, accented voice cutting through the room.

I flick my gaze toward him, and his gaze crumples.

"Oh," he breathes.

I nod.

There's nothing I can add.

Daniela's eyes narrow, and it occurs to me that most conversations involve more than grunts and eye contact.

"Dmitri," my father says, his voice calm and collected. "Unfortunately, the Blizzards are not able to secure a visa renewal for you."

"We did all we could do," Vince says. "We're very sorry. We know this is terrible news for any international athlete."

Dmitri presses his lips together.

"We are as upset about this as you," Daniela assures him. "You have been an asset to the team."

Dmitri's fingers jolt, and he rearranges every one of his perfect facial features into a sneer. "If you were as upset as me, you would find solution."

Daniela and Vince exchange a look that's a mixture of befuddlement and irritation. Dmitri isn't supposed to deign to protest.

"You were traveling out of status on multiple occasions," Vince says. "The government frowns on that."

"I traveled with team!"

"All the same, the government was supposed to be notified of any travel."

Dmitri squirms. "My agent should have taken care of that."

"We know," I say. "It's not your fault. He was a terrible agent."

"He was on list of recommended agents!"

"Obviously, we will no longer recommend him," Daniela says smoothly. "You can rest assured that future international athletes here will not be subjected to that experience."

"No one could have anticipated the meth addiction and flight to Mexico with everyone's money," Pappa says.

"That's not a common next business move for agents," Daniela adds.

Dmitri's sneer only strengthens. Because we're not telling him there's a solution. We're not telling him there's a way he can stay.

"It would have been easier to fight for you if you hadn't already had a police record," Vince reminds him.

Dmitri glares. “One bar fight. Mere scratches. No big deal.”

“A big deal to US immigration though,” Vince says.

“Someone wanted to say he hit Dmitri Volkov. Not my fault.”

“As you know, we travel to Canada often. We can’t have a player who can’t leave the country,” Pappa says. “This is the middle of the season. We need to find a replacement for you.”

Dmitri swallows hard. “I see. Do you have someone in mind...Am I still with the team?”

“We play Canada in ten days. We’ll need to secure a player before then. I expect we’ll announce your replacement in a few days. We’ve just learned the news ourselves. We really wanted you to stay.”

“We’ll miss you,” I manage, hating how my voice betrays me.

Dmitri nods, but the crease on his forehead doesn’t ease as much as I want it to. The silence that follows feels heavier than when the team left the playoffs last year.

Dmitri tosses his dark hair. The strands always get into his eyes. I spread my hands against the polished wooden table, lest I feel compelled to do something crazy, like smooth it away from his face.

“When do I have to go?” Dmitri’s voice is small.

I hate it.

I hate all of this.

Daniela smiles, happy that there's a question she knows the answer to.

I want to say something that will make it better.

I want to tell him that my heart is breaking, that I do care. That I'm not just uttering platitudes.

But the statement is impossible.

It involves revealing all the things that I've locked away. All the things that make Dmitri's teammates look at me with sympathy, their eyes round, whispering to each other in my presence, when they see me look at Dmitri for too long.

I focus on the manila folder instead. I memorize the color and the way the edges feel against my fingers.

But all I can think about is Dmitri.

It's so unfair. So outrageously terrible.

Dmitri came to this country to play hockey and he's done a remarkable job. The Blizzards are one of the top teams in the country. We might win the Stanley Cup.

He's not here to get money from the government. He has a job. A great one. A job that needs him.

Maybe he's on the second line, but that's because the first line is incredible and was formed years ago.

God, all Dmitri did was focus on the game. That's what he's supposed to do.

Dmitri inhales. “There’s nothing that can be done?”

“Not with an employment visa, unfortunately. You need to return back to Russia. You can continue the immigration process in your own country.”

“This isn’t the end, Dmitri,” Pappa assures him. “You’re a great player.”

“I can’t return to Russia. Is out of question.”

Vince’s smile is more professional than sympathetic. “I don’t suppose you have a secret girlfriend you’re about to propose to?”

Dmitri blinks. “What does that have to do with anything?”

“US immigration doesn’t want their citizens’ spouses to be sent away.”

“Oh.”

“But since you’re single, that’s irrelevant.” Vince shrugs.

“I see.” Dmitri rises. Six feet four inches of Russian muscle saunter away, and the door clicks shut.

“Well, I should get back to my office,” Vince says. “I’ll send the invoice.”

“Let us know if you think of anything else,” I say.

“He broke too many rules. I’m good, but I’m not magical.”

“I need to call Tanako,” Pappa says, already reaching for his phone.

“That could have gone worse,” Daniela offers.

“He’s not a bad person,” I say. “He deserves to stay.”

“He hired the wrong agent.”

“That was on the team’s list of recommended agents! God, remember what his English was like three years ago? We didn’t help him.”

Daniela shrugged. “He should have done his due diligence. We’re not liable for that. That list was issued before either of us got here. Oskar, you only arrived last summer.”

“It’s so awful.”

“Not every part of this job is good, Oskar. Most of it is.”

“He really doesn’t want to go to Russia, Daniela. It’s just...wrong.”

“Uh-huh.” Daniela rises, smoothing her skirt. “I have another meeting. Thanks for being here.”

She swooshes out of the conference room, and I follow, my heart pounding.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:48 am

D mitri

Music thumps through Finn and Noah's apartment, and puck bunnies swarm the space in their slinky, glittery dresses. My teammates recount our latest win, embellishing details until the women practically drag them to their apartments.

Finn still throws a great party, even if he's wildly devoted to his husband. They dance in a corner, staring at each other as if they've just handed each other the moon.

I make my way through the dancing women and the eruption of high-pitched giggles and baritone chuckles, clutching my tumbler. I might be at a party, but partying is the last thing I feel like doing. Some people carry plates of Mexican food. Burritos and nachos, things I won't find in Russia.

I plop onto the leather sofa and stare at Boston Harbor. Lights twinkle over the water. The sky is clear and perfect, no large cumulus objects separating me from the stars light-years away.

Beside me, Luke's boyfriend Sebastian is curled on Luke's lap. Clearly, I'm not in Russia yet.

"Hi, handsome." Madison, Finn's neighbor, topples beside me, filling my world with her thick floral scent.

She sprawls, rearranging her long, slender legs and red-backed stilettos.

I grin at the display of perfectly shaped flesh. "Nice heels."

“Enjoying the party?” Her voice is sultry and sexy, and she flicks her long dark lashes up. A smirk plays on her lips.

We both know what’s coming next.

This is where I say the party’s a bit too noisy, and this is when she reminds me that she has a whole quiet apartment on the other side of the wall.

We’ve done this before.

Madison is always ready for a good time, something I’m normally a strong proponent of.

I don’t say it though. Something tightens in my chest.

I can’t stop thinking about anything except my return home.

The door opens, and more guests flock into the apartment, followed by Oskar. The light settles on his navy velvet blazer, and I notice the moment another guy’s eyes flare, and he saunters toward him.

The guy is tall and blond, and I hate him at once. My veins bubble, and my eyes narrow. I may as well be on the ice, observing a player on the other side move too close to the puck.

I down the rest of my drink. The bourbon burns me in its customary manner. Normally, I drink vodka, but this is a night for American alcohol.

Madison slides her feet into my lap, her red-manicured toenails wriggling. My eyes widen, but she’s chattering about her heels and something about needing a foot rub, the kind only I can give, and I realize she’s been talking about this the whole time.

My gaze drifts to Oskar again. He's still talking to that guy. And that guy is now handing him a tumbler of some sort of amber liquid.

This time I glare.

I slide Madison's feet off my legs. "Sorry."

Her cheeks redden, and since she probably hasn't applied blush in the last two seconds, I guess I've embarrassed her. I have more important things to do now than to assure her that I absolutely enjoy having her put her feet on my lap.

This is no time for complimenting women, even a gorgeous one.

"I need to go," I say then march toward Oskar.

I'm vaguely aware of startled gazes swinging my way, and maybe you're not supposed to walk in between people having conversations, but I only stop when I'm in front of Oskar.

"Hi Oskar." My smile is tight.

"Dmitri. How are you?" His eyes are round and worried, and I'm pretty sure he's thinking about my visa.

He doesn't need to think about me. He should be thinking about how he's not supposed to accept drinks from strange men.

"I don't know you," I tell the strange man.

"Um, Dmitri, this is Blaine."

“I’m a friend of Sebastian’s,” Blaine says, thrusting out his hand.

I glare at it.

Blaine’s face pales, and his gaze darts to Oskar.

Are they already doing silent communication, couple style? I glower. This guy is so not inserting himself into Oskar’s life. I haven’t left the country yet.

Oskar gives a weak laugh. “Dmitri had a bad day.”

“Ah.” Blaine barely pretends to care.

“Well, you’re about to have a bad night.”

Blaine’s eyebrows swerve upward. “Sorry?”

“You sound Canadian.”

He brightens. “That’s right. I’m from London. Not London, UK, of course. London, Ontario. It’s near Toronto...”

“Boring.” I take Oskar’s drink and pour it onto a burrito-smudged plate.

“Hey!” Oskar says. “Why did you do that?”

“It might be dangerous if I tossed it into a plant. And the kitchen is too far away.”

He blinks. “I was drinking that.”

I grin. “Not anymore.”

“But—” Oskar’s eyelashes flicker upward, and his eyes are wide and concerned. Pink spreads over his cheeks, the color they get when he’s embarrassed or angry or has any emotion except complete calm.

Blaine shifts his legs from side to side.

I snort. “You’re still here?”

Blaine stiffens, then stalks away.

“Why did you do that?” Oskar asks. “He was talking to me!”

“He was flirting with you,” I clarify. “He brought you a drink!”

“And now I’m missing a drink.”

I shrug and usher him to the black marble island, now an impromptu bar. I pour Oskar a drink and hand it to him. “Here you go.”

He takes it reluctantly. “Dmitri, I’m an adult. He can flirt with me.”

“He could have put something inside that drink!”

“He knows Sebastian. I don’t think he’s going to roofie me.”

“He might! He got your trust! There’s more than one bedroom in this place Oskar. You shouldn’t be naive. Next thing you know, you’re in a locked room, and he’s pulling down your pants and spreading your cheeks!”

Oskar’s mouth drops open. “People are staring.”

I look around. “You’re right.” I clear my throat. “No one should leave their drinks unattended. Public announcement.”

“My drink wasn’t unattended,” Oskar hisses. “I was holding it!”

“You didn’t pour it yourself!”

God, normally Oskar is smarter than this.

“Didn’t they teach you anything at Harvard?”

He glowers at me, and I fling my hands up.

“You are embarrassing me,” he says.

I frown at him. “I’m sorry. But who’s going to keep you safe when I’m—”

His eyes soften. “I’m sorry. I—”

He doesn’t finish the sentence because there’s nothing that can be said. There’s nothing he can say that can change what’s going to happen.

He chews on his bottom lip. “Want to get out of here? My apartment is quieter.”

I nod. “Yeah. That sounds great actually.”

I grab my coat from the closet, then wrap Oskar in his. Blaine glares at me from across the room, and I smirk, then usher Oskar toward the door.

“That was one minute,” Oskar says. “I was at the party for one minute.”

“Was bad minute,” I say. “That man liked you.”

His eyelashes flutter down, and his nostrils flare. He looks like he’s counting, but when he speaks, it’s not to recite numbers to me. “Let’s get on the elevator.”

I follow Oskar. His apartment is in Seaport, like mine, though we’re in different buildings. Seaport is filled with modern high rises.

The elevator pings, and we walk across the lobby.

“Leaving already?” the guard calls to Oskar, and I frown.

“That’s your fault,” I remind him, in case he forgot.

Oskar rolls his eyes, but he doesn’t say anything. He strides through the lobby, not stopping for small talk.

Then we’re out in the crisp January cold. Piles of snow lie inelegantly on various sides of the building, some of it formed by snowplows. The snow glitters under the street lamps, the outer layer more ice than snow.

I double check that the ground is appropriately sanded and salted. I don’t want Oskar to fall. The sidewalks are safe, and we continue until we reach Oskar’s apartment. It’s less luxurious than Finn’s. The entry tiles are porcelain, not marble, the desk that the security guard sits at is less grand, and the walls are more soaring than super soaring.

“You’re annoying sometimes,” Oskar says, as we step into the non-marble elevator.

“You’re going to miss me.”

Oskar’s face crumples. “God, I’m going to miss you so much.”

I swallow hard.

The elevator pings, and we walk down the carpeted hallway to Oskar's apartment. He flicks the switch open, and I wait for all the feelings of coziness to come to me. All the chillness.

But instead, I stiffen, and all I can think about is that I'm going to leave the US and that things aren't right.

That's not something Oskar can change though. I take off my coat, and since Oskar is still fiddling with his, I finish unbuttoning it and remove it.

His eyes widen, and he gasps, like I've done something strange, but of course I haven't.

I slip off my shoes and collapse onto his couch. I close my eyes, waiting for the peacefulness to come, but my mind still races. I'm going back to Russia. I'll be there soon. Soon, this will be a memory. I look around the room, wondering which pieces of furniture will disappear from my mind first, when I'll forget the exact shade of gray paint on the walls, and when I'll forget that the walls were gray at all.

Will I forget whether the sofa had room for two or three people? Will I forget the material? The color? The faux fur blanket on one end? I yank it toward me, and run my fingers over it, because I need to remember. I have to remember.

I glance at Oskar. Will there be a time when I forget the sound of his voice? His favorite phrases? His name? His last name?

I won't. He's coach's son too.

But everything around me feels fragile.

Oskar rustles in the kitchen, then he plops down beside me and hands me a beer.
“Good?”

“Yeah.” I take a long sip, but this is all wrong too. The sour bubbles tumble down my throat.

It’s good. It’s all good.

Oskar sits on the armchair, and I frown, because there’s plenty of room on the couch. I pat the cushion beside me. “Better view of the TV from here.”

He nods and slips beside me. My shoulders ease, and I forget to turn on the TV.

I find myself dozing, and when I wake up, Oskar’s head is down. His long lashes flutter, and he looks soft and innocent, and I’m extra glad that I didn’t let that Canadian man hit on him.

I return to my apartment. God, I need to stay in the United States.

I scroll the immigration site like I have dozens of times before, as if a loophole will magically appear that none of my lawyers could find.

Then an idea hits me. A brilliant one. Because, well... I’m brilliant.

I put on my coat and shoes, then march from the apartment. This will fix everything.

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O skar

The doorbell's harsh buzz jerks me awake. My hand reaches beside me, but of course Dmitri isn't here, and I stifle my urge to sigh. There's no reason for him to have stayed overnight.

No light streams through the windows yet, and I shiver. I clutch the blanket—Dmitri must have draped it over me before he left. Maybe I imagined the doorbell.

“Oskar! Oskar!” Banging sounds on the door.

I rush forward at the sound of Dmitri's voice, my bare feet cold against the hardwood, and swing the door open.

He looms in my doorway, all six-foot-four of scowling Russian hockey player. “You need double locks on door. I told you before. Is easy to break in.”

“Maybe you shouldn't announce that in my hallway.”

“Why not? Next time you will have proper lock. Double lock. With chain. I install for you.”

I roll my eyes. “Just come in.”

Dmitri saunters in, then sets a bag down. I tilt my head back to look up at him. At five foot six, I'm never considered tall—but especially not next to an NHL player. It might be early, but he's still put on cologne, and the spicy scent follows him, making

my apartment feel smaller.

I remind myself not to stare at him in wonder or something similarly embarrassing.

“I make you breakfast.”

“You don’t have to make me breakfast, Dmitri.”

“Need protein. Not mushy vegetables.”

“Those are called smoothies, Dmitri. I can make one for you if you’d like to try...”

His aristocratic nose wrinkles. “No. Never offer guests mushy vegetables. What would you do without me?”

“Maybe I would be waking up beside a handsome blond Canadian man.”

His dark eyes flash. “Is not funny, Oskar.”

“I wouldn’t actually do that,” I say softly.

“I know.”

I tense, uncertain how much he knows. At twenty-three, I should be somewhat experienced. Boston is hardly rural Sweden. But there’s something I haven’t done, something that makes me flush every time the guys talk about hookups.

My eyes flick up to Dmitri as he moves around my kitchen, every move elegant and certain. Does he know? Is that why he is so protective of me? My stomach clenches. I don’t want that to be the reason.

I wish I'd lost my virginity my first week at Harvard. That I'd accepted those drinks thrust into my hands, followed those invitations upstairs. That I hadn't announced I wanted my first time to be special, then waited for someone who never appeared.

Dmitri's dark eyes study me. "Sit down. Low blood sugar makes you faint."

"That was one time," I protest. "And I didn't actually faint."

"No, you complained you were dizzy. Dizziness is first step of fainting."

"I'm fine—"

Before I can finish, his strong arms wrap around my waist and lift me off my feet. His cologne surrounds me, cedar and pine mingling with something distinctly Dmitri. He grips my waist and glares down at me like he's a professional mover and I'm an especially troublesome piece of furniture, then deposits me into an armchair.

"Stay. Today will be a big day."

That's not right. "I'm not doing anything today. Except, I guess laundry."

Dmitri lowers his gaze, and if I didn't know any better, I would call him nervous. But that can't be right. There are many things Dmitri is, but he's never nervous.

Then he narrows his eyes, and he's the same Dmitri as always. "Never let laundry pile up, Oskar. Maybe you'll need to travel."

"I have some fresh clothes..." I halt. "Why are you talking about travel?"

"Eat first." Dmitri opens my refrigerator, removes the eggs, then starts breaking them into a bowl. An unusual pink sheen spreads across his chiseled cheekbones.

“Dmitri?” I keep my voice stern.

He grimaces and busies himself with the pan, olive oil shimmering as it heats. “Go shower. I tell you after meal.”

“What happened?”

Dmitri looks nervous and guilty, two expressions I’m unaccustomed to seeing on him.

“Fine.” The eggs hit the hot pan with a sharp sizzle.

Finally, Dmitri takes the eggs and puts them onto a plate. He places it on the counter. “Eat.”

I scowl but Dmitri’s face says no-nonsense, and I do. I mean, the eggs aren’t exactly bad. This isn’t a hardship. Just slightly weird.

“Now can you tell me?” I ask.

He bites his lip. Also weird. Uncertainty isn’t a Dmitri trait. But then Dmitri would say he likes to encompass all the traits.

“Maybe you need more food,” he says. “Do you have oatmeal? Is good for heart.”

“My heart is fine, Dmitri. Just tell me.”

He sighs. He flicks his gaze to me, then looks away. “I bought us plane tickets.”

I blink. “Seriously?”

“Yep.”

My heart stutters. This is definitely weird. Dmitri and I have never ever gone on vacation together. Dmitri has never hinted that’s something he’s wanted to do.

But then he’s leaving the country soon. Maybe he wants to do some sort of sightseeing thing. That’s sort of sweet. He is very patriotic, even though this isn’t technically his country.

“You need to pack. Don’t forget hair products.” He gives a fond smile. “You complain when you don’t have them.”

“That was one time.”

“Won’t be a second time when I’m here to remind you.”

I sigh. “Where are we going?”

He inhales. “Vegas. Flight leaves in three hours.”

I stare, then I understand. “To see the Grand Canyon?”

He blinks. “I’m not dragging you across country to see hole in the ground.”

“It’s a big hole.”

He sighs. “But we can see it, if you would like.” He nods. “Yeah.” He flashes me a wobbly smile, and I see that odd nervous glint in his eyes again.

Okay. This is seriously super strange.

“You’ve been to Vegas before,” I say slowly. “Is that really where you want to go before you leave the States? You don’t gamble.”

“Of course not. Is waste of money.” His look turns stern, like the statues of Roman generals in the MFA. “And you shouldn’t gamble either. We have plans.”

“What plans, Dmitri?”

“I am not leaving the States,” Dmitri vows, his expression serious.

“But—”

Then a wide grin splits his face, and his eyes turn to diamonds. “We are going to get married.”

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D mitri

Oskar's eyes widen, his long lashes flicking up. His pink lips drop somewhere to the floor.

Then he starts to giggle. Peals of angel laughter flutter through the kitchen, bouncing over the subway backsplash to the narrow, specially ordered dishwasher, and the exposed brick wall. His silky blond hair gleams as he moves, his long neck tilting back like he's sharing his glee with the heavens.

Appropriate behavior for any angel.

My shoulders relax. My stomach settles. My heart slows.

"For a moment there..." He laughs again, and I laugh with him, relief moving through me. I thought he'd be angrier.

But then this is Oskar.

He snorts, then he puts the full force of his blue eyes on me. "What are we really doing?"

My throat dries. "I told you."

"But—" He swallows hard, and he presses his lips, now paler than before, together.

"We're going to Vegas," I repeat. "To get married. Will you marry me, Oskar?"

Uncertainty moves through me.

He might say no.

I thrust away the intrusive thought in my mind. That's like thinking that we might lose our next game or next three games or our next ten games.

Technically possible, but nothing worth thinking about.

"You're not serious," he says.

"I need a green card," I explain, speaking slowly and enunciating like they taught us in English class. I want there to be no mistake with my accent.

"So you want to marry me?"

I nod.

"But I'm..." His face pinkens. Colors I don't normally see speckle his cheeks. His pupils dilate. "I'm..."

"Yes?"

He gestures to himself, jerking his hand toward his torso, his narrow wrist moving. "A man."

"I know biology, Oskar."

He licks his lips. "Um. Yes. But you're not—" He wrinkles his brow, and there's something adorable in the way he does it. He opens his mouth again. "You're a..." He shuts his mouth, then tries again. "But you're straight?"

His voice rises at the end, like a question, and his cheeks turn even pinker. I frown.

I don't want him to be uncomfortable.

"You are gay. You shouldn't panic at the thought of marrying a man. Someday you will marry a man."

"It seems you want that day to be today."

"Yes."

"But you like women."

"Yes."

"You could ask a woman to marry you. You could probably get someone to say yes."

I blink. "Of course." I frown at him. "I am excellent match, Oskar. I am millionaire hockey player on television."

His eyes go funny.

"And good looking," I add. "Teeth in place."

"You'd still look handsome without your teeth," he says, then his eyes widen. "I just mean because you can get them fixed and things. So don't, um, stress about that."

"Of course I would still look handsome without my teeth."

I don't think that's something that might make him question whether or not to marry me, but best to not give him any reasons to say no.

“Pack,” I say.

“But—”

“Flight leaves. We get on it. Planes don’t wait, Oskar.”

He rakes a trembling hand through his hair. “Yeah, I’m aware of that.”

“Of course. You make transportation bookings. Is difficult job. Many flights. Many players. Need to make good bookings.”

He nods, his look somewhat glazed. His eyes drift to my mouth. Maybe he’s trying to imagine what it would be like if I had fewer teeth.

I wish Luke had had more topics of conversation to discuss when he was on his dating show last month than teeth and hockey injuries, but I suppose he was more distracted by the host than the female contestants.

I give Oskar another nod. “Now, Oskar.”

“We need to talk about it—”

“We can,” I say. “On way to airport. I don’t want to miss our wedding.”

He swallows hard. His gaze flits around my face, and I sigh.

“I’m sorry.”

“Sorry?” His voice is squeaky, and his eyes

“I forgot to make you coffee,” I apologize. “Brain processing is slow without it.”

He frowns. “My brain processes...fine.”

“I help you pack.” I march toward his background, conscious of his feet pattering behind me. He’s lighter than me, but I still hear every footstep over the hardwood floor.

I open the door to his bedroom, and my gaze falls on his bed. A stuffed bear is in the middle, and my eyes widen.

“That’s, um—” He wets his lips.

“Your bedtime companion?”

He slinks back as if he thinks I’ll hate it.

“Bears are good companions,” I say solemnly. “Very tough. Good protectors.”

I pick up the bear. It’s brown and worn, and I realize that this wasn’t bought at a gift shop in Yellowstone as a joke. I imagine younger versions of Oskar grabbing it. Caring for it.

I find myself grinning.

I turn to Oskar’s blushing face. I set down the bear on the bed. “Where is suitcase?”

He points toward the closet, and I grab a silver hard-cased carry-on from the top shelf and unzip it.

He blinks.

“Need suit. Marriage is serious.”

“But we’re not serious, Dmitri,” Oskar says. “You’re not gay. Or bisexual. Or pansexual.”

I blink. “I am serious person too, Oskar. I will be good husband. Until I get green card. Then we divorce.”

“You’ve researched it?” he asks faintly.

I nod. “Shouldn’t have trusted my agent. Would have done a better job myself.”

“I’m so sorry about that.” Oskar inhales. “But I can’t marry you.”

I halt. Molasses trudges through my body, making each limb lifeless.

I worried he’d say no. I told myself he’d say yes.

“Why?” My voice is hoarse. Molasses effect vocal cords too.

“It’s not right.”

“Am your best friend. Don’t best friends help each other?”

“I-I didn’t know you considered me your best friend.”

My jaw drops. “We spend all our time together! Is not that best friend relationship?”

My spine straightens. I narrow the distance between us. “You have other best friend? Someone not on team?” I swing my gaze around. “A neighbor?”

“No.” He backs away. “No. I don’t spend time with anyone outside the team.”

Something in my chest loosens.

I toss Oskar's suit into his suitcase, then add pajamas and briefs. My fingers tingle, but that's probably because he's staring at me like I'm crazy. At least he's no longer protesting.

Though maybe he's frozen from shock.

I tilt my head to him. "We marry. I stay in country. We still hang out. And you don't have boyfriend, so no jealousy. Finn and Noah are already married to each other. Luke has boyfriend. I cannot marry him. Must be you."

Oskar blinks.

Finally, he grins. "Yeah, you're right. Sebastian would kill you if you married Luke. Poison you at the first opportunity."

I shudder. "Then Oskar, what do you say, it's that or me poisoning? I hear poisoning is painful."

"Bad dreams for the rest of your life, then you die."

"You wouldn't want that for me."

He shakes his head, his eyes soft.

I take the bear and put it in the suitcase.

"You don't need to do that."

"Is just overnight trip, Oskar" I say. "I don't want you to be lonely." I smile. "They put big beds in our suite. California King. Extra wide."

“Oh. Space for both of us.”

“Space for you and the bear. I have my own room.”

“Right. Of course.” He blinks, and his cheeks pinken more. I wonder if there’s a vitamin deficiency that causes frequent blushes. Lately, Oskar seems to be suffering more from it. Maybe I can ask Finn. He talks about vitamins on his social media channel a lot.

I zip up the suitcase then carry it from the room, Oskar trailing after me. I type into my phone and book a ride-share for the airport.

Oskar still looks stunned. I enter his bathroom and remove his toiletries, grabbing the pomade he likes. I knew he was going to forget it.

“You want to pack your laptop?” I ask.

“I guess.”

“Is good for watching movies.”

“Yeah.”

He scurries away, finally packing something himself.

I then take his shoes from the shoe cupboard, kneel down, and put them on him. I stop and grab his dress shoes. “And fancy shoes for the wedding.”

“I’ll, um, get a plastic bag.” He scurries away, still looking bewildered as I order a car.

“Is okay,” I say. “Is overwhelming news. I only just found out too.”

He snorts, and when he reappears, I take his things and lead him to the waiting car.

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Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:48 am

O skar

“Are you okay?” Dmitri asks, his dark eyes rounded with something like worry. In the dim dawn light, his features look softer than usual.

“Um, I’m okay.” My voice comes out embarrassingly high, more teenage boy than Harvard graduate.

He pulls out his phone, the blue light casting shadows across his sharp cheekbones. I think he’s done talking and checking sports scores, but then he turns the screen toward me. “These are the seats. They’re pretty comfortable.”

A laugh bubbles up despite my nerves. “Did you think I was nervous about the flight? We take, like, a million of those a year.”

“Not million,” he says, his accent thickening with mock seriousness. “You should know. You book them.”

“Trust me, if you booked them, they’d feel like million too.”

He smiles, the kind that makes his eyes crinkle at the corners. “Maybe.” He scrunches his lips together. “But we normally fly private.”

“I can deal with non-private, Dmitri.”

Marrying my crush? That’s another story. But I’m handling it.

This is to help Dmitri. And I want to do anything to help him. If marrying him is that thing, then I'll do it.

Easy.

Nothing strange about it. No way.

"We will need to buy rings in Vegas," Dmitri says. "I do not know your ring size. I am sorry."

He looks so genuinely apologetic that my heart twists. The early morning light catches on his dark lashes as he glances down.

"I wouldn't expect you to know my ring size," I say. "I don't know my ring size."

"We will measure for you. For both of us."

"Okay." My voice still has that breathless quality that I hate.

"Is platinum okay?" He leans closer. "There's black titanium too."

"I think platinum is nice." I stare at my hands, trying to imagine his ring there.

"Whatever is cheapest."

He frowns. "This is your wedding, Oskar. Expense is not an issue."

"Oh."

"Need to decide what bands should say."

"Right." I swallow hard.

I suddenly wish I'd seen all those wedding shows that my sisters used to watch. Say Yes to the Dress . God, getting into Seeking Mr. Right earlier would probably have helped me too.

“What sort of things are normal practice for putting on rings?”

“It should be a date and something about our love.” He scrunches his lips. “Well, we started hanging out when you joined the Blizzards on June 10 th . We can put that and just ‘I love you.’”

“I love you?”

He turns toward me, and I swear to God that my skin prickles as if rising up toward him.

“You are my best friend. Of course, I do.”

“Right.” I nod hastily, my heart attempting a symphony.

He frowns, then slides his large hand onto my knee. Heat seeps through my pants. “And soon you will be my husband.”

My chest squeezes. Dmitri isn't supposed to say those words to me. Even in my dreams, and I hate that he appears in them sometimes, since it seems like a betrayal of our friendship that sometimes at night he enters my sleep and does things that he would never want to do.

Because I'm not for him. I never will be.

And I hate that each night when I do go to bed, I wonder if Dream Dmitri will appear. That version who kisses me and does all the things that Real Dmitri would recoil

from. The things, God, I haven't done. The things I've only seen when I've ventured onto certain webpages.

"Does this make you nervous?"

"No," I lie, my voice cracking.

We're friends. And now we'll be permanently attached on our lifelong paper trails.

"We get platinum rings. Platinum will look good with your hair." Dmitri runs his fingers through my locks, smiling.

"O-okay." My cheeks heat.

His dark brows draw together, and he drops his hand. "Remind me to talk to Finn when we get back."

"What about?"

"Nothing for you to worry about now."

"That sounds ominous," I say.

The airport appears ahead, large glass and steel buildings and signs warning about turnoffs.

Our driver pulls to the side of the road, then flashes us a beam that says she overheard the entire conversation

"You guys are so adorable!" she squeals.

“You are fan?” Dmitri asks.

“Of cute guys eloping? Obviously.”

“I mean—” Dmitri’s face reddens, and I press my lips together, stifling any errant laughs from escaping.

The airport bustles around us as Dmitri leads us to the gate, people parting instinctively before his hockey player build.

A few fans stop him for autographs, but finally we are on the plane.

Yesterday we were in a conference room with Vince, discussing his visa problems. Today we’re flying to our wedding.

Dmitri spends the flight scrolling through wedding websites, leaning close to ask questions that make this feel surreal: “Red velvet or buttercream? Pink roses or red? What do you think about doves, Oskar?”

Finally, the plane lands in Vegas. It’s the day, and the strip is not lit up. The buildings jut out inelegantly: the Eiffel Tower, the Pyramids, the Sphinx.

Dmitri leads me from the plane. Slot machines chime and flash even here in the airport terminal. I try to pretend this is all totally normal.

This isn’t my first time in Vegas.

And this isn’t my first time alone with Dmitri.

But though we’ve done touristy things from time to time when we’ve had free time in cities, we’ve never gone away together someplace

People eye him curiously when we walk through the airport. His dark hair and dark eyes and pale, chiseled features are striking. Even those who don't follow hockey can't help but stare.

God, I'm so ridiculous. The whole world has a crush on Dmitri Volkov. I shouldn't be thinking about his height or his shoulders or any of the things that he cannot change about himself. He needs me to be here for him, not acting like someone who's never seen a movie with a Hollywood A-list star in it.

This is a favor for a friend. A friend who needs me. And if it involves marriage, well, I'm glad I can help him. I wanted him to stay and now there's a way.

This is no big deal.

A marriage of convenience.

It's like any other favor. Borrowing sugar. Watering plants. Just involves more paperwork.

We exit the airport, and I pull out my phone. "I'll order us a ride."

"No." Dmitri scans the airport exterior, then juts out his chin.

I follow his gaze, but I only see a limo gliding toward us.

I stiffen.

He didn't.

Surely not.

Probably not.

But the glossy limo stops before us, and a short man in a uniform gets out, then opens the door, gesturing to us.

“You got us a limo?” My voice cracks.

“Marriages are special, Oskar.” His usual Slavic stoicism softens into something that makes my chest ache. “Happy wedding day.”

I step back, trip over the curb, and go flying.

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Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:48 am

D mitri

Oskar flails on the pavement. His arms swing up, as if hoping for a last-second rope from the sky. I rush forward and catch him.

I inhale his citrusy scent. His long lashes flutter, and his bright blue eyes stare. “Thank you.”

“Is no problem.” My fingers flex against his waist before I realize what I’m doing. I right Oskar up and guide him inside the limo, my hand pressed to his lower back, in case he displays more acrobatic inclinations.

The limo was the right move. Oskar keeps peeking at different spots in the interior, his gaze jumping from the cream leather seats to the polished mahogany panels. The amber LED lights render everything elegant and exquisite, sleek and spectacular.

“Special occasion?” the limo driver asks.

I frown, because obviously the company should have informed him. I slide my arm around Oskar’s narrow waist, noticing how he fits against my side. “We’re getting married.”

The limo driver grins, laugh lines deepening. “Congratulations! We have champagne cooling in the fridge and chocolate-covered strawberries.”

I give him a curt nod, because I didn’t hire a limo to make conversation with the driver. I turn my attention to Oskar. His pink lips have parted somewhat, and

something tightens in my chest when his long lashes swoop up.

I retrieve the champagne and lift out the crystal flutes. When I pass one to Oskar, our fingers brush against the stem.

“I-I can do it,” he stammers.

I smirk. “Hold the glass, Oskar.”

“Okay.” He stares as shimmering liquid fills his glass and bubbles leap and twirl.

I pour a drink for myself.

The limo glides from the airport, and I clink glasses with Oskar. “To our marriage.”

“To our marriage,” he echoes, gaze wider than normal, and his voice more husky.

I frown. “You’re catching a cold.”

“I’m fine.”

“Your voice is strange.” I buzz the limo driver. “Turn up heat, please.”

Hot air pours through the vents, but Oskar still trembles. I tighten my grip around the glass. God, is this my fault? We left too early.

I put down his champagne flute, then take his hands in mine. I rub his hands. They don’t seem cold, but maybe prevention is good in these situations.

He goes rigid. “What are you doing?”

“You’re cold. I warm you.”

“But—”

“You are trembling, Oskar.”

His skin pinkens, the pale color invading his cheeks and making everything soft and adorable. His wide eyes blink.

Romantic music starts to play in the limo. Elvis, I think. The LED lights switch to pink.

His hands are smaller than mine, softer, and...

I drop his hands and scoot away, my pulse quickening. Perhaps friends don’t contemplate other friends’ hands. Perhaps they don’t warm them up either. I give him a wobbly smile, then grab hold of the champagne bottle.

“It was a long flight.” I focus on refilling his flute.

The limo bounces over a pothole, and the champagne spills onto his shirt. I pat it dry quickly, moving my hands over his slender body.

“That’s enough.”

The words come out more harshly than I’m used to, and I still.

He closes his eyes and drags his coat over his lap.

I shake my head and snort. “And you said you weren’t cold.”

He swallows hard.

“Is good I’m here,” I say, and I hand him back his champagne flute, waiting to make sure he actually sips it and doesn’t simply spill it over his shirt.

He turns and focuses on the view of the windows, and I lean back. I would rather he spend his time looking at me, but that’s a strange thought to have. Vegas is interesting to look at. I take a lengthy sip of my own champagne. The bubbles slide down my throat, and I refill Oskar’s and my glasses.

This is going to work.

Oskar and I will be married, and I won’t be sent back to Russia. And no Canadian will hit on Oskar either. I smile, thinking about next time we go to a party. Hopefully the Canadian guy will be back. I think about when he learns that Oskar and I are married, and my smile widens.

“What’s so funny?” Oskar asks.

“I thought you were looking at the view.”

“You’re practically vibrating.”

I snort, and this time I laugh out loud. “Was thinking about the Canadian guy’s expression when he finds out we’re married. Will be so funny. Must make sure Finn and Noah invite him to their next party.”

“You really despised him.”

“He’s not good enough for you.”

“You don’t know that. You didn’t speak to him.”

I scowl. “My fiancé is not going to be talking about another man’s good qualities on our wedding day.”

His eyes round, then he starts to laugh too.

The limo driver probably thinks we’re being ridiculous, but it doesn’t matter. I can always be ridiculous with Oskar. He’s my favorite person.

Finally, the limo stops in front of the jewelry store.

Oskar blinks. “Where are we?”

“We need to get rings, Oskar. This is our wedding.”

“But—”

The limo driver opens the door and ushers us outside. Oskar’s feet still drag on the pavement.

“Something is wrong. What?”

“I—” His long lashes flutter up. “I thought we would buy something silly in the gift shop or something.”

“I do not buy silly things.”

“Right. Of course. But—” He inhales, and I see the way that his breath moves. “I think Finn just gave Noah his class ring. It doesn’t have to be fancy.” He eyes the shop. “Those rings cost real money.

“You deserve a nice ring, Oskar.”

He still hesitates, and I take his hand. It’s larger than a woman’s hand, and it trembles. Maybe I should have asked if he was okay holding hands.

I eye him. “Come, Oskar.”

“But—” He gazes at our joined hands.

His cheeks flush again, and I wonder if the concierge at our hotel can get some medicine in the room for him. He is probably coming down with a cold.

“We are getting married, Oskar,” I say. “People about to be married hold hands. Is problem?”

His eyes are too round, and my heart sinks.

Shit.

It’s a problem.

He doesn’t want to do it. I withdraw my hand, trying to smile. “Is fine, Oskar. I understand. Is a lot to ask for. It was nice of you to consider to marry me—”

He blinks, then shakes his head. “I’ll do it!”

“But—”

“I said I would do it.”

Relief moves through me, but I still narrow my gaze.

“What was the problem then?”

“I know you are straight,” he says, “and—”

“I can hold hands with man, Oskar. I do not melt like wicked witches in Oz.”

“I shouldn’t have shown you that movie.”

I shrug. “Is good movie. And your favorite children’s movie. Of course I wanted to see it.”

Some emotion I don’t recognize moves into Oskar’s eyes, but then he nods. “So we’ll hold hands.”

“Is practice for when we have to tell everyone we’re married.”

“And you really don’t mind? Because I’m a man, and...”

“I’m not going to not hold your hand because you have a penis, Oskar.”

His mouth drops.

“I see many penises every day,” I remind him.

He swallows. “I-I guess you do.”

“Is not scary.”

He blinks, and I squeeze his hand, waiting for him to square his shoulders just like I know he will.

“Let’s go, Oskar.”

He nods desperately, then straightens his spine, and we enter the jewelry store as a bell chimes above us, sending us closer to our future.

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O skar

This is not strange. Not strange at all. Not even slightly.

Dmitri's fingers still clutch mine when we enter the store, and the saleswomen's expressions transform from brisk professionalism to open delight.

The women behind the counters beam at us.

"I want best ring in the store," Dmitri announces, his tenor voice booming.

I tug his hand, and he turns his dark eyes on me.

"That could get expensive."

Dmitri grins, as if I've said something amusing. "Tonight you will have millionaire husband. Not bad, huh?"

"There's nothing bad about you," I tell him, and he turns.

My pulse skitters, and a sour taste invades my throat.

"These are our newest engagement rings for men," a saleswoman says, sliding open a velvet tray.

"Platinum," Dmitri says. "Will look good with his hair."

The woman nods. “Yes. He looks like a summer. He has a pink undertone. Silver will suit him.”

Dmitri smirks. “His skin is always turning pink.”

I go still, wondering if he’s cataloged every time I’ve blushed around him. Heat crawls up my neck at the thought.

Does he know I’m in love with him? Sometimes I think he’s completely oblivious. But then, is that why he picked me to marry him?

Here, away from everyone we know, I can pretend Dmitri actually wants to hold my hand. The store clerks coo over us, pronouncing us “adorable” and “cute.”

My gaze darts to Dmitri, because surely he can’t be okay with that. He only nods agreeably. Once he’s satisfied with the rings, we head to our next stop...the hotel.

The limo rolls down Vegas’s large roads, and I swallow down more champagne. The bubbles bounce against my heart, and my body is squishy by the time the limo stops.

The driver opens the door.

We sweep through the towering doors, and my breath catches when I enter the lobby.

It’s beautiful.

Absolutely beautiful.

Tens of thousands of mosaic pieces shimmer in pastel waves across the floor. My suitcase rattles over the uneven surface.

The casino thunders around us. Bright lights flicker from machines. Violet shifts to yellow then green. Some machines rotate, flashing promises of wealth in crimson red as pixelated fireworks explode in the background. Cheerful fast-tempoed music plays in the background. I move my gaze away from the gaudy machines to the potted trees and celestial sky, the color the sort a Renaissance painter might spend hours blending to get perfect. Stained glass gleams in one corner, welcoming people to its French-themed restaurant.

“See, I took you to Europe for our wedding!” Dmitri exclaims happily.

“Uh-huh.” I force my gaze away, resisting the impulse to linger on the way his lips stretch upward and the sparkle of his dark eyes.

All those people raving about jeweled-colored eyes have it wrong. The most beautiful color in the world is brown.

“Is okay?” Dmitri asks, his voice less confident than normal, and I hate that my facial expression might have had anything to do with making him feel uncertain. “We can go somewhere else if you prefer. Is not most expensive place, but—”

“I don’t need the most expensive hotel in Vegas. I love Paris.”

“Is romantic,” Dmitri says. “Good for wedding.”

He takes my hand and leads me to the hotel reception. Crystal chandeliers cascade from the gilded ceiling, making the area feel more Paris Opera House than US hotel.

Women strut in short blue dresses with not-short slits, holding trays stacked with brightly colored cocktails: Aperol Spritzes and Camparis, the drinks that look good on Instagram, dazzling and eye-catching even on a luxury vacation grid.

All I can focus on is the feel of Dmitri's hand around mine. He's making a habit of it.

The desk clerk hands Dmitri our room keys. We navigate toward the elevators. The gold doors slide shut, and the soft whoosh of the elevator and its ornate decor does nothing to lessen the tension thickening between us.

Dmitri and I are going to be sharing a hotel room.

Dmitri and I are getting married.

The elevator pings, and Dmitri exits. I follow quickly after.

He taps the key card and pushes open our door.

My eyes lock onto the Eiffel Tower glowing outside our window. "Wow."

"Is nice."

"It's super nice." I drift toward the view, passing gleaming surfaces.

The room is larger than any hotel room I've stayed in before.

"Let's get changed," Dmitri says. "Wedding is in twenty minutes."

I spin around. "Seriously?"

"I am always serious." Dmitri removes his coat and flings it on the bed. He then pulls off his soft long-sleeved t-shirt. His chest is bare. Completely. Devastatingly.

I stare, transfixed, then wrench my gaze away.

There were muscles on his chest. So many muscles.

Each plane and ridge makes my fingers itch to touch.

“What are you doing?” I ask.

“Am not getting married in street clothes,” he says. “And neither should you.”

Dmitri strides to the closet, utterly unconcerned about his half-naked state. He pulls out a luggage rack, metal clicking against metal as he unfolds it. The suitcase lands with a soft thud as he unzips it.

He turns, abs rippling with the movement. “Need help?”

“Um...” My brain short-circuits.

He’s still shirtless. His muscles are still everywhere. My mouth dries.

Then he unbuttons his pants and lowers his zipper.

“Dmitri?” My voice emerges as a squeak.

“Oskar?”

“You’re—” I gesture helplessly at his body, unable to form coherent words.

He tilts his head. “What?”

His pants drop down. He steps from them. Muscular thighs confront me. He’s wearing briefs, the fabric stretched taut over an impressive bulge.

Then he shimmies the briefs down too.

That's his cock. Right there.

Not hard of course. But magnificent all the same. Substantial.

Not that I've seen many of them of course.

Or any of them, in fact. Not in person. My own is always at a different angle.

But there it is. Dmitri's cock.

God, I—

I'm staring.

I swing around. My suitcase drops from my hand. It clatters to the floor. I shake.

At the next moment, Dmitri is beside me.

His voice is low and soothing. "It's okay."

"I-I dropped it."

"Is fine." He hauls the suitcase up easily, as if it's as lightweight as a book. His dick swings with the movement.

"You're still naked," I choke out.

He blinks. "Is usually what happens when you change clothes, Oskar."

“Right, but...” I force myself to look anywhere else.

“Besides, you’re gay,” he says matter-of-factly. “You’ve seen before. Is no big deal, huh?”

Dmitri clearly thinks I’m more experienced than I am. A reasonable assumption, since practically everyone my age has done more than I have.

He returns to his suitcase and starts dressing.

My heart skitters inside me, but I try to emanate some semblance of calm.

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Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:48 am

D mitri

Oskar is still trembling when I lead him to the wedding chapel. In the elevator, he keeps darting glances my way, then pressing himself against the far wall as if the metal rail might protect him from something.

The elevator display flashes: WEDDING CHAPEL.

“Think they label it that way to inspire spontaneous weddings, or because their guests are too drunk to read smaller text?” Oskar asks.

“Neither applies to us. I knew we should marry, and I’m completely sober.”

“You had some champagne.”

“Unlike Noah, I am not lightweight.”

Oskar snorts. “I wish I’d gone to that party. I just saw the aftermath on the ice.”

I shake my head. “One does not wish to hear someone throw up, Oskar. The sound is...”

“Unpleasant?”

“Worse than those Broadway songs you make me listen to.”

“Hey! Don’t insult musicals!”

“They are too happy. Is unrealistic.”

“Guess I’ll have to make you watch more of them.”

“Is impossible task.” I hesitate. “Which one will you torture on me first?”

Oskar scrunches his forehead, and I’m glad he’s thinking about something besides whatever is making him nervous.

He’s still thinking as we step from the elevator, and he’s still thinking as we walk to the wedding chapel room.

“Mr. Volkov!” A man with perfectly gelled hair waves us forward. “Right this way. Just fill out these forms and we’ll begin.”

He guides us to a room that would make French royalty gape. Gold leaf spirals across every surface, crystal dripping from the ceiling. Even the air smells expensive - some floral scent mixing with polished wood.

Oskar scans the opulent space. “I expected Elvis.”

“Is your wedding. I not let guy with questionable hair marry us.”

“Sideburns were the thing to wear at that time,” Oskar says.

“Is good we live now.”

Oskar’s lips swerve up. “You could pull off sideburns.”

“I can pull off anything. You though...” I trace his hairline, then move my fingers along his high cheekbones, where his sideburns would go. “If you had sideburns, they

would go here and stop here.”

Something makes my fingers zing, and I drop my hands.

“And?”

I shrug, trying to steady my voice. “Wouldn’t be worst thing. You could hide them under a hat.”

His eyes flash. “I wouldn’t need a hat to look good.”

“Guess we’ll never know. Unless you want to grow them and see if people start gifting you hats?”

“Let’s not test that theory.”

He picks up the marriage paperwork and I hold my breath. Will this be too real for him? Will he say, never mind, a marriage to you is not for me?

But he merely grabs a pen and starts filling in details with his precise handwriting. When he finishes, he looks up with a grin that makes my chest tight. I realize I still need to complete my portion.

He smirks. “Need help remembering your name?”

He grabs the paper and fills out everything for me. His nose wrinkles, and I have an odd urge to count each rarely seen crease.

“Oh, you are adorable.” A woman with fluffy hair and a sparkling cocktail dress says claps her hands.

The smile on Oskar's face drifts away. He shifts from me slightly.

I squeeze his hand, because that seems to brighten him when he gets lost in thinking.

"Yes. He's adorable," I say firmly. "Come, Oskar. Let's get married. Then we can relax and celebrate."

The woman giggles.

"We had long flight," I explain, drawing Oskar closer. "Boston to Vegas."

"That is quite a trip." She studies our paperwork. "And you only booked this today?"

"Yes."

"I have to ask if you're certain about the wedding..."

"Ah." Relief floods through me at an easy question. "We've known each other long time. Oskar is my best friend."

Her expression softens. "That's sweet."

I nod happily. "He's the best friend I've ever had."

Her eyes soften even further, as if she's attempting to make hearts spring in her eyes like they do in silly cartoons, and she opens the door to the wedding chapel.

Oskar's gaze darts around the space, which is as French-inspired and romantic as the rest of the hotel. Chubby cupids stare down from the ceiling, and the rounded walls in this circular room are adorned with ornate gold moldings everywhere.

“You like it,” I murmur to Oskar.

“How could I not?”

I grin. I’m happy that I convinced the hotel to arrange a last-minute wedding. I wasn’t going to marry Oskar in some grimy location. I can plan better weddings than Finn.

The woman explains the procedure to us, then we’re standing in front of the altar.

“Please join your right hands.” I link my fingers with Oskar’s.

Heat zooms through my body, even though the room seemed to be at a normal temperature before.

His eyes are wide, and I peer at the way his long lashes flicker upward and the slight part of his pink lips as he scrutinizes me.

He’s shorter than I am, shorter than the other guys on the team. He peers up at me, his gaze trusting, even when no one’s trusted me before.

God, I want this to be perfect for Oskar. I don’t want to disappoint him. He’s giving me so much. He’s giving me an opportunity to stay in the country I love. An opportunity to spend more time with him. An opportunity I don’t take for granted.

Maybe he senses my nervousness, because he squeezes my hand, and just like that, something in me settles.

We’re doing this together. I’m not alone.

I flew to the US from Russia, the only Russian on the Blizzards. And even though Oskar is not on the team, we grew close after he joined the Blizzards staff. He

understood being new to the US in a way no one else did. I don't want to return to Russia, and now, because of Oskar I won't have to. He fixed what the expensive immigration lawyer couldn't.

The marriage officiant begins to speak, and I smile at Oskar.

God, this is our wedding.

Emotions surge through me, and I study Oskar's face, my gaze bouncing from his high cheekbones to his full pink lips and the way they tremble, to his large eyes that seem to be landing on my lips again and again.

Almost as if...

Right. The kiss. This is a wedding. We're supposed to kiss. Obviously he's thinking about that. Oskar thinks about everything.

"I now pronounce you husband and husband," the officiant declares with a beam.

My heart speeds up. I never thought I would be here, standing in a wedding chapel, about to kiss my best friend. I never thought someone would be willing to reshape their life for me. Even when this ends, we'll be connected forever together.

"You may now kiss," the officiant says.

Oskar steps away and does some sort of half giggle and shake of the head to the officiant. "We, um..." He clears his throat. "We don't—"

The smile disappears from the officiant's face, and confusion sits in her eyes.

Does Oskar think that I won't kiss him? On our wedding day?

I pull him close, feeling his slender frame align with mine. We've sat together countless times, but this is different. I feel his heartbeat against my chest. His elegant fingers curl against my shoulders. His lashes flutter up, uncertainty creasing his brow.

God, this is our wedding.

Of course, it comes with a kiss.

When this ends and I have my green card, I don't want him remembering that his first husband wouldn't even kiss him.

I cup his cheek, tilting his face up to mine. His skin is warm silk under my palm.

"You don't have to," he whispers, breath feathering against my lips.

"I know," I say, because of course we could walk out.

He quivers in my arms, and I run my hands along his slender back because maybe I can ease some of his worry. I glance into his eyes to make sure he doesn't have a problem with kissing me. But his gaze is trusting, almost wondrous, and I run my hand through his short hair.

I brush my lips against his, waiting until he parts them. There's no way Oskar is getting just a peck on his wedding day.

I trace the seam of his lips with my tongue, like I've done hundreds of times before, with hundreds of willing women. He doesn't smell like department store perfume. He smells masculine. His body is hard instead of soft and curved and pliant. But then I've seen him in the gym. I know his compact frame is composed of muscular planes, even if they're less developed and bulging than the team players. They don't need to be. He just needs to be healthy, because I want him to have a happy, long life.

He gasps softly against my mouth, the sound barely audible—but I hear it. When I suck his lower lip, his tongue meets mine and electricity shoots through me. My cells dance. But then, I have a warm body in my arms. His tongue doesn't move at once, as if I've managed to take his breath away, as if he's inexperienced. As if no one's kissed him this way before.

I smile against his mouth, because life is super strange, but now I'm going to be staying in the US, and everything is wonderful.

I dip him downward, because if I'm going to do something, I'm going to make it fantastic.

And kissing Oskar...God, it's easy to make it super good. Holding him in my arms, moving my tongue against his, is great. Natural. Maybe because we know each other so well.

When Oskar's waist is parallel to the ground, I realize this is probably enough. I straighten us both and find his eyes glazed, lips pink and parted.

I'm grateful to him. No wonder electricity thrums through my veins.

O skar

Dmitri sets me back on my feet as casually as if he hasn't just kissed me breathless. He grins, then takes the paperwork from the effusive officiant whose eyes are doing that softening thing like the women in the jewelry store.

"We're married, husband," he declares.

"Uh-huh," I croak, because my throat has totally dried.

Dmitri kissed me.

He actually kissed me.

One of those Hollywood kisses that come at the end of movies and make the audience collectively coo in delight, despite their sticky popcorn fingers and overconsumption of soda and sweets.

I slide my gaze to him, because I'm pretty sure straight guys are supposed to have meltdowns after kissing men. Dmitri simply walks to the elevator with his customary swagger, all confidence and athletic grace, as if he's on the ice and the hockey announcer has just said his name in a booming voice and ten thousand strangers are cheering and clapping.

I hurry after him. "So..."

He swings around, his face glowing. "Thank you, Oskar. I am very grateful."

“Happy to help.” My voice sounds steadier than I feel.

“You did what immigration attorney couldn’t,” he says, and I smile back. It’s hard not to smile in the face of so much joy.

“Our flight’s tomorrow morning,” he says. “We should celebrate with dinner.”

“That sounds nice.”

“So this is our honeymoon?” I try to keep my tone light.

“Exactly!” His eyes sparkle. “Happy honeymoon, Oskar.”

The casino pulses with more energy than earlier, blackjack tables now filled with players. Dmitri takes my hand as we weave through the crowd, and I try to ignore the zing that springs through me at his touch. I try to pretend that this is totally cool, that we’re just two bros, even though bro has never been a word to describe me.

Dmitri oozes dudeness, and I tell my heart that it doesn’t need to beat like crazy. This isn’t a normal marriage. It’s not even a date.

Just two friends having dinner after some legal paperwork. Nothing more.

The Eiffel Tower restaurant hostess greets us with a practiced smile.

“We need table with view,” Dmitri declares to the pretty hostess. “Is wedding dinner.”

“Ah. Yes.” Her smile falters as she glances between us. “Is, um, the entire party here?”

“What do you mean?”

“I just wanted to check...”

“The whole party is here,” I say hastily, because I don’t want her to ask Dmitri if I’m truly his husband, or if I’m just a brother or best man or well-tolerated colleague, and if at any moment a gorgeous woman will burst up from the elevator. The hostess’s eyes track him with the intensity of a scout watching a top prospect, barely registering my existence.

Dmitri must realize all the same. He takes my hand in his, and I don’t miss the frown on his face or his tone. “Is my new husband.”

“Right.” The hostess nods multiple times, flushing. “Wonderful. Just wanted to...confirm.”

Maybe I should have been taller, looked more like Dmitri. His face is plastered on magazines and most eligible sports stars lists. I am...me. My features are dainty and delicate.

Heads don’t turn when I enter a room. People don’t act like elevators in my presence, swooping their gazes down me, until they finally slide their mouth open unconsciously.

No, that’s what happens to him.

Not me.

“Is okay,” Dmitri says softly to me.

I nod, because I’m not going to explain to him that the hostess didn’t think a man like

him could possibly want to marry a man like me.

Because there's no comforting words he can say. He didn't choose me, not really.

A fake marriage and a fake honeymoon before we fly back tomorrow morning and Dmitri continues on with his life like normal, content that he doesn't have to hire more lawyers.

The hostess brings us to our table, and it is stunning.

We settle into our seats and gaze at the fountain. Music plays and the fountain explodes with water jutting up ridiculous heights to the beat of the music in spectacular formations.

Our waiter is pleasant, and when we finally return to the hotel after a stop in the bar, I am happy and relaxed.

Until I realize that Dmitri and I will be sharing a hotel bed. I've never shared a bed with anyone, well, no one since I was a child and had sleepovers on blow up mattresses where they squeezed a dozen children into a room at once.

"You look nervous," he observes. "What's wrong?"

I huff out a laugh. "I was thinking about the bedroom situation."

He raises an eyebrow. "Is mattress not comfortable for you? Should I call reception?"

"That's not it!"

"Good. I don't know if they have extra mattress toppers." He frowns. "Though I can order it."

“I’m sure the mattress is suitably soft for me,” I say. “This is a nice hotel.”

“You want heater?” He pulls out his phone again. He’s prepared to fulfill every wish I have at a moment’s notice.

I close my eyes briefly and give a nervous laugh. “No heater.”

He unzips my suitcase and pulls out something from it. “I brought your teddy bear.”

I swallow hard. “You didn’t need to do that.”

“I didn’t want you to be lonely at night.”

“But you’ll—” I snap my mouth shut before I can say something embarrassing.

“I’ll be in the next room,” Dmitri says.

My eyes widen. “There’s another room?”

“Of course, there’s another room.” He chuckles. “You didn’t think we were going to share a bed or anything?”

“Um...” I flick my gaze to the carpet, but it’s too late. His eyes round. “I just mean that’s generally what people do in hotel rooms.”

“But those are real couples.”

My skin flames. I will not have him think that I think this is real. “I know we’re fake. We’re friends. That’s all there is between us.”

His nostrils flare as if I’ve somehow managed to offend him with my words, which is

utterly absurd. “I ordered a big room for us, Oskar. It has two bedrooms.”

“I didn’t know hotels had that.”

“For the couples who can’t stand each other.”

“Oh.”

Dmitri opens the door to the room, and he ushers me into the room. Maybe we’re both men, and of course we’re just friends, friends who have kissed each other, but Dmitri opens every door for me.

I remind my mind not to be confused. We are friends. That’s all. Dmitri is straight. So straight the thought of anything else doesn’t occur to him.

I step into the room. Something feels different, and when Dmitri flicks on the light, I see that the bed is covered with red flower petals.

I stare.

Beside the bed is a bottle of champagne and some chocolate-covered strawberries.

“Surprise!” Dmitri exclaims happily, then bounds for the champagne bottle. “Happy wedding night!”

“Nice,” I say, happy when my voice doesn’t squeak or something, even though my heart is lurching.

Dmitri pops open the champagne, and the cork lands somewhere on the velvet tufted couch. “Oops.”

I rescue the cork from the couch and join Dmitri.

Dmitri pours me a new flute of champagne, and even though we had wine at dinner followed by cocktails at the bar, I grab it eagerly.

I want to feel woozy right now. I want this day to pass by quickly because my heart is getting confused. My dream man shouldn't be handing me champagne in front of a rose-petal covered bed, and he shouldn't—

Dmitri's eyes gleam, and in the next moment he pops a chocolate-covered strawberry into my mouth. My eyes flutter down naturally as my taste buds celebrate the marvelous taste. "This is good."

"Of course it is."

I snort.

Then Dmitri laughs. "Who would have thought we would get married?"

"Not me!"

We break into giggles, and when we collapse on the bed, Dmitri throws rose petals at me.

"You didn't need to order champagne and rose petals," I tell him.

"I wasn't going to not order it for you."

"But rose petals? Seriously?"

He scoops up some petals and flings them at my face. I sputter as one lands on my

nose.

“Is in your hair too,” Dmitri says, and I try to brush it away. His eyes soften. “You’re making it worse. Hold still.” He lifts a hand and—God, his fingers are in my hair now.

His eyes catch mine, dark and intent as they get before a crucial play, and my heart hammers against my ribs with the rhythm of skates on ice, too fast, too loud, too much.

But this is all pretend. I shouldn’t be contemplating the shades of umber in his eyes, or the manner in which caramel shards mingle with the darker brown, and I bite my lip to keep from remarking on it. That’s something a significant other might remark upon, and though Dmitri and I might be married, I will never be his significant other. We will never be in a romantic relationship. The ache in my chest when I see him and remember he’ll never, ever be mine will ease with time and maybe distance. But it will never be eased by entering an actual romantic relationship with me.

Dmitri will never love me. Not really. Not the way I one day would like to be loved.

“Your eyes are very blue,” Dmitri says, and I blink.

Maybe it’s fine to stare into his eyes a bit.

I smile. “It’s a Swedish thing. Pretty normal.”

Dmitri frowns, and his jaw juts out as if he’s a general posing for a sculpture. “Nothing about you is normal, Oskar.”

My heartbeat quickens. I’m not sure what he means. “Because of the gay thing?”

His frown deepens, and I wish I hadn't said anything.

"Being gay is normal, Oskar. You know that. I just meant that you're...you."

I want to turn to him. I want to watch his face as he says nice things about me, but my heart can't take it. It's already beating too quickly.

Somehow Dmitri seems oblivious of the fact that I'm utterly and completely in love with him. Now that we're married, I definitely don't want to reveal it to him. I turn away and grab another chocolate-covered strawberry and drop it into my mouth and don't look at him. I finish the strawberry, then yawn.

"Ooh! I'm so sleepy," I say.

Dmitri stiffens, and I wish that I'd taken theater as an elective at Harvard. Acting I suppose is not something that comes naturally to me. Not something like mathematical equations and memorizing the chemical elements table.

Dmitri gets up off the bed, and when I glance at him, his smile is tender. Everything is fine.

"Then you should sleep, Oskar. We have an early flight tomorrow morning."

Dmitri takes his suitcase and opens the door to the adjoining room. The door clicks shut, and I sink onto the rose-petal strewn bed, my heart pounding.

I am married.

I am married to Dmitri.

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Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:48 am

D mitri

I enter my bedroom, smaller than Oskar's but still with a king bed sprawled across it. No rose petals here. I lift the marriage certificate, running my fingers over our names printed side by side.

Oskar and I are married.

Oskar has saved me.

I smile at the blue-and-white certificate, running my fingers over the ornate embossing before slipping it back into its envelope because it's so precious and tucking it into my suitcase. I get ready for bed, then slip under the covers.

The bed feels too big and too lonely, but maybe it's only natural to think that after spending the whole day with Oskar tucked beside me. I smile as I close my eyes.

The alarm makes its unwelcome blare too soon.

Vegas is still dark. The fountain no longer explodes to the sounds of one of music's most famous songs, and red-and-gold lights no longer move rapidly over the Eiffel Tower.

Vegas is garish and bold and ostentatious, and even though the city is silent, I stare out the window, grateful that Finn and Noah got married here, grateful I knew what to do to secure my eventual green card and stay in the United States.

This is nothing like the grim, gray block building I grew up in, that was surrounded by dozens of tall, equally grim, equally gray block buildings.

I can't go back.

I won't go back.

I check the marriage certificate again, needing to see it's real.

It is. I beam at the embossed engraving.

A knock sounds on the door, then Oskar appears in the doorway, hair still shower-damp. "Just checking that you're awake."

"I am. Thank you."

He nods multiple times, his gaze bouncing everywhere except me, which is sort of strange because the room is less interesting than his room. The armchair is the same material as the couch in his room, as is the velvet headboard.

"What are you looking at?" I ask.

He frowns, and somehow, I've said the wrong thing. He breathes in, then smiles, and clearly I was worried about nothing. "You gave me the nicest room."

I blink. "Of course I did."

He looks away, and I promise to get ready soon.

Soon, we're going back to the airport, back to Boston, back to our life.

We fly through the clouds, and I gaze at the patchwork of fields and tiny houses from the sky. My country, once Vince does the paperwork.

I grin. He's going to be so happy I found a solution.

"How do you think Pappa will react to finding out about, um..."

I jerk my head away from Oskar's face. A sensation I haven't felt today finds its way inside of me. Guilt spews acid through me, and I inhale and remind myself that I have nothing to feel guilty about.

"He, um, won't mind much, will he?"

Oskar turns his head to me, hesitation flickering in his eyes. "Well..."

He'll mind. Of course he'll mind.

"It will be fine," Oskar says, but his voice trembles slightly, and we both know he's lying.

"I'm sorry," I tell him.

Oskar laughs. "I'm pretty sure he'll be more upset at you."

I try to tell myself that that sentence is not ominous, but it stays with through the rest of the plane ride as if I've just come back from watching a particularly scary thriller movie and am eying various locations in my apartment with a fear that I do not generally feel.

It will be fine.

Coach is, well, mostly cool.

Besides, this is a paperwork thing. Maybe he doesn't even have to know.

"We, um, can keep this quiet."

Oskar nods, but his smile is strained. "Okay."

"I'm sorry," I say, and I don't know what I'm apologizing for.

It's not like Oskar and I are in love or something, and I'm forcing him to be quiet. I'm not some closeted guy who expects blowjobs at night and separation in the day.

"You're still my best friend," I tell him.

He nods. "I, um, didn't expect you would want to tell anyone. I didn't make any social media posts or take any pictures. No one knows. I promise."

I hate the way that he says 'I promise,' as if he's trying to convince me of his spy-like tendencies. He shouldn't be forced to keep secrets. But at the same time... My stomach curdles at the thought of what might happen if Coach finds out.

It's a paperwork thing. Oskar works for the team. It's no big deal.

But I know it's more than that. I knew it yesterday. That's why I insisted on going to all the fancy restaurants and all the fancy stores so I could make his day special.

God, he should have experienced all those firsts with the guy he'll actually end up with. Not with me. Not with a bumbling hockey player who hired the wrong agent and got into a fight with the wrong person and all the newspapers and blogs and vlogs and newscasters say bad things about him.

Oskar slides off his ring, and I hate how effortless it looks. My gaze lingers on his bare finger.

“What are you doing?”

“People would probably ask about it if they see me wearing a wedding ring,” he says.

He’s smiling when he says it, but the words gnaw at my heart. He slips the ring into my palm, and it feels heavy, even though my trainer would gasp if he heard me say that, even though, scientifically, that doesn’t make sense. I lift super heavy dumbbells each day.

I stare at the platinum band. “I don’t want this.”

“It was a lot of money,” Oskar says softly. “Maybe you could try to return it? Or, I don’t know, sell it off? It would be a loss, but you would get something for it.”

I stare at the ring, heavy in my palm. It’s not supposed to be here. This is all wrong.

“I am not selling your wedding ring, Oskar.” I give it back to him, then fold his fingers around it, just in case the ring slips away from him on the plane. “You can put it on a chain.”

“You want me to wear it around my neck?”

For some reason his eyebrows are doing some sort of upward movement thing, and maybe it’s because of the altitude, because there’s no reason for him to act surprised. Is there?

“I think I have a chain that would work,” he says, and the tension from my shoulders eases, more efficient than even the work of the team’s masseuse.

It's not completely okay. I want him to post pictures of us on his social media accounts. I want to see his face lit up and glowing. But that's not the kind of marriage we have.

Finally, the plane lands.

I squeeze his hand as we exit the plane, even though we're not entering a wedding chapel or a jewelry store, even though hand squeezing isn't something I've done with other men.

But Oskar is different.

Oskar has always been different.

Oskar drops my hand first, casting a look around as if he half expects to see some paparazzi or influencers around us.

Which honestly, I guess there could be.

They probably loiter around airports. Finn and Noah were followed around by them a lot after they got married.

Something hits my stomach.

I'm pretty sure Finn and Noah didn't intend for their wedding to be announced. In fact, other teammates have speculated that Finn and Noah just got married after drinking too much, though that seems dubious given how utterly and revoltingly devoted they are to each other.

Is this going to get out? Are people going to know?

From Oskar's wide-eyed look, he's just had the same thought. Oskar and I have always been on the same page.

"People might know," he says.

"I knew that before we got married."

"But—"

"Is fine," I tell him.

He looks uncertain, and I hate it. I hate that just because he happens to be a man that there would be anything people might think was strange about marrying him.

Oskar is perfect.

"If I was gay, you would be my perfect husband," I tell him.

His face crumples, and I'm not sure what I said.

"Is everything okay?"

He pastes a smile on his face that I know is fake, but I'm still not sure what I said that was wrong.

"You're wonderful," I tell him. "Fantastic. The absolute best."

He turns around. "So are you."

I nod, but the air feels heavy between us. Maybe it's the fact that we're in an airport, a place notorious for stress. Everyone around us is probably either trying to figure out

the way to the rideshare app pickup or they're triple checking to make sure they haven't lost their wallets or passports or boarding passes.

That's probably it. Once we leave, things will feel normal again.

But things are still strange when we take a car back to our apartment complex, and they still feel wrong when I walk him to his apartment door.

He doesn't invite me inside, because that would be crazy. I need to drop off my luggage and get ready for practice. But it still feels strange when he waves goodbye, and the door shuts between us.

It's fine, I remind myself.

Totally fine.

I pull out my phone to call Vince. "I have good news."

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Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:48 am

O skar

I prepare for work quickly. I'm late.

Daniela is probably so confused. I'm never late.

I think about asking Dmitri for a ride in his car, but that feels too couple-y, and honestly, I probably should remember we're not a couple.

And we never will be.

Dmitri is incredible.

And straight.

If he's cool with my gayness, I should be cool with his straightness. Lusting after my best friend, and well, technically now husband, does not fall in that category.

I walk to the arena, because maybe the fresh air will put some sense into me, even though nothing, certainly not fast-paced walks, will keep me from thinking that Dmitri is the most wonderful man there is.

After all, hundreds of thousands of people vote him onto 'Sexiest Athlete' lists every year. I dash into the arena, wave at the guard, and hurry through the hallways.

"Hi Oskar!" Troy waves at me.

I give him something resembling a wave and hurry forward. Finally, I slide into the office.

Daniela raises a lofty eyebrow. “You’re late, Oskar. That’s very unlike you.”

“Sorry. I texted, but, um I know I didn’t request PTO formally and...”

Her eyes soften. “It’s fine, Oskar. Really. Just paperwork today.”

I nod and slip into my office chair. The wheels roll too fast, and I grab the desk to steady myself.

“Is everything okay?”

“Me! Everything is fine! Super! Super-duper!” My voice ends in a squeak, but then the last time I said super-duper was probably when I was prepubescent. I half expect her to wheel out some whiskey or chardonnay and pummel me with questions.

Thankfully, she doesn’t do any of those things.

I nod to myself one too many times, and she snorts and shakes her head.

This is a normal day. Perfectly normal. Just like what I did last night was also perfectly normal. I mean, people get married every day.

Obviously, most of those people love each other. Or at least don’t sleep in separate rooms on their wedding night. And also don’t break US laws to get married.

God, I never even handed in papers late at school. And now when I’m flaunting rules, it’s against the US government?

I don't regret it of course. I just—God, I just hope it goes okay.

Which it will.

Dmitri needed a US spouse, and that's me.

I inhale, just like my breath app on my phone recommends I do when things get stressful.

Daniela shoots me a glance. "Are you sure you're okay?"

"I'm fine," I say, my voice too sharp.

It's the sort of voice that other people might use when they're about to burst into tears, something I don't plan on doing since this is an office environment. And because I'm in my twenties, not lower single digits.

"Dmitri arrived late too."

"Oh?" I go for innocent.

It doesn't work.

"Did you two have a fight?"

"What? No! Never... I could never..."

Her eyes have that sympathetic look that is on too many faces whenever I mention Dmitri.

"I know crushes are normal," Daniela says, "but this seems to be getting in the way of

your work.”

“I’m fine. I don’t have a crush.”

She gives me a hard stare. “So you don’t think his gaze is broody, and his chest is wide, and the way that his t-shirts stretch over his pectoral muscles is interesting?”

“No!”

“You don’t think his accent is dreamy?”

“Um...”

Daniela gives me another one of her stares. “You’re smitten. You shouldn’t lie to me.”

“His gaze isn’t broody around me!” I exclaim.

She sighs. “He’s straight, Oskar. He’s very, very straight. He goes to bars all the time. If he wanted to sleep with men, he would. Plenty of men-appreciating men would be happy to appreciate him. Ever since Finn and Noah got married, the sports bars are filled with gay and bisexual men. He’s never indicated the slightest interest in men.”

Each sentence slams against my chest as if she’s suddenly turned into a knife-wielding maniac, and from the sympathetic smile she shoots me, she’s fully aware of the fact.

God. A knife-wielding, sympathetic maniac.

And I’m a virgin. Even if he decided he was curious or something, he wouldn’t pick me. And if he was curious... he would have told me.

I know all about his not-so awesome family back in Russia, though he only has a few not-so awesome cousins alive now, and I know about his not-so awesome school experience.

Dmitri shares things with me.

My heart quakes. My breath sputters.

A ring interrupts my thoughts.

Daniela answers. “Hello, you’ve reached the Blizzards.” Her chirpy voice fades.

Could this be about Vegas? No. Surely not.

Her gaze slides toward me, phone still pressed to her ear. “That can’t be right. There must be some mistake.”

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Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:48 am

D mitri

Vince didn't sound happy on the phone. He was supposed to sound happy. I fixed the problem.

Instead, his voice climbed higher with each "What!" until he sounded like he might rupture something.

I mean, I'm married to Oskar. He became a US citizen after his family moved here from Sweden. I'll get my green card. Simple logic, really.

But now Vince wants me at the arena, and my chest feels like I've been doing weighted pull-ups.

Something is wrong.

The team doesn't realize, thankfully. They continue to chatter, and I continue to pretend to follow their conversation.

Maybe it's just extra paperwork. Administrative details.

It's fine.

I was efficient. I took care of the visa. I'm married to Oskar.

God. Oskar actually married me.

And even though the morning is turning to be less splendid than I thought it would be, I'm still happy. Because I'm not alone in this world. Not really. Maybe my mother and grandparents are gone, and maybe I never met my dad and I'm not sure if he ever met me, but I have my teammates.

My loud, oblivious teammates who push me to achieve things with my body that I didn't think was possible and who push me to be better on the ice.

Maybe firing rubber discs into nets for money is an odd way to make a living, but I excel at it. Before the immigration issue, Coach was talking about putting me on the first line when Evan and Vinnie retire. If our team wasn't so wonderful, I'd be there already.

Footsteps thunder down the hallway.

That's not necessarily foreboding.

This is a place filled with two-hundred pound plus athletes. Footsteps have a habit of thundering when men of a certain sturdiness march through the hallways.

"Where is he?"

Shit.

That is definitely coach's voice. But maybe he's excited. Maybe he wants to give Evan another award for being the perfect captain. Evan collects those like I collect penalty minutes.

And Coach might be speaking loudly, but that's sort of his thing.

I switch to heavier dumbbells. If I'm getting distracted by hallway noises, I'm not

pushing hard enough.

Maybe the only problem is that my hearing got a workout in Vegas. Maybe Vegas heightened my hearing with all those slot machines and pulsing music designed to keep gamblers throwing away money. No drunken whoops or giggling guests or business deals sealed with bourbon here. Seeing how a person acts when drunk and exposed to vices is a technique that businesspeople have followed for thousands of years.

I learned about that watching a documentary with Oskar about ancient Persians. He loves that historical stuff.

So yeah, the shouting is nothing.

Absolutely nothing.

The door crashes open.

The weight room goes silent. Everyone stares at me.

“What did you do?” Noah whispers.

“Nothing,” I lie.

Coach storms in, and I hope that he went to Florida overnight or something and laid out in the sun for hours with no sunscreen, but even I know that that is probably not what happened.

He’s angry.

Angrier than I’ve ever seen him.

Angrier than when that news article came out about how I was in a barroom brawl, and before I had a chance to explain that it was totally the other person's fault.

He's furious, and something in my chest tightens. I want him to like me. He's my father-in-law now. The father of the most important person in my life.

Get up, Volkov!" he roars.

Gasps sound from around the locker room, and I shoot an irritated glance at my teammates, because really, it's not that strange.

Is it?

Coach's fist moves upward, and I could duck, but I'll let him have this win.

"Hi, Daddy," I say.

His pale blue eyes darken to steel.

Then his fist moves in the air. It's closer, closer, closer—

Pain explodes across my jaw. The floor rushes up to meet me.

I knew Coach was going to punch me, but he definitely didn't withhold anything. Pain screeches through my body, and my jaw screams with confusion. Normally, it's not confronted with anything more painful than an occasional snag with my razor, and the last time that happened was when I was in junior high.

I rub my face. "That hurt!

"It's supposed to." Coach advances, and my teammates surge forward.

“Um...” Noah’s voice quavers.

Coach usually breaks up fights, not starts them.

“Maybe you can talk about it?” Finn suggests.

“He deserved it,” Coach growls, glaring down at me.

“I think there’s been a misunderstanding—” Troy starts, but I shake my head.

“It wasn’t,” I say, because I won’t pretend this is something it’s not. “Oskar and I got married in Vegas yesterday.”

Jaws drop around us, but I keep my eyes on Coach. He’s the only one who matters right now.

OSKAR

Shouts and crashes echo from the locker room.

Shit.

I push back from the conference table. “I-I think...”

Daniela’s eyes are wide. I bolt toward the locker room, nearly collide with an irritated and much less friendly looking Vince, then scurry past him. When Pappa said he’d fetch Dmitri for the meeting, this wasn’t what I imagined.

The corridor stretches endlessly. More shouts propel me into a run, my dress shoes squeaking against the polished floor.

I burst into the locker room to find Dmitri sprawled on the ground, Pappa looming over him.

“Did you hit him?” My voice cracks.

Pappa doesn’t bother to look at me. “Go to the conference room.”

Instead, I drop to my knees beside Dmitri, my hand hovering over the reddening mark on his face. “Are you hurt?”

He snorts. “I don’t have fever, Oskar.”

Heat floods my cheeks as I snatch my hand back.

He scrambles up, then pulls me up. I squeeze his hand. He squeezes back.

Pappa stares at our still joined hands. “I can’t believe it.”

Everyone is staring at us.

Finn. Noah. Troy. Axel. Jason.

I bounce my eyes away from their gazes, only to be confronted with a new, stunned expression.

God.

Everyone knows that I have feelings for Dmitri. And everyone knows that Dmitri is straight.

My heart ricochets against my ribs like a badly aimed puck. I stumble, but Dmitri’s

shoulder brushes mine, steadying me.

“There’s, um, a meeting in the conference room,” I say. “Vince is there.”

“It will be fine,” Dmitri murmurs with that easy confidence of his.

I nod, but Vince’s thunderous expression suggested otherwise. Nothing about this feels fine at all.

D mitri

Things are not fine.

Things are not fine when I step into the conference room and take my seat, and things are definitely not fine when Vince starts speaking.

“Let’s be clear,” Vince says. “You too definitely got married?”

Oskar and I nod.

I take my marriage certificate out of my gym bag because I knew he would want to see it. I slide the blue-and-white certificate over the table.

Vince snatches it up, scanning the ornate text. “Fuck.”

I blink. I might be new to the US and its culture, but I’m pretty sure it’s not common practice for lawyers charging several hundred dollars an hour to swear at their clients.

“Is there a problem?” Oskar’s voice quavers.

“You said this would be easier if I had a significant other to marry,” I point out to Vince.

“I meant a girlfriend.”

Oskar stiffens beside me. I press my knee against his until the tension eases from his

shoulders.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Heat rises in my chest. “Gay marriage is legal!”

“But gay marriage is for gay people,” Vince says. “Which you’re not.”

“Are you bisexual?” Daniela asks.

I blink. No one has asked me that before. I’ve never considered it. “I’m not...”

Vince’s face pales. “Don’t answer that question.”

“But—”

“We need plausible deniability.” Vince’s knuckles whiten around his pen. “I’m pretty sure we all know what you were going to say, so just... be silent.”

“What’s wrong?” Oskar asks.

“Everything.” Vince drags a hand down his face. “You made a fraudulent marriage. The US government doesn’t take kindly to being lied to. Immigration fraud is a federal offense.”

“And,” Coach adds, his voice tight, “you involved the Blizzards.”

“People will think it highly convenient that you married the coach’s son,” Vince continues. “They’ll think the Blizzards arranged this.”

“Oskar is my best friend.”

“You couldn’t have married a woman unrelated to the team?” Vince asks. “You seem

to know many of them. You're in the papers with them all the time."

"I haven't dated anyone for months."

Oskar's head snaps up, surprise flickering across his face.

"I don't think this is any of your business," I continue.

"You made it your business when you married someone from this organization," Coach says.

"And my business since I've been giving you legal advice," Vince says, his voice miserable. "You cannot conduct fraud against the US government."

"This will be a huge scandal when it breaks," Daniela says. "You're not only breaking federal law, you're making a mockery of same-sex marriage."

I frown. "That's not right. I would never do that. My best friends are gay."

"But you're not," Daniela says.

I'm silent.

"So the problem is people won't believe we married for love," Oskar says, his voice steady despite the tremor in his hands.

"Exactly." Vince's shoulders slump.

Coach glowers at me. "You shouldn't have involved my son."

I pale.

Shit.

“As if toying with his feelings is not sufficiently terrible.” Coach sighs.

I blink. Toying with Oskar’s feelings?

“What do you mean?” I ask.

“That’s, um...” Oskar coughs, then gulps down some water. He coughs again. “Um.”

I pat Oskar’s back. Normally, Oskar is more articulate.

Finally, Coach stands. “This is outrageous.”

“You’ve made this situation far worse,” Vince says.

“And now the team could be liable,” Daniela adds.

“I just want to stay in the US.” My voice comes out smaller than I intend.

“You’ll be lucky if you can visit as a tourist in the future.”

My eyes widen. My organs crumple together, sending waves of blood rushing through my body in odd directions.

I am discombobulated. I am not myself.

Oh, God.

It’s all ending.

I'm going to have to go back.

Oskar flicks a worried gaze at me, then squares his shoulders. "We can still control the narrative."

"But—"

"Newspapers haven't reported the wedding yet," he says, and something in his tone makes me look up.

Coach exhales heavily. "You're right."

"Or maybe they're waiting outside the arena right now," Daniela says, her fingers flying over her phone screen.

"Maybe," Oskar says, and I'm not sure how any of this is supposed to make me feel better.

My heart skitters.

"There are loads of pictures of Oskar at games," Daniela says slowly. "And with Dmitri."

"What does that have to do with anything?" Coach asks. "This is a major problem!"

"This is salvageable. What if," Daniela leans forward, "we say they married for love?"

Vince shakes his head. "No one will believe that."

Oskar's face drains of color.

“Have you seen the women that Dmitri has been with? And they married before dating? Too suspicious.”

Oskar’s hands tremble, and I hate it.

I clasp my hand over his. “Please do not insult my new husband in this manner,” I say, the word ‘husband’ strange on my tongue. “Of course, I married him because I wanted to marry him.”

“For a green card,” Vince mutters.

“Because the thought of not being with him was deeply upsetting. It, um, made me realize my feelings.” I fumble for words. Usually when a woman starts talking about feelings and the future, it’s my cue to leave. In fact, it’s a sign that I stayed with her way too long and that I was not sufficiently discerning when I chose her. I like party girls, not future and forever girls.

So yeah, this conversation is totally not my thing. If I don’t like talking about feelings with people when there is no audience, I really don’t like talking about feelings when I do have an audience, especially when saying the wrong thing can lead me to never being able to stay in the US again.

“This is ridiculous,” Vince huffs.

“Painful,” Coach adds.

I frown and turn to Daniela. Maybe I can convince her. Maybe she can convince them. Maybe.

I tighten my grip on Oskar’s hand, trying to ignore his sharp intake of breath, the way his eyes go wide. It’s just my hand. No big deal.

For a horrible moment, I think that maybe he'll scramble from my grip. Maybe he'll slide his chair away from me, because maybe the ten inches separating us is too narrow for the distance he craves. Maybe his face will whiten, and when he'll speak it will be in short, terse tones that don't sound like him, like he's eager for me to leave his space as soon as possible and only social propriety is keeping him from flinging his glass of lemon-and-cucumber-infused water at me.

God, Coach is right. Vince is right.

I've caused a scandal, and I've dragged him right into it. Will his face be on newspaper articles under the words "visa fraud"?

Unless I can do something.

"I'm in love with Oskar, and, um..." I squeeze his hand.

He turns to me, drawing back slightly.

Maybe he's thinking about future newspaper articles. Maybe he's thinking about how every time people google his name in the future, they'll see it attached to scandal.

Coach was gentle with that punch. I deserved worse.

I look into his eyes, and maybe he sees something, because he puffs out a sigh.

"That's, um, right," he says in his tenor voice, his gaze fixed on the notepad in front of me. "I fell in love."

Coach gives a frustrated sigh. Oskar's cheeks pinken.

"When Dmitri asked me to marry him, of course, I said yes," he continues. "There

could never be another answer. Dmitri is a wonderful person.”

“Well, plenty of people are wonderful and you don’t marry them,” Vince says. “This isn’t...”

I turn to him. “Are you sure? You don’t want me to give interviews and tell people about how I fell in love with Oskar?”

“The Blizzards does not need more publicity on this—” Coach says.

“Wait.” Vince frowns. “He’s right. It’s our best option.”

“Really?” Coach stares at Vince.

He gives an awkward shrug. “Yeah. This is the only path now for Dmitri to stay.”

Daniela nods multiple times. “Okay. Fine.”

“I suggest that we get as many details about the wedding as possible,” Vince says. “The immigration lawyers love pictures. They need to see that this wasn’t just a drunken escapade.”

“We did intentionally fly to Vegas from Boston,” Oskar says.

“We got married in the afternoon,” I continue, “no minibar enhancements.”

“Well,” Oskar says. “There was champagne in the limo.”

“There was?” Vince leans forward. “That’s great!”

“My son having access to alcohol was great?” Coach says, still glowering.

“I am twenty-three,” Oskar says tersely. “Don’t embarrass me.”

“All the details are important for immigration officers,” Vince says. “Your green card interview will be very important.”

“We’ll need everything to be expedited,” Daniela says. “We play in Montreal and Toronto next month.”

Vince nods. “So, um, do you have the photos?”

“Well...”

He raises his gaze from his notepad. “Well?”

“We didn’t actually take any photos,” I say.

“None?”

“None.”

My heartbeat pounds. They were just beginning to go along with this. But I ruined it. Somehow, I ruined it all.

“Dmitri has receipts,” Oskar says smoothly.

I nod hastily, pulling out my phone to forward everything to Vince: limo, hotel suite, restaurant.

“You know hockey players are very protective of their privacy,” Oskar continues.

“So no pictures,” Vince says miserably.

I already have Vince's e-mail address on my phone and I forward him receipts quickly: of the limo, of the hotel room, of the restaurant.

"A two-bedroom honeymoon suite?" Vince mutters. "Just like any newlyweds."

I'm pretty sure Vince thinks this is going to explode in pieces around us.

He might be correct.

Intelligence has never been my strong suit. It's never mattered before. Hockey has always been everything. So much of my life has been spent practicing hockey. Watching games to imagine scenarios but also making myself stronger and faster.

God, if only I'd picked another agent. If only I hadn't picked the one agent who was going to spend his time not doing paperwork. And now he's sitting on a beach in Mexico somewhere.

I'm not going to let my life be destroyed because of something out of my control.

"I got a large suite in Vegas," I say, "because it was the most important day of my life."

I look to Oskar for support, but he's studying the table's wood grain. He's been quieter since I proposed this plan.

Finally he nods. "The room was beautiful. Honeymoon package. Red petals everywhere."

"Oh God." Coach buries his face in his hands. "This is a terrible idea."

"It's my choice, Pappa," Oskar says.

“You don’t have to do this.”

“You better take care of him,” Coach says. “Don’t hurt him. In any way.”

I blink. “I would never hurt Oskar.”

Coach just shakes his head, then leans toward Daniela. “He’s oblivious.”

She nods, and I frown.

“You’ll need to move in together,” Vince says.

“Oh.”

“This needs to be believable. Can you handle living with Oskar for months? Maybe a year?”

“Of course. I’m at his place all the time anyway.”

“You are?” Coach’s eyes widen.

“What don’t you understand about best friends?”

“Move into Dmitri’s place, Oskar.”

He stiffens. “It’s a studio.”

“But that shouldn’t matter since you’re so in love.” Vince’s lips swerve into a smirk.

He’s expecting me to say no way to this. I know he is. He’s expecting me to get angry, to leave, and then the Blizzards won’t have to worry about this immigration

mess.

Well, I'm not having it. I'm not going down without a fight. I clasp hold of Oskar's hand. "He's moving in tonight. We're very excited. Right, babe?"

"Yeah." Oskar's voice is thin and strained. "Super excited."

Around us, everyone groans.

O skar

The conference meeting ends.

“I, um, guess I’ll go,” Dmitri says.

“Extra sets for you,” Pappa says.

Dmitri glances at me uncertainly, his manner more embarrassed than normal. His demeanor is vulnerable, and I hate it. I hate that this process has taken away his confidence I refuse to let more of it be taken away.

“I’ll see you after work.” I bite my lip.

I’ve never been in a relationship.

Not once.

I’ve never taken a guy home to my parents and said, this person is special.

How can I fake a marriage when I’ve never even had a boyfriend? How do I act like a husband with the world watching and Dmitri’s future hanging on every gesture?

My heart shudders inside my chest.

Dmitri leans toward me, and for a wild moment I think he’s going to kiss me, like he did in Vegas.

Instead, he leans closer to me, and I inhale his scent, more masculine and sweat-scented than in Vegas. “See you later, babe.”

And then he does kiss me.

On the cheek.

It’s a peck, but it still causes my heart to somersault.

I nod, probably too many times. “Yeah, see you later...honey.”

He winks at me, then saunters away, moving in his customary swagger like everything is okay, and hopefully it will be.

My eyes flutter shut, but Dmitri’s face still looms in my mind.

“This is such a bad idea,” Daniela says, interrupting my reverie.

“We’re in lo—”

She shakes her head, and I hate it.

Because of course Dmitri would never be in love with someone like me.

The day drags. Papers blur together. I can’t focus, my thoughts circling back to Dmitri.

God, Dmitri is totally going to discover that I have a crush on him. How can I hide that when we’re sharing the same space?

DMITRI

I return to the locker room to find everyone staring. I don't blame them. Guess it's not every day a player gets punched in the face by his coach.

"What was that about?" Troy asks.

"Family squabble. No big deal."

"Are you hurt?" Noah frowns at my jaw.

"Is fine."

It does hurt, but God, I deserve it. I clench and unclench my fists.

"So you're really married to Oskar?" Finn asks.

"Yes."

Finn and Noah exchange glances.

"Was this a too much alcohol situation?" Troy asks.

"Of course not. Oskar and I flew to Vegas yesterday morning."

"Vegas?" Finn's eyebrows climb.

I nod. "Is good place to marry. You got married there."

"Yes, but that..."

Noah shoots Finn a look, and Finn laughs and pulls Noah closer to him and gives him a noisy smack on the lips. "Well, I love Vegas. It is great for weddings."

I nod. “Yes. We stayed at Paris Hotel. Then went to Eiffel Tower. Very romantic.”

Finn’s forehead creases.

“We took limo. Very nice people there.”

“Well, no surprise they’re nice to the guy in the limo,” Noah says.

“So you and Oskar really...” Finn keeps squinting at me like my words are in Russian.

“We are married couple.”

“For your visa...” Troy asks.

“No,” I say carefully. “That would be visa fraud.”

I emphasize those words. They need to understand.

These are my friends. They do.

“Well, congratulations on your marriage,” Finn says.

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Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:48 am

O skar

“Is good you’re here,” Dmitri’s voice booms from the next room.

Muffled, masculine voices sound, followed by stomping.

I leave the bedroom to find Dmitri’s best friends trampling around my room. Their smiles are awkward, their gazes confused.

Finn holds up a bottle of champagne. “For the newlyweds!”

“Thank you,” I say, though my voice sounds more like a squeak. My skin flames, and I feel their curious gazes on me, as if to wonder how I managed to end up married to the guy I was so obviously crushing on.

Dmitri takes the bottle of champagne. “Is good for packing. Makes the boxes less heavy.”

The others laugh, and I do too, because Dmitri is charming.

He navigates my tiny kitchen with familiar ease, pouring champagne into glasses.

Troy’s eyes narrow. “You know your way around Oskar’s kitchen.”

“Of course. Is my best friend.”

“Yes, but....”

The others shake their heads. Dmitri pulls me toward him, and gives me the first glass. “Happy wedding, husband.”

“Happy wedding,” I stammer out.

“Right. Let’s get packing!” Noah lurches for the cardboard boxes lined in one section of the room, as if touching them will dissipate the awkward energy around us.

Finn grabs some masking tape, and in the next moment they are turning the cardboard into actual boxes, cavorting into all manner of positions.

“Where should we start?” Noah asks.

“Doesn’t matter,” Dmitri says. “Everything will go.”

“You’re certain about this?” Finn asks. “Because if we pack everything, um, it won’t be easy for Oskar to come back when...”

He doesn’t finish the sentence.

Instead, his cheeks pinken, which is a rare occurrence for him.

Dmitri narrows his eyes. “Of course, everything must come with. Oskar needs to have his things.”

“But if you split...”

“I am not splitting from my new husband,” Dmitri says, steel in his voice. “Is outrageous.”

“Right.” Noah nods multiple times. “That’s nice.”

“It’s so great you’re married,” Luke says. “I wish you a very long and happy marriage.”

He shines a bright beam at me, and for a moment, I almost believe this is real, and that I am actually going to have an ongoing and happy marriage to Dmitri.

I glance at Dmitri, but he just sends me a blissful smile, and something catches in my throat.

The guys start packing my life into the boxes. Pillows and books and throw blankets disappear. They move into the bedroom, and I’m glad I already packed my intimate things, before they rifle through the rest of the room.

Later, we line the boxes against Dmitri’s gleaming walls. His apartment is glossy and expensive in a way that mine isn’t.

“Welcome home, baby,” Dmitri exclaims, slinging an arm around my shoulder, and laughing.

The other guys bounce their gazes away, but not before I see some of them look at me with pity.

Only Luke gazes at us happily.

I turn around and grab one of the boxes. I concentrate on unpacking it, moving things around Dmitri’s apartment, even though I feel that his sleek, modern furniture is screaming at me that my things don’t belong with his.

I inhale and exhale.

This is fine.

One year of pretending that I am not madly in love with him. It's no big deal. I've been pretending this for the past three years. It's definitely my area of expertise.

Finally, the guys say their goodbyes and offer additional congratulations about our wedding.

It's all fake.

They know it.

We know it.

But Dmitri must have said something about how it's important for us to pretend for the visa process, and thankfully, the guys play along.

"I'm so happy you guys finally got married," Luke says.

"Oh, year?" Dmitri grins at him.

"Yeah, maybe something can be done about all your chemistry," Luke says.

Dmitri's smile falters as he glances at me.

"I think it's super great." Luke continues. "I know homosexuality is forbidden in Russia. I'm really proud of you, Dmitri."

Dmitri swallows hard, managing a strained nod. "Thank you. That's, um..."

He doesn't finish the sentence. He can't. He's too shocked.

After Luke leaves, I meet Dmitri's stunned gaze.

“I don’t think Luke was acting,” he says.

“Luke is a terrible actor,” I say, and we both laugh.

“Worst reality TV show ever,” he says, and we both plop onto Dmitri’s slick leather couch and giggle.

The tension that has whirled around us dissipates, leaving me gasping for breath.

Luke had been infamously terrible on “Seeking Mr. Right” after Troy and Noah signed him up. The whole country watched him fumble through conversations with bemused, stunning women, only to end up with Sebastian, the host, much to the producers’ fury.

“Well, we fooled one person,” Dmitri says.

“We need to fool the world,” I remind him.

“We’ve got this.” He shifts closer. “There’s no one I’d rather fool the world with.”

I stiffen, then scramble for the remote control. Anything to distract me from the fact that I have two hundred pounds of ridiculously handsome Russian man beside me. I wait for my heart to slow to a more manageable level as I put on a sitcom that everyone has watched a million times.

Finally, Dmitri yawns. “Bedtime?”

“Okay.” My voice squeaks, and he shoots me a sidelong glance. Thankfully he doesn’t say anything.

“So, um, should I go back to my apartment now?”

He stares at me. “You’ve moved into this apartment.”

“Yes, but...”

“You’re sleeping here,” Dmitri says.

D mitri

Oskar is acting strangely, and I want to end this day as fast as I can. Maybe when we wake up there won't be this strangeness between us. Maybe then he'll just be my best friend, just like normal. It's normal that things would feel strange after we move in together as husband and husband. That's all.

I take off my shirt, and Oskar's eyes grow round as pucks, and he shuffles backward.

My chest tightens. "Is there problem, Oskar?"

"Problem?" His voice cracks. "No problem."

"You are backing away."

"Well, you're half-naked."

I glance down at my chest, where a few dark hairs curl against my skin. "But you are guy too. Nothing scary about me."

As I slide down my pants, he turns away and bolts from the room, the door frame of the bathroom rattling in his wake.

When he returns, his cheeks flushed pink, I ask, "Is a Swedish thing?"

His throat bobs. "What do you mean?"

“No nudity in Sweden?”

“Um... They’re not Puritans there.”

I nod. I know that word. Massachusetts history is all about Puritans.

The awkwardness follows us to bed. Oskar changes in the bathroom, and when he emerges in flannel pajamas, he approaches the bed with a pained expression more similar to people walking the plank.

“Is very nice mattress,” I assure him, patting the memory foam. “Medium firm.”

“That’s nice.” His gaze darts everywhere but at me, even though I’m way more interesting to look at than the wall or whatever else he could be focusing on.

Finally, he slides under the covers. I mean, I think he’s in the bed. He’s pretty thin, and the mattress doesn’t dip or anything. I roll over to look at him, and yes, there he is. He moves back, and I frown. I raise my torso to check something .

Yep, he’s totally squished at the very end of his side of the mattress.

“You can move closer,” I say.

“Um...”

“It’s just me.”

For some reason, he only looks more panicked when I say that. “I’m comfortable.”

“You’re going to roll off if you get any closer to the edge.”

“I like it,” he says. “It’s, um, airy.”

I roll my eyes, then I sigh and pull him toward me. I pat his pillow. “Put your head on that.”

He does so obediently.

“See? Isn’t that better?”

“I guess,” he says, but his voice doesn’t sound normal.

“We’ve slept beside each other before,” I remind him.

“We’ve never slept together!”

I stare.

He blushes.

“I mean—”

“On the plane,” I remind him. “How many times have you fallen asleep against me?”

“I have?” I hate the horror in his voice.

I nod. “You’re very cuddly. Just pretend we’re on a plane.”

“Okay,” he says, but his voice still sounds strained.

I sigh and pull him toward me, wrapping him into a hug. His breath only quickens, which is so not the point of my hugs. He flips so he’s facing the ceiling, and we lie

side by side, contemplating the dark ceiling.

“I’m sorry I dragged you into this.”

“It’s fine,” he says, but whatever has caused the distance between us can’t possibly be fine.

We spend too long being quiet, and even though his breath has stilled, I’m not sure if he’s just feigning sleep.

Finally, I wake up. At some point in the night I pulled him into my arms. He rests his head against my chest, and I inhale his scent, no longer masked by cologne, but just him. A slew of gold rests on my chest, and for a moment, I raise my hand to brush my fingers through his hair, then I remember that he’s a guy and that’s not something I do.

A wave of tenderness moves through me all the same, and I hate the moment my alarm goes off and he springs from my arms, his cheeks red and eyes wide, murmuring apologies.

“Sorry!” His long lashes flutter up, and he rakes a hand through his blond curls. “I-I didn’t mean to...”

“Is fine.”

He pulls the covers up in a suspicious move that I totally recognize.

“Want to use the bathroom first?” I ask.

He yawns. “I’ll just wait. You can go.”

“Uh-huh.”

He casts another nervous glance toward the blankets strewn over his lap, and my lips twitch.

“You have erection,” I say.

His eyes widen. His mouth drops.

“Is something that happens in mornings, Oskar. No big deal.”

Pink descends over his face. He shuffles the blankets around.

I sigh. I won’t have him be uncomfortable.

“Look.” I remove the blanket. “I have one too.”

He turns to me, and his breath catches audibly.

“You’re showing me your...” He doesn’t finish the sentence.

“Is covered by pajama pants,” I explain, gesturing to the gray cotton, “but you get the point.”

His gaze remains fixed downward at my bulge. “Yes, I get the point.”

I smile, trying to ease the tension. “See, you don’t have to worry. We’re both men.”

“But...”

“Is biology, Oskar. Happens every morning. Besides, you were lying in my arms.”

His cheeks flame again.

Shit.

That wasn't what I wanted to say. Now he's stressed again.

"If I'd had a problem, I could have woken you up," I say. "Or slid you from my arms."

"You were awake before the alarm went off?"

"Uh-huh." I step from the covers. Oskar's eyes flare, before he studies his palms, but I don't mind. The man is gay, and I'm highly attractive.

It would be strange if he didn't look from time to time.

"Big day ahead of us," I call out, padding toward the bathroom.

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Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:48 am

O skar

Paparazzi wait for us at the arena. They wear black, standing out against the snow-covered ground. The January breeze brushes around us. Dmitri squares his shoulders and takes my hand in his gloved one.

“Picture time,” he declares.

“Okay.” I give a strained smile.

My heart beats wildly. Whenever I’ve been at charity events there have been photographers, but I’ve always been confident in the fact that I’ve never been the subject of their attention. Pictures of lower team management don’t make headlines.

But now everything is different. Now I’m the story. God, they were all over Noah and Finn when they first got married.

This is going to be huge, and I don’t think Dmitri has any idea of just how big this is. Just how much news of this will be read and discussed.

Because if this were real... God, it would be wonderful. I imagine the younger version of me reading that a hockey player like Dmitri had run off with a man. It would be incredible.

But this is a lie.

For a moment guilt surges through me, but in the next moment, I feel one of Dmitri’s

fingers brush over the palm of my hand. Electricity zings through me, my body confused that his touches don't mean what I want them to.

I inhale and exhale.

"Is good," Dmitri assures me, and it takes me a second to realize that he's talking about the group of men directing their cameras at us. "You look handsome."

A laugh escapes me, more nerves than humor. "I wasn't thinking about that."

"You're supposed to tell me I look handsome too."

"I am?"

"Is polite. About repr..." He frowns.

"Reciprocity?"

His face brightens. "Yes. It's about that. Exactly."

"You're always handsome," I say, the words slipping out before I can catch them.

My stomach drops. I hadn't meant to voice that truth.

But Dmitri just shrugs with the casual confidence of every brooding hero from every teen movie ever made. "I know. Is why I didn't give you hard time."

"You sort of gave me a hard time."

His eyes dance, then dart to the side.

In the next moment, he wraps me in his arms, and I'm surrounded by the scent of cedar and citrus and Dmitri.

"Forgive me?" he murmurs.

"Always."

My heartbeat escalates, and he tightens his grip on me, then he kisses the corner of my mouth.

Then he steps away, and only when I hear the sound of shutters do I realize that paparazzi have captured the moment.

Heat floods my cheeks, but he ruffles my hair. His gaze is fond, then he turns to the group of cameramen.

"That's my adorable husband."

"You're gay, Dmitri?" one shouts.

"Bisexual," he shouts.

"You've never dated a man before."

"Other men aren't Oskar," he says lightly.

The paparazzi nod, but I note how some of their eyes narrow. God, they're not buying this. This isn't going to work. Maybe Finn and Noah got together, and everyone believed them, well, everyone except Vinnie, but Finn and Noah were both handsome and athletic. If Dmitri wanted to be with a man, he could be with anyone. Why would he pick a skinny non-athlete?

“Wave to the cameras,” Dmitri prompts.

I wave, and he kisses my cheek.

“We want a real kiss!” one of the cameramen demands.

“Yeah, a real kiss.”

I don’t want to look at Dmitri. I don’t want to see him stiffen, and I don’t want to see panic in his eyes.

But instead, I feel him pull me closer to him. He lowers his head, then his words are in my ears. “Do you mind?”

“You want to kiss me?”

His smile curves against my skin. “I have before.”

I nod, remembering Vegas, and the taste of champagne and possibility.

Maybe I smiled or something when I nodded, because in the next moment, his hands are cupping my face, and in the moment after that, his lips are on mine.

And then we’re kissing.

I’m sailing on the same fabulous cloud I was in Vegas, and my heart is pounding in just that same manner.

When he finally steps away, I probably look like a disaster. Hair mussed, cheeks flushed, lips swollen.

He grins, then turns to the cameras. “Did you catch that?”

“Do it again!” one person shouts.

I roll my eyes and pull Dmitri away toward the entrance.

“Sorry guys,” Dmitri says. “Apparently we can’t just make out in front of the hockey arena. My husband is in hockey management.”

“You’re also the son of the coach!” one paparazzo shouts. “What does your dad think about the marriage?”

“Coach was very excited once he found out,” Dmitri says.

“I’d never seen him so excited,” I agree.

People scribble on their phones, and we hurry into the building before someone can think to ask if it was good or bad excitement.

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Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:48 am

D mitri

I follow Oskar inside, my heart pounding a more frantic rhythm than usual.

The kiss was... Well, it was good. Really good.

And though I'd like to say that every kiss I've ever had has been good, that's not the case. Probably we didn't have chemistry.

And Oskar...

He's not a bad kisser. Not at all.

Does that mean I have chemistry with him? But I'm straight.

Maybe it's that Harvard education. That must be it. He probably read a book on kissing or something. That would be totally like something he would do.

"Aw..." Finn grins at us in the hallway. "Holding hands when no one is around and staring goofily into the distance. How romantic!"

Our hands spring apart.

"I-I didn't realize," Oskar stammers, stepping away like he's been shocked.

Finn's eyes soften, and regret enters his gaze. "It's sweet."

“We, um, were ambushed by paparazzi at the entrance.”

Finn’s face twists. “Shit. I’m sorry. They were relentless with Noah and me last year.”

“I’ll get to work,” Oskar mumbles, already backing away, his shoes squeaking against the polished floor.

“Have fun,” I call after him. “I’ll stop by at lunch.”

“You will?” His eyes round, and I hate that I don’t stop by every day for lunch.

“Of course. You’re my husband, and we work in the same building.”

“But—”

Finn is following our conversation with great interest. I sigh and give Oskar a kiss on the cheek. “See you later.”

“See you.” Oskar scurries away, practically sprinting down the corridor.

I turn to Finn who for some reason is frowning.

“What’s wrong?” I ask.

“Be careful with him.”

I blink.

“Protect his feelings.”

“Of course I’ll protect him. I’m his husband.”

Finn shakes his head, then sighs. “I am serious.”

“No one would protect him more than me.”

Finn tilts his head. “You’ve always been close to him.”

“Yes. I am his best friend.” I eye Finn. “Best friends are very close.”

Noah joins us, and a smile touches Finn’s lips. “Noah is my best friend.”

I nod, pleased he understands. “Then you know what I mean.”

For some reason, Finn’s smile collapses. “But he’s also my husband.”

“Oskar is my husband.”

“But—”

I stare.

Finn stares.

Finally Finn shakes his head. “You know, Sebastian’s friend was not impressed that you didn’t let him speak to Oskar at the party at our house.”

“He wanted to speak to Oskar alone.”

“You speak with Oskar alone.”

“I am his husband.”

“But— “

Noah elbows him, and then they seem to be doing a strange sort of staring match instead.

Finally, Finn huffs out a breath. “You know if you want to be his husband in every sense of the word, that would be cool.”

I furrow my brow. “What do you mean?”

“You know. Every sense.” Finn waggles his eyebrows like he’s trying to communicate in code.

“You’re strange,” I declare.

Noah giggles, then Finn elbows him and then they start elbowing each other in the hallway. I know from experience that this sort of behavior leads them to making out, and the conversation is officially over.

I wander away, wondering what it might be like to have the sort of close relationship that Noah and Finn have. I have that with Oskar of course, but we don’t start randomly making out.

I glance back at Finn and Noah.

Yep, they’re totally acting like they’re in the end of a romantic comedy now, the part where the music swells and the camera starts spinning.

Troy and Jason are working out.

Jason frowns. “You seriously married Oskar? In Vegas? Just like Noah and Finn.”

“Is traditional American wedding celebration place.”

Troy nods. “Well, that’s correct.”

Noah and Finn enter the locker room.

Troy scrunches his lips. “Though, you know, you can get certified online.”

“What does that mean?”

“You could have asked one of us to marry you.”

My eyebrows raise. “I was only going to ask Oskar to marry me. Not one of you.”

Troy’s lips twitch. “That’s good to hear. I meant conduct the ceremony.”

I blink.

“If you’d waited a few days for the license, you could have gotten married on your lunch break.”

“Oskar deserved real wedding.”

The guys exchange glances again.

“That’s adorable,” Troy says finally. “If we’d known in advance we could have thrown a bachelor party.”

I grimace, imagining dancing men around Oskar. “Is not good wedding tradition.

Inappropriate.”

“We totally agree,” Finn says, elbowing Noah. “That’s why we didn’t have one.”

“You keep things appropriate, babe,” Noah says, and Finn ruffles his hair and beams.

The door slams open and coach marches into the room. He shoots me one of those ferocious glances that Vikings probably used centuries ago to make their enemies crumble and hand over gold.

He points at me. “Family dinner on Thursday. Be there.”

“Yes, daddy.”

His glower deepens. “Seven pm. Don’t be late. Ingrid does not like serving cold food.”

Oskar

I try to focus on my work, but Daniela's gaze keeps pulling me from the spreadsheet on my screen. Finally, she flashes me a smile that hovers somewhere between conspiratorial and predatory. "I've just arranged an interview for you for tomorrow."

"Seriously?"

"We need to get ahead of this story, Oskar. We need to control the narrative, not whatever assumptions they have."

"Yeah."

"People are already saying that you and Dmitri have a green card marriage, Oskar."

"They are?"

"People can put two and two together. Everyone knew about his visa issues. His agent made national news, and Dmitri is sort of the poster boy for his former agent's incompetence."

I blink rapidly. "Right."

"He's worth ruining your professional and personal reputation for?" She leans forward, her eyes sharp. "I recommend you and Dmitri practice explaining your love story. And make it realistic."

“Sure. No problem.”

“Because it really happened.”

“Totally.” I blink multiple times and scratch my nose.

Daniela shakes her head. “You’re a bad liar, Oskar.”

“Not something I ever thought my boss would bring up as a negative quality at work.”

A knock interrupts us, and I brace myself for Pappa to appear with his latest critique. Instead, Dmitri fills the doorway. He strides to my desk and places a coffee cup before me. “Here you go, husband.”

“Thank you.” I grip the coffee thankfully. It’s warm which is super important in January, but the best thing is the scent of white chocolate that inundates my nostrils.

“My favorite,” I murmur.

Dmitri’s eyes soften. “I know.”

The printer starts to whirr, then Daniela hands us both printed papers with a flourish. “Here are some potential questions. Get Dmitri to go over it with you tonight. You need to have some answers.”

I glance at the page. “Where was our first date?”

Daniela nods.

“And where was our first kiss?”

“Hard to answer if you haven’t kissed him before.”

“Of course we’ve kissed,” Dmitri says.

“You have?” Daniela’s eyes widen.

“A husband kisses his husband,” Dmitri says.

Daniela opens her mouth, then shuts it. Finally, she smiles. “I guess he does.”

“We have pictures as proof,” I add.

Daniela’s face hardens. “And that’s the sort of statement you should not be making to the journalist.”

Even my white chocolate mocha has not succeeded in keeping my throat from going dry.

I feel Dmitri’s gaze, then he takes my hand in his and squeezes it. I guess he’s doing it to comfort me, but when he moves his fingers, it’s not to move away, but to link his fingers with mine.

He takes the sheet Daniela printed and scans it. “We’ll go over everything tonight.”

Then he unravels himself from my grip, because of course, that was the plan all along. He folds the sheet and gives it to me. “Take care of it.” Then he frowns, and I’m not sure what he’s thinking. My heartbeat escalates, because the only expression I want on his face is a smile. Then he kisses my cheek. “See you later, honey.”

My eyes must be wide, because he grins.

He clears his throat, then nudges my foot with his. “You’re supposed to say something.”

“I am?”

His eyebrow does one of those climbing things. “You are.”

Realization moves through me. “See you later, baby.”

He grins, then leaves the room, walking backwards until he reaches the door and slips out.

The door clicks shut.

“That would have been totally cute if I didn’t know you were headed straight for Heartbreakville.”

“That’s not a place, Daniela.”

“You’re going to be there soon.”

I want to tell her she’s wrong, but of course I can’t. From the smug look she gives me, she knows she’s right.

God. I’ve broken Rule # Super Important about being gay: don’t fall in love with a straight man.

I avoid eye contact and sit down. The screen blurs together, and I can still feel the spot where Dmitri pressed his lips against my cheek.

D mitri

Oskar and I perch on opposite sides of the sofa. I extend my hand, and he passes me the folded paper. I smooth out the creases with careful fingers.

“What was our first date?”

Oskar scrunches his forehead. “I guess we could make it anything.”

“We had lunch in Colorado,” I say. “That was the first time we hung out.”

“Yes, but we can’t go back that far. We have to have them think we’ve been secretly dating.”

“That restaurant in New Hampshire?” I suggest. “When there was all the snow?”

He nods, jotting it down.

I lean over his shoulder and read the next line. “Tell me about your past relationships.”

Pink stains his cheeks, and slime sludges through my veins. I don’t want to hear about his past relationships. Don’t want to imagine him with other people, being cherished, being loved. Don’t want to see that faraway look in his eyes that means he’s thinking about someone else

He hesitates. Maybe he’s wondering which relationship to describe first. How many

relationships has he had?

None since I've known him.

I think.

He hasn't talked about his relationships with me, but then I haven't spoken about my relationships with him. I've definitely had relationships in the three years since I first met Oskar, but speaking about whichever woman currently was on my arm seemed like a waste when I could be speaking with him about more interesting things.

Who was he dating at Harvard? I picture him arm-in-arm with men in bowties discussing biochemistry. They probably came from wealthy families that sail the Mediterranean and learn languages for fun. They probably never had to push their bodies to physical limits to escape a repressive regime. And they definitely never worried about being sent far away from everything they love.

"I don't think that answer is necessary," Oskar says finally.

Something thuds in my chest.

"I thought you were taking this seriously," I say.

"I am."

"I should know who your past relationships were with," I say. "Is something husband should know."

Oskar shifts on the couch. He pulls his legs away from me, and I hate it. I want to drag them back to where they were, so his calves touch mine.

“You’re not a real husband.”

The words shouldn’t hurt. I know that. They shouldn’t detonate through my body like an explosion.

“We’ll tell them we don’t believe in sharing that information,” he says. “Tell them that the only relationship that matters is our relationship.”

I stare at him. “Seriously?”

“Uh-huh.” He nods firmly at the dark television screen, avoiding my eyes. I cross my arms. “No.”

He turns to me. His mouth drops, then he quickly moves his gaze away from me. He’s focusing again on the TV, even though it’s currently just a dark screen. “I refuse.”

Uneasiness slithers through me. “I see.”

He rises. “I should do some work.”

“You’re not in the office, Oskar.”

“I want a head start for tomorrow.”

“But—”

“Are you going to say what I do isn’t important?”

I shake my head quickly. I know better than that.

“These questions are important too,” I say finally.

He sighs, and his long lashes flutter down. He rakes a hand through his silky blond curls, and his soft, full lips transform into a pout. “Do you want to talk about your past relationships?”

“Is on paper. Is not desire.”

“What should I know?” he asks finally.

“Nothing was serious,” I say. “You’re the first person I lived with.”

He gives me a weak smile. “There was that woman you took to Isaiah’s wedding last year.”

“Rebecca.”

“And you were pretty close with Madison,” he says.

“Just casual,” I say. “You know how it is.”

His face whitens, and he shoots me another one of those wobbly smiles I absolutely despise.

“We weren’t close,” I say. “Not really.”

“Who were you close with?”

I frown.

“Have you been in love?”

I open my mouth. Then shut it.

“I don’t have a tragic love story in my past, Oskar. I met lots of nice women that I had lots of nice times with. Is simple.”

“Oh.” His brow remains wrinkled.

Should I have been in love with someone before? That’s normal too, isn’t it? But I’ve seen Finn and Noah, Luke and Sebastian, Vinnie and Evan.

And what I’ve had with the people I dated... well, it wasn’t that. My past relationships were about having fun. About having sex and going to events together. They never lasted long. The women I chose weren’t expecting a forever with me, just stories they could tell their friends. I was one of a string of pro athletes, and I’m pretty sure they were waiting for the doctor or finance guy who had a job that would make money over the coming decades. I’m in my prime, and once I’m sent back to Russia, it will be over.

I’ll be through with the NHL, through with my life here. Through with my friends, through with the job I love, through with spending time with Oskar.

“Is okay if you don’t want to talk about your past relationships,” I say.

Oskar nods, but for some reason his eyes dart away in a manner that I might term guilty.

But that doesn’t make sense.

When his phone buzzes, he leaps for it. In the next moment, he’s speaking to his mother about visiting for family dinner and bringing me. I listen to him chatter, watch his shoulders lessen in tension, and see him throw his head back as he laughs at

whatever his mother is saying.

Maybe I'm not supposed to watch someone have a phone conversation, and I pull my gaze away.

I'm going to family dinner with Oskar.

And the last time I saw his dad, he punched me.

When Oskar hangs up the phone, I pull him toward me. His blue eyes widen.

"Dmitri?" His brows dart upward.

I should probably let go of his wrist.

I don't.

"So, um, how do I impress your mother?"

"You want to impress my mother."

"I mean, I really didn't impress your dad. She's sort of my last hope."

His pink lips swerve upward. "She'll like you."

"Oh yeah?"

"She married a hockey player too."

"You did not just compare me to your dad."

His eyes round, then his mouth. “Um, no way. I mean, your hair is darker, and your voice is...”

“Is?”

“Nicer?” His cheeks pinken together, but I just nod. Of course my voice is nicer.

“You compared us,” I say. “So tragic. You know what happens now?”

He shakes his head.

“Punishment!” Then I pull him toward me and tickle him until he’s writhing below me, and his blue eyes are dancing, and his tenor voice is squealing beneath me and all I can smell is his sweet skin.

My cock hardens, and I release Oskar.

Shit.

His eyes round. “Is something wrong?”

I give a wobbly smile. “You won this time.”

He raises his arms in a victory pose, like he’s Charles de Gaulle or something, then he bounds away. I quickly adjust myself, because I’m pretty sure I’m not supposed to get hard from tickling someone.

My heart thunders. Strange.

Maybe it’s been too long since I slept with someone. That’s probably it. Nothing more. Obviously.

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Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:48 am

O skar

I pace the hallway outside the locker room. Finally, Dmitri arrives. His eyes flare when he sees me.

We should have prepared more for the interview last night. I scan Daniela's list of questions again, anxiety bubbling in my body.

He's freshly showered, and beads of water still shimmer on his face. His hair is damp, and he wears the team sweatpants and sweatshirt.

He takes my hand, and I try not to quiver at the touch of his bare skin against mine.

"The press are here."

"Good. Let's get this over with."

Even though there aren't any journalists in the hallway, Dmitri doesn't let go of my hand. I guess a journalist could emerge at any moment, and he's just being smart.

There's no other reason why we should be holding hands.

We enter the room.

"The happy couple," Daniela exclaims when we enter. Her smile is brittle, but she types on her tablet valiantly.

I recognize Jeremy Jones and Rex Manley—two journalists I wish were far, far away.

Maybe I'm being unfair.

They're probably great people.

But they have the ability to destroy my husband's life, and even if, strictly speaking, he doesn't intend to spend the rest of his life with me, I can't bear the thought of anything bad happening to him.

"Congratulations on your wedding." Rex's eyes dance as if he finds the situation amusing.

Something constricts in my throat, but then Dmitri's hand covers mine, warm and wonderful.

"Thank you," Dmitri says, his deep voice grounding me.

"I can't believe there are so many gay couples on the Boston Blizzards," Rex says. "It's pretty unbelievable."

"Well, I'm not a player of course."

Jeremy and Rex's eyes round.

"I mean, obviously," I say. My cheeks heat.

Pappa was one of the best hockey players in Sweden, but I'm shorter than him. I don't look anything like a hockey player.

"Unlike Finn and Noah," I say hastily. "Or Evan and Vinnie. I, um, work on the

management side.”

“That is convenient,” Rex says, and even Jeremy is nodding along with him now, his eyes narrow and assessing.

Shit.

Jeremy is supposed to be the easy interviewer. He comes from an LGBTQ magazine.

“You’ve been having visa issues,” Rex says. “And now they’re solved.”

Dmitri tenses.

The door swings open and a slender woman with Texas hair and Italian heels sweeps into the room. She wears a badge, and my heart sinks.

“Sorry I’m late,” the woman squeals. “This arena is massive.”

“You’re Kara?” Daniela asks.

The two women talk for a bit.

I give a frozen smile. I know Jeremy and Rex. I don’t know this woman.

Rex pulls out a chair for her, and she settles in the room, murmuring apologies in our direction.

She flutters her lashes in Dmitri’s direction. “Congratulations to the happy couple.”

I stiffen. This isn’t going to work. Dmitri is straight. She’s going to be able to tell.

I've seen Dmitri pick up women that look just like her at bars. She's his type. I know, because I know everything about him.

But Dmitri gives the same polite nod that he'd given to Rex and Jeremy before, and he flashes the same smile that he gives audiences afterward.

"Thank you. We're very happy." He grabs my hand and squeezes it, and I try to be calm. I need to be calm. This meeting is important.

"So how did you fall in love?" Rex asks, his lips still drawn into a smirk.

I can answer this.

I've been in love with Dmitri for ages, even if that was never something I wanted to broadcast.

But Dmitri speaks before me. "Oskar and I have always been close. He's my best friend. That's always the best foundation for love."

Rex narrows his brow. "I've always thought friendship was a great foundation for...good friendship."

"Then you're missing out," Dmitri says lightly, his thumb tracing circles on my hand.

"We are best friends," I say.

"How adorable," the female reporter says.

Dmitri turns to her, and I stiffen. But he doesn't look at her any differently, and I feel guilty for thinking that he would.

“Oskar is adorable,” Dmitri says, smiling at me fondly.

“And you eloped in Vegas,” Rex asks. “You married your best friend, a guy, even though you’ve always dated women before? Right after you had visa issues and realized you might be expelled from the country?”

Dmitri’s mouth falls. He’s not easily ruffled, but yeah, he’s ruffled now.

“Dmitri and I were dating. We kept it quiet because he didn’t want me to be in the news.” I give my best smile. “I’m sort of shy.”

“And when I found out about the visa issue, I realized I didn’t want to live my life without Oskar,” Dmitri says. “He’s the most important person in my life.”

“And now we’re married,” I say, my heart beating wildly.

“Happy ending,” Rex says.

“Very,” Jeremy says.

The female reporter claps her hands. “Super adorable.”

Dmitri stands abruptly. “We should go. I, um, need to get back to practice. And Oskar will be busy with his work.”

We hurry from the room.

“That could have gone better,” I say.

Dmitri’s face is already pale, but he nods. “It could have gone worse.”

“Yeah. That’s true.”

I chuckle, and Dmitri snorts.

“Come, Oskar.” Dmitri leads me from the interview room, and only when he stops in front of my office do I realize that he’s been holding onto my hand the whole way back.

D mitri

My muscles scream as I drag myself off the ice. Coach's drills pushed me harder than usual today. He's been extra brutal since the wedding. Punching me wasn't enough. But I can take it. What I can't take is disappointing Oskar's family at dinner.

"I hope you haven't forgotten, Volkov," Coach says, his eyes promising fresh vengeance if I have.

I swallow the urge to say something sarcastic. It's easier to resist that impulse now that Coach is no longer attacking me. "I'll see you at dinner, Coach."

"Make sure you bring good wine," Coach says. "None of that boxed stuff or things in cans. Ingrid will be unimpressed."

"I'll bring wine." I give a decisive nod to show I'm serious, then hurry past the others. "I need shower. Is important!"

Finn laughs behind me. "Feeling extra dirty, Dmitri?"

I turn around and scowl, tearing off my athletic gear and throwing them into the hamper.

"We don't need to see a full frontal," Jason says. "This is too gay."

"Hey!" Finn tosses a dirty tank in Jason's direction.

Noah cringes. “Sorry, Dmitri. Jason is like that sometimes.”

I furrow my brow as Jason leaves the room. “I didn’t realize he acted like that.”

“Welcome to our point of view,” Noah says.

I nod slowly, then remember that I need to get ready. Dinner is soon, and I don’t want to keep Coach waiting.

I bound into the shower room. I scrub my body because no way am I entering Coach’s house smelling like anything less than perfect.

I move hastily, dry even faster, then hurry to pick up Oskar from his office.

A few people shout after me, but I don’t care.

Oskar is shutting off his computer when I enter, and I grab his coat and help him into it.

Daniela raises an eyebrow. “You’re very helpful.”

“Is important evening,” I tell her. “I’m meeting Oskar’s mother and sisters.”

“They’re not scary,” Oskar assures me.

I narrow my gaze. “You’re not taking this seriously.”

His eyes widen.

I grab his scarf and wrap it around him, then zipper up his coat.

“I can do that.”

“Okay.”

I step away as he takes over his zippering. I slide his hat over his head, make sure it covers his ears and start to put on his gloves.

He giggles. “I’m not helpless.”

“Of course not. But we are in hurry.”

I take Oskar’s hand and lead him away, noting how his eyes flare when we touch.

“You don’t have to hold my hand everywhere,” he says.

“Is advantage of marriage.”

He opens his mouth, then shuts it, sending me a blissful smile. “Okay.”

I squeeze his hand, and we hurry down the corridor. Some of my teammates stream from the locker room, but there’s no way I’m going to stop for conversation now.

“It’s just family dinner,” Oskar says.

“Is first time I’m meeting your mother and sisters.”

“I thought you met them before.”

“I’ve waved to them. Said hello. Never spent time with them.” I squeeze his hand.

“This would be easier if I had. You should have invited me beforehand.”

He grins. “I didn’t expect you to become my husband.”

I shake my head. “Thought Harvard students were supposed to be able to anticipate the future.”

“Nope. Never anticipated that I would marry a Russian hockey player.”

“You should ask for a refund from Harvard,” I say.

Oskar giggles and I remove my phone. “Siri, what is the best wine store near us?”

Siri gives her mechanical instructions, and soon I’m ushering Oskar into my car and we’re hurrying to the nearest wine store, then we’re off to Coach’s suburban house.

I am not nervous.

No.

I still tighten my grip around the steering wheel though.

“Tell me everything about your mother, Oskar.”

“Everything?”

“Is important. She needs to like me.”

“It doesn’t matter what she thinks,” he says. “Even if she hates you, we’ll still be married.”

“You deserve to have husband your family likes.”

“I—” Oskar opens his mouth, then shuts it.

Maybe he’s thinking that this relationship doesn’t matter, because it’s not his forever one.

“That’s nice of you,” he says finally with a smile.

I smile back at him, but my heart feels heavy in my chest.

Oskar chatters about his parents and younger sisters as we drive toward Arlington. We leave Boston and its swarms of tourists and busy professionals. Immaculately groomed men and women walk fluffy dogs.

Finally, I pull in front of the large suburban house. It’s white with green shutters and looks like the houses in movies I used to watch when I was growing up in Russia. It’s the sort of house with nice families, next to other houses with nice families. It’s nothing like the concrete apartment where I was born, where I used to sleep in my mother’s room until I was ten and was sent to play hockey for the Russian state. We shared that apartment with my mother’s grandparents, a grumpy gray-haired couple who complained about my presence and my mother’s presence and my dad’s perpetual absence.

This is fine.

I’m meeting Oskar’s parents.

And technically, I’ve met them before.

But they know just how terrible I am. They’re not impressed with the marriage.

I tell myself I don’t care if they like me, because God, that’s not something I

normally do care about. When I fight other players on the ice, I don't care that they might not like me. In fact, the more the other team doesn't like me, the better, I've always said.

But this is different. I don't want Oskar to experience any blowback. I don't want his relationship with his happy, super adorable family to change because of me.

I don't want him to look back on his life in a few decades and say that when he met me, things changed. No way.

I take Oskar's hand and walk up the winding stone path with him, then ring the doorbell, clutching the expensive wine like a shield.

O skar

The door swings open, and Dmitri squeezes my hand before releasing it. My sister opens the door, pink-and-red braces flashing.

“Dmitri Volkov!” she squeals. “I’m your sister!”

Shit.

“Hi Linnea,” I say.

In the next moment, Linnea flings herself into Dmitri’s startled arms with the enthusiasm and confidence of a pairs figure skater. He shoves the wine into my hand.

“Hi,” Dmitri says, patting her head awkwardly.

I hear footsteps, then Olivia lurches into my arms.

I grin. I’m not sure how used to children Dmitri is. He doesn’t have any siblings and when we do charity events, he normally signs up for the events with veterans or animals.

“That’s enough, Linnea,” I say.

I turn to my youngest sister. “Hi Olivia. How was school?”

“Why didn’t you invite us to your wedding?” Olivia whines.

“We, um, didn’t invite anyone to our wedding,” I say, exchanging a quick glance with Dmitri.

Olivia assesses Dmitri. “Are you shy?”

Dmitri swallows hard, his Adam’s apple bobbing desperately. “Maybe a bit shy.”

I grin.

Dmitri definitely is not shy at work. He’s one of the most talkative players on the team.

But right now he looks like he’d rather face an angry opposing team than my teenage sisters.

“Maybe you should let Dmitri go,” I suggest.

“Oh, you squeeze him enough at home,” Linnea says, still clutching hold of Dmitri. “It’s my turn now.”

“That’s not how marriage works.”

“You’re an expert on marriage?” Pappa appears behind her, voice dry.

“I-I didn’t see you,” I stammer.

“I wasn’t going to run to answer the door for him.” Pappa sneers in Dmitri’s direction, then extends a stiff handshake. “Let him go, Linnea.”

Linnea releases Dmitri reluctantly, then she spreads out her arms wide. “Welcome to the family.”

Pappa rolls his eyes. “Don’t get attached to him.”

“He’s Oskar’s husband!” Linnea squeals.

“Yeah, he’s Oskar’s husband!” Olivia says, squealing louder, and proving that size and vocal diaphragm size are not predictable.

“Not all family members are forever,” Pappa says helplessly.

Linnea’s lower lip trembles, and even Dmitri looks a shade paler.

“What nonsense are you saying in front of the children?” Mamma appears, swatting Pappa aside and pulling Dmitri into the house.

I got my fine bones and slender frame from her, but she has no trouble manhandling hockey players.

“Welcome to the family, Dmitri. We’re so happy you’re here.”

Dmitri’s eyes widen, but he gives my mother a serious nod. “Thank you. I-I appreciate it.”

“Ingrid,” Pappa says. “You know things aren’t like that.”

Mamma raises an accusatory eyebrow, and Pappa glances at Linnea before his shoulders slump.

I’m pretty sure that Pappa told Mamma the marriage is fake, and they decided not to tell Linnea and Olivia I’m glad they didn’t. Preteens are hardly known for their discretion.

“This is from Dmitri,” I say, handing Mamma the bottle of red wine.

She studies the label. “From Tuscany. How wonderful.”

“The person at wine store said it was good,” Dmitri says, his usual confidence absent.

My mother frowns in his direction, craning her slender neck upward. “What happened to your face?”

Pappa shoots a guilty glance in our direction.

“Is no big deal,” Dmitri says. “Hockey is rough.”

Mamma shakes her head. “The amount of time I used to worry about my husband.”

Pappa’s guilty expression intensifies.

“I’m sure he could take care of himself,” Dmitri offers. “Still can.”

“I think dinner is ready,” Pappa interrupts. “Dining room, everyone!”

Linnea and Olivia race through the house, sliding across polished floors while Pappa shouts at them to behave.

“I assume he’s better at getting NHL players to behave than the girls,” Mamma says to Dmitri.

“We always thought he was pretty scary,” Dmitri says.

Pappa whirls around and jabs a finger at his face.

“He’s still pretty scary,” Dmitri says quickly.

Pappa puffs out his chest. “That’s right girls. Listens to this man.”

Linnea and Olivia stare at Dmitri, then shake their head.

“I thought you’d picked a smarter husband,” Linnea says finally.

“Why didn’t you pick a smarter husband?” Olivia echoes.

Horror flashes across Dmitri’s face.

“He’s plenty smart,” I say.

“He thinks Pappa is scary.”

“I am scary,” Pappa exclaims.

“Then you’ll get along wonderfully,” Mamma says, slipping her arms around Pappa and kissing him.

“Ew!” Olivia hollers.

“Ew!” Linnea squeals.

“Couples kiss,” Pappa says.

“One day you’ll kiss someone,” Mamma adds.

Olivia wrinkles her nose and shakes her head violently.

“Oskar kisses Dmitri,” Linnea says.

Olivia narrows her gaze. “No joke?”

“Of course,” Dmitri says, which I guess is better than saying he doesn’t.

“That’s disgusting,” Olivia says.

“Young lady!” Mamma scolds.

“Is not disgusting,” Dmitri says, wrapping his arms around me from behind, pulling me against his chest.

I’m his shield now.

Olivia eyes him skeptically. Pappa follows the exchange with way too much interest.

“You really kiss, Oskar?” Olivia asks.

“Absolutely,” Dmitri says firmly. “Sometimes.”

“You’re so lucky, Oskar,” Linnea sighs, batting her eyelashes at my husband.

“I’m the lucky one,” Dmitri says lightly, pressing a kiss to my temple.

My eyes are probably rolling back or doing something similarly embarrassing.

“I’m so happy for you,” Mamma beams. “I know how long you wanted this.”

I feel Dmitri stiffen behind me.

“To think the first time you bring home someone, it’s—”

“Mamma,” I plead, scrambling from Dmitri’s arms and scurrying away.

“What?”

“Mamma!”

I feel Dmitri’s gaze burning into me. My skin prickles.

I thought Pappa would be the embarrassing one.

“What? You’re together now!”

“But—” I stare at her.

She stares back.

“Sit down,” Pappa interrupts. “Food will get cold.”

Dmitri practically sprints to the dining room table. I don’t blame him.

I don’t want Dmitri to know just how strongly I feel about him. It’s mortifying. I should be able to be friends with a stunningly attractive athlete without pining after him. I shouldn’t objectify him. It’s not right.

I take a deep breath, as if it’s possible to swallow my feelings, and sit down. Dmitri takes the chair beside me. Usually his presence settles me, but now I feel unsteady, like when he started asking about my past relationships.

God, Mamma almost told him I’ve never had a boyfriend. That no one’s ever wanted

me.

My nerves remain on edge, and I'm startled when Dmitri takes my wine glass and hands it to my mother, and more startled when he takes it back from her, now filled with wine. He rubs my shoulder, as if he thinks his touch can calm me. Not a bad assumption, honestly.

I take a longer sip of wine than I normally might, and when I set my glass down, Pappa is frowning at me.

"Don't turn my son into an alcoholic, Dmitri," Pappa says.

My mouth drops. "I took a sip! And you wanted him to bring the wine!"

Pappa's lips curl, and I realize I'm not exactly projecting maturity here.

God, if Dmitri actually liked men, if he actually liked me, he probably wouldn't after tonight.

"Dmitri is making our son happy," Mamma scolds Pappa. "Do you know how long—"

"Mamma!" I plead. "Please."

We do that staring thing again, though for some reason, she looks puzzled.

Does she think Dmitri and I are married for real? She must know this is fake. Dmitri is straight, straight, straight. He'd never pick me. Even if he were gay, he would probably pick someone muscular who could keep up with him in the gym. Like Vinnie and Evan or Noah and Finn.

No, maybe someday I'll meet the wiry accountant or anesthesiologist of my dreams.

Dmitri says something praising the food to my mother, and I realize I probably should actually eat it. Family dinners generally don't involve driving to my parents' house, then staring at the food my mother worked on for hours.

I grab my fork and knife. The meatballs are probably super juicy, but when I put one in my mouth, it feels heavy and foreign. I chew awkwardly, conscious of Dmitri beside me, worried that Mamma will say another thing that will make him know just how inexperienced I am.

This isn't the 1950s, and I'm not a woman who can get pregnant. There're no bonus points for being inexperienced now. Dmitri sleeps with a different woman practically every time the bus stops in a new place. What will he think if he discovers that the friend he married for boring bureaucratic reasons has been pining for him for years?

My stomach clenches as I force myself to keep chewing.

Dmitri squeezes my thigh, and I probably give him a startled look. His eyes are round with worry.

"Okay?" he murmurs.

I nod, even though it's not true, but when his lips swerve into a smile, there's no way I'm not smiling right along beside him.

"You're so cute!" Linnea squeals, and Dmitri stiffens.

"How is school going?" I ask quickly, listening to my sisters chatter about teachers and classmates.

I keep on asking them questions because the last thing I want is for Mamma or Pappa
tto start interrogating Dmitri

The tension that's gripped me since we arrived starts to dissipate.

Of course it couldn't last.

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D mitri

Oskar's family oozes niceness, and I'm saying this after my face hasn't quite healed from Coach's punch.

But Coach was defending Oskar, and... I get that. I would punch anyone who hurt him. And yeah, I can see now that if this doesn't go well, if we don't convince the world that we're in love, if he becomes a poster boy for green card fraud...that will hurt him.

Terribly.

When I imagined worst-case scenarios, I only thought about this not working for me. I couldn't picture a world where Oskar wasn't gliding toward his fantastic future. I know he's just working for the team temporarily, that he took his LSATs this summer, that he's applying to fancy law schools that will set him up for life.

Oskar is considering pursuing law. He can't be found breaking US immigration law. I am so unworthy of this sweet, kind man. He moves with such grace, laughing with his sisters.

He seems to have relaxed from his initial unease, because this man was not made for lying, especially not to his family.

I've corrupted him in a million ways, and all I want is his happiness. Lately I've begun to think that maybe my very presence makes him unhappy. Why else would he scamper away when we're watching movies on the couch?

The flickering candlelight plays across his face. His long lashes flutter when he talks, and I have an odd urge to trace his upturned Swedish nose and cup his full cheeks, rosy now from wine.

His sisters pepper me with questions. I'm too stiff with them, I know. But I'm not used to children, and I want these laughing, teasing, outrageous girls to like me. Normally, I don't care what people think. This situation is novel.

"So tell me about your family," Oskar's mom asks. "Do you have any siblings?"

"No." I furrow my brow. "I mean, maybe I have half-siblings. I don't really know my father."

"That must be difficult."

I shake my head. "I never met him." I give a soft laugh to prove to her that it's not difficult at all, but it sounds hollow and horrible, and I press my lips together.

Does he have another family? Are they sitting around somewhere doing happy things together?

"Maybe he's dead," I say finally. "My mother said he was a soldier. But I guess I don't know."

My mother lied about a lot of things, and telling her son that her dad was a soldier and that's why he never was around would be on brand.

Still, it's definitely possible.

I tense. God, the only people I have to fight are on the ice.

Who was my dad?

“Is your mother still part of your life?” Oskar’s mother asks carefully.

“She passed away. But I still have cousins.”

“I’m sorry,” Oskar’s mother says, and maybe my emotions weren’t as masked as I thought.

“Overdose. It happens all over the world. Is not her fault,” I say, because I don’t want Oskar’s mother to think badly about her. I don’t want her to pity me. “She had me young. Her parents were not happy. They suddenly had another child to take care of and the apartment was tiny.”

“Skating must have been important to you,” Oskar’s mother says, changing the subject.

“I was lucky I was good at it.” I swallow hard, imagining for a moment if I hadn’t been. After all, I’m not good at anything else. “I was sent from my family when I was ten. Was better there.”

“They’re pretty strict in Russia,” Coach says, eyeing me. “You were Olivia’s age.”

“Was better than home,” I say.

“This is boring,” Olivia whines. “Russia, Russia, Russia.”

“I feel the same way.”

“How did you know that Oskar was the one?” Linnea asks, clasping her hands together and leaning forward.

Coach's gaze narrows. I glance at Oskar's mother, who gives me an encouraging smile. She seems to be really inviting me into the family. I thought she'd be suspicious and protective like Coach, but instead she acts like she's been waiting for Oskar and me to get together.

Oskar and I are friends. That's all. But is there another world where we could have been more? Where I could have seen him and decided I didn't just want friendship, but something deeper? Where I didn't just want to spend evenings watching whatever we watch, but wanted to spend them holding him and kissing him and more.

The man is fucking adorable.

Of course, I'm straight, so that world doesn't exist.

That world is for some gay hockey player who met Oskar.

But Finn said he didn't think he would ever be with a guy before he met Noah, that the idea had never occurred to him, and look at him now.

"Don't bother Dmitri," Oskar says, and I realize that maybe I should have answered his sisters.

"We met after a hockey game," I say finally.

"That doesn't sound romantic," Olivia says, her brow furrowed in just the same manner that Coach furrows his brow during practice when he's trying to impart some guidance to us and we're not quite getting it.

"Guess we have a boring romance," I say, squeezing Oskar's hand.

"You forget that Dmitri looks very good in hockey clothes," Oskar says. "And he's

an excellent skater.”

Olivia still looks skeptical, but Linnea nods her head.

“He’s super hot,” Linnea agrees.

“Oskar is hot too,” I say.

Oskar’s eyebrows shoot up like he didn’t expect that. I frown.

The thing is, I’m right. Of course, I’m right.

“He’s smaller than me,” I say, “but that’s cute. Everything about Oskar is adorable. Compact, but definitely hot.”

I take his hand in mine and meet his eyes. “Didn’t you know that?”

Oskar’s skin pinkens. “We, um, don’t have to talk about that.”

“I’m being serious.”

He nods, but he looks away. The thing is, this night feels very much not like a lie.

I wish this night were actually real. I wish I were actually meeting my in-laws, knowing this was the first of many family dinners and holiday celebrations and all the things actual, happy families do together.

Because there’s no one better than Oskar.

And he is handsome, even if he’s surprised that I’ve noticed. I’m straight, I’m not blind. Oskar’s features are delicate. He’s beautiful. He’s fit, but his body is never

going to bulge with muscles and he's not going to spend his time defending a net from flying pucks.

I place my hand on his thigh, because I'm pretty sure that's something that a husband might do.

Oskar's mother leaps up. "Who wants dessert?"

A chorus of "yesses" ring out from around the table. Oskar's mother starts clearing plates, and I stand to help her.

"You don't have to do that, Dmitri," she says.

"That's okay."

"You're our guest."

I stiffen. This was feeling like we were an actual family, but of course she's correct.

Her eyes soften. "But I would be very grateful if you helped."

I nod and clear the plates.

Oskar rises, confused.

"Sit down, Oskar."

Oskar gives me a worried look.

"I'll be back soon," I promise him, then just because I lean over him and kiss the top of his head.

Oskar's skin turns that pretty pink color again, and my chest tightens as I observe him.

Coach clears his throat, and I scamper to the kitchen with the plates.

"I apologize for asking so many questions about your family," she says. "I think in the US they call that putting people on the spot."

"Is fine." I inhale. "Thank you for raising such a great son."

"I always thought you would get together. I'm glad you finally are."

I frown, because Coach had to have told her. "We're not..."

She tenses, and guilt surges through me.

"He is special man," I say finally, and when she nods happily, I'm sure I've said the right thing.

"Get back in here," Coach hollers. "I need to take some pictures."

"You have your phone at the dining room table!" Linnea exclaims. "I'm not allowed the phone at the dining room table. That's unfair!"

"That's right!" Olivia echoes. "That's unfair!"

They start jumping up and down while Coach's face gets redder and redder. Olivia and Linnea should totally open a law practice once they're old enough.

"Is for pictures of my first family dinner here," I say.

The girls frown at me.

“Smile,” Coach says, pointing his phone at us.

O skar

Once dessert is over, I stand. Dmitri has been subjected to my family for long enough.

“Thank you for the delicious food,” Dmitri says.

“It was nothing,” my mother says, because she cooks amazing food every night.

Pappa has always focused on his career, while she dedicated her time to raising me, and now, Linnea and Olivia. We say more goodbyes, and then Dmitri bundles me in my coat and drags me out of there.

“Do you think the pictures turned out good?” I ask as Dmitri opens the car door for me.

Dmitri snorts. “Your father’s technique didn’t seem good.”

“Yeah, I should have given him tips.”

“Your photographs are beautiful,” Dmitri says, closing the door before heading to his side. “We’re going to a party now.”

“We are?”

“At Finn’s and Noah’s.”

“Oh.” I smile.

Most parties are at Finn’s and Noah’s.

“Will be nice,” Dmitri promises.

Dmitri is driving, but he reaches over and takes my hand. I glance at him, but his gaze is focused on the drive. Snowflakes fall, a not infrequent occurrence in Boston this time of year, and I watch the flakes flutter downward and melt onto the windshield.

Dmitri turns the windshield wipers on, and the car fills with their swish-swish.

Finally, Dmitri parks his car in his apartment building, and we walk together to Finn’s and Noah’s apartment.

Dmitri takes my hand again.

“Smart thinking, someone might see,” I say.

Dmitri’s eyebrows fly up, then he winces, but that doesn’t seem right. Maybe it’s too dark to read his expressions properly or something.

He doesn’t let go of me when we enter Finn’s and Noah’s fancy apartment complex, he doesn’t let go of my hand when he nods to the security guard, and he doesn’t let go of my hand when we take the elevator to the penthouse floor.

He knocks, and the door swings open. A rosy-cheeked Noah beams at us.
“Welcome!”

Noah ushers us inside. “The star couple is here!”

I step into the apartment, and hockey players cheer. A banner drops that says “Congratulations on Your Wedding,” and romantic music starts to play.

“Who wants champagne!” Troy exclaims, and soon he’s thrusting flutes of bubbly liquid into our hands.

It’s still strange to realize that I have a husband, even if he’s the pretend kind.

I take a sip of champagne and distract myself from the sudden ache in my chest that occurs whenever I remember that all of this is fake.

The lights sparkle and the penthouse gleams. Finn is on the top of the hockey game, but he’s also from a super-rich Boston family. In fact, his cousin Cameron is supposed to be a very big deal in tech circles and is already a billionaire.

I smile happily into the crowd, then I feel Dmitri’s arms slink around my waist. He nuzzles his cheek against mine, and when he speaks, his breath is warm.

Team members soon surround us, because this might be Finn’s and Noah’s apartment, but it’s our party. Everyone is here except Jason, but from the unfriendly looks he shoots me, I’m not wildly surprised, though I thought he and Dmitri got along.

“I hope no one else is going to have a wedding without inviting the team,” Troy says, elbowing Luke hard.

Luke laughs, but his face reddens a bit, and he clutches his boyfriend to him.

“I promise,” Luke stammers.

“We should set up a poll for when they marry,” Troy says, whispering to me.

“Stop whispering to my husband,” Dmitri says. “Is inappropriate.”

Troy’s eyes widen, then he starts to giggle. “You got it.”

“Is our wedding celebration,” Dmitri says.

“You going to dance for us?” Troy asks.

Heat burns my cheeks because this isn’t that kind of marriage, and I hate that everyone is pretending that it is.

“Of course,” Dmitri says, and in the next moment, he’s dragging me to the middle of the room.

“You want to dance?” I ask.

“Is happy occasion,” Dmitri says, and a frown appears. “Is time for dancing, right?”

“Um, yeah,” I agree. “I guess that’s normal.

His shoulders ease, and I swing my hands around his neck. He’s taller than I am, and I crane my neck up to find him right there, smiling into my eyes.

Something romantic is playing, but Dmitri doesn’t grimace. Instead, he stares into my eyes, then pulls me closer to him.

I guess he truly wants to convince everyone this is for real.

“Enjoying the party?” he asks.

I nod. “You?”

“I enjoy every chance I get to spend with you.”

This man is going to ruin me for anyone else. He already has. It was ridiculous he was jealous of Blaine the Canadian. I’ve been Dmitri’s all along, whether or not he cared.

He doesn’t care, I remind myself.

This is all for pretend.

I tighten my grip on his neck because I want to pretend a little longer that all of this is real, even though I know it’s absurd. I close my eyes and inhale his masculine scent, letting myself feel the warmth of his skin against mine.

DMITRI

The music thumps, and I clutch Oskar tightly to me. I smile and run my fingers through his silky blond locks, and something in me warms when he emits a groan. I suddenly wonder what he would be like in bed. He’s so responsive to my touches, even when he pretends not to be. He’s cute and cuddly and compact. He fits easily beside me, like he’s always supposed to be there.

I mean, obviously he’s not supposed to be there.

I’m straight.

But I couldn’t have chosen a more perfect person to marry.

Even if I have to return to Russia, I got to spend my remaining time in the US with him. I twirl him around because dancing is something I enjoy doing, and I watch as his long lashes flutter up and his pink lips part in something like wonder.

Finn and Noah are in a corner, their bodies plastered together. They're making out. No one in this room cares. This isn't Russia.

I want to kiss Oskar again. I want to feel his lips against mine, feel his tongue. And maybe, if I'm honest, it would be cool if we did more.

It would be nice if when we undress tonight, we do all the things that people generally do when they sleep in a bed. I could pull him against me and inhale his citrusy scent and no one would think anything of it.

My heart beats, and I eye his lips. They're round and succulent, and all those memories of our kisses before the cameras come crashing into me.

I think, I want him.

I shouldn't.

I know that.

I'm straight.

But if I weren't straight, I would definitely want to be with him.

Once we've stayed at the party long enough, we decide to head out. I say my goodbyes and thank yous to Finn and Noah and Troy, tugging Oskar beside me.

"That was a party for us," Oskar says as we walk into the crisp Boston air. Snow is still falling, and I tighten my grip on Oskar's hand. I'm not going to let him fall into the snow and ice. Oskar's eyes seem shinier than before.

"Did you have a good time?"

He swings around, his movements bolder. “The best.”

I take in the sparkle of his eyes and the swoop of his Scandinavian nose, and for some reason, warmth fills me.

His eyes dart to me. “What is it?”

My heartbeat quickens, and I feel on edge. “Um, nothing.”

But I know I’m lying, and my gaze turns to him again.

We return to our apartment.

Oskar fumbles with his coat buttons, and I help him.

“I can do it myself,” he protests, but he’s smiling, and not really upset.

“I know.”

“I’ve been unbuttoning coats for years.”

“I’m in the presence of an expert.”

“Uh-huh.” He nods and moves his fingers to his coat buttons. They brush against mine, and his breath catches. I pretend not to notice, just like I pretend not to notice the way my own heart races.

“Did you like the party?” I take his coat.

“I loved it.” He hesitates, and his long lashes flicker up. “I liked the dancing.”

I grin. “That’s because you’re good at it.”

“Really?” His eyes widen. “I wasn’t sure. I mean, I’ve never...”

“Never what?” I hang his coat up and turn to him. I unbutton my own coat, and his gaze darts away.

“Danced with someone... like that. Um, close.” He waves his hand in a vague manner, and suddenly I know.

“Oskar, have you ever dated anyone?”

He steps back, and his face pinkens. He bounces his gaze around the apartment. “Naturally!”

But his voice wobbles in a distinctly un-normal manner.

I narrow my eyes. “Who?”

“People. Guys. At school. You wouldn’t know them.

That’s what I always assumed, but now...

“What were their names, Oskar?”

“That’s not important!”

“You haven’t dated at all, have you?”

“I have! We’ve gone on dates!”

“But before me?”

He looks away. My chest tightens. “Oskar...”

“Don’t. Please don’t make fun of me.”

“I would never make fun of you.” I step toward him, because I’m always drawn to him. I want to wrap him in my arms, but I hesitate, unsure. He wasn’t supposed to say this, and my mind reels. “I-I just don’t understand. You’re...”

I want to tell him he’s beautiful. I want to tell him that he’s perfect.

He still doesn’t meet my gaze. He steps back, as if the wall is better protection against the world than me. “It just never happened. I thought it would. I mean, that’s what is supposed to happen, right? But I was busy with school, and...” He swallows hard. “And maybe I was waiting for someone special. I have done...other things with guys. My first week at Harvard I went to a house party and someone invited me to the rooftop, and we kissed and...”

My body grows cold. “And?”

“Nothing like that.” His skin reddens. “But when I saw him again, he didn’t remember me. I-I didn’t want that. I wanted...more.” He squeezes his eyes shut. “Maybe I was too focused on school. And later my heart wasn’t into it and...”

His hands flutter, and I take them gently. I wait for his eyes to open.

“You should have told me.”

He squirms from my arms, and I flinch. “So you could feel more guilty about the green card? I-I didn’t want that.”

“I could have made everything more special.”

“It was special.” His voice is soft, but my heart thuds.

I want to hold him in my arms, kiss him, and show him just how special he is in every way I can.

But I’m straight. But this isn’t the first time I’ve thought about pulling Oskar into my arms.

There’s no one telling us to kiss.

There are no paparazzi.

No nosy reporters either.

But all I want is Oskar in my arms.

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Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:48 am

O skar

Oh God, this was not supposed to happen.

Dmitri was not supposed to find out.

But he knows.

I open my side of the chest of drawers and remove my pajamas. When I turn to head to the bedroom, Dmitri is beside me. I jump.

“You’ve never slept with anyone?”

I draw back, my heart thumping. “It’s not important.”

Dmitri stares at me, his dark eyes intent. “Is very important. Is your happiness.”

“Other things make me happy, Dmitri.”

“Nothing makes anyone as happy as sex, Oskar.”

“Well, I wouldn’t know anything about that.” I turn away, blinking rapidly.

“I wish you’d told me.”

“So we could have had this conversation earlier?” My voice is too high, and my fingers flutter too much.

I'm not myself.

"But now you can't sleep with anyone," Dmitri says. "Because you're married to me. You don't even have memories of sleeping with anyone."

Nausea rises in my throat. "You've been distracting yourself with memories of sleeping with other people?"

Dmitri's mouth drops, then he shakes his head. "No. I haven't. But that doesn't mean—"

"What? When you asked me to help you, I should have said 'no thank you, I don't care about your situation' because I haven't had sex yet and don't want to postpone it for another year?"

Dmitri clamps his mouth shut. "I'm sorry. This is all my fault. We divorce and you'll be twenty-four-year-old virgin."

"I'm helping you," I say. "That's enough for me."

He gives me a tender smile that makes my heart ache. Then his eyes round. "I have idea."

"What?"

"Is good idea," he declares.

"Okay..."

"We can have sex."

My jaw drops. Then I realize my mistake. I misheard.

I frown. “And risk your green card application?”

“What does my green card application have to do with anything?”

Irritation moves through me.

He’s proposing this because he misses his hookups.

“It just takes a single news article to derail everything,” I say. “A single social media post.”

Understanding seems to flicker through his eyes, and for some reason his lips move upward, as if I’ve said something amusing.

I haven’t.

I’ve just reminded him that sleeping with people as a newlywed is the sort of thing that might get people to think that the marriage isn’t real, and that’s not the sort of thing I want them to think now.

“Oskar,” he says, his voice gentle.

“I’m serious,” I say. “I don’t want you to sleep with anyone else. It’s not right. I don’t want to tell you this, and yes, I do feel absolutely ridiculous, but I don’t want you to do this. I know how important staying in the US is for you, and...”

“When I said, we should have sex,” he says, his voice slow like he’s taking to an infant in the middle of an English lesson, “I meant us. Together.”

My heart rate quickens, and I should probably say something, but I must have misheard. Because he definitely did not say that. No way.

His lips move in a sultry manner, and I can't look at him. I am concocting things with my imagination. My brain has decided that it doesn't like its normal life and to just instead go about and make up a brand new one.

Oh, God.

"Oskar," Dmitri says, his voice low and way too appealing. "Don't run."

"But..."

"We already like kissing each other," he says.

"We do?"

He blinks. "You don't?"

"I-I like kissing you." My chest tightens, and my tongue feels too thick for my mouth, but when I finally meet his eyes, they're filled with warmth.

"Same," he murmurs.

His voice is deep, and my cells zing, as if they want to crawl up beside him.

I stare into his eyes but then force myself to look away. My heart beats wildly, and I have to remind myself not to do something ridiculous like kiss him.

Because Dmitri is straight. And he kisses beautiful, experienced people.

He doesn't want me. Not really. Not when no one before has claimed me.

I'm not going to make our friendship more awkward, and it's already pretty amazingly awkward now. I'm not going to test it to the limits. I'm not going to crawl into bed with him...well, not to do anything besides actual sleeping.

I inhale. "That's nice of you, but..."

He frowns. "No?"

My eyes widen. "No."

He nods. "No." Then he takes my hands and pulls me toward him. I stiffen when I realize he's going for the bed, but when he sits down on the edge, and ushers me into his arms, I slip onto his lap.

Even now, when my heart beats like crazy and embarrassment floods my body, I still feel safest beside Dmitri. His skin warms and soothes me.

"What's wrong, Oskar?"

"I'm embarrassed."

He smooths my hair and tucks some strands behind my ear. "You shouldn't be."

"But you've been with so many people."

"Is not bad to want more from people," he says. "Is good quality, Oskar. Besides," his voice lowers to a super sexy rumble, "I can teach you everything."

"You've never slept with a guy," I say.

“I’ll figure it out.”

I raise an eyebrow.

“I’m good with my body.”

I snort. “You probably would be incredible at it.”

Dmitri’s chest puffs out. “I know.” He kisses my temple. “You will be too. We’ll both be new at it together.”

“It’s not that easy.” I try to be stern, but I feel a smile bubbling through me despite my best efforts to restrain it. “You’re ridiculous.”

“Only with you,” Dmitri promises. “I’ll make you an expert in bed. And when you meet the man you’re really supposed to be with, you won’t be embarrassed.”

Something in his voice is wistful, but when I glance at him, he meets my eyes and smiles.

Maybe I imagined his tone.

“This sounds like a bad idea,” I say.

He shrugs. “Maybe we can take up boardgames instead.”

My nose wrinkles, and he chuckles against me.

“Is your choice, Oskar,” Dmitri says.

“But you’re straight. I don’t want you to feel sorry for me—”

“I don’t feel sorry for you,” he says.

“But I’ve never—”

He places a finger over my lips. “You are smart and handsome and well-educated and have an amazing family. You don’t have a career that’s about to end in approximately ten days.”

“But—”

“I would be absolutely lucky to make man-on-man love with you.”

“No one calls it that.”

“See, you’re already teaching me.” He pinches my cheek. “And if we don’t like it, we stop. No questions asked.”

I scrunch my lips together and stare into the middle distance.

“You can’t tell me you’re not curious.”

“I’m curious...”

His eyes darken. “Tell me to stop.”

I stare into his eyes, finding only warmth and acceptance there.

After a few moments, he kisses my neck. He’s kissed my lips before, and I’ve felt both his lips and tongue move, but he’s never kissed another area. No one has kissed another area. I shiver when he touches the thin skin, and my cells are doing their zinging thing again. Butterflies swarm my body, and my heart fights to leave my

chest.

Dmitri continues to trail wet kisses down my neck, his hands moving over my body.

“You smell good.”

“I used your body wash...”

He snorts. “Oh, good. It works on both of us.”

“I-I guess. I left mine in the move. I forgot it.”

“You can use my body wash, Oskar.”

“Oh?”

“Uh-huh.” Dmitri moves his kisses closer to my ear, then he captures my lobe with his teeth.

My eyes round. “Oh.”

“Feels good, huh?”

“Yeah.”

He smooths my hair with reverence, and I arch closer to his fingers.

“I’m going to make you feel so good,” he promises.

And then before I can say something silly like telling him that we don’t actually have to do this, he captures my lips with his, and we are once again kissing.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:48 am

D mitri

I am kissing Oskar. Oskar is in my arms, and I am kissing him. Ever since our first kiss in Las Vegas, I've been longing for just another moment like this.

Unlike in Vegas, no one is watching us, and our kiss is not constrained by how long it takes to dip him down and pull him back up. Tonight, I can kiss him for as long as I like.

And I really, really like that.

My heart patters happily. Maybe I've wanted to do this before Vegas on some level. Maybe there's a reason I've always been drawn to this kind, cute man in my arms.

I clutch onto his waist, then lie down, so he is on top of me. I want him to feel safe, since this is new for him, a fact that still bewilders me.

God, Oskar could have anyone. He's incredible. Oskar shouldn't be sharing his firsts with me. I'm just a bumbling athlete. I'm someone who got bad grades at school all my life. I'm nothing without hockey, and soon I won't have hockey.

But I have him in my arms now, and I'll certainly enjoy every second. It's different, but not unpleasant. Something hard presses against my belly. Something...pulsing. Something surprisingly...

I move my hands downward, feeling the outline of his member. It's as I thought.

I pull away from Oskar. He stares at me, blinking bleary-eyed. His cheeks are pink, roughened from where my cheeks brushed against his. He's beautiful.

And hiding something.

"Oskar... What is that?"

He blinks, and I gesture downward.

His cheeks pinken in that adorable, innocent manner. "My, um..." He swallows, then his gaze narrows. "You are familiar with male anatomy."

"I see hockey players naked every day."

"Men generally have these." He presses his lips together. "But if it's too strange—"

I clutch him closer to me before he can decide to scramble from my arms or something.

"Has anyone told you that you have a rather large piece of equipment there?"

He swallows hard, and I laugh.

"Oskar, you are very endowed."

"Um, I guess?"

"You're sort of tiny otherwise. I assumed you would be a bit compact there. But you're not."

His skin reddens. Maybe he's not used to whole conversations about his cock.

“Let me see it,” I whisper.

“Um...”

“Please?” I whine. I move my hands over it again. His bulge is large. I didn’t imagine it.

“I guess I can show you.”

I clap my hands, and he rolls off me, startled.

“I’ll do the honors.” I unbuckle his pants, then decide to unbutton his shirt. I want a naked Oskar in my bed.

“You better get naked too,” he says.

“Fine.” I pull off my clothes quickly and toss them in the general direction of the hamper. I don’t think I reach it, because Oskar giggles.

“Hey, I’m not a football player.”

“Good thing.” He moves his gaze to me, and his eyes flare. His tongue wets his lower lip, and he’s just as adorable as ever.

God, I’m the first naked man he’s seen.

I like it.

I really like it.

My eyes fall to his cock. It sticks straight up against his belly. It’s large and long and

indecent in every manner.

I chuckle. “That is humongous.”

“It’s not humongous.”

I fling myself back onto the bed and rearrange him so that I have an excellent view of his cock. His hard, leaking, throbbing cock.

“How many inches is that?”

“A reasonable amount?”

“No, Oskar, that is not a reasonable amount. You have all sorts of extra inches.”

“Maybe a few...”

I laugh.

“It just looks that way because I’m, um, smaller.”

I giggle. “You’re bigger than me.”

“Is that a problem?”

“Nope. No problem.” I fling myself beside him, then line our bodies up so that our cocks are touching. Heat moves through me at the feel of his body. I didn’t think just touching a cock would feel so good, but this is absolutely working for me. “We have to make sure we’re completely even.”

“You’re an expert?”

“Am expert in many things, Oskar. You know it.”

I move my fingers over our cocks, and he bites his lower lip.

“You can groan,” I say. “Feels good. Groaning is good.”

“Yeah?” He pants and looks so adorable that I kiss him all over again.

“Yeah.”

“Now you have to remeasure,” he says.

“Is my pleasure.” I run our cocks together from the base. “Two inches, Oskar. You’re two inches more than me. You must be eight inches long. Maybe more.”

“Eight and a half,” he says. “If I’m really hard.”

“I’ll get you really hard.” I move my fingers over his cock, feeling every ridge and vein. Pre-cum spills from the top, and I move the liquid over his cock, so it will make him feel good.

He gives me a strange look. “You don’t mind?”

I frown. “I like sex. And I have these same parts. And I like you. So, why should I mind?”

“I like women, but I don’t want to touch them like this.”

My frown deepens. Maybe I shouldn’t like this. But I don’t feel any repulsion or tentativeness. This is Oskar.

“It’s not a problem,” Oskar says softly.

“No?”

“I like it when you touch me.”

I smile into his big blue eyes, and all my body warms. Something tightens in my chest.

“I’m glad we’re doing this,” I say, and the words come out more husky than I intend.

He blinks up at me in his trusting manner. “Me too.”

I eye his cock again. It truly is massive, whatever Oskar says. I definitely didn’t expect Oskar to have this. It’s definitely cool.

I move my fingers over the velvety length, feeling the way the blood pulses. It seems to grow harder, larger in my hand. Then I dip down and open my mouth...

Oskar realizes what I want to do at once.

“You don’t have to do that—”

But the next word he says is garbled, because my mouth is on his massive cock. I open my mouth wide, thankful I can fit the tip in. I wetten my mouth, because Oskar’s never experienced this before, and I want to give him an amazing blowjob.

If I’m going to introduce Oskar to sex, I want to make sure I give him the very best introduction.

After all, I’m his best friend. And I’m Dmitri.

This is going to be awesome.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:48 am

O skar

This is not happening. Obviously. There's absolutely no way I'm in bed with Dmitri Volkov, NHL star and certified F-boy, doing things that happen in x-rated fantasies.

My heart flings itself into an advanced gymnastics routine because somehow, this is actually happening. Dmitri is my favorite person in the world. I was content being his friend, happy merely knowing that he existed.

But now all his focus is on me.

His dark eyes are intent, his hands sure and confident on my body.

I grip the sheets and try not to combust on the spot. His talented mouth is doing incredible things, and I'm trying desperately not to embarrass myself by coming in two seconds flat. His hands roam my body like he doesn't even notice I'm not his usual type. My frame is decidedly masculine, but he seems... enthusiastic?

God. My cock is in his mouth. His succulent lips are stretched around the most private section of my body. I feel his wet lips around my head and feel his tongue licking the sensitive underside of my cock.

He pulls back. "You're thinking too hard."

"You weren't supposed to notice."

"I always notice you."

My heart stutters at his comment, and I tell myself this is enough. This night, if it's all that ever happens between us, is enough. I push away the selfish part of me that tells me that I want this to matter to him too, that I want us to be together like people are together in nineties romcoms and books in certain sections of the bookstore, the way that my parents are together.

This isn't that.

But it's fine.

It's more than fine.

Then Dmitri does some sort of sucking motion with his lips, and my heart throttles forward, slamming against my ribs.

"I'm going to..." I swallow hard, unsure what the etiquette is.

"Just relax. Let it happen."

His eyes are soft and tender, and his lips move into a smile. Then his lips swerve into a smirk, and he pulls me toward him. I guess I'm super light, and he's definitely super strong, because in the next moment he's rearranged me so that my bottom is exposed. He sucks his index finger. I stare as he hollows his cheeks. He can't intend...

But he does. He completely does.

He runs his finger against my crease.

"Dmitri..."

"Asses are a big part of man-on-man love, Oskar."

I giggle. “Good thing I have you to tell me that.”

He nods in a pleased manner.

“But I don’t think...” I inhale. “This is already...”

He grins. “Already a lot for you? Don’t worry, we spread out education. I don’t want your brain to explode.”

“My brain wouldn’t—”

He raises an eyebrow, then moves his finger against my hole. Yeah, he’s right. Maybe my brain would explode. Because even though I know this is a big part of sex... Somehow, I didn’t think it would feel so good. The times I kissed guys who weren’t Dmitri didn’t feel so amazing, and I sort of always put sex into a box that some people are crazy about and others less enthusiastic about. Like cars. Some people care about it a huge deal, and others don’t. And either way is fine.

But this feels amazing. Dmitri’s grin widens, and he moves his finger into me.

First a knuckle.

Then another knuckle.

Then a third knuckle.

My heart expands.

“Next time, I’ll be putting my cock into you,” Dmitri promises.

My heart patters.

“Or...” He glances at my cock which has turned some sort of purple color. “Maybe you’ll be putting your humongous equipment inside me.”

My eyes must widen, because he grins. He moves his finger, and all the cells in that area explode with something that feels exactly like joy.

“Dmitri...”

He bends down, his eyes on my cock. He licks it, then puts the head back into his mouth, and I...

Well, I explode.

Obviously.

D mitri

Oskar's beautiful eyes flutter, and his beautiful lips part, and his beautiful neck arches. His release spills over his stomach, and he collapses onto the bed. He's so fucking adorable I can barely stand it.

He reaches for me, but I can already see his exhaustion.

That was his first sexual encounter.

I was there.

I was present.

"No, baby," I say, the endearment slipping out naturally.

"You need to..." He makes another grabby motion toward my cock, which is still hard and throbbing.

"Want to touch it?"

His eyes go wide, and he nods eagerly. I straddle his hips and guide his hands. The way he touches me, like I'm worthy of his reverence, makes my heart ache.

"Is this your first one up close?"

He nods, and my chest expands even more. He moves again to touch it, but I know

he's sleepy. I know he's shattered. This isn't about reciprocation and checklists. I just want him happy.

"Lie back and watch," I tell him.

He obeys instantly, those big blue eyes fixed on my cock like it's the most fascinating thing he's ever seen.

I wrap my hand around myself, already close. The sight of him spread out beneath me, flushed and satisfied, is more than enough. Pre-cum beads at the tip and I use it to slick my strokes, paying special attention to that sensitive spot under the head.

Then I'm painting Oskar's chest, his neck, his face.

I'm claiming him. He's mine.

His pretty pink tongue moves out from his pretty pink lips, and my cock pulses again, spent but still aching for him. Maybe I should have just stuck it in his mouth, but I wanted to be sure he would enjoy it. I want his first sexual experiences to be good. I need him to look back on this night with nothing but fondness.

He licks his lips again, eyes bright with satisfaction. He's so fucking hot.

I fetch a warm washcloth from the bathroom, ignoring my discarded clothes. After cleaning him up, I kiss his forehead and pull him close. His whole body fits against mine like it was made to be there. I fall asleep grinning, and he's still in my arms when I wake.

I catch the moment when his body stills before he tries to wiggle free.

"Where do you think you're going, mister?" I tug him back against me, enjoying how

easily he moves in my arms.

“You’re awake.” His voice comes out squeaky.

“Uh-huh.”

“I was going to leave before you woke up.”

“Oh, yeah? Ghosting me in my own bed? Pretty cruel, Oskar.”

He giggles. “No. I—”

We’ve somehow drifted to the very edge of the mattress, so I shift us back and turn him to face me. God, I love how compact he is, how perfectly he fits against me. His eyes go all soft and dewy when they meet mine, nostrils flaring slightly like they always do when he’s flustered. Has he always looked at me this way? How did I miss it? How did I not see how beautiful he is?

I drink in his delicate features, the adorable upturn of his nose, when his eyes go wide with horror. He claps both hands over his mouth and starts scrambling backward.

“Where are you going?” I demand.

“I didn’t brush my teeth last night!” His face flames red as he keeps his fingers pressed firmly over his lips.

“I exhausted you.”

His gaze darts to my mouth, then he bolts for the bathroom. “You should have told me!”

“You looked so comfortable.”

“My teeth have bacteria on them!”

“Your teeth always have bacteria on them.”

“They probably grew!” He scampers into the bathroom, as if he thinks I’ll be able to smell his mouth from the other side of the room.

I sigh and follow him. He’s already furiously scrubbing his teeth.

“I also have teeth.” I remove my toothbrush and put toothpaste on it.

“Oh.” The word comes out garbled, and I don’t suppress my laughter.

He sneers and brushes harder.

“Don’t remove your enamel,” I say.

Toothpaste foam drips down his chin. Even with his hair a wild mess and an orange toothbrush hanging out of his mouth, he’s the most gorgeous thing I’ve ever seen. How did I not realize this before?

“What?” He eyes me suspiciously around his toothbrush.

“I’m glad you’re my husband.”

“Oh.” His shoulders sink, then he ducks down, shields his mouth from view with his hand, and spits. He hastily cleans the sink with water.

“You can spit in front of me.”

He draws himself up like an offended aristocrat. “It’s inelegant.”

“We live together, Oskar,” I remind him, continuing to brush my teeth.

“Yes, but.”

“But?”

“You’re amazing.”

I poke the back of my throat with my toothbrush, and my eyes water. I start to cough, fling myself over the sink and spit, as Oskar descends into peals of giggles.

“Wouldn’t have happened if you hadn’t followed me into the bathroom,” he says.

“Just saying.”

I dab my mouth furiously and place my toothbrush back in the holder. “Well, if I hadn’t followed you inside, I couldn’t do this.”

“What?”

I stalk toward him, grinning as he backs up until he hits the towel rack. In one smooth motion, I lift him onto the counter and capture his lips with mine.

“Oooh,” he breathes against my mouth.

“Uh-huh. Dmitri knows best,” I say in my sternest voice.

He giggles, but then we’re kissing again, his arms wrapping around my neck as his legs circle my waist, pulling me closer.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:48 am

O skar

I pull myself away from Dmitri reluctantly. “We’re going to be late.”

“We’re married couple. They’ll understand, baby.” His warm hands linger at my waist.

“I don’t think we can use that excuse.”

“We’re supposed to be on our honeymoon. In the Caribbean. Or Mediterranean. They’re lucky we’re here at all.”

“We don’t have that kind of marriage.”

Dmitri stills against me, his body suddenly tense.

Shit.

I’ve said the wrong thing. When I dart my gaze up to him, his normally playful expression has gone stiff. I’m not sure how this gorgeous, ridiculous man could possibly be insulted at being reminded he doesn’t have to spend his life with me.

“Let’s shower,” I say quickly.

I slip down from the bathroom counter and take his hand. The mood has changed between us, and I hate it. I keep hold of him as I adjust the shower temperature. Once the water’s perfect, I tug him under the spray with me.

“I really like you,” I say, water droplets clinging to my eyelashes. “You know that?”

He nods, but something’s still off.

I love him actually. Have for longer than I care to admit.

But I’m not going to spring that on him while we’re rushing to work. Instead, I squirt shampoo into my palm and look up at his towering frame.

“This would be easier if you were shorter,” I grumble.

Finally, he smiles. “Is not husband duty to shampoo other husband.”

“No? I didn’t read the booklet.” I stretch up on my toes and work the shampoo through his thick dark hair until it’s full of foam. A grin spreads across my face.

“What’s so funny?”

“Now I know what you’ll look like when you’re old.”

His mouth drops.

My mouth drops.

Shit.

I did not just sleep with someone for the first time, then talk about getting old together. I spin away, promptly slipping on the wet tile.

Dmitri instantly steadies me. “Good?”

“Uh-huh.” My voice squeaks as water streams into my eyes. I wipe it away, trying to act like a functional adult who showers regularly.

“My turn,” Dmitri says, pulling me closer. His strong fingers massage shampoo into my scalp, and I melt into his touch.

I’m pretty sure that my hair does not need to be shampooed the length of time he dedicates to it, and when I open my eyes, he’s staring at me.

“Now I know what you’ll look like when you’re old.”

My heart thuds.

I’m suddenly aware that I’m stark naked and standing in front of the man I care about the most. He runs soapy hands over my body, and after a moment’s hesitation, I do the same.

God, I can’t believe I’m touching him. My fingers trace the hard planes of his torso, mapping broad shoulders built from years of sending pucks flying across the ice. The hot water has turned his skin pink, steam rising between us.

“Time to rinse.” He pulls me closer to him, and I close my eyes, just in case he can see the worry and admiration and hero-worship reverberating in them.

Maybe we’re married. Maybe we did physical things together I never imagined us doing. But that doesn’t mean he has to know all my secrets.

Because this thing between us is going to end. Either we’ll fail at convincing the government to let him stay, and my heart will be broken, and he’ll have to move to the other side of the world, or we will be successful: and I’ll have to wait for him to begin divorce proceedings and see him with the person he actually wants to be with

and live his happily ever after without me.

I keep my eyes closed.

But then Dmitri's hands run through my hair as he rinses me, and finally I feel him feather kisses on my temple, then my lips. I deepen the kiss, because maybe I can forget all the reasons why this is temporary, why all of this will dissolve into a memory, one in which I won't be sure if he behaved tenderly or not.

"Is okay," Dmitri murmurs, and maybe he can read my sadness. "Is okay, Oskar."

Then he turns off the shower, bundles me in a robe that is far too big for me, and dries my hair.

We rush through getting dressed, then head to the arena. His hand finds mine during the drive, staying there longer than any driving instructor would deem strictly proper.

Finally, the arena appears, modern and flashy. Dmitri parks, and we head to our separate sections. He goes with the athletes, the warriors, the people who bring the whole audience in, while I go to my office and my papers and my admin.

I push open my door to find Daniela frowning at me. "The papers know it's a lie, Oskar."

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Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:48 am

D mitri

I push open the locker room door and nineteen pairs of eyes snap to me.

“What?”

“Did you read the paper?” Troy asks.

“Does anyone read the paper these days?”

“Did you read the news section of your phone?”

I blink.

“I think the answer is no,” Luke says.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” Troy says too quickly.

“No big deal,” Noah adds.

“It will all be fine,” Luke chimes in.

“Totally, completely fine,” Finn echoes.

My eyes narrow. “You’re acting weird.”

“You made the news,” Axel blurts.

The others turn to him, annoyed.

“But that doesn’t mean you have to read the news,” Luke says.

I take out my phone and pull up the news. I see my name immediately. Dmitri Volkov Weds Coach’s Son in Sham Green Card Marriage.

Everything heats. My organs burn, as if seeking to incinerate themselves on the spot.

“Oh.”

“Maybe you should sit down,” Noah suggests.

I square my shoulders. “I’m fine. No big deal.”

Noah and Finn exchange glances and conduct one of those private couple eye conversations. But they’re an actual couple. Their marriage is real.

And even when people thought their marriage was fake, the worst thing that could happen was that Noah would be sent back to the AHL in Rhode Island.

I mean, that’s terrible.

But give me Rhode Island a thousand times over Russia.

Because even though part of me loves Russia and is proud of it and proud of being from it...I can’t go back. I can’t go to the other side of the world and pretend my life here never happened.

But that's not my main concern.

Oskar sacrificed everything for me. His career. His dating life. His reputation.

My legs quiver, and my heart is unsure whether to speed up or slow. There's no right answer, because nothing will change this situation.

Everyone knows the marriage is for pretend. Will I ever be able to enter the US again, even as a tourist, after this? Will I ever get a tourist visa if the government thinks I tried to do immigration fraud?

The worst part? They're right.

God. I've never been smart. Never been intelligent.

How did I think I could outsmart the United States government? The most powerful, most amazing country in the world?

Axel normally tells jokes or complains about his childhood rival who plays for Los Angeles. He's not supposed to look at me, eyes round with concern. Neither is Troy.

They're standing too close to me, and I hate it.

Because if their eyes are round with worry, if I've managed to concern professional athletes who are never concerned with anything, who push their bodies to the limit everyday, then this is seriously bad.

"Is fine," I say, but their eyes are still rounded.

Some of them nod. They're lying for me.

“Is fine because we are real couple,” I say.

“It’s one newspaper article,” Finn says.

“Well...” Axel starts to speak, then evidently thinks better of it.

I furrow my brow. “What?”

“I doubt it will be just one newspaper article by the end of the day. I, um, was already contacted for a comment.”

“What!” Troy grabs his phone, then reads a message, evidently from a reporter. “Oh.”

Finn and Noah check their phones too. I don’t believe their innocent, no big deal expressions for one moment.

“I told them that Dmitri and Oskar are very devoted and always together,” Axel says. “Wasn’t a lie!”

“Thank you,” I say.

I mean it, but I hate that I’m getting the most important people in my life to lie for me.

“I am devoted to Oskar,” I say. “In fact...”

I rake my hand through my hair. I hate that my hand is fluttering, like some Victorian woman who inhaled too many smelling salts. How can I hit the puck into the net if my hand isn’t even steady? And if my heart feels like it’s trying to claw its way out of my chest?

“I need to go,” I say.

Then I brush between Noah and Finn and head for Oskar’s office.

He must hate me. What if this doesn’t work? What if he’s angry? What if everything amazing from last night and this morning means nothing now? What if all he feels is regret?

My teammates are saying something to me, but I don’t care.

I need to get ready to go on the ice. I need to be focused on our game tonight.

But the only person who matters is in a small office in this arena, and I stride toward him. My feet feel weighted as I trudge through the corridor. Finally, I stumble through his door.

“Dmitri?” Oskar jumps up, worry filling those blue eyes.

Somehow his concern doesn’t make me feel weak. With him, I don’t have to be tough.

“There was an article...”

Oskar nods. “I know. I saw.”

“You did?”

“Sorry. I wanted to tell you, but I know you have practice. Didn’t want to distract you.”

“Oh.”

“So you’re...” I hesitate, unsure what I’m asking.

Oskar seems to understand anyway, and he pulls me into a hug, wrapping his slender arms around me. “I’m fine. We knew this might happen, right?”

“I didn’t want it to happen though.”

“I know,” he murmurs into my shoulder. “But we’ll get through this.”

“And if we don’t?” My voice cracks.

“Then we’ll know we tried.” He looks up at me. “And we’ll still talk. You can reach me on Zoom. I won’t disappear.”

I nod, pretending that’s enough. Having Oskar here, solid and real, beats any pixelated version on a screen. But maybe it’s more than I deserve.

He tilts his head up, and I smooth his hair, staring into his bright blue trusting eyes.

“I like you in person.”

“I do too. And what’s a few negative articles and social media messages?”

“Multiple articles? Already?” My voice shakes.

Oskar glances behind him. “You know, Daniela is supposed to be back any minute. Let’s go somewhere quieter.”

He grabs a key and pulls me after him. I hold his hand tight, telling myself memories will be enough.

At least I was part of the NHL. At least I met great people.

That's more than I ever could have hoped for, and more than my family ever thought I deserved.

But the thoughts aren't soothing, and my brain screams at me that I've already hurt Oskar so much anyway, and that maybe I should confess and say I coerced him or something so he can rectify his career.

Oskar stops at a door, checks both ways, then unlocks it.

"You took me to the massage room?"

His cheeks pinken. "It's quiet and smells good."

"You always smell good."

His face turns serious. "I don't want you to go."

O skar

Dmitri's face is paler than normal, and his movements lack their customary grace. Even his smile wavers. For a man who regularly kisses me in front of cameras and reporters, he clearly has been shaken.

I slink my arms around him and hope that helps. I gaze into his eyes, and his dark eyes soften.

"I'm here now," I say. "You're here now."

His throat works as he nods, his gaze dropping to my lips.

I tug him toward me, parting my lips. Uncertainty bubbles through me. I've watched him for too many years. I've known him as my straight friend. Not my husband whom I kiss. But I push away my fears, and instead, I kiss Dmitri.

He melts against me. He shifts his position, but it's not to separate and stammer embarrassed apologies that he's straight and last night and this morning never should have happened. Instead, he tightens his grip around me, and I focus on strengthening our kiss. My tongue explores his mouth, because I'm definitely getting the hang of this now, and the way his heart beats against my chest tells me all I need to know.

For some crazy reason, Dmitri Volkov actually likes me. He does want this.

I bring my hands to his face and continue to kiss him. I want to kiss away his stress and fears. Our tongues and lips dance, and my cock is as hard as any hockey stick.

He breaks away. “Is big deal, Oskar.”

“I know.”

“Media is onto us.”

“Yeah.”

“And the government...” His beautiful features twist.

“Shhh...” I kiss him again. “We’ll figure it out.”

He nods, even though he knows that we might not figure it out. We’re just two men.

“Come here.” I lead him to the massage table.

I push him onto it with more enthusiasm than grace. “Sorry!”

He laughs. “Feeling feisty, baby?”

“Um, maybe?” I slide between his legs, and his gaze dips to my bulge. He bites his lower lip, and I grin. He really does seem to like that section of my body.

He wraps his legs around me, so that my bulge is pressing against his, and I see the way that his eyes roll up and the way his lips press together as if to constrain a moan.

“Slide off your sweatpants,” I whisper.

His eyes round.

“I want to see it.”

His lips swerve. “I thought you were virgin.”

“You’ve been corrupting me.”

His eyes soften, and he unties the string of his sweatpants. His cock juts out obscenely. Maybe I’m bigger than him there, but he’s hardly small.

His sweatpants slide down.

My mouth waters.

“And your boxer briefs,” I order.

“Oh, yeah?” His eyes dance, but he moves quickly. He can see the benefits of wearing fewer clothes too.

Then I see it.

His hard, throbbing, leaking cock.

I reach out to touch it, and it pulses, jumping toward me.

“You don’t have to do anything, Oskar,” he says, his voice more serious.

“I’ve waited a long time to do this.”

“In that case, okay. I don’t want to deny you years of curiosity or anything.”

“That’s generous of you.”

I kneel down. His cock juts out between his thighs.

I hesitate.

“Just lick it a little,” he says, and my shoulders ease. “Feel it with your lips and tongue. I, um, want to see it in your mouth.”

“You do?”

“You’re beautiful, Oskar. Of course, I want to see your lips around my cock.”

I suck it into my mouth tentatively, wishing I’d been reading how to guides in my office before he entered. My heart pounds, and I think about all the people who’ve done this to him before me.

I dart my gaze upward, and his eyes are soft.

“Oskar...” He ruffles my hair with his hand, his every movement tender.

I focus on the feel of his cock in my mouth. He tastes salty, and I swallow, eager to get more of the taste.

“Yeah... Like that.” His cock hits my throat. He’s not all the way in, but he places my hands on his balls, which are tighter than before. “Play with these.”

I move my fingers over his balls as I inhale and suck on his cock. My heart thrums. His cock pulses.

I can’t believe this is happening. I move my hands under his balls, holding them lightly. I want to memorize everything about this moment.

“Just like that,” he murmurs.

I try to remember what he did last night and try to apply a similar suction.

It works.

His breaths become shorter, noisier, rising above the hum of the air conditioner and the faint scent of eucalyptus in the air.

He moves his fingers through my hair, his tender motions becoming more frantic, like he wants to ascertain that I'm there.

And then all of a sudden, he jerks up and pulls his cock out of my mouth. I whine, because I still want to have him in my mouth, but then I stare, transfixed, as his cock jerks and jumps, white shooting from it.

The salty scent is now in the air.

"Shit," he murmurs, staring at the aftermath.

His cheeks are now flushed pink, and his eyelashes flutter in a happy manner. He grins at me.

"Was that...?"

"It was good, baby." He pulls me toward him, then kisses the top of my head. My heart pounds and sweat prickles my spine. He reaches his hand toward me and pulls me on top of him. I grind against him, protected by his large figure. He kisses me, but then I feel his hands reaching down and unbuckling my belt, lowering my zipper, and rounding his hand around my member.

His hand is warm, and he moves with the same confidence he carries in everything he does.

He squirts some massage oil on his hand, then strokes me, his grip firm. “Just relax.”

“O-okay.” My voice is breathless, and I feel him smile against me as he feathers kisses along my cheek. I turn to him, thankful we both fit on the massage table. He moves an arm around me, so I don’t fall onto the floor, and he inhales, as if he really likes having me next to him.

My heart sings, and he continues to stroke me in firm motions.

I turn my head toward him, gazing at his symmetrical features, his thick brows furrowed. The warm, spa-like light settles on his features, casting a golden glow over his profile. He looks like one of those sculptures of Roman gods I find at the MFA, every feature masculine, his expression focused.

He turns toward me. “Hi there.”

My cheeks warm. I guess I was staring. “Hi.”

He grins at me.

“I guess this is different for you.”

He shrugs. “Is nice.” Then he leans toward me and kisses me.

My mouth melds against his, and I open up for his tongue. His kisses are long and deep, and god, maybe one day he’ll be putting his cock in me with the same rhythm, the same force.

My heart expands, swelling under his attention.

How did we get to this place?

Happiness flits through me, and in the next moment, I start to shake. He withdraws his hand from me.

“You...” I swallow hard. “You...”

“Took your breath away?” He winks.

“Yeah. That.”

He pulls me toward him, and I curl against him. My pants are still unbuckled, my briefs are still pulled down, dignity is not exactly something I’m emitting now, but it doesn’t matter.

Then we’re kissing once again, and I feel his lashes flutter against my cheek.

A noise at the door startles us apart.

I stiffen.

He stiffens.

“Is locked?” Dmitri whispers.

“The masseuse is never here,” I say miserably.

He grins. “Bad boy Oskar.”

The handle turns again.

“One moment!” Dmitri calls, hastily straightening his clothes. I do the same, though from his amused look I’m not quite achieving “professional workplace appropriate.”

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D mitri

“Take your time,” I tell Oskar. “Is fine.”

“Dmitri?” Coach’s voice comes from the other side of the door. “Are you in here?”

“Yes.”

Banging sounds.

Shit.

Coach seemed okay with me last night, but that was before the negative articles about me and his son came out.

I cringe, then sturdy my shoulders.

I knew we weren’t really a happy family. I knew it.

“One moment, Pappa!” Oskar shouts.

“Oskar?” I hear confusion in Coach’s voice. He doesn’t bang on the door anymore though.

Oskar smooths his hair and fixes his bowtie.

His shirt is wrinkled, and his hair is, well, not smooth. I pat it down for him.

“How do I look?”

“Amazing,” I murmur, then step back as his eyes go wide.

God, could we have been doing this all along? Did he always like me this way? Why didn't he tell me?

And now, I'll probably be going soon.

I swallow away the jolt of pain as if someone has mistaken me for a vampire and has just thrust a wooden stake into my chest, then I walk to the door.

I exchange a glance with Oskar because no way am I letting Coach in before he is absolutely ready.

He nods to me, and I open the door.

“Dmitri Volkov,” he says, and I hate that he used my last name, as if to stress that I'm not really part of Oskar's family.

Maybe I'm technically Coach's son-in-law, but not in the way it counts. Not really.

I raise my chin. “Coach.”

“You shouldn't lock yourself in the massage room. You missed stickhandling practice.”

I resist the impulse to tell coach that I was engaged in some private stickhandling with his son.

“Hi, Pappa,” Oskar says.

Coach turns toward Oskar. His mouth drops. His eyes round. “You were alone in a room with Dmitri. In a locked room.”

“We’re married, Pappa. Pretty sure you want the door to our apartment to be locked.”

“Um.” Coach wrinkles his brow. He glances around the room, and his nostrils flare slightly.

Shit.

Fathers-in-law aren’t supposed to smell those sorts of scents. He looks bewildered. The massage table looks more rumpled than normal, our body weight still indented in the high-quality padding.

I clear my throat before he can decide that he definitely smells what he suspects.

“Just having a discussion,” Oskar says quickly.

“Don’t forget we have a game tonight,” Coach reminds me, his voice gruff.

“You’ve got it, Daddy,” I say.

He winces. “Don’t call me that.”

“Thought you might like an American name since your kids call you Pappa.”

“Not something for you to be concerned about.” He rakes a hand through his hair, and I decide I better leave before he starts shouting or something.

How a man as grouchy as Coach could have created a man as sweet as Oskar is one of the mysteries of the universe. A mystery I probably shouldn’t contemplate from

the way Coach's expression is contorting into one of his scowls.

I turn to Oskar. "I should leave. My boss is angry."

"Furious," Coach corrects, though amusement ripples through his voice.

"Bye, baby." I pull Oskar close for a quick kiss, then scamper away before Coach changes his mind about murder.

OSKAR

The door clicks shut behind Dmitri, leaving me alone with Pappa's scrutiny.

"I suppose you should go after him," I say. "Important work. Los Angeles."

Pappa narrows his gaze. "What were you doing in here?"

"He wanted to talk."

"I don't like this."

"He's not a bad guy, Pappa."

Pappa sighs. "No, he's not. Your mother likes him."

"So do I."

"Believe it or not, so do I," Pappa says. "I hired him, after all."

I nod.

“He’s not a serious man,” Pappa says. “He parties. He’s the reason we enforce curfews.”

“Give him a chance.”

“I just don’t want to see you get hurt.”

“I know. He’s worth it.”

Pappa presses his lips together. He definitely wants to say more, but I’m grateful when instead he leaves the room. I swallow hard, my heart thudding.

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D mitri

The crowd murmurs differently tonight when the announcer calls my name. They've all seen the headlines accusing me of green card fraud. I feel their stares, like skates scraping on my soul.

I scan the stands, imagining how many military veterans sit there, how many proud Americans.

Guilt moves through me.

I love this country, but I've become the poster child for breaking its actually pretty reasonable laws.

The newspapers think that Coach forced his son to marry me, which is the most ridiculous part of this whole speculation.

I can't wait for the day to be over so I can take Oskar back into my arms and pretend that we'll get to do this all the time. I find him in the stands, next to Luke's boyfriend Sebastian. He nods to me, and my heart swells.

One person is in my corner.

One person believes I can do this.

I don't know how long I'll get to play on NHL ice, but I vow not to waste a second of it.

“Okay?” Luke asks beside me.

“Amazing.” I square my shoulders and inhale the cold arena air.

Finally, it’s time.

I chase after the puck, whacking it away from the Los Angeles player, then sending it toward Luke.

Los Angeles players taunt me, and I swing around.

“Be cool,” Luke murmurs. “You want to make headlines for attacking someone?”

My muscles coil tight. Luke glides away, all grace and control. He’s kind and large, like the bears in silly children’s cartoons. Probably the kind of bear that inspired Oskar to keep one as a stuffed animal on his bed.

No one’s first word about me would be kind. I want to skate to the other side, to show Los Angeles exactly what I think about them.

A crash echoes across the ice. Axel has leveled a Los Angeles player. Whistles screech and he skates to the penalty box, head high.

I grip my stick tighter, trying to focus on the game and not the whispers from the crowd. Every time I touch the puck, the murmurs swell. The Los Angeles players smirk when they check me into the boards, like they know I’m about to disappear.

Noah skates past. “Keep your head in it.”

Easy for him to say. His marriage to Finn wasn’t splashed across every sports blog with words like “fraud” and “investigation.”

I chase after a loose puck, but my timing's off. A Los Angeles forward steals it and races toward our goal. Coach's shouts echo across the ice.

"Defense! Get back!"

My skates carve into the ice as I pivot. Everything in me wants to slam into the forward, show him what a "fraud" can do. But Luke's warning rings in my ears.

The guy scores. The light flashes. Los Angeles players cluster together, celebrating.

Coach's face darkens on the bench. I brace for him to pull me, but he just shakes his head.

That's worse.

During the next shift, I play it safer. No dramatic checks, no fancy moves. Just doing my job while thousands watch and judge.

Between periods, I find Oskar in the stands again. He's leaning forward, hands clasped like he's praying. My chest tightens. He shouldn't have to worry about me on top of everything else.

The second period starts. I focus on the sound of my skates cutting ice, the familiar weight of my stick. I've earned my place here. Whether they believe in my marriage or not, no one can take away what I've accomplished on this ice.

A Los Angeles player sneers as he skates past. "Going back to Russia soon, Volkov?"

My grip tightens on my stick. One good swing and I could—

No. That's exactly what they want. They probably were prepped to annoy me. God,

no wonder Axel hates Los Angeles. I thought it was just his strange obsession with that player, but obviously they're all terrible. The one thing I know about the US is that the East Coast is definitely the best coast.

On his next rush, I angle my body perfectly, reading his movements like the pro I am. My stick hooks under his, and I swipe the puck clean. He stumbles, cursing, and I grin.

I sprint toward the neutral zone, flicking the puck ahead to Jason. He takes off, skating past two defenders. The light flashes. The crowd roars.

For a moment, they forget they're supposed to hate me.

I don't give them time to remember. When Jason's next shot rebounds off the goalie's pad, I'm there. My stick lifts, and I snap the puck over the goalie's outstretched glove. The net ripples.

The light flashes again.

I allow myself a small smile.

Let them put that in the headlines.

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D mitri

The reporters snap their gaze on me as we enter the press room, and sure enough, the first question is not about my goal, but about my marriage.

“Is good marriage,” I say. “I am enjoying it.”

Coach’s lips thin.

“Is better than not enjoying it,” I explain to him, my voice lower than before, but still probably carrying quite a lot.

“Are you going to honeymoon anywhere?”

“Every day is a honeymoon with Oskar.”

A few of the journalists shift their legs. I’ve made them uncomfortable. Sports reporters tend to be dependably heterosexual in my experience. We’ve given some interviews with pride publications, but none of those interviewers have come to cover our hockey game against Los Angeles.

“What’s it like being married to your coach’s son?” one reporter asks.

Jason huffs audibly next to me. His gaze keeps flicking to one of the reporters. Cal something or other I think.

I’ve only seen Jason in a press conference once before, and maybe he deserves more

attention. I flourish a hand in his direction. “But Jason scored tonight too.”

The other reporters look bored, and a few more shout questions about Oskar and me.

“He doesn’t score goals often!” I shout. “Is unusual for him! Ask him questions.”

Jason glares at me, as if I’ve made some sort of mistake. My eyebrows shoot up. Too late I realize my mistake.

“This is such a farce,” he mutters into his mic.

“What exactly is a farce?” Rex Manley pounces.

“Nothing,” Coach interjects. “No farce.”

But Jason’s already rolling his eyes. “This is ridiculous. No one believes—”

“That Dmitri Volkov and Oskar are happily married?” Rex raises an eyebrow.

“They might be happy, but only because they’re getting away with it,” Jason says.

“The first time I heard of any romance was when they announced they were married.”

The room is quiet, and Coach looks like he is contemplating slinking onto the floor and slithering toward the door, under the optimistic hope that he might turn into a snake somewhere between his seat and the ground.

“I don’t tell you everything, Jason.” I force a smile as fear races through my veins.

His eyes widen with sudden regret, but it’s too late.

“I don’t know everything,” he backtracks. “Obviously.”

There's silence in the room. He rises. "This team is too queer. Idiots."

He stalks out while Coach's face turns an alarming shade of purple.

"I apologize," Coach says, his voice tight. "Any other questions?"

The room erupts.

"Related to the game?" Coach specifies through gritted teeth.

Rex's hand shoots up.

"Rex."

"Would you say your distracted performance at the beginning of the game today stems from the stress of faking your marriage to Oskar?"

Coach's face drains of color.

"Um, no," I say. "Of course not."

"But you were distracted during the game today."

"I also scored a goal. I have worries, but I can assure you that they have absolutely nothing to do with Oskar. Marriage is wonderful thing."

Rex's brow furrows. He appears unconvinced. I vaguely recall that he went through a messy divorce last year. Maybe expounding about the wonders of love is something he associates with actors on the screen who are being paid millions of dollars to recite lines.

Coach ends the press conference, and we bolt from the room.

“Maybe it wasn’t that bad,” I offer.

“Maybe,” Coach says.

Shit.

But then I see Oskar waiting in the hallway and my chest lightens. I pull him into a hug, kiss him quickly, and keep my arm around him as we follow Coach.

“How was the meeting?”

“Not boring,” I say.

“I’m sorry.”

I shrug. No point rehashing it.

“I need to speak with Tanaka,” Coach announces. “And Daniela.”

“Seriously?” Oskar asks.

“There was...an incident,” Coach says.

“I think Jason just misspoke,” I try.

“He’s been ‘misspeaking’ too much.” Coach’s scowl deepens. “I won’t tolerate homophobia. It was my one worry leaving Sweden for this job.”

“He said something?” Oskar looks up at me.

I lean down to whisper, “Apparently team is too queer. Is fine. Reporters loved it.”

Worry fills his eyes as my stomach drops. I can already see tomorrow’s headlines.

Why did Jason have to say anything?

D mitri

“Dmitri, conference room,” Coach barks into the locker room before vanishing.

I strip, then hurry to the shower. The heat is normally relaxing, but now uncertainty races through each vein, leaving my body stiff. After a rushed shower, I towel off and dress. Conference rooms are for important meetings, and I’m not entirely surprised when I see Vince, Daniela, Coach, and Oskar in the conference room. I’m more surprised when I see the Japanese billionaire owner of the team.

“Ah, Dmitri Volkov. Our troublemaker.”

“I don’t mean to be.”

There’s nothing polite about his smile. Maybe he’s not technically berating me, but he is displeased.

“You’ve been in the papers quite a bit lately,” he says.

“Is correct.”

“Articles about immigration fraud.”

My jaw stiffens, my muscles tense. I feel discombobulated, each part of my body aching, like I’ve been broken and put back together ineffectively, with tape and glue-sticks, and at any moment, body parts will start sliding off me and landing on various parts of the conference table and conference room floor.

Oskar's eyes are round and worried, but he pulls out the chair beside him. He gives me a reassuring smile, and I hurry toward him, ignoring any risk of limbs breaking off before I collapse beside him. His hands are folded together, an image of professionalism, but he wraps his ankle around mine. My racing pulse steadies, as if my body needs his to remind itself at what rhythm blood is supposed to pulse through veins.

Tanaka steeples his fingers. "This is an unexpected problem."

The room is quiet. Coach pats his forehead. Vince's face looks the shade of green used to depict absinthe in old paintings, like the ones in that art history documentary Oskar and I watched once.

"I should not have to remind you that the Blizzards do not condone immigration fraud. In fact, we do not condone any type of fraud. We don't condone anything illegal."

"Yes, sir," Coach mumbles.

My stomach drops. What if Tanaka decides to replace Coach? Coach has that beautiful house in Arlington with his wife and children. What if all that goes away because of me? What if Oskar's mother has to move away from her friends? If Oskar's sisters have to start a new school? No one likes switching schools, and they've already moved from Sweden.

Am I harming the people I care about most? Am I destroying their future?

"This whole team's reputation has plummeted," Tanaka says.

"I'm sorry," I croak, sounding nothing like a professional athlete.

He probably can't believe that I even play hockey. I sound like a frightened man who rarely ventures into the real world.

He looks at coach. "I'm sure you could have found a player to replace Mr. Volkov. You didn't need to break the law. We've already had sufficient share of bad publicity."

"You have?"

He glowers at me. "Our captain moved in with his defenseman. Our first-line winger eloped with another player. Our alternate captain went on a dating show to prove he was straight—then ran off with the male host!"

"They're all in love."

"No one needs to hear about a hockey player's love life, especially when their love life is so... unconventional."

Oskar inhales sharply. I reach out and squeeze his thigh, as if I can knead away his troubles like some baker extraordinaire.

Tanaka narrows his gaze at us. "Stop touching your husband, Mr. Volkov. No need to pretend. Everyone knows you're straight."

"Respectfully," Coach says after a few awkward moments have gone by, and tension floods the room with the force of a broken pipe sending out noxious chemicals. "My son and Dmitri are very devoted. I did question their romance, but I, um, have reason to believe that they are in an authentic, um, romantic relationship."

His cheeks pinken. I'm sure he's remembering the massage room incident.

“You do?” Tanaka frowns.

“They are very caring to each other.”

“Mr. Volkov’s romantic history has been well documented. The whole country is discussing immigration fraud. The Blizzards are becoming synonymous with deception.”

Shit.

“You understand why this is problematic?”

Everyone nods frantically.

“My other companies’ managers are complaining. This tarnishes my brand. The government already scrutinizes foreign businesses.”

My veins pulse. My head whirls. Every muscle aches.

Tanaka glares at Coach. “I do not like how this team is being run.”

Coach sits back. His lips press into a tight line. His fingers wobble, then he rapidly removes them from the table and places them on his lap.

I leap up. “Is my fault!”

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:48 am

Oskar

Dmitri lurches to his feet, trembling with a crazed expression on his face that I immediately despise. “Is not Coach’s fault. Is not Oskar’s fault. Is not Daniela’s fault. Is not—”

“We get the point,” Tanaka interrupts. “I suppose you want to tell us that it’s US immigration’s fault for having visa rules?”

Dmitri grimaces.

Daniela clears her throat. “Dmitri’s agent put him in a terrible position.”

Tanaka cuts her off with an irritated wave of his hand. “What is it you say in this country? Two wrongs don’t equal right?”

“Something like that,” Vince says. He seems less scared than the others. Tanaka doesn’t pay his bills. He’s probably regretting ever taking the Blizzards as clients.

Tanaka sniffs. I used to be excited about working for a famous tech billionaire, but that time has long passed. His words are less inspirational than angry. When I leave for grad school, I definitely won’t miss these meetings.

I hate the way he makes Dmitri feel. Dmitri’s emotions bounce off of him, violent and fearful, and I want to calm him and tell him it will be all okay.

But will it? Maybe not.

Tanaka is right about one thing: the media is enjoying ripping Dmitri and the Blizzards apart.

But my marriage to Dmitri feels more and more real every day. I want it to stretch on forever.

“I asked Oskar to marry me,” Dmitri says.

“Because Oskar was your boyfriend,” Daniela jumps in. “Your secret boyfriend.”

“Um, yes.” Dmitri’s face reddens at the lie.

And despite the fact that you could say this whole thing was a lie, Dmitri isn’t a liar. Not really. He’s thoughtful about his opinions and he’s not afraid.

I can’t imagine what it would have been like for him to discover that he’s attracted to a man. It took Vinnie years to tell Evan that he wanted him... And that was in the US, where being gay isn’t illegal.

No, Dmitri is brave. Unfortunately, Tanaka seems to be too busy frowning at him to notice.

My heart gallops. Maybe this is my fault. If I hadn’t been so nervous in those interviews, if I looked more like an athlete instead of management staff, maybe they’d believe us. They had no problem believing Finn and Noah’s drunken Vegas wedding.

Maybe it’s my fault.

Maybe if Dmitri had asked Axel or Troy to do it, he wouldn’t be at risk of being deported.

Maybe I'm not enough.

Ice skitters through my body, as if Tanaka has inserted some straight into my veins. What would I do if I were forced to leave everyone I cared about and a job that was well-paying and difficult to get and which I was amazing at?

How can anyone look at Dmitri with revulsion? I knew exactly what I was getting into, and I would do it again.

My breath stutters, but this is not about me. This is about Dmitri.

I reach up and take his hand. From the firm grip he gives me and the soft inhalation he makes when our hands touch, this was exactly the right move to make. I won't be able to hold his hand if he goes back to Russia though.

"Oskar and I have always been close. It's true that I did not realize the depth of my feelings for him until recently, but I assure you, my feelings are strong." Dmitri's voice cracks on the last word.

Pappa's eyes soften, but Vince and Daniela keep watching Tanaka like they're bracing for an explosion.

"As, um, strong as the feelings between two people can be," Dmitri adds, staring into my eyes.

Tanaka rises. "Next, you'll say you're in love with him. Blah, blah, blah. Face it, no one believes you."

Dmitri pales. Pappa's jaw works like he's biting back words.

"Get him an immigration interview immediately," Tanaka orders Vince. "The sooner

he's out of the country, the better. Give the fans time to forget before the playoffs.”
He jabs a finger at Pappa. “And you can find a replacement.”

“But I might stay,” Dmitri says. “I am proud to be Oskar’s husband.”

“Save it for the interview.” Tanaka slams the door behind him.

“Don’t give up hope,” Pappa tells Dmitri.

Vince nods. “There’s always hope.”

The words don’t manage to sound very hopeful, but maybe it doesn’t matter.

“At least if it gets resolved soon, you won’t have to worry anymore,” I offer.

Dmitri pulls me into his arms. “That’s right, baby.”

I inhale his masculine scent, and I rest my head against his chest.

But his heart is beating faster than normal, and his breath sputters an uneven rhythm.

He’s terrified.

I am too.

D mitri

I hang up the phone and turn to Oskar. “I’m meeting with immigration tomorrow. They’re squeezing me in. Apparently, they’re aware of the media attention and want to get this over with too.”

“Oh.” His eyes go round. “Then we’ll know.”

“Is fine,” I say.

“Absolutely,” he echoes too quickly.

I nod sharply, but the room tilts. The couch seems to have drifted miles away.

Oskar slips his arm around my waist because he is amazing and always knows what I want.

I collapse onto the expensive leather. For a moment, I remember the nights I collapsed on the couch with overnight guests who were not Oskar.

I press my face into my hands.

“What’s wrong?”

“Just thinking about all the wasted years. All the time I could have been with you.”

“Oh.” He blinks.

“I’m sorry. I know you were busy being a student and everything for two of those years. I know you probably wouldn’t have wanted anything to do with me—”

He launches himself into my lap, making me laugh in surprise. His hands frame my face. “Of course I would have wanted you. I would never have ignored you. You are the most incredible man—”

I laugh. “You trying to make me happy, Baby?”

“I’m being truthful,” he huffs.

I wrap my arms around him before he can move away or do something ridiculous like suggest cooking dinner.

“There’s a chance I won’t make it through tomorrow,” I tell him. “Vince says I should prepare for that.”

“But you might.”

“Yeah. Hope so. You know what I’ll miss most if I have to leave?”

He inhales sharply.

“You, baby. More than anything.”

“More than hockey? The city? Your whole life here?”

“More than all of it.”

His eyes glisten. “I’ll miss you so much. I don’t want you to leave. I-I—”

He cuts himself off. I think I know what he wanted to say.

I take his hands in mine. “If I don’t pass, they want me out by tomorrow night.”

“What? Why so fast?”

“Apparently, I’m bad publicity for the whole immigration system now.”

“Oh.” He leans back against my chest, pulling my arms tighter around him.

I don’t tell him I should probably start packing, that Vince suggested boxing up my life. What’s the point? My furniture stays. My clothes can be thrown in a suitcase if it comes to that.

And though I don’t tell it to Oskar, there is a high chance that the worst will happen. The US immigration system will want to show people that it takes immigration violations seriously, and why shouldn’t they? I don’t know how persuadable the immigration officers will be under national pressure.

Still, there’s a chance. There’s hope.

“What does this mean?” Oskar asks.

“Probably that we should order takeout, so we don’t waste any time cooking.”

Oskar lets out an astonished laugh, and my heart warms. His laugh is the best sound. Not strictly speaking the most melodic sound. But definitely the nicest sound in the world all the same.

Because all I want is for him to be happy.

“We can still keep in touch if you leave,” he says.

“Yeah, internet’s pretty amazing.”

“Hey! I would have written you letters.”

“Oh, yeah?”

“Yeah. Instead, you’ll get video calls.”

I stroke his waist, memorizing the exact weight of him in my lap, the precise way he fits against me.

“You’ll still want to talk to me?” my voice wavers.

He stiffens. “You’re my best friend, Dmitri.”

“Yeah. Same.” My voice is husky, and his body radiates tension.

Best friend doesn’t feel like enough. But I asked him to marry me before I thought to ask him for a date? How can I tell him that I want to keep seeing him in every romantic sense? When what I have to offer him is so much less than before?

Would he say yes out of a sense of duty or obligation? Propriety?

Maybe.

Oskar is good at rule following. Not everyone can get into Harvard, and even those who do don’t always succeed.

Why would he want to be with some jock who tarnished his reputation? Who doesn’t

have a job? Who is not even allowed to be in the same country as him?

My heartbeat quickens, and I press kisses onto the side of his neck until he's moaning, and my cock is raging, and thoughts are more of an abstract concept than something I'm actively having.

O skar

I shift in Dmitri's lap, and he makes a small noise of protest, pulling me closer against his chest, eliminating any space between us. When our faces align, Dmitri knows just how to apply the right suction, just how to make every nerve ending in my body sing with joy that we are together.

"Maybe we should move to the bed," he suggests softly.

"Okay." I grin. "I like that idea."

Dmitri lifts me up like I weigh nothing, ignoring my protests that I can walk perfectly fine.

"Bragging, huh?" he teases.

I giggle happily, and he tosses me onto the bed, then lunges himself beside me. The mattress bounces, a pillow falls off.

Dmitri is unconcerned, focused on me.

I laugh as he tosses me onto the mattress before landing beside me. The bed bounces and a pillow tumbles to the floor, but Dmitri only has eyes for me. His gaze is intense but nervous as he reaches for the nightstand drawer.

"So..." he hesitates.

“Dmitri?”

“If you want, we could do it the other way.”

For a moment, well, more than one moment, I’m just frowning at him, bemused.

But then I get it.

I take the condom. “You want me to...”

He nods. “If you want. Only if you want.”

“But what if I’m not good at it? I might hurt you.”

“I play hockey, Oskar. I’m used to things hurting.”

“You’ll be inside me. That sounds pretty amazing. I have a lot of fun doing it the other way. I want you to experience it too.”

I stare at the condom. I didn’t think I would be entering Dmitri. He’s... Well, I just didn’t think it would happen.

“I want to see all of you,” I tell him.

“Is yours,” he says simply.

Shit. My pulse thunders.

Dmitri reaches down and pulls off his sweatpants. He flays his legs as he tries to kick off the rest. His ass is exposed, round and firm and muscular.

I run my hands over the firm muscles of his ass, exploring this new territory. The room feels twenty degrees warmer. When I spread him open, revealing that intimate place no one else has touched, my breath catches.

“Touch me,” he urges. “I want to feel you.”

I slick my fingers and circle his entrance, remembering how incredible it felt when he did this to me. When I press inside, he’s impossibly hot.

Somehow none of my fantasies were about this, but it’s amazing. I’m seeing Dmitri’s most hidden part of his body. I run my finger down his crease. He writhes below me, obviously not too dismayed by this action.

“Touch it,” he says. “I want your finger...there.”

I squirt some lube on my hand, then rub against the puckered rosebud, remembering how good it felt when he did the same to me.

Then I venture into his hole. “It’s hot.”

“That makes sense,” he says, amusement rippling in his voice. “I’m hot.”

I want him to be amused. I want him to be distracted.

Though ideally he’ll be distracted by the sensation of having a cock in his ass, and not by some spectacular failure. But my hand trembles slightly and he notices, turning to look at me.

“You nervous, baby?”

“You nervous, baby?”

I give a miserable nod.

He scoots up. Then takes the lube and condom.

Right.

I failed. I missed my chance. I didn't give Dmitri what he needed, what he wanted.

Dmitri tears open the condom wrapper, and I prepare for him to put it on his cock.

He doesn't.

He takes my flagging cock and strokes it multiple times until it's pulsing in my hand. Then he slides the condom down, moving the latex down my cock. He takes the bottle of lube then squirts some on his hand, then rubs it on my cock. The latex crinkles.

"Is so big," he murmurs appreciatively, adding more lube.

"I was reading about this, and..."

My eyebrows jolt up. "You were reading?"

He elbows me. "I know how to read! Just funny characters in English. Not very many of them."

"We have extra letters in Sweden," I say.

"Very sensible," Dmitri says.

I giggle.

Troy is right. Sometimes Dmitri's English makes him sound like he stepped out of a Regency novel.

I giggle. Then the reality of what we're about to do hits me. I run gentle hands over his muscled back. "I'll go slow."

"Yes," he says, more serious now. "And don't worry about being perfect. Is first time."

"I might not last very long," I warn him.

"Good," he says happily, settling into position, like he's doing some obscene yoga position. "You're not supposed to be happy about that!"

He eyes me. "Is sexy if you come at once. Sort of um, flattering. And if you don't, also sexy."

"Oh."

"Is what they call win-win," he explains. "Not a hockey thing. And after it's over, Oskar, I'll fuck you really hard."

My heart thrums, and heat swirls inside me. I blink multiple times.

"Right." I move into position behind him.

I stretch my hands around his hips, so I grab his cock. It jerks in my hand, and from the startled, happy sound Dmitri makes, he didn't expect me to pay any attention to it.

My cock glistens from the lube, but I take my time stretching Dmitri's hole. I remember what felt good when he did it to me.

I stare at the hole, then I kiss his cheek, sucking his skin into my mouth.

“Gug...” Dmitri sputters.

I continue stroking my hand over his cock. This is the same angle I would use when touching myself, and I move my fingers over his shaft and twist under his head, just like I would to myself. Pre-cum spills from his cock, and a salty scent that wasn't in the room before wafts around my nostrils.

God. Is this my last night here? And tomorrow night I'll be back in my apartment with my childhood bear to keep me company?

I don't want to think about it.

No way.

Because that might involve tears, and I'm totally not going to do that. People get teased for crying after seeing sex on TV shows. No way am I going to cry before sex.

I kiss Dmitri's bottom again, sucking on his skin. I move closer to his hole. My cock is harder now, and before I know it, I've buried my face inside his crease. The musky scent isn't unappealing. I kiss inside his cheeks, venturing to a place I know other people venture but which I've always been somewhat skeptical of.

I'm not skeptical any longer. Dmitri moans beneath me, and I go ahead and lick his puckered hole.

It's good. It's so good.

My cock hardens, and I bury my face between his cheeks, continuing to lick his hole.

His breaths sputter unevenly, growing louder and more frantic. I massage his cheeks with his hands, gripping hold of the firm globes, and move my tongue into his hole.

God, I want to be inside him.

I want to be inside him in every way.

I want our bodies to be joined.

I raise my head up. My cock jerks; I'm harder than I've ever been. I run my fingers along my cock once more, ascertaining that I'm still slicked up for him. I delve my fingers into his hole, spreading him open.

"Oskar..." Dmitri says, and that's my cue.

I place my cock against his hole. I inhale.

Dmitri has already taken my anal virginity, but this, I've never done.

Then I slide in.

It's amazing.

Of course it's amazing.

Everyone says it's amazing.

Dmitri might be experienced, but I'm doing something with him that he's never done before. His body tenses.

"Are you okay? Was it too fast?"

He chuckles, but his voice sounds strangled, as if he's really struggling.

“Keep on going.”

I hesitate, unsure.

Then Dmitri reaches behind himself, clutches hold of my cock and starts to slide up against.

“You want it in you?” My voice is soft.

“Of course. It's you.”

And then I push deeper inside him, into a tight, hot world that is all new to me. His channel is smooth, and it grips my cock in a new, unfamiliar way.

I smooth my hands over Dmitri's body, because there's no way I can be satisfied with just my cock inside him. I want to be as close to him as I possibly can. Because I am not just creating a glorious, oh-my-God evening with him, I am creating memories to sustain me.

His body is slick with sweat. It glistens, as if he needed anything else to make the muscular planes of his body look anymore stunning.

He lets out a gasp.

“Was that okay?”

“That was...” He halts, as if struggling to speak. Guilt moves through me. Maybe I didn't stretch him enough. Maybe I was hasty, too eager, too excited—

“Do it again,” he orders.

I move out, until my cock is almost out, then I slide into him again.

“Yeah,” he murmurs. “Like that.”

I do it again.

And again.

I’m thrusting, I’m having sex, and Dmitri is moaning beneath me. His muscles writhe below me. Even with his back turned he’s the most beautiful person in the world.

Happiness darts through me, and I forget all the sadness. The world only consists of me and Dmitri and the pants and moans and incredible tension squeezing my cock.

Then Dmitri squeezes around me, and I explode. My body flails, and a few moments after, Dmitri’s body pulses in such a manner that I’m pretty sure that he’s exploding too. Dmitri collapses onto the mattress, taking me down with him, then he wriggles away.

“Is wet. Very, very wet.”

I kiss the back of his neck. “I guess I should, um, move.”

“Do you think they’ll believe we’re married if we show up joined together in the immigration office tomorrow?”

I give a weak laugh. “Now, I really don’t want to pull out.”

“You liked being inside me?”

“Was pretty amazing.”

He nods in the direction of his pillow. “Is why I wanted you to have the experience.”
He hesitates. “I wanted to feel you inside me.”

I swallow hard.

My cock is spent, shrinking inside my condom. It looks indecent.

I grab the condom edge and make sure it's tight around my not-so-very-thick-anymore cock and pull out.

Dmitri groans.

“Did it hurt you?”

He springs around, and his eyes glitter. “I miss you already.”

“Maybe you'll get to stay,” I say.

He nods, but I have the vague sense he's saying that to comfort me. God, they're going to send him away. We just got together, and he's going to be sent to the other side of the world and not even be allowed to enter this country.

He watches me and extends his arm out.

I tumble into at once, then curl around his chest and legs, my heart thumping wildly. I wrap myself around him as tightly as I can, so I feel each breath he inhales and exhales, like he's my raft in the middle of the ocean, and I'm floating on him.

His arm shifts, then his hand moves to my head. He plays with my locks.

“We should think about nicer things,” he says.

“Any suggestions?”

“Hmm...” His grin turns wicked. “Like what position I should fuck you in?”

D mitri

Oskar's mouth forms a perfect O of surprise, and I can't resist kissing him. He can't show me his mouth and not expect me to want to delve in there. No way.

He sweeps his arms around my neck, his arms tight, reminding me that he's not a soft female. His body might be on the smaller end, but everything is compact firm muscle, and I feel safe in the tight grip of his hands.

I've been fucked.

I'll always be a man who's been fucked.

I smile at the ceiling, as if Oskar has drawn a happy face over my soul.

"Is important question," I tell Oskar.

"Oh, yeah?"

"Lots of options."

"I like the option where I can see your face." I shrug. "Is good face. Works out for me. You have a good face too."

And then I'm cupping my hands around his face, feeling his high cheekbones, and watching his blue eyes glitter. "If I could find a way to stay, I would."

“I know.”

“For you,” I tell him.

“Don’t worry about my job,” he assures me. “I-I don’t care about it. It was worth it for me. Besides, I’m going to go to graduate school. It will be a few years until I’m back in the workforce”

I pull him toward me and ruffle his belly, my fingers playing along his narrow waist.

I don’t say anything.

I want him to be right.

With the internet, I’m not sure he is, but I know he knows that too.

My heart swells with wonder at this marvelous man who has become the center of my world.

He is amazing.

Utterly amazing.

He stares at me, and my world consists of the most gorgeous shade of blue and black irises and white sclera. How come no one lauds that color combination? It should be on every item of clothes, every furniture piece, everything.

But then I look at his blonde hair and his clear skin, lightly freckled, the dots visible only at a close distance like this and the pink of his cheeks and the deeper pink of his lips and I know that I am wrong.

“You’re smiling,” he says.

“Of course. You’re in my arms.”

He giggles and snuggles closer. Every moment with him feels precious now.

My cock stretches toward him, heat pulsing through my organ. It pokes into his stomach, and his lashes flutter when he feels it, and he moves closer to it.

“Careful. I might come before I’m inside you,” I warn.

He scrambles up, and I regret my words. Then he grabs another condom. I wait for him to hand it to me, like we’ve done before, but instead he tears the wrapper.

My eyes must widen, and maybe my jaw does a bit of dropping, because he says, “I can unwrap things.”

“My baby is so clever,” I say.

“Your baby went to Harvard,” he reminds me, and I grin because he’s acknowledging that he’s my baby.

He removes the condom, then places it on my shaft. I look down, but he’s applied it correctly, leaving the tip loose for the come that I know will come pouring out of me when I’m thrusting inside him.

Then he takes the lube and squirts some on his palm.

I cough noisily. “Excuse me. I can do that.”

“Oh, yeah?”

“I want your bottom up,” I say in my sternest voice.

“Seriously?”

“You gave me ideas, Oskar.” I shake my head, keeping my voice still strict.

His cock jerks.

“Someone’s into this,” I say.

“Maybe.”

“Can’t keep secrets about what you like when you have a cock like that.” I pat beside me on the bed, and in the next moment, he flips around, straddles my chest, then points that sweet ass straight into my face.

“Fuck.” I stare at his two globes. “You are so fucking beautiful, baby.”

I stretch his globes.

“That first night you moved in with me I should have stripped you naked and stared at your ass all night.”

His cock jerks, bobbing against my stomach.

“See, no secrets.”

He gives a weak laugh. I lube up my hand, then lube up his cock. I place his hand on it, then move his hand up and down. “Keep on jerking yourself, baby. I’m going to take care of you.”

Then I spread his cheeks and eye his hole.

It's gorgeous and dark pink.

No one has seen this. I see parts of him that no one else in the world ever has. I am so incredibly lucky.

My heartbeat quickens, and I grab his cheeks with each hand, loving the feeling of his warm flesh. I squeeze his cheeks. If I ever thought I would miss boobs, this is a hell of a replacement.

I mean, women have asses too, but I've never paid them much attention.

So I considered myself pretty sexually adventurous.

I've had a lot of sex.

I mean, professional athletes tend to have a lot of sex, and I've always been on the high end.

Why have conversations in bars when you can be thrusting in and out of someone? My English wasn't great when I arrived, it's still not great, because hockey fills my days, not listening to lectures or something that uses words. I preferred inviting a woman to my bed and pretending that I wasn't that alone. Pretending that I wasn't on the other side of the world from everything that I knew. Pretending that I was utterly awesome.

The wondrous glances women shot me helped with the latter.

There was never a woman I wanted to spend more time with. I guess that makes me an F-boy, but I'm pretty sure they knew what they were getting into. Now I'm less

certain. How could an act that feels so intimate and special with Oskar have ever been something that was almost routine with others?

The point is, I never rimmed anyone before. I never got rimmed. And if any of the women had strap-ons tucked with their bright silicon toys, they never told me.

I'm doing things with Oskar that I never did with anyone before.

I gaze again at Oskar's puckered, wrinkled hole, then I lean toward it and lick it.

Oskar's moan is instantaneous. He practically flies from my arms, tumbling onto my legs and toppling off the bed. I grab hold of his hips and bring him closer to me.

"Is good," I say.

"So good," Oskar says.

I lick him again.

And again.

And again.

I want to memorize his taste, his musky scent, the way he feels in my arms, and the soft moans that he emits. I want to memorize everything.

O skar

The City Hall looms ahead. It's a brutalist monstrosity, concrete jutting out in unpleasant angles and low ceilings, as if the local government was determined to inspire as much fear and distaste in anyone visiting so they don't argue back.

Most buildings in Boston are beautiful, but this one seems to have taken pride in making itself as unpleasant as possible.

My phone pings. "My parents are here."

Dmitri's eyebrows jolt up. "Really?"

We're still clasping hands, but I rub a hand over his palm. "Your in-laws."

His grin turns goofy. "Is nice of them."

"They're great. Sorry about Pappa going all protective."

"Is fine." He shrugs. "I would have done it if my son had married team's bad boy."

"Son?" My voice squeaks. "You think about...I mean, in the future?"

Dmitri stops and turns to me. His eyes are soft, and I know I'm not being the least bit subtle. He knows exactly what I'm thinking. Exactly.

"Yes. I like your family, Oskar. Why not have a house filled with misbehaving tiny

people?”

My throat tightens.

“You know Evan and Vinnie have daughter—”

“Oh.”

He squeezes my hand, then drags me forward.

“Wait! Really?”

“He stops. Yeah, they really do. Her name is Stella, and—”

I elbow Dmitri hard.

Someone clears his throat. “Are you sure you want to do that where the press might see you?”

Shit.

My parents are here.

I turn toward Pappa’s voice, and heat inundates my cheeks.

I’m trying to be a good husband to Dmitri for the immigration office, and I almost wound up having a photo of me shoving Dmitri all over social media.

I turn to Dmitri. “I’m sorry. I-I forgot. Not that I should do that anyway...”

His eyes dance. “You’re very cute.”

My skin prickles, the words ushering through me, filling my blood, filling my soul.

He shrugs. “I am... I think you say, ‘built like tank’. Nothing hurts me.” His gaze slides to Pappa. “Even locker room attacks.”

Pappa’s cheeks pinken. “I’m very sorry, Dmitri. It’s clear that I misinterpreted the situation.”

“Is okay,” Dmitri says broadly. “Thank you for being here. Is unexpected and nice.”

“Lots of people pass immigration interviews,” Ingrid says.

“Exactly.” Dmitri smiles at her. “Good energy. Is appreciated.”

We walk into the lobby, following the signs. My heart sputters and quakes but I paste a smile on my face, as if that will be sufficient armor against the US immigration system. I definitely could use some chain mail and a shield now. I don’t want to attack them...I just want to be protected.

Dmitri’s stance is confident, his shoulders wide, his breath even. But then, Dmitri skates into an arena filled with people watching him and judging him on a grueling basis. If most people make a mistake at work, no one notices. If he makes a mistake at work, a clip will be created of the event, so that even those who didn’t bother to watch the game can watch it over and over and over again. If he looks scared and intimidated, the players on the opposing team might notice, and they wouldn’t be sending him comforting smiles and “you’ve got this” messages his way.

Vince greets us in this lobby holding a briefcase. I try not to think about the immigration paperwork inside.

“Some of your teammates wrote letters in support of your relationship,” Vince says.

“They did?” Dmitri’s eyes shine.

“Yes.”

“That’s very nice of them.”

“We did too,” Pappa says.

“They all included photos of you together. Some of the photos go back three years.”

Dmitri’s eyes soften. “I was always drawn to you. I wish I’d known—” He stops, then smiles. “Thank you, Vince. I know I gave you a lot of extra work to do.”

“It’s my pleasure,” Vince says. “Genuinely. I hope you get to stay.”

I notice that Daniela and Tanaka aren’t there. Of course, they wouldn’t be there, but there are many more people who want to see this meeting implode.

Dmitri squeezes my hand, as if he can read every thought in my mind. And perhaps he can.

“We got you in before the first meetings start,” Vince says. “Emergency hearing. Now, the thing with lawyers is to say as little as possible. Just the facts. We have pictures. We have letters. We have your declarations of love. No huge stories.”

“I’m not a big talker,” I promise him. “English is my second language too.”

“I was aware of that,” Vince says. His gaze slides to Oskar. “And I know you’re not a big talker either. See you’ll be fine.”

His expression twists briefly, something some people would call a micro expression,

but which I'm going to say was simply something I imagined, a shadow as we pass on the corridor. Maybe one bulb is less bright than the others. That's all. No big deal.

I nod and tell myself that this is all completely fine and all completely going to go well.

I keep on telling myself that as we walk down the corridor to the office, and I keep on telling myself that as we stop in front of an office.

We've got this.

We've totally got this.

D mitri

I am not scared.

I am Dmitri, and I do not get scared.

My heart might be beating like crazy, but it's always good to get some extra blood flow in. I give a curt nod in the direction of the middle-aged woman behind the desk. She's wearing a bright green blazer.

See? Not scary. Green is a good color. Grass is green. Bushes are green. And plants too.

Her eyes are beady and look at me intently, as if I'm already doing the interview.

The point is that I am not scared. I am Dmitri Volkov. I made it all the way from Russia to play for the NHL. I'm not going to be sent back now. No way.

She gestures in the direction of some seats. Vince takes the seat in the back, between Oskar and me. I try to think of his presence as reassuring and not think that we're being surrounded on all sides by people scrutinizing our relationship, and not thinking that they sort of maybe, maybe sort of definitely have a point.

But even though Vince is presenting me as his client, I can't forget his distaste and horror when he found out that I'd married Oskar, and I can't forget that he knows that he asked me in the meeting if there was someone I was considering marrying.

Sweat beads my forehead. The back of my neck itches, as does my lower back. I suddenly regret wearing a suit to this meeting. I wanted to show that I took this seriously, but I feel like I'm playing pretend, and I'm scared that they'll think I'm playing pretend.

"So you're Dmitri Volkov." The immigration officer, whose name is Ruth Santoro, eyes me.

"Yes."

She turns to Oskar. "And you're the man who married him. Oskar Holberg."

"Yes," Oskar says, his voice clear and un-nervous sounding.

My shoulders ease. He's doing great. But of course he is. He is Oskar and he is wonderful.

Ms. Santoro eyes glitter. "I see you haven't changed your name?"

She addresses Oskar.

"No, that's a bit old-fashioned," Oskar says, his voice confident.

"But we might still do it!" I interject hastily.

Oskar tenses. Vince tenses.

Shit.

I guess interrupting isn't highly regarded?

“Is that so, Mr. Volkov?” Ms. Santoro asks, her smirk growing. “I suppose you want your new husband to take your name?”

“Um, no.”

Vince pulls his legs more tightly toward him, and his feet slide across the thin, bumpy low-pile, tan-and-brown carpet tile.

“So you haven’t discussed this?” She blinks.

I swallow hard. God, why didn’t I bring a bottle of water here?

“I mean, Oskar wouldn’t take my name. There are enough Volkovs in the world. They’re not so great. But, um, I could take his name.” My voice rises too much at the end of the sentence, and my heart pounds.

Maybe Oskar will think this is a terrible idea. Maybe I shouldn’t be springing forever and matching last names and potential children to him. Especially since I said our future children would be misbehaved. I mean, is that actually appealing to Oskar? Why didn’t I say that our future children would be little wingless angels or something?

He slides his gaze over to me, and his blue eyes glitter.

“What do you say, Mr. Holberg?” Ms. Santoro asks.

“I think that sounds very nice,” Oskar asks, his voice still clear and steady, he reaches to me and squeezes my knee.

I gaze at my handsome, adorable husband.

God, imagine if we were Mr. And Mr. Holberg.

“Might get confused for brothers,” Ms. Santoro sniffs.

The mood shatters. Oskar withdraws his hand from my knee. The air is cold, the whirl of the air conditioner obviously broken, because why else would Arctic air flood the room. Just leave that air in Siberia.

“We don’t look similar,” I tell Ms. Santoro.

“And you’re not that similar,” she says, and I stiffen.

I didn’t think that statement would be a segue to all the reasons people doubt our relationship.

That so was not my intention.

Ms. Santoro opens a manila folder that Vince definitely did not give her. “You’ve made the news, Mr. Volkov.”

“Unintentionally.”

“Be that as it may, we don’t condone that.”

Vince clears his throat. “Perhaps we can constrain our discussion to normal interview questions?”

Ms. Santoro sniffs. “Yes, you would like that.” She looks at her papers. “In this case, the newspaper articles are highly relevant to this case.” She looks at me. “Most couples who come to me have been in relationships for at least months, most normally years. How long did you date before you decided to get married?”

My throat goes dry. I try to swallow, but my tongue has lost all function. My heart beats unsteadily.

I inhale and smooth my pants. This is fine. Completely fine.

“Oskar and I have been friends for years. Best friend, in fact.”

I smile, but Ms. Santoro does not follow me.

“In other words, you knew that Oskar Holberg might follow your scheme to defraud the US government?”

“Um...”

Vince leans forward. Maybe he'll say the right thing. “Strictly speaking, they're not doing anything to defraud the government. Financially speaking.”

Shit.

Maybe I'm not a native English speaker, but even I know that wasn't a reassuring comment.

Ms. Santoro's eyes gleam. She's enjoying her job. And I'm pretty sure she's not imagining how she's going to make Oskar and me happy. No way.

“I like being married to Oskar,” I tell her. “He...”

She stares at me.

“He's amazing. Obviously. He's smart and adorable and fun.”

“Yes, you do like to have fun,” Ms. Santoro says smoothly. She flicks to another article. “You’re quite the partier. Different woman in each town?”

My heart beats. “They weren’t important.”

Her gaze narrows.

Shit.

“I mean, of course, they were important.”

Ms. Santoro eyes remain narrow. I realize I’m not helping myself any more with these statements.

“Everyone is important in this world. Cashiers are important. Moms are important. Um, government officials are important.”

I’m pretty sure I hear Vince muffle a groan behind me.

Shit.

“I just meant, it wasn’t that kind of a relationship. It was, um, fake. Like off-brand soda.”

“And the real relationship would have been, what, beer?”

“Maybe?” My voice is too high-pitched. I know that. We’ve gotten off track. “Look, that’s not important.”

“I’ll decide what’s important, Mr. Volkov.”

“Right. Of course.” I try to look contrite. Tension bubbles through me.

Ms. Santoro slides her gaze to Oskar. “So how much is he paying you?”

Oskar’s eyes widen, and his face is three shades paler than he was to begin with, as if someone put an instagram filter over him.

“He’s not paying me anything,” Oskar says.

“Looks like he moved you into his fancy apartment. I see the receipts for your wedding. You spent a lot of money on it.”

“Because Oskar deserved the best.”

“You have quite an expensive ring,” she tells Oskar. “I guess it’s yours to sell. After everything is over.”

Oskar’s nostrils flare.

I move my hand to Oskar’s thigh. “This won’t be over.”

Ms. Santoro watches us, her eyes narrowed. “Do you mean to say that if I decline your request for a visa due to your marriage, because I don’t see your marriage as valid, you would still be together.”

My throat dries. “Well, then I would be back in Russia. Where homosexuality is not permitted.”

She sighs. “Yes, your lawyer already requested to change this to an asylum application. Honestly, we can’t accept everyone in under that who claims they’re not straight suddenly.”

The oxygen slinks from the room. I inhale, but my action is too obvious. My hands tremble, and I slide them over my lap.

I don't want her to confuse nervousness for hiding something. I don't want her to confuse uncertainty and trying to say things correctly and failing for bad intent.

But I'm pretty sure Ms. Santoro knew how she was going to decide when someone handed her the manila folder with all my F-boy behavior.

God, I knew Oskar was my best friend months ago. Was that why it had felt strange when I went to bars? Was that why all my flirtatious chatter at bars felt forced, and why I was relieved when the women would scramble from the bed after we did some mutual moaning and screaming together, happy that I still had time to text or call Oskar?

I knew that I liked having him beside me. I knew that he was cute, but I thought it was in the vague way I think puppies are cute or something. I should have put it together that when I was thinking about the curve of his nose or the shape of his lips or the color of his eyes, that maybe I'd ventured into not completely friend territory. I've never pondered Axel's muscles or Finn's hair color or Troy's narrow waist and not-so-narrow shoulders.

What if Vince had not said that immigration would be easier with an American citizen spouse? How long would it have taken me to realize that Oskar is the person for me?

I shiver. Part of me will always be grateful that the immigration process helped me realize this. Unfortunately, if I have to return to Russia, there is no happy ending for me. Not really. At some point Oskar will forget me, just like all my friends when I was boy in Russia and was sent to hockey camp. When I visited home, they acted confused when I wanted to hang out. I was some person from their past who they

didn't think about, and I couldn't tell them that I thought about them all the time.

The women I met at bars wouldn't disappoint me in that matter. There would never be any risk like that. There would only be short-lived pleasure, which seemed like a fine enough way to end a night after playing hockey.

"Oskar makes me be the person I want to be," I say.

"A future American citizen?" Ms. Santoro asks, one eyebrow slanting up her wrinkled brow.

"A good person," I say hastily.

Vince huffs behind me, and I have the horrible sensation that I'm not making this any better.

"Well," Ms. Santoro says. "I have come to a decision. I will put you out of your misery."

She gives a smile.

That has to be a good sign, right? I mean, she's smiling. Smiles are...good.

But my heart beats ferociously, and the air thins.

We lean forward.

D mitri

“Dmitri Volkov must vacate the country,” Ms. Santoro announces.

The words hit like a body check. When I look at Oskar, his eyes shine with tears I never wanted to see.

“I’m sorry,” Vince murmurs to me, his voice regretful.

I nod. “Is okay. You tried.”

Oskar wraps his arms around me, and I lift him up. He wraps his legs around my waist, and I kiss him.

When we stop kissing, I notice that the judge is staring at us.

“That won’t make a difference,” she says.

“I don’t care. I’m going to kiss my husband.”

I don’t give her any more attention. Maybe regret fills her gaze, or maybe her chin hardens, and her scowl becomes deeper and more pronounced.

Nothing will change the result.

I open my mouth to tell Oskar I love him. I do. I so do. But how will that knowledge help him when I’m on the other side of the world?

My heart aches, and I smooth his hair. His beautiful blue eyes glisten.

“I’ll miss you,” I say.

He nods, but he seems to hesitate too.

When he answers back, “I’ll miss you too,” my heart shatters.

Because we’re already on the road to a breakup. Because there’s no world in which I can bring him to homophobic Russia. Not after all the newspaper articles about us there.

“Maybe one day I can come back,” I say, and he nods, but the words feel like I’ve uttered a lie, and Vince grimaces.

I square my shoulders and take Oskar’s hand in mine. I turn to Vince. “I guess you can tell me the next steps?”

“The main one is that you have to leave.”

I blink. Pain enters my eyes, and I struggle to keep my features impassive.

I want to holler at the judge and shout that she was wrong. I want to send a hitman after my former agent.

But every day I’ve been here I’ve been lucky. I’m grateful that I got to be here as long as I did. I’m grateful that I met my friends and had this career and met Oskar.

And honestly...I was trying to pull one over the US government. Even if Oskar and I fell in love, I did ask him to enter a marriage of convenience. And to be honest the person the marriage was convenient for was solely me.

The internet sleuths who found compromising pictures of me with hookups, who noted that I'd only ever shown an interest in women, weren't wrong.

I never considered that I might be interested in men too. Obviously, I'm clearly bisexual. But maybe sweet, slender men are my type. I've never been drawn to the muscular athletes and fans who surround me.

I'm grateful to Vince for fighting for me, grateful to Oskar to sticking up for me, grateful to this whole system for allowing me to state my case.

"I need to pack," I tell Vince.

"Yeah. Good idea."

Oskar tightens his grip on my hand.

Vince and Oskar and I leave. Coach and Ingrid are waiting outside. Their faces turn somber and sorrowful once they see us.

What will we be when Oskar and I don't end each night in bed together? When I'm not there for all the hard things? When I'm not there for the good things, even the tiny good things, like when a TV show makes him laugh?

In a few days I won't even be speaking English. My world will be in Russian. I try to remind myself that Russia is beautiful, that Russia also has amazing people, but all I can think is that I want to stay with this beautiful man.

Some things aren't meant to be.

"I'm so sorry," Ingrid says, pulling me into a hug.

“Thank you. Is appreciated.”

I glance at Coach. All the things that he worried about came true.

I am leaving Oskar and making him sad. I have hurt Oskar’s career and reputation. I have pulled the team into my immigration drama, and hundreds of thousands of people think Coach is the kind of guy who will marry off his only son to a straight bad boy hockey player so as not to have to go through the bother of marrying someone else.

“I-I apologize,” I stammer. “You were right.”

“No,” he says, his voice firm. “I wasn’t. I wanted you to stay, Dmitri. I think you and Oskar make a great couple. I-I would have liked to have seen more of you.”

I nod and give him some sort of wobbly smile.

He nods back.

My heart races.

This is happening.

“Are you going to be okay there?” Ingrid asks.

“Is my home country,” I say. “I’ll be fine.”

Devastated, of course. Miserable, too. But otherwise fine.

Coach and Ingrid are silent. My dreams have shattered. I brought their son into my legal issues.

Oskar squeezes my hand, and I try to smile, even though I know that soon, I'll be on the other side of the world.

How soon until Oskar tells me that maybe we should just get a divorce after all?

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O skar

Dmitri says goodbye to his teammates, then we pack up his things together. Finally, he takes me to my parents' house. He wants me to spend the night there.

Now it's time to say goodbye.

I wrap my arms around Dmitri. "I'll miss you."

"I'll miss you too." His eyes shine with tears, and his grip is firm. I lay my head against his shoulder, my heart beating wildly. I inhale his scent and try to memorize it. I want to memorize everything. I don't want him to become just a memory, but it's time.

A ping sounds on Dmitri's phone, then, a honk.

I pull away from Dmitri. "That must be your Uber."

He nods regretfully. "I'll contact you once I arrive."

"You better."

His eyes are solemn, but he nods.

We both know things will be different. Our relationship is new, and we'll be communicating over vastly different time zones. Things won't be the same.

Pappa clears his throat, then gives Dmitri a hug. Dmitri's eyes shut.

"You take care of yourself," Pappa says, separating.

"Yes, Coach."

Pappa nods, but Dmitri grimaces. Maybe he remembers that Pappa is no longer his coach, Dmitri is no longer a Blizzard.

"You better go," I say.

Dmitri's eyes glisten, then he yanks me toward him and kisses me.

Air brushes around us. I think Pappa opened the door.

We separate, then Dmitri gives a curt nod, and hurries to the Uber.

Pappa and I wave as the car moves away, then it rounds the corner. I blink, then I feel Pappa's arms around me. He tugs me toward him, closing the door.

"It wasn't meant to be," Pappa says, and he reaches out and pats me on the back.

Two taps, then he leans back assessing me. "You'll be fine."

I stare at him.

Pappa isn't one to get emotional, and this probably counts as a speech or something that involves words like "love" and "feelings," the kind that other fathers sometimes tell their pretend sons in movies.

"He wasn't serious," Pappa says. "He's nice, I guess."

“He loved you,” I say.

I squeeze my eyes together and pinch my forehead against the coming migraine, as if my head is wailing.

“Loves you,” I correct myself, because Dmitri might not be in the country, but he isn’t dead or anything.

“He’s an f-boy,” Pappa says. “That’s what they call them.”

He grins, as if proud of knowing young person lingo or something.

“I’ll get you a beer,” Pappa says. “Maybe something good is on TV.”

I nod slowly.

This feels wrong.

This wasn’t supposed to happen.

People are forgetting about Dmitri so easily, just like he worried.

“There’s no solution, Oskar. You did what you could do.”

I frown.

“There’s always a way.”

“He’s a Russian citizen. He has to go back. He doesn’t have citizenship of other countries.”

“I know that. I wanted to give him US citizenship.”

“It was always going to be a long shot after what his agent did.”

Pappa opens the beer bottle and hands it to me. The click goes off in my mind.

“I-I have to go, Pappa.”

Pappa frowns. “It’s over, Oskar. You want one final kiss from him or something? His plane leaves tonight.”

“I know.” I rise, my heart beating.

It occurs to me, that I might make an absolute fool of myself. I don’t know that Dmitri wants this. That he really wants me.

The old me wouldn’t have tried.

All those years I was madly in love with Dmitri I never once told him. I never once imagined that he could want me in that way. I always assumed that he would be a painful crush, and never fought for us.

I never thought that maybe he would be willing for more, that maybe there was a reason he always liked hanging out with me, or that he would fall asleep snuggling me after long days at hockey practice.

I never thought to have the conversation with him: maybe we could be more.

Because God, what if he’d been dating far earlier? What if we could have shown US immigration that? What if none of the bad articles about us had ever appeared?

I can't change the past, but perhaps I don't need to settle for a future I don't want, that fills me with despair.

I'm not the same person anymore that I once was.

I'm going to fight for Dmitri, fight for us. I'm going to give him options and not assume.

I grab my things, then rush upstairs, because there's something in my documents I need.

"Oskar!" Pappa shouts after me. "You're not going to do anything silly?"

"No. Not silly at all." My heart swells. I'm going to be brave.

All my life I've told myself that I'm shy. I've let other people be brave for me.

If I don't offer him this option, I'll always wonder. And maybe...my heart expands. Maybe it will work.

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D mitri

I'm not sad. I had a great time in the US. The best time.

I reach my gate. I wish that I had told Oskar to join me after all. But we said our goodbyes already, and I don't want to get on a plane to Moscow crying. I don't know if the media will be there to see me, but I just can't have that happen.

My phone buzzes.

OSKAR: Are you through security yet?

DMITRI: At my gate. I miss you already.

OSKAR: I miss you already too.

My heart patters and I stare at my phone and the abundance of emojis he just entered.

We were friends first and we'll still be friends. It's not the relationship I want with him. At some point he's going to tell me he met someone, and I'll say I'll be happy, and perhaps I really will be. I'll want the best for Oskar.

My heart aches. It's not the US I'll miss the most. It's Oskar.

Maybe it was always him.

I dart my gaze around the waiting area for the gate. Couples sit beside each other.

How have I never noticed how many people go through life in pairs?

I call Oskar.

“Dmitri?” He answers on my first ring.

My heart thuds. “I’m sorry. I just wanted to hear your voice.”

“Oh.” I hear the smile in his voice. “I like hearing your voice too.”

Something about the call feels strange, though. His words seem to be coming out in small pants.

I frown. “Are you exercising?”

He giggles. “Sort...of.”

I think I hear people around him too.

And that’s good... I didn’t want to say goodbye to him at the airport because I thought I might start bawling or something in public, and he decides to go to the gym instead.

“Um exercise is important,” I say. “So that’s good.”

Maybe he can hear the sadness and confusion in my tone.

“Dmitri, look behind you,” Oskar says on the phone, his words still coming out slightly breathless.

I blink.

He wouldn't...

No...

Hope that I might see him again wars with the reality that I've probably misinterpreted what he said or something.

I jerk my head behind me, and there he is.

My Oskar. At the fucking airport.

He's wearing the same clothes he wore when I said goodbye, though his hair is tousled, and his cheeks pink.

Relief bubbles through me, and I stretch out my arms. Oskar quickens his pace and jumps into my arms. His legs encircle my waist, and I see other passengers gazing in our direction, some puzzled, some with soft expressions, and some frowning.

Never mind them.

I turn my focus to the most amazing man in the world.

"Oh, God. You came to say goodbye in person."

I kiss his lips, and maybe I will be bawling when the flight attendant tells me it's time to board but it's worth it. Feeling his warm body against my chest will always be worth it.

I kiss his lips, melding into his warm mouth. I am home, at least now.

Oskar pulls away. "So, um..."

He slides down my legs, and if I didn't know better maybe I would think he was embarrassed.

Maybe the public display of affection was too much?

I frown. "How did you pass through security? Don't you need to show a boarding pass?"

His cheeks flame. "I got one."

"For the international terminal?" I smooth his hair. "International tickets aren't cheap. I appreciate it."

"So you're happy to see me?"

"Of course I am." I frown. He's acting weird, but this whole situation is weird.

Maybe my head was in the sand, but I believed that we would be able to find a solution that didn't involve me being deported.

"I love you, baby," I say.

His eyes glisten. "I love you too."

He steps away, and for some reason, he still seems nervous. "I really love you, Dmitri. And I still want us to be married. I still want us to be together."

"I can't be here, baby," my voice cracks.

His fingers flutter, then he squares his shoulders. "But I can go with you."

Joy explodes in my heart, and I take his hands in mine. “That’s the nicest thing anyone has ever said to me.”

I crush my forehead to his, and I tighten my grip around his hands. I inhale. I don’t want to say what I’m about to say.

But it’s the right thing to do. I need to protect Oskar. He matters more than anything.

I pull away. “I can’t let you do that, baby. Russia doesn’t approve of gay relations. I don’t want to move you away from your home, your job for me. We can pretend to be roommates, but we’re already in the news there. It’s not safe for you.”

I drop my hands. “I love you so much. Please know that.”

“Actually...” Oskar smiles. “Actually, I had something else in mind.”

I stare.

He stares.

“I’m a Swedish citizen, Dmitri. And you’re my husband. You have a right to accompany me there.”

“Oh.” I blink. Hope starts to fill me, but I gaze at him uncertainly, too scared that I’m building a future in my head with him that he doesn’t mean to give me.

“You’ll still need a visa and residency permit.”

“Oh.” I force the hope building in my chest away.

“But it’s a straightforward application.”

“The US government didn’t think we were a real couple.”

“We are though,” Oskar says. “We can live there. Together. If you, um...”

“But your job is here. Your family is here. Your friends.”

“You’re my best friend, Dmitri. I-I know it sounds crazy. It’s a new language for you to learn, and um, maybe it’s too much— “

“It’s not too much,” I say quickly. “I want a life with you. If you don’t mind...”

Oskar smiles. “I grew up in Sweden. It would be nice to return. Maybe later we can move to the US or something. I wouldn’t give up hope. But I can’t offer you the NHL. Or even a similar spot on a Swedish team—”

“Hey.” I take his hands in mine. “I have some skills. I bet I could do coaching. And I have savings.” I tuck a strand of hair over his face. “If you are really up for doing that—”

“I am. You’re my husband, Dmitri. I want to be where you are.”

“Good.” We stare at each other. “How long does it take for me to get a residency permit in Sweden?”

His face pinkens. “So, um, I actually had another idea.”

“I like your ideas so far.”

“I bought us tickets to Turkey.”

My eyebrows shoot up. “Turkey?”

“We don’t have to go. At least I got to talk to you in person.”

I smile. “Why did you buy us tickets to Turkey, baby?”

“They have visa on arrival for Russians,” Oskar says. “I did research in the Uber. There’s a flight in an hour. We can go to Istanbul, see the sights, and apply for your residency permit to Sweden. I-I know it’s crazy...”

I pull him toward me. “Is genius. Absolute genius.”

He grins happily.

I take his hands in mine. “I love you.”

“I-I love you too.”

I look around at the passengers waiting at the gate. “Guess I have to break the bad news to the flight attendant that my bag needs to be unbranded.”

“Bad boy,” Oskar says, taking my hand in his.

“You’re corrupting me. I was a sweet, innocent passenger.”

He giggles, and it’s the sweetest noise in the world.

We’re going to live a life together, wherever in the world that might be. The important thing is that we’re together.

I squeeze his hand, my heart light with happiness.

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D mitri

“Guys!” My voice barrels through the locker room, and twenty athletes turn to me.

My gaze bounces around the wood-paneled locker room, and I grin.

“We’re going to win this.”

My voice is authoritative and steady as I give my special speech. Tension eases from some of their shoulders.

The guys like it when I’m confident, and luckily, I’m very confident.

I’m Dmitri.

I don’t tell the guys that I once irritated my coach so much that he punched me in the face. Besides, that’s in the past. Now I video call with Oskar’s family every Sunday before their family dinner and after our family dinner.

I’m working at a university. Maybe I only graduated high school, but now I go to university every day. Next semester, if I’m still here, I’ll be able to take classes too. Maybe I’ll do business or sports management or history.

The future is amazing.

Since Oskar and I have been living together, Vince says he thinks he’ll be able to get me back into the US. After all that drama, he never suggested we go somewhere

together.

I can always play for the AHL somewhere, if no NHL team wants me. The Blizzards roster looks full, but you never know, and I do have a special in with the coach.

But honestly, I'm happy where I am. I like that my nights are now spent learning Swedish, and it's cute that Oskar is now the only one of us who speaks the language. I think it makes him more assertive, but that could be because he spends so much time with me. After Swedish lessons, I worship his body every night. After all, that man is a god. My cute, adorable Viking god, who changed my life so much for the better.

If he wants to return to the US, we will. But if not, I'll happily spend decades by his side here in Sweden.

I say a few more words of encouragement to the team, who all look at me with hero worship I probably don't deserve. But I had a great career in the US. I think some of them have a shot at playing for the NHL one day. They will after I'm through with them.

The team wobbles on skates and heads for the tunnel, and I take out my phone and text Oskar.

I grin at the slew of romantic emojis and GIFs we exchange, then I take my seat right off the ice.

I wave at Oskar in the crowd, then blow him a kiss. His face still pinkens, he sometimes still can't believe we're together, but I'm absolutely the lucky one.

The game begins. I lean forward, grinning.

Life is marvelous.

I hope you enjoyed spending time with Dmitri and Oskar. If you enjoyed the book, please consider leaving a review. The next book, Rule #4: Never Get Stranded with a Sports Reporter is available for preorder.