

# Rhythm and the Blue Line Ch 36

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*On tour and in the playoffs.*

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Brody hung by the blue line, waiting for his defensemen to get to the puck out of the corner. Time slowed as players jabbed at the puck, trying to free it from under skates and sticks. After what seemed like forever, the puck dribbled free and Bax snagged it and started up the ice. Brody followed him and saw Tolya joining the rush. They crossed the red line and Bax dumped the puck down the ice. Brody put on a burst of speed and went after it, colliding with a Devil player along the boards. He grunted and jerked away, focused on getting the puck. Bax muscled his way into the scrum by the boards and Brody was glad for the help. Tolya waited near the goal line, ready to get to open space if he could. Brody gritted his teeth and took advantage of a Devil losing his footing to grab the puck and send it to his winger. Tolya backed up and skated behind the goal as his teammates got into position, Brody moving to the net and Bax going to the boards for the cycle. Brody planted himself in front of the crease, ignoring the player behind him who harassed him with cross-checks from behind. Tolya got the puck to Bax, who sent it to Mark up at the blue line. Mark played catch with his defense partner and ripped a shot on net when he got it back. The goalie blocked it but couldn't control the rebound and Brody jumped on it. He flipped a shot towards the net and there was chaos as everyone crowded the goal crease. He dug for the puck, desperate to get it in the net. The ref's whistle shrilled and Brody rounded on the Devil behind him; in short order he was joined by his teammates. There was a lot of pushing and shoving but no fights as the linesmen got everyone separated. He went back to the bench and grabbed a proffered drink, gulped it down and wiped his face with a towel. Whatever music they were playing seeped into his thoughts and he wondered how Ryan was doing. They'd talked or at least texted every day since she'd left. Despite that and how busy they both were, he missed her more than he expected he would. He shook his head; no time to think about that now. The Caps were protecting a one-goal lead in game four of the best-of-seven series and half the game remained. A win would put the Caps up three games to one and put the pressure on New Jersey to avoid elimination. Don't think so far ahead, he chastised himself; looking past the game at hand was a sure way to lose it. Two hours later, he was boarding the bus to go home, exchanging back slaps and high fives with his teammates. An empty-net goal had sealed the Caps' victory, giving them the chance to close out the series in two days at home. He was psyched and couldn't wait to call Ryan. He was about to dial her number when he realized he didn't know where she was. In the middle of a

show? About to go on stage? Traveling to the next gig? The hell with it, he thought, and dialed. If she was busy, she wouldn't answer. As he expected, he was shunted to her voice mail. "Hey, Ryan. It's me. We won tonight and, well, I just wanted to let you know. Call me later. I'll probably be up late." He disconnected and stared out the window, lost in thought. "What's the matter, Langer?" Bax dropped into the seat next to him. "You look like you forgot something." "What? No. Just zoned out for a second." Brody put his phone away. Bax settled back and closed his eyes. "God, it will be good to get back. I feel like I could sleep for a week." "Sucks to get old, huh?" Brody snickered. "You'll find out soon enough. You're what, almost twenty-seven? Athletes start slowing down as they approach thirty, you know." "Speaking from personal experience, right?" He laughed at Bax's glare. "Fuck you. Anyway, how's Ryan? Tell her thanks again for the songs. I sent them to my kids and they love them. They're hoping the band will play somewhere nearby." "I will. I guess she's doing okay. I left her a message but haven't talked to her for a day or so. This tour thing really keeps her on the move." "She enjoying it?" "Last I checked, yeah. She sounded a little overwhelmed, and said she panicked a little before the first show, but I think she'll be fine." He smiled. "I honestly can't picture her doing anything else." Bax laughed. "Listen to you. When did you turn into such a sap?" "You're jealous. I have the gorgeous rock star girlfriend, and you're just old." "Maybe, but I'm the one who told you that you were a goner over Ryan, and I was right. With age comes wisdom." Bax winced. "And sore knees." Brody could only nod in agreement on that point. Despite everyone's elation over the win, more than one Capital was nursing a few bruises. As always, defensive play picked up in the playoffs and Brody felt like he'd blocked more shots in the last few games than he had in the last month of the regular season. It'd be worth it to advance in the playoffs. Bax closed his eyes again and Brody relaxed into his seat as he stared out the window. There wasn't much to see at this hour, but in his experience it didn't matter whether it was daytime or not. The New Jersey Turnpike was one of the most god-awful boring roads he'd ever been on in his life. The scenery never seemed to change; it was like riding on the world's biggest treadmill. He wondered where Ryan was and how the tour was going. She'd told him she was over her stage fright, but he suspected she was just ignoring it and the thought made him smile. People didn't call her the "fearless leader" for nothing, but he knew she had her anxieties. He imagined that it wasn't too different from when he'd started in the NHL. He remembered how excited and nervous he'd been as he'd at last put on the sweater for an NHL team, and it was hard to say now which emotion had been stronger. All he could recall now was the feeling that he'd had to succeed, had to bring his play up so that he could stay at this level. Going back to his minor league team would feel like failure. Somehow, he'd done it. He was willing to bet that Ryan felt that way. Going back to the 9:30 Club wouldn't be an awful thing, but he knew she wanted more and he hoped she got it. It was going on two a.m. when he let himself into his apartment. The euphoria of winning the game had faded in the last hour and all he wanted was to flop into bed. He rubbed a hand over his face as he headed back to his bedroom, disappointed that Ryan hadn't called. Just as he finished brushing his teeth, the phone rang. "Hello." "Hi, Brody, it's me. I'm sorry, did I wake you?" "Hey, Ryan. No, I'm still up. Just getting ready for bed." "I won't keep you, then. I got your message and wanted to call back. I know it's late, but you said you'd be up, so I thought I'd try." She sounded tense and he

had to laugh. "You okay?" "Yeah, I'm fine. I mean, I am a little wired but I think it's just the weird hours catching up with me." She paused and he heard her take a deep breath. "Okay, that's better. How's everything?" "Great." He sat on the bed and kicked off his shoes before lying back with a groan. "We won." "I know! I'm so glad. I didn't get to see anything but Nate keeps me updated. He's always shoving the box scores in my face. Wow, one more and you take the series. That's great." Brody chuckled at the image she'd put in his head. "Yeah, one more. I'm not trying to look too far ahead but I've got a good feeling about this." "You guys can do it." "Thanks. The next game is day after tomorrow, if you get a chance to watch." "I'll try, I will, but I don't know. This has just been so crazy. I mean, we've been doing some promotional stuff in addition to the shows and with all the driving, sometimes I don't even know where I am." "Do you know where you are now?" "Yeah, I'm in the lobby of a Motel 6, I think." "You think? And why aren't you in a room?" "All these places look alike. Lara's in the room talking to Trout and I didn't feel like talking to you in the bathroom. First rule of touring: there is almost no privacy." "Pity. I was hoping one night we might work in a little phone sex." "Brody!" He couldn't hold back a laugh as he imagined her going red in the face. "What?" "Jesus! I'm not going to do that! Not in a hotel lobby!" "Why not? How many other people are there at this hour? Who'd even notice?" "I don't care!" "Okay, well, then next time you switch and Lara talks in the lobby. Then you'll be in the room, alone, and we can talk about . . . oh, I know, that little sound you make when I—" "Knock it off, Brody." "Why? No one's here. I'm all alone and—" "You may be but I'm not! Good God!" He cracked up. "Relax, Ryan," he said when he could talk again. "I'm kidding. God, I thought all you musicians were supposed to be depraved and into all kinds of sexual things." "Yeah, well, think again." She huffed out a breath. "Keep that up and you won't get any sex at all when I get back." "How about if I let you spank me as punishment?" "What the hell is wrong with you?" Ryan tried to sound angry but she was laughing, too. "Nothing, nothing. I just miss you, that's all." She sighed. "I miss you, too. I'm having fun, but I miss you." "How are you doing, seriously? Over the stage fright?" "Pretty much. Oh, Brody, I really can't tell you—this is so great. I mean, even the being nervous part is okay because we get to do this. We're jelling, I guess, more than we ever have before. Lara's writing songs, I have ideas for the music, Nate and Mitch are just terrific. It's—I don't know—it's just amazing. And when we go out there, it almost doesn't matter if the audience likes us." She laughed. "But so far, they do." He smiled at how happy she sounded. "Of course they do. What's not to like?" "Thanks." "So, where are you?" "We are in Scranton, PA, and after that we go into New York. Then Connecticut." "Are you eating?" "Not right now. It's too late." "Ryan." She snickered. "Yes, I eat. I promise. The others make me. Did you bribe them or something? I swear I can't go an hour without one of them asking if I ate or pushing food at me." "Lara and I may have had a talk at some point. Other than that, I did nothing." "I knew it. It's a conspiracy." "Yes. It's a conspiracy to make sure you don't faint from hunger in the middle of a set." "You and Lara make a great mom, you know that?" "Speaking of which, any word from your family?" He couldn't help it; he kept hoping that someone, perhaps Ryan's mom, would realize that supporting Ryan was better than losing her. He knew it was unlikely, especially after the fight Ryan had had with Jim, but he still had a hard time accepting that her family would just turn her out. "I talked to Evan the other day. He's moving into a group house as

soon as his finals are done. He tried talking to Dad, but there's just no middle ground." "I'm sorry. He'll be fine, though. He's got a sister to look up to for an example, after all." "Thanks, Brody. I feel bad, but there's not much I can do about it. Dad may come around for Evan after a while." "I hope so. Listen, you should get some sleep." "You should, too. You must be beat after the game. Hey, you didn't get hurt, did you?" "A few bruises, but no worse than anyone else and nothing some sleep won't cure." "All right." She paused. "I do worry about you, you know. I may not be the biggest sports fan but I know about the risks." "You're just a big softie, aren't you?" She laughed. "Yeah, but don't let it get around." "Okay. Take it easy, rock star. Get some sleep." "You, too." "Night, Ryan." "Night." He snapped the phone shut and stared at the ceiling. He was glad to talk to her, but sometimes all the phone calls did was remind him that she was a few hundred miles away. With a grunt, he sat up and stripped out of the rest of his clothes, then lay back down and turned out the light. A few hundred miles away was not as good as next to him.