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THE  
LONG  
GAME

RACHEL REID



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This book is for the Shane and Ilya fans.  
Thanks for making this happen.

## *Chapter One*

### *July*

Shane had never wanted anything so badly in his life. His goal was right in front of him, and nothing would stop him from reaching it.

“You wish, Hollander,” called a hoarse voice behind him.

Shane felt like his chest was going to explode, but he huffed and pushed himself harder, refusing to give up. The pounding of sneakers on the trail and of Shane’s own heartbeat almost drowned out the laughter behind him. Shane tried to ignore it all as he focused on the trail exit just ahead.

Suddenly, Ilya was right beside him, drenched in sweat, T-shirt balled up in one fist. Ilya winked at him before speeding past him like a cartoon character. Shane grunted in frustration and tried to catch up, but Ilya’s long legs and seemingly super-human stamina were making it impossible.

Ilya reached the end of the trail first, arms raised in victory. Then he collapsed on a grassy patch at the edge of the small parking lot.

Shane stumbled over to him, gasping and swearing. He put his hands on his knees as he waited for breathing to stop being painful.

"Fuck," he wheezed, "you."

Ilya flopped onto his back, shaking with laughter. He mopped at his forehead with the damp shirt he was holding. "I almost let you win."

"Liar."

"The view was not bad. From behind. Almost worth staying there."

Shane didn't know how his boyfriend was able to speak in full sentences. "Shut up."

"I like those little shorts."

Shane laughed, but it sounded more like a steam engine puffing. "Thanks."

Ilya pulled himself up to rest on his elbows. He closed his eyes and tilted his head back, rolling it gently from side to side. His hair was soaked, curls sticking to his face and neck, and his chest glistened with sweat. The crucifix he always wore around his neck was resting on his shoulder.

Shane dropped to his knees beside him. "I hate that you can outrun me like that. It doesn't make sense."

Ilya opened one eye. "Maybe you should eat carbs."

"I eat *healthy* carbs."

"You eat nothing."

"You *smoke*."

"Almost never."

"You had a cigarette *last night*."

"How do you know?"

"I have a nose."

Ilya booped the tip of Shane's nose. "A cute one."

Shane tried to glare at him, but he couldn't keep it up. Not when Ilya was smiling at him like that. Instead, he gently adjusted Ilya's crucifix, moving it to rest in the middle of his chest.

"So you like the shorts, huh?" They were a shorter style than the basketball ones he usually wore to work out in. Something new Shane was trying. His hair was longer than it had ever

been too. He'd grown it out during the playoffs, and Ilya had protested when Shane had suggested it was time to get it cut. He'd let Shane shave his terrible, patchy excuse for a playoff beard, though.

Ilya traced the hem of one leg of the shorts where it was pulled tight against Shane's thigh. "I think your dick would rip right through these if you got hard."

Oh wow. Yikes. Shane glanced around. They were the only ones in the parking lot, which was secluded by thick trees on all sides, but they were still in public. "Let's not test that here."

Without warning, Ilya grabbed him and rolled them both until Shane was on his back, Ilya stretched out on top of him, grinning down at him.

Shane shoved at his sweaty chest. "You're disgusting."

"We are both disgusting." Ilya dipped his head and kissed him, quickly.

"Enough," Shane said, though he didn't sound like he meant it. "We should go home. Shower."

"Fine." Ilya sprang off of him, then offered a hand to help Shane up.

"You're just full of energy," Shane grumbled, taking his hand and allowing himself to be hauled up.

"I can think of ways to use it up," Ilya said.

God, Shane wished. "We have that call with Farah soon." He started walking toward the car.

Ilya sighed heavily behind him. "Why do we need this call?"

"Because she's our agent and it's her job to, like, check in on us."

Ilya had signed with Shane's agent last year, after parting ways with the Russian agent he'd had since he'd been a teenager. He'd wanted a Canadian agent, and Shane couldn't recommend Farah Jalali highly enough. On top of being a great agent, she'd been nothing but supportive when Shane had told her he was gay two years ago.

"We could tell her, maybe," Ilya said.

"Tell her what?"

"About us."

"What? Today? *Now*?" Despite the summer heat, and his blood still churned up from the run, Shane suddenly felt icy cold.

Ilya shrugged easily. "She probably knows already."

The panic alarm that lived inside Shane started blaring. "Why would she?"

"We are together at your cottage. You are gay. I am hot."

"It's a bit...soon. We should talk about it more. Figure out how to word it and—"

Ilya was gazing at him with a mixture of fondness and exasperation. "Is not complicated. And if she does not support us, then she should not be our agent."

Shane chewed his lip, considering the undeniable truth of that. "She'll support us."

"I know. So we tell her."

The shower they'd taken together had lasted longer than was strictly necessary. As a result, Shane was still struggling into his T-shirt when Farah's FaceTime request lit up his phone. Ilya was only wearing underwear.

"Should I answer?" Ilya asked, picking up Shane's phone from the dresser.

"No! Get dressed!" Shane snatched the phone and accepted Farah's request. Her face filled the screen, elegantly put together as always.

"Hi, guys," she said cheerfully. "Or, hi, Shane, anyway."

"Ilya's here. He's just..." Shane trailed off, momentarily distracted by Ilya's low-slung shorts and bare torso.

"Hi, Farah," Ilya called out.

Farah smiled, probably used to dealing with idiot hockey players by now. She was only about ten years older than Ilya and Shane, but seemed twice as mature as they'd ever be. "Hi, Ilya. Are you guys having a nice summer?"

"Great. Yeah," Shane said, probably a little too enthusiastically. He was nervous. And he'd just realized that they were doing this video call from his bedroom, which was probably a bit weird. He sat on the edge of his bed, holding the phone at eye level. "How's your summer going?"

"Busy."

Ilya joined Shane on the bed, still tugging his T-shirt into place. Farah glanced between them, probably noticing that they both had wet hair.

Fuck. This was ridiculous.

"Before we talk about...other stuff," Shane said. "We have something we want to tell you."

"I'm all ears."

Shane met Ilya's gaze. Ilya rested a hand on Shane's knee and squeezed.

"So," Shane said slowly, "you know that I'm gay."

"Of course. You told me."

"Yeah. So here's the thing..."

"I am bisexual," Ilya blurted out.

Farah's lips curved up. "I think I can see where this is going," she said calmly.

Well, now they knew how easy it would be for someone to put two and two together if they knew the truth about Ilya's sexuality.

"Yeah," Shane said. "I think you do."

"We are together," Ilya said, in case she didn't.

"Sorry," Shane said. "I know this is going to be complicated for you."

"Don't apologize. I love you guys, and I'm happy for you." She laughed. "Can't say I predicted this when I woke up this morning. May I ask how long you've been together?"

Shane and Ilya shared a smile, then Ilya said, "A long time. Years."

"So it isn't brand-new," Farah said, more to herself than to

them, Shane suspected. "Not to ask a stupid question, but it's serious?"

"Very," Ilya said. Shane's heart flipped the way it always did when Ilya made it clear how much Shane meant to him.

"Do you want to tell people?" Farah asked.

"No," Shane said quickly, at the same time Ilya said, "Not yet."

"We just wanted you to know," Shane clarified. "Not many people do, but we thought you should."

Farah nodded. "I'm on your side. So whatever you need from me, you've got it. There's no precedent for NHL rivals being romantically involved, obviously, so we're in uncharted waters here. Whatever happens, it definitely won't be boring!"

"I wouldn't mind boring," Shane mumbled.

"Shane loves boring," Ilya said.

Farah laughed. "Well, good, because I have a whole list of boring stuff to go over with both of you."

They talked about endorsement opportunities, about the scheduled air date for a documentary ESPN had made about their rivalry, about Shane's impending free agency at the end of this upcoming season, about the charity hockey camps that started next week. None of it, as far as Shane was concerned, was boring.

"I'm looking forward to seeing the documentary," Farah said. "Their Scott Hunter doc was fantastic."

"Did not see it," Ilya said flatly.

"I guess they didn't quite capture the *real* story about you guys, though."

No. Ilya and Shane had both been very careful not to give *that* away. Not that they'd had a lot of direct involvement in the documentary. They'd sat for separate interviews, and had endured a bit of the film crew following them around for a couple of days last season—again, separately—but as far as Shane knew the doc was mostly going to consist of existing game footage and interviews with other people.

As soon as their call with Farah ended, Ilya pinned Shane on the mattress, holding his wrists and kissing him breathless.

"That went okay," Shane said between kisses.

"Was great. I told you."

Shane loved Ilya so much it physically hurt to contain it some days. He didn't want to be a gay icon, or deal with any of the attention they would get from the hockey world—both good and bad—if they ever disclosed their relationship, but he wished he could love Ilya openly without dealing with any of that.

Maybe one day. After they were both retired. Shane knew some retired NHL stars and they'd been able to easily fade into the background if they'd wanted to. Sometimes even if they didn't want to. Eventually, the world just stopped caring about them.

At the moment, Shane and Ilya were both in their prime at twenty-nine years old. Shane had just led his team to his third Stanley Cup victory, and while Ilya was the captain of a much worse team, he was still putting up big numbers in Ottawa. They were both superstars, and they both had a lot of hockey left in them. Shane had every intention of playing another decade at least, and he expected Ilya to do the same.

Which meant another decade of hiding, probably. But Shane would do it. He would do anything for Ilya. He'd told him, once, that he was willing to play the long game when it came to their relationship and he'd meant it.

"Why are you getting sad?" Ilya asked.

Shane blinked at him. "Sorry. Nothing." He kissed him quickly. "I love you."

Ilya gave him one of his crooked, sexy smiles. "Of course. Why wouldn't you?"

## Chapter Two

Ilya was dreaming of his mother.

He knew, somehow, that he was dreaming, but his stomach still twisted with dread as he slowly crossed the familiar lawn behind Shane's cottage to where he could see a pale arm hanging limply from the hammock. The same way it had hung from her bed once, when he'd been twelve years old.

Then, in the dream, her hand moved. Her wrist twisted, and her fingers danced, as if she was moving them to music. Ilya smiled, and walked faster.

"Mom," he said when he reached her, in English, for some reason. Irina Rozanova smiled at him from her hammock—the one that he and Shane had installed together last summer—looking young and beautiful and perfectly relaxed. She didn't speak, only smiled and took his hand.

"Shane is in the house," Ilya told her. "I want you to meet him."

Her smile grew wider, but she stayed silent. Ilya looked toward the house, where he could see his boyfriend's silhouette in the kitchen window. Ilya waved to him, and Shane moved away from the window. Good. He would be here soon, then.

Ilya gazed at his mother while he waited, knowing that this

wouldn't last. He would wake up, she would disappear. But still he wanted her to meet Shane.

Shane was taking his fucking time. There was no sign of him when Ilya looked back at the house, and he began to panic.

Irina patted his hand. She was still smiling, but it looked pained. Her skin was tinged with gray.

"No," Ilya said. "Wait. He will be here."

An annoying bird started chirping loudly nearby, and Ilya gripped his mother's hand more tightly. "Just...wait. Don't go."

Everything dissolved. The bird turned into Ilya's alarm, and Ilya found himself in Shane's bed in Montreal.

He snarled at his phone as he turned off the alarm, then scrunched his eyes closed, trying to get the dream back.

It was gone.

He stretched out one hand, searching for Shane, but found his half of the bed empty. And cold.

Jesus, how long had Shane been awake?

It was the first day of that summer's charity hockey camps, so Ilya shouldn't be surprised Shane had gotten an early start. He supposed he should get out of bed and find him.

He rolled to his back and exhaled loudly, trying to release the vortex of feelings that the dreams always churned up inside him. The joy of seeing his mother again, the heartbreak of realizing it wasn't real, and the frustration of Shane not moving fast enough. Of not caring enough. It was this last emotion that Ilya needed to shake off most of all, because it was ridiculous. Shane cared. Shane cared enough that he'd suggested naming their charity after Ilya's mother.

He threw on a pair of sweatpants and headed to the kitchen. He found Shane sitting at the kitchen table, already wearing a camp-branded polo shirt, studying his laptop screen through his glasses.

"Good morning," Ilya said.

"Hey," Shane said without looking away from the screen.

"Just going over the medical forms for the kids. There are so many different things. A couple of the kids are allergic to eggs."

"Then we won't throw eggs at them."

"It's serious! What if something goes wrong?"

"Nothing did last year."

"I know, but it still could."

Ilya crossed the room and stopped directly behind him. He put his hands on Shane's shoulders and squeezed gently. "It will probably happen, someone getting sick or hurt. But it will be okay. Is hockey. And kids."

He combed his fingers through the long strands at the back of Shane's head. Ilya liked it long; he'd liked the way it matched Shane's transformation when they were alone together by the lake, relaxed and even a bit silly.

Shane rubbed his eyes under his glasses. "I don't want this week to be a disaster."

"You are worrying too much."

"Easy for you to say," Shane grumbled. "*Your* mom hasn't been texting all week with stressful details about this damn camp."

Ilya's hands dropped to his sides. "No," he said quietly. "She has not."

It was early, and Shane had probably barely slept and was tied into even more knots than usual, so Ilya decided to let the insensitive comment go. He knew Shane hadn't meant anything by it. Just like he knew he couldn't be mad at him for never rushing outside to meet Ilya's mother in his recurring dreams.

Instead, Ilya made coffee, because it seemed Shane hadn't done that yet.

"Where is Yuna?" Ilya asked, suddenly realizing she wasn't in the kitchen. She was staying with them for the week of the camp. Shane's dad, David, was back home in Ottawa, working.

Shane huffed. "She left for the rink like forty minutes ago."

As Ilya had gotten to know Shane's parents better, he'd been surprised to learn that Shane—the most determined over-

achiever Ilya had ever met—was the slacker in the family. "And how many times has she texted you since?"

"Too many. There's a local news crew coming this afternoon, I guess. It's French, so I'll talk to them."

"Okay."

"I know it's annoying to have them come on the first day, but..."

"Is fine."

Shane turned in his chair to face Ilya. "Do you think we're ready?"

"I don't know," Ilya said mildly. "We only have eight pro hockey players coaching this thing. Do you think that is enough to teach some kids how to play hockey?"

"I'm just..." Whatever Shane was going to say dissolved into a frustrated sigh.

Ilya grabbed the back of Shane's chair and pulled him away from the table and his laptop. He crouched in front of him, resting his folded arms on Shane's knees. "You are just being you."

Ilya was excited about the camps—he'd enjoyed them last year—but he didn't like how quickly Shane had reverted to his usual, uptight self. These weeks could have been spent at the cottage, laughing together in the kitchen, dunking each other underwater in the lake, and enjoying unhurried, indulgent sex in a place where they were safe and alone. Ilya could be sitting on the dock there right now, his feet dangling in the cool water with Shane's head in his lap.

But these camps were important to both of them. They would raise money for organizations and initiatives that helped people who struggled with mental illness. People who struggled the way Ilya's mother had struggled.

The worry didn't leave Shane's eyes, but his voice was soft when he said, "What if someone figures us out?"

"We are good at protecting this thing," Ilya said. "We have been doing it for years. And we did it last year."