

## Next Best Thing

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| Rating:          | <a href="#">Teen And Up Audiences</a>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
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| Relationship:    | <a href="#">Shane Hollander/Ilya Rozanov</a>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
| Characters:      | <a href="#">Shane Hollander</a> , <a href="#">Ilya Rozanov</a> , <a href="#">ilya Rozanov's niece</a> , <a href="#">Svetlana Vetrova</a> , <a href="#">Rose Landry</a> , <a href="#">Hayden Pike</a>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
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# Next Best Thing

by [peiceabread](#)

## Summary

When a devastating call from Moscow interrupts a routine practice, Ilya Rozanov's world tilts on its axis. His brother is dead, and his ten-year-old niece, Sofia, is left alone with nobody by her side

Ilya knows he is the only one who can save her from the state system, but the Russian Federation doesn't recognize his marriage—in fact, it disqualifies him.

-Completed-

Please note I didn't have a beta reader and my English is not the best

I PROMISE THEY DONT BREAK UP THEY JUST GET DIVORCED BC FUCK RUSSIA

## Notes

I have made a discord server as a way to talk to more people from the fandom, along with that beta reader applications can be found in the announcements chat if you are interested - <https://discord.gg/e3SvBaeSZp>

database of all my fics - [https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1K05xfC0cJCv7ujHKqze\\_KhG5l0KMbPKriZjNNvM4EWI/edit?usp=sharing](https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1K05xfC0cJCv7ujHKqze_KhG5l0KMbPKriZjNNvM4EWI/edit?usp=sharing)

THIS FIC IS SET AFTER LONG GAME BECAUSE OF THAT THIS MAY CONTAIN SPOILERS IF YOU HAVE NOT YET READ IT PLEASE KEEP THIS IN MIND

Thank you for all the support on my other fics in this fandom I have been writing non stop since the show started and I am finally posting, this fic I started when the first episode aired and I am 2/3s of the way complete,

The amount of comments and kudos and bookmarks has been overwhelming and so amazing and is keeping me motivated to post my work,

I don't have a beta reader so I am relying on myself to notice any grammatical errors and English is my second language and I doubt you wanna read a fic in Spanish so sorry for any mistakes.

Along with this feel free to comment any suggestions, I have almost finished this fic but I am not against suggestions for another fic oneshots or a subplot that can be easily added

for those who haven't read long game and are still gonna read this because who cares bout spoilers there are a few key things to nore

- They are married
- They both play for Ottawa
- They have a dog (Any)

# Chapter 1

The air inside the practice rink was crisp, smelling of shaved ice and rubber mats—the smell of home. Or, at least, Ilya Rozanov's second home.

He dug his edges into the ice, spraying snow as he came to a sharp halt near the bench. As the captain of the Ottawa Centaurs, he usually ran a tight ship during practice, but today the vibe was loose, energetic. They were on a winning streak.

Ilya reached for his water bottle on the ledge of the boards. Next to it, his phone buzzed against the hard plastic. He frowned. Usually, phones stayed in the locker room, but he was expecting a call from his interior designer about the renovations on the kitchen he and Shane were obsessing over.

He flipped the screen over.

**Incoming Call: Alexei.**

The air in Ilya's lungs seemed to freeze, colder than the rink.

He stared at the Cyrillic letters. He hadn't spoken to his brother in months. Their last conversation had been a request for money, followed by a slur when Ilya had refused.

The phone kept vibrating. Buzz. Buzz. Buzz.

"Everything good, Cap?"

Ilya looked up. Shane Hollander—his husband, his Assistant Captain, and the only person who could read Ilya's micro-expressions from across an arena—was gliding over. Shane's helmet was tilted back, sweat dampening his dark hair.

Ilya flipped the phone face down, silencing it. "Fine. Just spam," Ilya lied, though the tightness in his jaw gave him away. "Let's run the power play drill again. Second line looks lazy."

Shane studied him for a second too long, his brown eyes narrowing slightly, but he nodded. "You got it."

Ilya skated back toward center ice, barking orders, but the buzzing phantom of the phone seemed to burn against his skin even from twenty feet away.

Forty minutes later, practice was dismissed. The locker room was a cacophony of laughter, tape ripping, and showers running.

Ilya sat on the bench in front of his stall, still fully dressed in his gear—shoulder pads, shin guards, skates still laced tight. He picked up his phone.

The screen was full.

## **20 Missed Calls: Alexei. 1 Missed Call: Svetlana.**

Ilya's stomach dropped through the floor. Alexei calling twenty times was harassment. Svetlana calling? That was a catastrophe. She was his oldest friend back home, the one person from his past—aside from his family—who he still trusted implicitly. She had transitioned from being a casual hookup years ago to his fiercest ally, the only one in St. Petersburg who genuinely supported his life with Shane.

She knew better than to blow up his phone during practice unless the world was ending.

"I need a minute," Ilya muttered.

Shane was two stalls down, pulling his jersey over his head. He paused, his torso bare and pale under the harsh lights. "Ilya?"

"Just... I have to take this."

Ilya stood up on his skates, wobbling slightly on the rubber matting, and clomped out of the main locker room area into the quieter hallway near the equipment room.

His heart was hammering a rhythm against his ribs that had nothing to do with hockey. He tapped her name.

She answered on the first ring.

"Ilya?"

Her voice was high, thin, and terrified. Svetlana was the toughest woman he knew; hearing her sound like this made his blood run cold. The conversation was entirely in Russian, the vowels sharp and familiar.

"Sveta," Ilya said, pressing the phone hard against his ear. "I saw the calls. I was at practice. What is going on? Why was Alexei calling me twenty times?"

"He wasn't," Svetlana sobbed. A jagged, wet sound. "I was calling from his phone. I didn't know how else to get you. You answer his number faster than mine sometimes because you think he is in trouble."

Ilya leaned against the concrete block wall, the cold seeping into his shoulder pads. "Calm down. I can't understand you. Why do you have his phone?"

"He's gone, Ilya. He's gone."

The world tilted. "Who is gone? Did he leave town again?"

"No," she wailed, the sound breaking into a cough. "He is dead. Alexei is dead."

Ilya stopped breathing. He stared at a scuff mark on the opposite wall. *Dead*. The word didn't make sense. Alexei was trouble. Alexei was chaos. But Alexei was his big brother. He was supposed to be the one who survived everything out of spite.

"How?" Ilya's voice was a rasp.

"Overdose," she whispered. "Heroin. Maybe Fentanyl. The police don't know yet."

Ilya closed his eyes. He felt a wave of nausea. He had expected this news for ten years, but that didn't make the punch land any softer.

"And..." Svetlana was hyperventilating now. "Ilya, it is Sofia. Oh my God, my poor Sofia."

Ilya's eyes snapped open. His niece. His brother's ten-year-old daughter. "What about her? Is she okay?"

"I am at the hospital with her now. The doctors are checking her for dehydration."

"Dehydration? What are you saying?"

"Alexei's wife... she left a year ago. You knew that. It was just Alexei and Sofia in that apartment." Svetlana's voice dropped to a horrifying whisper. "Ilya... the coroner thinks Alexei died on Tuesday."

Ilya did the math. "It's Monday."

"She was alone," Svetlana cried. "She was alone in that house with him for six days. He was on the bathroom floor and she... she didn't know what to do. She ate what was in the fridge. When the food ran out, she finally went to the neighbors. They called the police, and the police called me because I am listed as the emergency contact."

Ilya felt the bile rise in his throat. He slid down the wall until he was crouching in his skates, his heavy hockey pants bunching up.

Six days. A ten-year-old girl. Alone with her father's corpse.

Tears, hot and stinging, blurred his vision. He gripped the phone so hard he thought the screen might crack.

"Is she... did she see him?"

"Yes. She tried to wake him up."

Ilya let out a choked sound, a half-sob. He covered his face with his free hand, his glove still on, the leather rough against his skin.

"Listen to me," Ilya said, his voice shaking violently. "You stay with her. Do not leave her side. Do you understand me? You make sure the doctors give her whatever she needs."

"I don't know what to do. I can't handle this alone. I love her, but I am just... I am not family. You are her family."

"I'm going to call you back," Ilya said. "I need... I need to figure this out. I'll call you back in five minutes. Just watch Sofia."

"Ilya—"

He hung up.

He couldn't breathe. The hallway felt too small. The chest protector felt like a vice crushing his ribs. He clawed at the collar of his jersey, trying to get air.

"Ilya?"

The door to the locker room clicked shut.

Shane was there. He was wearing his track pants and a hoodie now, hair wet and messy. He took one look at Ilya—crouched on the floor in full gear, shaking, tears tracking through the sweat on his face—and he was moving.

"Hey, hey," Shane dropped to his knees, disregarding the dirty rubber floor. His hands found Ilya's face, framing it. "Ilya, look at me. Breathe."

Ilya gasped, looking into Shane's steady, warm eyes. The anchor in the storm.

"He's dead," Ilya choked out, switching to English. "Alexei."

Shane's face fell, sorrow washing over his features. He didn't say *I'm sorry*. He just pulled Ilya forward, wrapping his arms around Ilya's bulky shoulder pads, pressing his face into Ilya's neck.

"I've got you," Shane murmured into his skin.

"It's not just that," Ilya whispered, his voice trembling. He pulled back so he could see Shane. "Shane, his daughter. Sofia. She's ten."

"I remember," Shane said softly.

"She found him. She was... she was alone in the apartment with the body for a week. No one checked on them. Her mother is gone. God, Shane, she was alone for a week."

Shane looked horrified. His grip on Ilya's shoulders tightened. "Oh my god."

"She's at the hospital. Svetlana is there with her, but she's... she's a mess. She's helping, but she's not her mother. She can't take care of a traumatized child alone." Ilya wiped his nose on his sleeve. "I love her, Shane. I met her when she was a baby, and she was so sweet, and now..."

Ilya looked at his husband, panic rising in his chest. "I don't know what to do. She has no one. I'm her uncle. I'm supposed to... but we're here, and hockey, and..."

"Ilya." Shane's voice was firm. It cut through the spiral.

Shane reached down and started unlacing Ilya's skates. His movements were efficient, calm.

"We aren't solving this in the hallway of the practice rink," Shane said, pulling the laces loose. "We are going to go inside. You are going to take a shower. I'm going to pack your bag."

"Shane, I can't—"

"Yes, you can." Shane pulled one skate off, then the other. He looked up, his expression fiercely determined. "We're going to go home. We'll hug the dog. We'll sit on the couch. And we will figure out how to get Sofia safe. Okay?"

Ilya stared at him. He felt like he was shattering, but Shane was holding the pieces together.

"Okay," Ilya whispered.

Shane stood up and offered his hand. "Come on, Ilya. Let's go home."

Ilya took his hand.

The drive home was silent. Not the comfortable silence that usually filled their car after a long day, but a heavy, suffocating quiet. Ilya stared out the window at the passing snowbanks of Ottawa, his hand gripping the door handle white-knuckled.

When they unlocked the front door of their townhouse, the sound of claws on hardwood broke the tension. Anya, their rescue husky-mix, came skidding around the corner, tail wagging furiously, letting out happy little *woofs*.

Usually, Ilya would drop to his knees and wrestle with her, cooing at her in Russian. Today, he just sank onto the gray sectional sofa, still wearing his team track jacket. Anya, sensing the shift in energy, didn't jump. She trotted over and rested her heavy head on his knee, whining softly. Ilya buried his hand in her fur, his shoulders slumping as if the strings holding him up had finally been cut.

Shane watched them for a moment, his heart aching. He hated seeing Ilya like this—dimmed, defeated. He needed to be useful. He needed facts.

"I'm going to call Svetlana back," Shane said gently. "I need to understand what we're dealing with."

Ilya didn't look up, just nodded, his fingers stroking Anya's ears rhythmically. "Okay."

Shane walked into the kitchen to give Ilya some space, though he kept a clear line of sight to the living room. He dialed the number from Ilya's recent calls.

"Ilya?" Svetlana answered immediately, her voice still thick with tears.

"It's Shane," he said. "Ilya is... he's safe. He's with the dog. But he can't talk right now."

"Oh, Shane." Svetlana let out a ragged breath. "Thank God you are there. I didn't know if he would even make it home without crashing the car."

"He's okay. But I need you to tell me exactly what's happening with Sofia," Shane said, keeping his voice low and steady. "Where does she go from the hospital? Who makes the decisions?"

"That is the problem," Svetlana said, her English heavily accented but clear enough. "The police asking about next of kin. Alexei... he never wrote anything down. No will. No guardian appointed."

"Okay," Shane said, leaning against the quartz countertop. "But Ilya is his brother. He's the closest blood relative."

"Yes. But Shane... you know how it is here."

Shane went still. "What do you mean?"

"The authorities, they will look for family first. But when they see Ilya is in Canada... and when they see who he is married to..." She trailed off, the implication hanging heavy in the air.

"Because we're married," Shane said flatly.

"Yes. You know the laws. Adoption, guardianship... for same-sex couples, it is impossible here. Foreign adoption is already hard, but for a gay couple? It is illegal. They will not see you as fit parents. They will see you as a danger to her 'traditional values'."

Shane looked through the open archway. Ilya was curled sideways on the couch now, his face pressed into Anya's flank. The dog hadn't moved. The domestic safety of their Ottawa home suddenly felt very far away from the cold reality of St. Petersburg bureaucracy.

"So what happens?" Shane asked, a cold knot forming in his stomach. "If they don't give her to us?"

"The state," Svetlana whispered. "Or they find distant cousin. Or foster care. The system... it is not good, Shane. Especially for a girl who has been through what she has."

Shane gripped the phone tight. "No. That's not happening. She's not going into the system."

"I am trying," Svetlana promised. "I am telling the doctors I am close family friend. I am staying with her tonight. But social services will come in the morning."

"You stay with her," Shane commanded, "Do not let them take her somewhere you don't know. We will... we'll figure out the legal side. We have money. We have lawyers. Just keep her safe for now."

"I will. I promise, Shane. I love her too."

"I know. Thank you, Sveta. Really."

"Take care of Ilya," she said softly before the line clicked dead.

Shane lowered the phone. He took a deep breath, staring at the kitchen cabinets, then looked back at his husband. Ilya hadn't moved. The fight ahead of them wasn't just about grief anymore; it was going to be a war against a government that didn't believe they should exist.

But looking at Ilya, broken and clinging to their dog, Shane knew one thing for certain: they weren't losing that little girl.

Shane moved straight to the dining table, opening his laptop before he even sat down. He dialed their lawyer, Diane, putting her on speakerphone as he started typing furiously into a search engine.

"Diane, it's Shane. We have an emergency."

He explained the situation rapidly—the death, the child alone, the lack of a will, the jurisdiction.

"Okay," Diane's professional voice came through, calm and measured. "First step, we need to know if Alexei had *any* legal documentation regarding guardianship. Shane, ask Ilya if there was ever a godfather appointed, or a notarized letter. Anything."

Shane looked over at the couch. "Ilya?"

Ilya didn't move. He was staring at the blank television screen, his hand idly tangled in Anya's ruff. It was like the lights were on, but nobody was home.

"Ilya, babe," Shane tried again, softer this time. "Diane needs to know if Alexei ever wrote anything down. About Sofia. About who should take her if something happened."

Ilya blinked, slow and heavy, like a lizard in the sun. "Alexei didn't plan for tomorrow," he murmured, his voice hollow. "He definitely didn't plan for death."

"Are you sure?" Shane pressed, desperation seeping into his tone. "Maybe a conversation? An email?"

Ilya just shook his head, a microscopic movement, and went back to staring at nothing.

Shane felt a surge of helplessness. He wanted to go over there, pull Ilya into his arms, kiss his forehead, and promise him that Sofia was going to be sleeping in their guest room by the end of the week. But he couldn't. He couldn't lie to him.

"He says no," Shane told Diane, rubbing his temples.

"Alright," Diane said, the sound of typing clicking in the background. "I'm going to reach out to a firm in Moscow that specializes in international family law. But Shane... prepare yourself. The current climate over there regarding LGBTQ+ rights and adoption... it's hostile. Extremely hostile."

"Just find a way, Diane. Cost doesn't matter."

He hung up and dove into the internet.

Hours bled into one another. The sky outside the window turned from gray to pitch black. Ilya eventually fell asleep on the couch, exhausted by grief, his breathing hitching every so often in a dry sob. Shane covered him with the throw blanket, kissed his temple, and went back to the laptop.

By 4:00 AM, Shane's eyes were burning. The blue light of the screen illuminated a landscape of legal despair.

Every tab he opened was a dead end. *Article 127 of the Family Code of the Russian Federation: Adoption is not permitted by persons of the same sex... Ban on adoption to citizens of countries where same-sex marriage is legal...*

It was a fortress designed specifically to keep people like them out. To keep people like Ilya—successful, loving, stable—from saving his own flesh and blood because he loved a man.

Shane slammed the laptop shut, the sound echoing in the silent house. He scrubbed his hands over his face, feeling the stubble on his chin, a headache pounding behind his eyes.

"You won't find it."

Shane jumped. Ilya was watching him from the couch. His eyes were red-rimmed, dark circles bruising the skin beneath them. He looked older. He looked defeated.

"I'm just looking for precedents," Shane said, his voice raspy from disuse. "There has to be a loophole. A special visa. A medical exemption."

"There is no loophole, Shane," Ilya said quietly. He sat up, pushing the blanket aside. Anya shifted, resting her chin on his thigh again. "It is Russia. They do not care that I am rich. They do not care that I am famous. They care that I am a 'pervert' in their eyes."

"Don't say that."

"It is true," Ilya said, his voice devoid of emotion. "Sofia is stuck. She is going to go into the system. She will go to an orphanage, or maybe some distant cousin who only wants the state stipend will take her. That is the reality."

"I am not accepting that," Shane snapped, standing up. The exhaustion made his temper short. "I am not leaving your ten-year-old niece in an orphanage, Ilya."

"What can we do?" Ilya asked, spreading his hands. It wasn't a challenge; it was a surrender. A heartbreaking, total surrender. "We can't walk in there and take her. They will arrest us before they let us leave with her."

Shane looked at his husband—the strongest man he knew, the man who had played through broken bones and media storms—crumpling under the weight of a system that hated him. Ilya had given up because he had to, to protect his own heart from breaking further.

But Shane didn't have to protect his heart. His heart was already in the fight.

"You're right," Shane said, walking over to the couch and kneeling in front of Ilya, grabbing his hands. "We can't just walk in. So we find another way. We bribe someone. We hire a surrogate guardian. We appeal to the damn Canadian embassy. I don't care."

Ilya looked at him, tears welling up again. "Shane..."

"No," Shane said fiercely, squeezing Ilya's hands. "You want her here, don't you? You want to give her the life she deserves. The best life."

"More than anything," Ilya whispered, a tear escaping. "I promised her when she was born."

"Then we are getting her," Shane vowed, his eyes burning with a dark, dangerous determination. "The system doesn't care about her? Fine. Then I don't care about the system's rules. We are getting her out, Ilya. Whatever it takes."

## Chapter 2

### Chapter Notes

I would like to formally apologise for the next 6 chapters

The next morning, the ice at the Centaurs' practice facility felt less like a second home and more like a prison of glare and noise. Ilya moved through the drills with lead in his veins. His legs, usually explosive and precise, felt heavy, his reaction times dull. Shane wasn't faring much better; he missed a pass he could usually catch in his sleep and nearly collided with a rookie during a scrimmage.

They looked exactly like two men who had spent the night staring at legal statutes and crying quietly in the dark.

As they coasted toward the bench for a water break, Fabian, one of the younger defensemen, grinned, nudging Ilya's shin pad with his stick. "Rough night, Cap? You and Hollander keep the neighbors up or what?"

The locker room banter usually rolled off Ilya. Today, it felt like a slap.

Ilya whipped his head around, his eyes cold and dead. "Shut the fuck up, Fabian."

The silence that fell over the bench was instant and suffocating. Fabian's smile vanished, replaced by genuine alarm. Ilya didn't apologize. He just ripped his helmet off, threw it onto the bench, and skated away to the far end of the ice.

Practice didn't get better. By the time the whistle blew, the air was thick with tension.

"Rozanov. Hollander. My office. Now." Coach's voice boomed across the empty rink.

They walked in still in their gear, skates clacking on the rubber floor. Coach stood behind his desk, arms crossed, looking between them.

"I don't know what is going on at home," Coach said, his voice low but hard. "And frankly, I don't usually ask. But you two? You look like zombies out there. We fly to Winnipeg in four hours. We have a game tomorrow night."

"We know, Coach," Shane said, his voice rasping.

"Do you?" Coach raised an eyebrow. "Because today was embarrassing. Fix it. Whatever it is—fix it, bury it, or leave it in Ottawa. I need my Captain and my A-Captain in Winnipeg, not their ghosts. Get your shit together."

"Yes, Coach," Ilya muttered, staring at the floor.

They showered in silence, the hot water doing nothing to thaw the ice in Ilya's chest. They drove home to grab their bags, the dread of the upcoming road trip mixing with the terror of leaving the situation unresolved.

As Ilya was zipping up his suit bag, his phone rang. Svetlana.

He answered immediately, putting it on speaker so Shane could hear.

"Sveta?"

"They are here, Ilya," Svetlana said, her voice trembling. "Social services. They are at the hospital. They are saying... they are saying they have to take her to a state facility. A transit center for now, then an orphanage."

Ilya's knees gave out. He sat heavily on the edge of the bed. "No. No, they can't."

"They say there is no legal guardian," Svetlana was crying now. "I am trying to stall them, but I have no rights, Ilya."

"Sveta, listen to me," Ilya begged, his voice cracking. He gripped the phone with shaking hands. "You take her. You have to take her."

"Ilya, I can't—"

"Please!" Ilya shouted, desperation tearing out of his throat. "If she goes into the system, she is gone. I will never see her again. They will lose her paperwork, they will move her... please. Tell them you are her godmother. Tell them you are a cousin. I don't care. Just sign the papers. Be her guardian."

There was a silence on the line, heavy and terrifying.

"Ilya... I am a single woman in a small apartment. I work two jobs. Fuck my dad stoped paying for my shit when you got married and I didn't loose contact,"

"I will pay for everything," Ilya promised fast and hard. "I will send you money for a bigger apartment, a nanny, food, clothes—anything. You won't spend a Pennie. Just... please, Keep her safe. Keep her out of that place."

He heard her take a shaky breath. "Okay. Okay. I will try. I will tell them I am taking emergency custody."

"Thank you," Ilya sobbed, pressing his forehead into his hand. "Thank you."

"But Ilya... this is temporary," she warned, her voice steeling. "You have to get her out. I cannot be her mother forever. She needs you."

"We are working on it," Shane said, leaning in close to the phone. "We won't stop until she's here."

The team plane was a hum of low conversation and the whirl of engines at thirty thousand feet. Most of the guys were playing cards or watching movies. The lights were dimmed for the evening flight to Manitoba.

In the back, in their usual row, it was quiet. Shane had passed out twenty minutes after takeoff, sheer emotional exhaustion claiming him. He was slumped against Ilya's side, his head resting heavy and warm on Ilya's shoulder, his mouth slightly open.

Ilya didn't move. He sat rigid, his laptop open on the tray table, the screen's glow illuminating his tired face.

He was cycling through emails with Diane, their lawyer. The thread was a depressing list of 'No', 'Not possible', and 'High risk'.

*Russian Federation prohibits adoption by citizens of countries that allow same-sex marriage... Single parent adoption scrutinized if suspect of homosexuality...*

Ilya rubbed his eyes. He looked down at Shane, watching the gentle rise and fall of his chest. He brushed a stray hair off Shane's forehead. He wanted this life for Sofia. He wanted her to know what it was like to be safe, to be loved by people who didn't leave.

A new email pinged into his inbox. It was Diane.

**Subject: Potential Avenue - Citizenship Act**

Ilya clicked it open, his heart rate spiking.

*Ilya,*

*I've been digging through the Canadian Citizenship Act and cross-referencing with Russian exit protocols. We might have found a needle in the haystack.*

*It's a long shot, but does Sofia have any other biological family? Specifically, anyone with Canadian citizenship?*

*There is a provision for "Citizenship by Descent" or family reunification that bypasses the standard international adoption bans if the child has a direct claim to Canadian citizenship through a biological parent or grandparent. Or, in rare cases, if a direct relative with Canadian citizenship can prove they are the sole remaining family, we might be able to petition for a special grant of citizenship.*

*If she doesn't, we are looking at a much harder road. But if there is any link—even a tenuous one—we might be able to claim her as a Canadian citizen stuck abroad, rather than a Russian citizen being adopted out. It changes the jurisdiction.*

*Call me when you land.*

Ilya stared at the screen. A Canadian citizen family member.

Alexei had never left Russia. His wife was Russian. Their parents were Russian.

But Ilya...

Ilya had been in North America since he was eighteen. And three years ago, after he and Shane got married, he had finally applied for his Canadian citizenship.

He was a Canadian citizen.

He typed back furiously, his fingers flying over the keys.

*I am a citizen. I have been for three years. But I got it through marriage to Shane. Does that matter? Does the Russian government see that on my file?*

He hit send, his heart hammering against his ribs. He looked down at Shane, whose breathing was soft and rhythmic against his neck.

Five minutes later, the wifi icon spun, and a new email appeared. The subject line was blank.

*Ilya,*

*This is the most unprofessional email I have ever sent. If anyone asks, I never wrote this.*

*Your citizenship is secure. You have it based on residency, time in the country, and your employment status. The 'marriage' box on the application is just a detail now.*

*However, the Russian Federation's main objection to you is your marriage to a man. That is the barrier.*

*If you and Shane divorce, legally, you become a single man with Canadian citizenship, a high income, and a direct blood relation to the child. We wouldn't have to tell the Russian government about your relationship. To them, you would just be a bachelor uncle stepping up.*

*You can bring Sofia to Canada as a single adopter. It will take about a year for her full adoption and citizenship to go through.*

*Once she is a Canadian citizen, you can marry Shane again.*

*It is extreme. But it is the only loophole I can find.*

*- Diane*

Ilya read the words three times. *Divorce.*

He stared at the email, the white text glowing in the dim cabin. Then he looked down. Shane was sleeping soundly on his chest, one hand loosely gripping Ilya's shirt, totally unaware that to save their family, they might have to destroy the legal proof of it.

The landing gear deployed with a mechanical groan that vibrated through the floorboards. The sudden shift in cabin pressure popped Ilya's ears, snapping him out of his trance. He closed the laptop with a soft click, his hand trembling slightly.

"Shane," Ilya whispered, nudging the shoulder pressing into his chest. "Shane, baby. We're landing."

Shane didn't stir. Usually, Shane was a nervous flyer, twitchy and unable to sleep without medication, but the emotional toll of the last twenty-four hours had buried him under a layer of exhaustion so deep it looked like a coma.

Ilya shook him harder. "Shane. Wake up."

Shane groaned, his face scrunching up as he peeled his eyes open. He blinked blearily at Ilya, a crease from Ilya's shirt button impressed into his cheek. "We there?"

"Winnipeg," Ilya said, his voice tight. "Put your seatbelt on."

The bus ride to the hotel was a blur of streetlights and snow. The silence in the back of the bus was heavy. Ilya stared out the window, his mind replaying Diane's words: *If you and Shane divorce...*

Shane was slumped against the window, staring at nothing, his hand resting on Ilya's thigh in the dark. The warmth of his palm felt like a brand. Ilya wanted to cover it with his own, but he couldn't move. He felt like he was holding a grenade with the pin pulled.

They got their room keys from the team coordinator in the lobby. Room 312 for Ilya. Room 314 for Shane. It was a formality they had maintained for years, a relic from before they were out, and then just a habit to give them 'space' that they never actually used. Everyone knew. The rookies, the vets, the coaches—everyone knew that room 314 would remain untouched and that Shane's bag would end up next to Ilya's in 312.

They rode the elevator in silence, shoulder to shoulder.

As soon as the heavy door to Room 312 clicked shut and the latch engaged, the silence broke.

Shane dropped his duffel bag on the floor and sighed, rubbing the back of his neck. "I'm going to order room service. I don't care what the nutrition plan says, I need a burger. You want—"

"I want a divorce."

The words hung in the air, sharper and colder than the Winnipeg wind outside.

Shane froze. His hand was still on the menu on the desk. He turned around slowly, his face blank with confusion. "What?"

Ilya stood by the door, his coat still on, his hands clenched into fists at his sides. "I want a divorce, Shane."

Shane's expression fractured. He looked like he'd been punched in the gut. "What the fuck, Ilya? Is this... is this a joke? Because it's not funny. We are in the middle of a crisis, and you decide now is the time to—what? Panic? Push me away?"

"No," Ilya said, his voice cracking. He stepped forward, desperate, his eyes filling with tears. "No, Shane. I love you. I love you more than anything. You are my life."

"Then why the hell are you asking for a divorce five minutes after we land?" Shane shouted, fear spiking in his voice.

"Because it is the only way!" Ilya yelled back. He fumbled for his phone, his fingers shaking so badly he almost dropped it. He pulled up the email, the screen bright in the dim room, and shoved it toward Shane. "Read it. Just read it."

Shane looked at the phone, then at Ilya's desperate face. He took the device, his eyes scanning the glowing text.

Ilya watched him read. He watched the confusion turn to realization, and then to horror.

"Diane found a loophole," Ilya whispered, tears finally spilling over. "If I am single... if I am not married to a man... the Russian government doesn't block me. I can bring her home. But I can't do it if I am your husband."

## Chapter 3

Two days later, the air in Ottawa felt different. It was no longer just the place they played hockey; it was the war room.

They sat in Diane's office in downtown Ottawa, the city spread out below them in a gray, snowy panorama. Diane sat across the mahogany desk, a stack of papers in front of her. She looked tired, but focused.

"Okay," Diane said, sliding a thick document across the desk toward them. "This is the dissolution agreement. I've drafted it to be as clean and surgical as possible."

Shane stared at the papers. *Petition for Divorce*. It looked like a weapon.

"We're doing an uncontested, no-fault divorce," Diane explained, her voice professional but softened by pity. "To make this work for the Russian authorities, Ilya needs to look like a completely independent entity. That means no financial entanglements that suggest you are still partners."

"The prenup?" Ilya asked, his voice low. He was gripping Shane's hand under the table so hard his knuckles were white.

"We are nullifying it," Diane said. "A prenup implies a planned separation or a protection of assets within a union. We don't want to protect anything. We want to show that you are walking away with your own money, your own assets, and no ties. We are essentially tearing up the financial map of your marriage so that when the Russian social workers look at Ilya's bank accounts, they see 'Single Man with High Income', not 'Man splitting assets with Husband'."

Shane nodded slowly. "So, legally, we just... erase it."

"Exactly. It keeps the audit trail clean." Diane tapped the file. "Now, the trickier part is the optics. You two are... well, you're Ilya Rozanov and Shane Hollander. You are famous. You are openly married."

"They know who we are," Ilya said darkly.

"The bureaucrats in St. Petersburg might know the name, but they don't follow NHL gossip blogs," Diane countered. "However, if they dig, they will see photos. They will see the 'Game Changers' articles."

"So what do we do?" Shane asked.

"We lean into your privacy," Diane said. "You two have always been notoriously private. We spin that. To the Russian courts, if they ask, you are former teammates who tried to make it work but the pressure was too much. You remain 'roommates' because of the season schedule,

or because real estate in Ottawa is expensive—which is a lie, but they don't know that. We make the closeness look like professional necessity, not romantic love."

"Roommates," Shane scoffed, a bitter smile touching his lips. "Back to that."

"It's safer," Diane insisted. "Our partners in Moscow are already talking to the case workers. They are painting Ilya as the devoted, wealthy uncle who is heartbroken over his brother's death and wants to save his niece. They are minimizing Shane Hollander's existence in the narrative entirely."

Ilya took the pen Diane offered. He looked at Shane. "Ready?"

Shane took a deep breath, looking at the man he had fought so hard to be with. "It's just paper, Ilya. It's just paper to get her home."

They signed. The scratch of the pen sounded deafening in the quiet office.

Back at the townhouse, the mood was frantic but productive. Ilya was on the phone with Svetlana, pacing the living room, explaining the plan in rapid-fire Russian.

Shane, feeling useless and overwhelmed, retreated to the guest bedroom—the room they were mentally earmarking for Sofia. He sat on the edge of the stripped mattress and dialed a number he hadn't called in a while.

"Hollander?" The voice on the other end was surprised but warm. "To what do I owe the pleasure? You finally demanding a trade back to Montreal?"

"Hey, Hayden," Shane said, his voice cracking slightly. "No trade. Just... I need a dad. Or, I need to talk to one."

Hayden Hayes, his former teammate and one of the few people who knew Shane before he was *Shane*, went quiet. "Everything okay?"

"No," Shane admitted. He rubbed a hand over his face. "It's a long story, Hayds. But... Ilya's brother died. And he left a daughter. A ten-year-old."

"Oh, shit. Shane, I'm so sorry."

"Yeah. And she's alone over there. We're... we're trying to bring her here. We're going to adopt her, I mean I assume we haven't really... ya know what yeh."

"Wow," Hayden breathed. "That's... that's huge, man. Good huge, but huge."

"I'm terrified," Shane confessed, the words tumbling out. "I don't know the first thing about ten-year-olds. Your twins are that age, right? What do they... what do they need? How do I not screw this up? Especially with... with everything she's been through."

Hayden chuckled softly. "Shane, you led a team to the Cup. You can handle a ten-year-old. But listen... they aren't puzzles you solve. At that age? They just need to know you aren't

going anywhere. They need routine. They need to know that even if they scream at you or shut down, you're still going to be making pancakes in the morning."

"Pancakes. I can do pancakes."

"And patience," Hayden added. "If she's been through trauma... she might be angry. Or silent. Just let her be whatever she needs to be. You and Ilya... you guys are the most stubborn people I know. You'll be great dads because you won't quit on her."

Shane felt a lump form in his throat. "Thanks, Hayden. I needed to hear that."

"Anytime. Seriously. Call me at 3 AM if you need to know how to handle nightmares or homework. I'm here."

Shane hung up, feeling a fraction of the weight lift off his shoulders. He walked back out to the living room. Ilya was off the phone, sitting on the couch, staring at his iPad.

"Sveta texted," Ilya said, his voice tight. "It is 9 PM there. Sofia... she wants to talk to me. Before she sleeps."

Shane sat next to him, pressing his thigh against Ilya's. "You got this."

"I haven't seen her since she was five," Ilya whispered. "Only photos Sveta sent. What if she hates me? What if she blames me for not saving Alexei?"

"She won't," Shane promised. "She just needs her uncle."

Ilya took a shaky breath and tapped the FaceTime icon.

The screen blurred for a second, pixelating, and then resolved into a dimly lit hospital room. Svetlana's face appeared first, tired and drawn, but she offered a weak smile.

"Here she is," Svetlana whispered in Russian. She moved the phone.

And there was Sofia.

She looked so much like Alexei it hurt. The same dark, brooding eyes, the same sharp chin. But she had Ilya's mouth. She was pale, looking tiny in the hospital gown, clutching a stuffed bear that had clearly seen better days. She sat with her back pressed into the corner of the hospital bed, as if trying to make herself as small a target as possible. Every time a cart rattled in the hallway, she flinched, her eyes darting to the door with a terrified intensity.

"Privet, Sofia," Ilya said, his voice trembling. *Hello, Sofia.*

The little girl stared at the screen, her eyes wide. She didn't speak for a long moment. Then, in a small, rough voice, she said, "Uncle Il'yusha?"

Ilya let out a sound that was half-laugh, half-sob. "Yes. Yes, it's Uncle Il'yusha. I'm here, baby. I'm right here."

"Sveta says you are coming," Sofia whispered, hugging the bear tighter. "She says you are going to take me to Canada."

"I am," Ilya vowed, leaning into the screen as if he could crawl through it and hold her. "I am doing everything I can, Sofia. I promise. I am going to bring you home, and you will never be alone again. Do you hear me?"

Sofia nodded, a single tear tracking down her cheek. "Okay."

"I love you," Ilya said, tears streaming down his own face now. "I love you so much."

"I love you too, Uncle Il'yusha," she murmured. "Please hurry."

"I will," Ilya choked out. "I'm coming."

The call disconnected. The screen went black, leaving only the reflection of Ilya's tear-streaked face.

He stared at the dark glass for a moment before setting the iPad down on the coffee table with a trembling hand. He slumped back into the cushions, the adrenaline of the interaction fading into a heavy exhaustion.

Shane watched him, his mind already racing to the next hurdle.

"Does she speak English?" Shane asked quietly.

Ilya rubbed his eyes, sniffing. "Not much. They teach it in school, but... she is ten. It is basic. 'Hello', 'My name is', 'Cat', 'Dog'."

Shane's eyes widened, a fresh wave of panic cresting over him. "Ilya, I don't speak Russian. I mean, I know the swear words you taught me, and 'I love you', and 'pass the puck', but I can't parent in Russian. How am I going to explain math homework? How am I going to ask her if she's sad or hungry or if she hates my cooking?"

Ilya looked over at him, a small, tired smile breaking through the grief. He reached out and squeezed Shane's knee. "You will be fine, Shane. Kids learn fast. And besides, your Russian is getting better. You understood when Sveta told me to eat last week."

"That was tone," Shane argued, though his heart rate slowed a fraction. "She sounded like my mother."

"You will figure it out," Ilya promised. "We will figure it out. Language is the easy part compared to the rest."

Shane softened. He shifted closer, sliding his hand up Ilya's neck to cup his jaw, his thumb brushing away a stray tear. He leaned in and pressed a firm, lingering kiss to Ilya's lips—a kiss that was less about passion and more about anchoring them both to the earth.

"Have I told you how much I love you today?" Shane whispered against his mouth.

Ilya let out a wet laugh, the sound surprised but genuine. He rested his forehead against Shane's. "You might have mentioned it. But you can tell me again later."

Ilya pulled back and glanced at the clock on the wall. His eyes widened.

"We have to go," Ilya said, the hockey player mode snapping back into place, however reluctantly. "We have a home game against the Leafs tonight. We have to leave in thirty minutes if we want to beat the traffic."

Shane groaned, letting his head fall back against the sofa. "Right. Hockey. I forgot we had jobs."

"Go suit up, Hollander," Ilya said, standing up and offering a hand. "We have a game to win before we save the world."

Shane took his hand and let Ilya pull him up. "Lead the way, Cap."

## Chapter 4

The game against the Maple Leafs was a blur of violence and speed. Usually, Ilya played with a kind of calculated artistry, but tonight, he played like a man trying to outrun a ghost. He scored two goals, both slap shots that nearly tore through the netting, and spent four minutes in the penalty box for roughing.

Shane was right there with him, their psychic connection on the ice sharper than ever. They didn't speak on the bench. They didn't need to. They moved as one unit, channeling every ounce of their frustration, fear, and love into the game.

When the final buzzer sounded, the Centaurs had won 4-1. The crowd was deafening, but Ilya just skated to center ice, tapped Shane's shin pads, and headed for the tunnel.

Three days later, the adrenaline had long since faded, replaced by a cold, leaden dread.

The bedroom was chaos. Clothes were piled on the bed—thermal layers, formal suits for court, casual clothes for the apartment Svetlana was finding for him.

Ilya stood by the dresser, his passport in his hand. The new one. The Canadian one. And the old Russian one underneath it.

Shane was leaning in the doorway, arms crossed, watching him. He looked like he hadn't slept in a week.

"You have everything?" Shane asked, his voice rough. "Diane sent the updated custody petition?"

"It is in the carry-on," Ilya said, not looking up. "Along with the birth certificates and the bank statements."

Ilya stared at his left hand. The platinum band on his ring finger caught the light. It was simple, elegant, scratched from years of wear. He had put it on three years ago in a private ceremony in Montreal, and he hadn't taken it off since.

He felt sick.

"I have to take it off," Ilya whispered.

Shane flinched, but he pushed off the doorframe and walked over. He stood behind Ilya, wrapping his arms around his waist, resting his chin on Ilya's shoulder. They looked at their reflection in the mirror—two men, exhausted, terrified, and so in love it was painful.

"It's just metal, Ilya," Shane said softly, though his eyes were wet. "It doesn't change anything. You're still mine."

"I know," Ilya choked out. "But... going back there. Pretending I am not yours. It feels like a betrayal."

"It's a disguise," Shane corrected him firmly. "You are going undercover, spy-style. You are Agent Uncle Il'yusha. And the mission is to get our daughter."

*Our daughter.*

Ilya took a deep breath. He twisted the ring. It resisted for a moment, clinging to the skin, before sliding over the knuckle.

He held it in his palm. It felt heavy.

"Keep it for me?" Ilya turned around and pressed the ring into Shane's hand.

Shane closed his fingers around it, tight. "I'll keep it safe. Right here." He patted the pocket over his heart. "It goes back on your finger the second you land in Ottawa."

"Promise?"

"Promise."

Shane kissed him then, desperate and consuming, trying to pour enough love into Ilya to last him through the weeks of cold and loneliness ahead.

The airport drop-off was brutal. Because they were 'private', and because the 'divorce' was now technically in motion, they couldn't linger. They couldn't hug for ten minutes at the gate.

Shane pulled the SUV up to the curb at departures. The engine idled, a low rumble beneath the noise of traffic.

Ilya turned to him. "Don't let the plants die. Walk Anya twice a day. And eat actual food, Shane. Not just protein bars."

"I'll survive," Shane said, his smile trembling. "Just... call me. Every day. Even if it's 3 AM. Even if nothing happened."

"I will."

Ilya reached out, gripping Shane's hand one last time. He squeezed it hard, grounding himself.

"Bring her home, Ilya," Shane whispered.

"I will," Ilya vowed.

He let go, opened the door, and stepped out into the cold Canadian wind. He grabbed his bag from the trunk and walked through the sliding glass doors without looking back, because he knew if he looked back, he wouldn't be able to leave.

Shane watched him go until the automatic doors slid shut, cutting off the view of the broad shoulders and the dark coat.

The car felt suddenly massive and empty. The silence was deafening. Shane put the car in drive, his hand instinctively going to his chest pocket where Ilya's ring sat, warm against his skin.

He was alone. But the mission had started.

The flight to Moscow was a blur of sleeplessness and turbulence. Ilya spent the nine hours staring at the flight tracker screen, watching the little plane icon inch closer to the border he hadn't crossed in five years.

When the wheels finally touched down at Sheremetyevo International Airport, the jolt felt like a physical blow. Ilya Rozanov was back in Russia.

He navigated customs with his head down, cap pulled low. The border agent barely glanced at his Canadian passport before stamping it with a heavy thud. *Welcome home*, the sound seemed to say, *we've been waiting*.

The moment he stepped past the security gates, the wall of English he had built around himself crumbled. The announcements, the murmurs of fellow passengers, the bark of the taxi drivers—it was all in Russian. For the next few weeks, English would be nothing more than a memory, a ghost language he left behind with his husband. From this point on, he lived and spoke in the tongue of his ancestors.

He caught the high-speed Sapsan train to St. Petersburg immediately. The four-hour journey through the white birch forests passed in a gray haze. By the time he stepped out of the train station in St. Petersburg, the cold bit at his cheeks—a wet, biting cold that was different from the dry freeze of Ottawa. It smelled of exhaust, river water, and old stone.

He didn't go to a hotel. He hailed a taxi and gave the driver the address.

"Kupchino?" the driver asked, the rough Russian vowels familiar to Ilya's ears after so long.

"Da," Ilya said shortly.

The drive to the outskirts of the city was slow. The grand imperial architecture of the city center gave way to the endless, identical blocks of Soviet-era housing. Concrete giants, stained by weather and time.

When the taxi pulled up to the familiar building, Ilya's stomach turned. It looked exactly the same as the day he had left it, just grayer.

He used the spare key Svetlana had mailed him years ago for emergencies. The stairwell smelled of boiled cabbage and damp concrete. He walked up to the third floor, his steps heavy, and unlocked the door to apartment 34.

The silence inside was oppressive.

It wasn't empty, not really. It was full of the debris of a life interrupted. A half-drunk mug of tea on the kitchen table, growing mold. A pile of unopened mail on the floor. A child's pink backpack by the door.

Ilya dropped his bag and walked slowly through the hallway. He avoided the living room where the TV was still plugged in. He walked straight to the bathroom.

The door was open.

The tiles were cracked. The faucet dripped. *Drip. Drip. Drip.*

This was where it ended. This small, grim room was where his big brother, the man who had taught him how to skate, the man who had defended him from bullies, had died alone on the cold floor.

Ilya sank down onto the edge of the bathtub. He didn't cry. He felt too hollow for tears. He just sat there, staring at the grout, feeling the crushing weight of the years they had wasted, the calls he hadn't answered, the distance he had put between them to save himself.

He sat there for an hour. The sun went down outside, casting long shadows across the linoleum, but Ilya didn't move. He was paying his penance.

His phone buzzed in his pocket, shattering the silence.

Ilya jolted, his heart hammering. He pulled it out.

**Incoming Call: Kirill Volkov (Lawyer).**

Ilya cleared his throat, wiped a hand over his face, and answered in his native tongue. "Da?"

"Ilya," Kirill's voice was crisp, professional, the formal Russian greeting grounding him. "Welcome back. I hope the flight was manageable."

"It was fine," Ilya rasped in Russian.

"We have the initial paperwork ready for review. The social services office opens at 9 AM tomorrow, and we need to have the strategy finalized tonight. Can you come to the office?"

Ilya stood up. His legs felt stiff. He looked around the bathroom one last time, whispering a silent goodbye to the ghost of his brother.

"I am coming," Ilya said.

He hung up, grabbed his bag, and walked out of the apartment, locking the door on the past. He had a future to fight for.

The law office of Volkov & Partners was located in a sleek, modern glass building overlooking the Neva River—a stark contrast to the crumbling apartment block in Kupchino.

Ilya sat in a leather chair, his spine rigid. Across from him sat Kirill, a man with a sharp suit and sharper eyes, and next to him was a woman named Olga, the state-appointed case worker. She wore a wool suit and an expression of permanent skepticism.

"Mr. Rozanov," Olga began in rapid, bureaucratic Russian, flipping through a thick file. "Your financial records are... impressive. There is no doubt you can provide for the child materially."

"Sofia," Ilya corrected, his voice tight. "Her name is Sofia."

"Sofia," Olga conceded. "However, material wealth is not the only factor we consider. Stability is paramount. Especially for a girl who has suffered such neglect."

"I am stable," Ilya said. "I have a permanent residence in Ottawa. I have been with the same employer for seven years. I have support nearby."

Olga looked up over her glasses. "And your personal life? Your file indicates a marriage certificate from Canada. To a Mr. Shane Hollander."

The air in the room vanished. This was it. The moment they had rehearsed a thousand times.

Ilya forced his face to remain blank, channeling every ounce of his ability to hide pain. He looked Olga in the eye.

"That is correct," Ilya said, his voice steady. "But we are divorced. The paperwork has been filed."

Olga narrowed her eyes. "Divorced? That is convenient timing, Mr. Rozanov. You were married for three years, and you file for divorce the week your brother dies?"

"The marriage was... failing for a long time," Ilya lied. The words tasted like ash in his mouth. "We were teammates. We confused friendship for something else. It was a mistake."

"A mistake?"

"Yes," Ilya said, his heart screaming in protest. "I... I regret that time of my life. It was a phase. I was confused. I am not interested in men. I want a traditional life. I want to raise my niece with proper values."

He looked down at his hands, resting in his lap. His thumb instinctively sought out the ring on his left hand, but found only bare skin. He rubbed the empty space where the platinum band used to be, the phantom weight of it almost painful. *Forgive me, Shane*, he thought. *Forgive me.*

Olga watched him, her gaze lingering on his fidgeting hands. She studied the way he rubbed the empty ring finger. To her, it probably looked like nervousness or shame. To Ilya, it was a lifeline.

After an agonizing silence, she closed the folder.

"Very well," Olga said. "The court hearing is in two days. If your paperwork is in order, and if the judge believes your... change of heart... we will grant temporary custody for the purpose of emigration."

She slid a piece of paper across the desk.

"This is the contact information for the temporary guardian. I believe you know her."

Ilya picked it up

"I know her," Ilya said.

"Good. You may go."

Ilya walked out of the office, his legs shaking. He felt dirty. He felt like he had just sold his soul. But he had done it.

As soon as he hit the cold night air, he pulled out his phone. His fingers flew across the screen.

*Ilya: I am out. It is done. Can I see her?*

The response was immediate. An address pin. And one word: *Come*.

Ilya hailed a taxi, the address clutched in his hand like a winning lottery ticket. He was going to meet his niece.

Svetlana lived in a slightly better district, but the apartment building was still old, the elevator creaking ominously as it ascended to the fifth floor.

Ilya didn't bother with the elevator. He took the stairs two at a time, his breath coming in short, sharp bursts that had nothing to do with the exertion. He reached the door with the peeling blue paint and knocked. His hand trembled.

The door opened almost immediately.

Svetlana stood there. She looked exhausted, her eyes rimmed with red, hair pulled back in a messy bun. But when she saw him, her face crumpled with relief. She didn't say a word; she just pulled him into a fierce hug, burying her face in his shoulder.

"You made it," she whispered in Russian.

"I made it," Ilya replied, squeezing her tight.

He pulled back, his eyes darting past her into the small, warm hallway. "Where is she?"

Svetlana stepped aside. "Sofia? Il'yusha is here."

For a moment, there was nothing. Then, a small shadow detached itself from the doorway of the kitchen. Sofia stood there, wearing oversized pajamas that looked like hand-me-downs.

She looked so much smaller in person than she had on the screen. Her dark hair was messy, her eyes huge and dark, filled with a terrifying mix of hope and fear.

Ilya felt his knees hit the floor. He didn't remember deciding to kneel. He just needed to be on her level.

"Sofia," he choked out.

She stared at him for a heartbeat, two. And then her face broke. A sob ripped out of her throat, and she started to run.

She collided with him with enough force to knock the wind out of him. Her thin arms wrapped around his neck, strangling tight, and she buried her face in the crook of his neck, wailing. She was shaking, a fine, continuous tremor that vibrated against his chest. She smelled of hospital antiseptic and stale fear.

Ilya wrapped his arms around her tiny frame, pulling her against his chest, shielding her from the world. The dam inside him, the one he had built to survive the meeting with Olga, to survive the flight, to survive the news of Alexei's death, finally shattered.

He wept. He rocked her back and forth, murmuring her name into her hair, his tears soaking into her pajama top.

"I've got you," he promised in Russian, over and over. "I've got you, little bird. I'm here."

Sofia pulled back just enough to look at him. Her face was wet, her nose red. She reached out with a small hand and touched his wet cheek, as if checking he was real.

"It was so quiet, Uncle Il'yusha," she whispered in Russian, her voice trembling with a memory she shouldn't have had. "I was terrified. I thought... I thought no one would ever find me."

Ilya pulled her close again, squeezing his eyes shut. "I found you."

"Promise you won't leave?" she begged, her fingers digging into his coat, clinging as if her life depended on it. She wouldn't let go of his hand, even to wipe her nose. She gripped his fingers with a strength that was painful, as if she thought letting go meant he would disappear. "Promise you won't go away like Papa?"

"I promise," Ilya vowed, kissing her forehead. "I am never leaving you. You and me, forever."

Sofia clung to him for a long moment before speaking again. "Papa showed me pictures," she hiccuped, her voice small and broken. "He showed me the magazine. He said... he said you were the best skater in the world."

Ilya froze. The breath left his lungs in a rush. He stared at her, stunned. "He said that?"

"Da," Sofia nodded, sniffing. "He said you lived far away because you were a champion."

Fresh tears welled in Ilya's eyes. Alexei, despite everything—despite the drugs, the homophobia, the resentment—had preserved Ilya's hero status for his daughter. He hadn't poisoned her against him. He had given Ilya this one last gift.

"He loved you very much," Ilya whispered, brushing the hair out of her eyes. "And I loved him. Even when we were far apart."

Sofia leaned her forehead against his. "Is it going to be okay, Uncle Il'yusha? The police... they said I couldn't stay home. They put a lock on the door."

"I know, baby. I know." Ilya held her face in his hands, forcing her to look at him. "Listen to me carefully. I am going to fix it. I am going to take care of you. You are never going to be alone again. No more police. No more being hungry. I promise."

"Promise?" she whispered again, needing to hear it.

"I swear it on my life," Ilya vowed. "I am going to look after you no matter what happens. You and me."

Sofia let out a long, shuddering breath and collapsed back against his chest. "Okay," she murmured, her grip on his coat tightening. "Okay."

Ilya held her there on the floor of Svetlana's hallway, surrounded by the smell of borscht and old dust, and knew that for the first time in days, he was exactly where he was supposed to be.

# Chapter 5

## Chapter Notes

I spent the past 6 hours finishing this fic I was gonna wait but I have no will power and wanna post it so ima spam the fic for a bit sorry

The next morning, the practice facility was quiet. Most of the team had cleared out, heading home for naps or video games before the evening's charity dinner.

Shane lingered in the hallway outside the coaching staff's offices, his phone clutched in his hand. He watched the door to the Head Coach's office, waiting for the light underneath to flick off. When the door finally opened and Coach stepped out, briefcase in hand, Shane pushed off the wall.

"Coach," Shane said, his voice echoing slightly in the empty corridor. "Do you have a minute?"

Coach stopped, looking at Shane over the rim of his glasses. He looked tired—mid-season fatigue hit everyone, not just the players. "For you, Hollander? Always. But make it quick, my wife is expecting me for lunch."

"It's about Ilya," Shane said. "And... everything else. We need to loop you in. Properly."

Coach's expression shifted instantly from impatient to serious. He nodded at the open door. "Come on in."

Shane followed him inside, closing the door firmly behind him. He sat in one of the guest chairs and immediately placed his phone on the desk.

"I'm going to call him," Shane said. "He needs to be part of this."

"He's awake?" Coach asked, glancing at the clock. "It's what, evening over there?"

"Yeah." Shane tapped the contact.

Ilya answered on the first ring, video this time. His face filled the screen, looking weary but alert. He was sitting in what looked like a kitchen, a floral curtain visible behind him.

"I am here," Ilya said, his voice tinny through the speaker. "Is he there?"

"I'm here, Rozanov," Coach said, leaning forward. "Good to see you. How are you holding up?"

"I am surviving, Coach," Ilya said, his tone serious. "But we have... complications. Shane, tell him."

Shane took a deep breath. He clasped his hands together to stop them from shaking. "Coach, you know Ilya went back because his brother died. And you know about his niece, Sofia."

"The little girl," Coach nodded. "Tragic business."

"It's more than that," Shane said. "She has no one else. If we don't get her out, she goes into the state system. Orphanage. Foster care. It... it's not an option."

"Okay," Coach said slowly. "So you're looking to adopt? That's noble, boys. The organization will support that however we can."

"It's not that simple," Ilya cut in from the phone. "Russia... they do not let same-sex couples adopt. It is illegal. If they know I am married to Shane, they will never let me take her. They would rather she rot in an institution than be raised by two men."

Coach frowned, his brow furrowing. "So what are you saying? You're stuck?"

"No," Shane said, his voice steady as he laid out the plan they had agonized over. "We found a loophole. A legal one. But it's... extreme."

Shane looked Coach in the eye. "We filed for divorce three days ago."

Coach recoiled as if Shane had slapped him. "What?"

"It's a paper divorce," Shane clarified quickly, holding up his hand. "Just on paper. Legally, Ilya needs to be a single man. If he's single, he can apply as a sole guardian. He's a Canadian citizen, he has the income, he's blood relative. If he's single, he checks all the boxes. If he's married to me... the door slams shut."

Coach stared at them—at Shane, sitting rigid in the chair, and at Ilya, watching intently from the phone screen. He ran a hand through his thinning hair, letting out a long, low whistle.

"You filed for divorce," Coach repeated, shaking his head in disbelief. "To trick the Russian Federation."

"Yes," Ilya said. "We nullified the prenup. We split the assets—on paper. To the Russian courts, I am a single bachelor who regrets his 'lifestyle choices' and wants to raise his niece. Once she is in Canada, once the adoption is finalized and she has citizenship... we will remarry."

"But until then," Shane added, "technically, legally... we aren't together. And we need the team—or at least the front office—to understand why Ilya's paperwork might look... different. Why he might be listed as single on insurance forms for a while."

Coach sat back in his chair, the leather creaking. He looked between the two of them for a long moment. He had coached a lot of players in his career. He had seen egos, fights,

scandals, and selfishness. But looking at his Captain and Assistant Captain, seeing the lengths they were willing to go to for a child they barely knew...

"You two," Coach grunted, a strange look of respect in his eyes. "You don't do anything halfway, do you?"

"Never, Coach," Ilya said.

"Alright," Coach said decisively, slapping his hand on the desk. "Consider me looped in. I'll handle the GM. I'll handle the press if they start sniffing around about marital trouble. We'll spin it as 'personal strain due to family tragedy' if we have to, but we'll keep the adoption strategy quiet. The last thing we need is some tabloid blowing your cover in Moscow."

"Thank you," Shane breathed out, the relief making him lightheaded.

"How long, Rozanov?" Coach asked, directing his attention to the phone. "How long until you get her out?"

"The hearing is in two days," Ilya said. "If I get temporary custody, I can apply for her visa. Maybe... maybe three weeks? A month? I have to navigate the bureaucracy."

"Take the time," Coach ordered. "I don't want you back here until that little girl is sitting in the stands wearing a Centaurs jersey. You hear me?"

Ilya smiled, a small, genuine thing. "I hear you, Coach. Loud and clear."

"And Shane," Coach added, looking at his Assistant Captain. "You keep this ship afloat while he's gone. And if you need to fly over there to... I don't know, sign something or punch a bureaucrat, you tell me. We'll make it work."

Shane nodded, feeling a surge of gratitude for this gruff, hockey-obsessed man. "I will. Thanks, Coach."

"Get out of here," Coach waved them off, reaching for his sandwich. "Go save the girl. I've got a power play to fix."

Shane grabbed the phone. "We'll talk later," he told Ilya.

"Da," Ilya said. "Love you."

"Love you too."

Shane hung up and walked out of the office, feeling lighter than he had in days. They had a plan. They had support. And soon, they would have Sofia.

Later that evening, in St. Petersburg, the atmosphere was less triumphant.

Ilya walked into Svetlana's small living room. Sofia was sitting at the low coffee table, her brow furrowed in concentration as she worked on a math worksheet. The lamp cast a warm, yellow glow over her dark hair. Svetlana mentioned that Sofia had been hoarding food in her

room—crackers, apples—a survival instinct from the week alone that hadn't faded yet. Even now, as she worked on her math, she kept glancing up at Ilya every thirty seconds, as if checking to make sure he hadn't vanished into thin air. She was jumpy, too. When the refrigerator compressor kicked on with a hum, she jumped so hard she dropped her pencil. It took Ilya five minutes of murmuring soft reassurances to get her breathing steady again. She also refused to sleep with the door closed, needing to see the hallway light. Every time the floorboards creaked, her head would snap up, eyes wide and panicked.

Ilya sat on the sofa behind her, watching her work for a moment. "How is the homework going?" he asked in Russian.

Sofia didn't look up immediately. She scratched out a number with her pencil. "It is okay," she mumbled in Russian. Then, she turned around, her large eyes fixing on him with an intensity that made Ilya nervous. "Uncle Il'yusha... if I go with you to Canada... do I have to leave my school? And my friends?"

Ilya felt his heart crack a little. He shifted, leaning forward, elbows on his knees. "Yes, little bird," he said gently in Russian. "You would have to leave this school. But you will go to a new school in Ottawa. A very good school."

"I don't want a new school," Sofia said, her voice rising slightly. "I want my school. I want my friends. Why can't you just stay here? You are Russian. Why do we have to go to Canada?"

Ilya sighed, rubbing a hand over his face. How did he explain geopolitical homophobia to a grieving ten-year-old?

"It isn't safe for me to live here, Sofia," Ilya said carefully in Russian. "My life... my work... it is all in Canada now."

Sofia stared at him, her eyes narrowing. "Is it because of him?" she asked sharply. "Because of Shane?"

Ilya flinched. "Partially," he admitted. "But also because I play hockey there. That is my job."

"I hate him," Sofia spat out, the words venomous and sudden. "I hate Shane. If it wasn't for him, you could stay here."

Ilya felt tears prick at the corners of his eyes, hot and stinging. He forced them back, keeping his expression neutral. He couldn't let her see how much that hurt. She was a child. She was grieving. She didn't mean it.

"Finish your homework, Sofia," Ilya said, his voice firm but strained. "And then go to bed."

"No!" Sofia threw her pencil down. "You can't tell me what to do! You're not my dad!"

The silence that followed was heavy and suffocating.

Ilya stared at her. He saw the pain behind her anger, the fear behind her defiance. But he also felt the weight of the last week—the death of his brother, the divorce papers, the ring sitting

in Shane's pocket across the ocean—crashing down on him.

"Yeah, well, I'm the next best thing," Ilya snapped in Russian, the raw frustration bleeding through before he switched back to Russian, his voice hard. "Do you want to be in a fucking state facility? Because that is the alternative, Sofia. An orphanage. With strangers."

Sofia's mouth snapped shut. Her eyes went wide with shock. She stared at him for a second, then turned back to her homework, her shoulders hunched. She didn't say another word.

"Hey!" Svetlana's voice cut through the air from the kitchen doorway. She switched to English, her tone sharp. "Ilya! That was too harsh. Her father just died. She is a child."

Ilya stood up, pacing away from the table to the window, looking out at the dark, snowy street.

"Yeah, well, I don't have much choice, Sveta," Ilya said in English, his voice shaking with suppressed emotion. "I am not leaving her to be thrown into a state institution. And I am not leaving my husband to live in a country where nobody likes me and it is almost illegal to be gay. I am trying to save her life. If she hates me for it right now, fine. I can live with that. But I won't let her stay here."

## Chapter 6

Court day dawned gray and sleeting, the sky over Moscow a bruised purple. The tension in the apartment was palpable.

Sofia sat at the small kitchen table, pushing her oatmeal around with a spoon. She hadn't spoken a word to Ilya since the argument two nights ago. Her silence was a heavy, sullen thing, filling the small space.

Svetlana bustled around, trying to force cheerfulness. "Look, Sofia, I ironed your good dress. You look so smart. Like a little lawyer yourself."

Sofia didn't look up. She just shrugged one shoulder.

Ilya stood by the window, adjusting his tie. He wore a dark, conservative suit that cost more than most people in this neighborhood made in a year, but right now, he felt like a fraud in it. He caught Svetlana's eye. She gave him a sympathetic grimace and tried again with Sofia.

"Sofia, honey," Svetlana said softly in Russian. "Uncle Il'yusha is doing this because he loves you. You know that, right?"

Sofia finally looked up, her dark eyes flashing. "If he loved me, he wouldn't make me leave," she muttered in Russian.

The words cut deep, but Ilya didn't engage. "We have to go," he said in Russian, checking his watch. "The lawyers are waiting."

The ride to the courthouse was silent. Sofia stared out the window at the rain-streaked city, clutching her backpack like a shield. She gripped his hand on the walk to the taxi, holding on tight enough to cut off circulation. She didn't let go until they were safely inside the car. She sat close to him on the bench, her knee pressed against his, needing the physical confirmation of his presence.

They met Kirill outside the courtroom. He looked calm, collected, a stark contrast to the churning nausea in Ilya's stomach.

"Everything is in order," Kirill assured them in Russian. "The judge is strict but fair. Stick to the script."

The courtroom was old, smelling of wood polish and dust. The judge, a stern woman with steel-gray hair, peered down at them from the bench.

The proceedings were a blur of legalese. They went over Ilya's finances again, scrutinizing his bank statements, his property deeds in Canada, his contract with the Centaurs.

"Mr. Rozanov," the judge said in Russian, looking over her spectacles. "Your career requires extensive travel. How do you intend to provide stability for a ten-year-old child?"

"I have arranged for a full-time nanny," Ilya answered in Russian, his voice steady. "And I have a strong support network. Close friends... teammates who have families of their own. Their wives... their families help out." He carefully avoided using gendered language for his own household.

The judge turned her gaze to Sofia, who was sitting beside Svetlana. "Sofia Alexeevna. Do you understand what is happening here?" she asked in Russian.

Sofia looked small in the large wooden chair. She glanced at Ilya, then away. "Yes," she whispered in Russian.

"Do you wish to go with your uncle to Canada?"

The silence stretched for a heartbeat too long. Ilya stopped breathing.

"Yes," Sofia said finally in Russian, her voice flat. "I have nowhere else to go."

It wasn't a ringing endorsement, but it was enough.

Then came the question Ilya had been dreading.

"Mr. Rozanov," the judge said, flipping a page in the file. "There are reports in the media regarding your personal life. Specifically, a public relationship with a man. Can you clarify your current status?"

Ilya felt Sofia turn to look at him. He could feel her gaze burning into the side of his face. He kept his eyes fixed on the judge.

"That relationship is over, Your Honor," Ilya said in Russian, the lie tasting like bile. "It was... a mistake. A period of confusion. I am divorced. I am focused solely on my career and my family now. I regret the... choices I made in the past."

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Sofia frown. She shifted in her seat, opening her mouth as if to speak, but Svetlana placed a firm hand on her arm, silencing her. Sofia slumped back, looking from Ilya to the judge, her confusion deepening.

The judge studied Ilya for a long, agonizing moment. Then she nodded.

"Very well."

Twenty minutes later, the gavel banged.

"Custody of the minor child, Sofia Alexeevna Rozanova, is awarded to her uncle, Ilya Rozanov."

Ilya let out a breath that felt like it had been held for days. He slumped slightly against the table, relief washing over him so intensely it made him dizzy.

An hour later, they were in Kirill's office, the air smelling of fresh coffee and triumph.

"The hard part is over," Kirill said in Russian, handing Ilya a pen to sign the visa application. "With the custody order, the visa should be expedited. Three weeks, maybe four."

Ilya signed his name with a flourishing hand. *Three weeks.*

The ride back to the apartment was different. The silence wasn't angry anymore; it was thoughtful.

When they got inside, Sofia didn't run to her room. She stood in the hallway, watching Ilya take off his coat.

"Why did you lie?" she asked suddenly in Russian.

Ilya paused, one arm out of his sleeve. He turned to look at her. "When?" he asked in the same language.

"To the judge," Sofia said in Russian, her brow furrowed. "You said Shane was a mistake. You said you didn't love him. But... you told me he is your husband."

Ilya sighed, hanging his coat up. He knelt down so he was eye-level with her again. "Sofia... remember what I told you about secrets?"

She nodded slowly.

"In this country... the government does not like people like me and Shane," Ilya explained quietly in Russian. "If I told the judge I loved him... if I told her we were still married... they would not have let me take you. they would have said I was a bad person. they would have sent you away."

Sofia's eyes widened. The logic of the adult world was cruel, but she was beginning to understand the game. "So... you lied to save me?" she asked, her voice small in the quiet hallway. "If you lied about Shane... did you lie about wanting me too?"

"Yes," Ilya said fiercely in Russian. "I would lie to the President himself if it meant keeping you safe. Shane understands. He knows I had to say those things. And no, little bird, I never lie about wanting you. You are my blood. You are my family."

Sofia chewed on her lip, processing this. "Okay," she whispered. "I guess that's okay."

Ilya's phone rang in his pocket, loud in the quiet hallway. He pulled it out. *Shane.*

A smile broke across his face, involuntary and bright. "Speak of the devil," he murmured in Russian.

He answered, switching to English. "Hey."

"Tell me," Shane's voice was tight with anxiety. "Did we win?"

"We won," Ilya breathed, looking at Sofia. "Full custody. We are at the lawyers now... well, we just got back. The visa application is in. They said three weeks."

"Oh, thank god," Shane exhaled, the sound of relief loud even over the transatlantic line. "Three weeks. Okay. We can do three weeks. I'll... I'll have the room ready. I've already bought paint. Do you think she likes purple? Hayden says all ten-year-olds like purple."

Ilya laughed, the sound bubbling up from his chest. "You can ask her yourself later. But yes, purple is probably safe."

"I've been practicing," Shane said, his voice shy. Then, in very slow, heavily accented Russian: "*Ya... zhdu... vas.*" *I am waiting for you.*

Ilya's heart squeezed. "Your accent is terrible," he teased gently. "But the grammar is perfect."

"I'm working on it," Shane laughed. "I miss you, Ilya. Come home soon."

"We are coming," Ilya promised. "Just a little longer."

He hung up and looked at Sofia. She was watching him with a strange expression—not anger, not fear. Curiosity.

"Was that him?" she asked in Russian.

"Yes," Ilya replied in Russian. "That was Shane. He is learning Russian for you."

Sofia rolled her eyes, but a small, tentative smile tugged at the corner of her mouth. "Is he any good?" she asked, a hint of amusement in her Russian tone.

"He is terrible," Ilya grinned, switching back to Russian for her. "You will have to teach him."

It was 3:14 AM in St. Petersburg when the silence became too loud to ignore.

Ilya lay on the pull-out sofa in Svetlana's living room, staring at the ceiling. The streetlights outside cast long, shifting shadows across the plaster, mimicking the ghosts that seemed to haunt the corners of his mind.

He was exhausted. His body ached from the tension of the court hearing, from the emotional wringer of the last week, from the sheer physical distance between him and his life. But sleep was a foreign concept.

Without Shane next to him—without the solid warmth of his back, the steady rhythm of his breathing, the way he mumbled nonsense in his sleep—Ilya felt like an amputee. He reached out into the empty space of the sofa, his hand finding only cold upholstery.

He sat up, scrubbing a hand over his face.

"Fuck it," he whispered in English, just to hear the language.

He grabbed his laptop from the coffee table and wrapped the thin wool blanket tighter around his shoulders. The wifi in the apartment was spotty, but he tethered it to his phone, praying

for a stable connection.

It was 7:15 PM in New Jersey. Puck drop.

The familiar logo of the NHL GameCenter app filled the screen, a beacon of blue light in the dark room. He clicked on the Ottawa Centaurs vs. New Jersey Devils feed.

The pixelated image stuttered, then resolved. There they were. The white away jerseys. The familiar helmets.

And there was Shane.

Ilya's breath hitched. Shane was at the faceoff circle, bent low, his focus absolute. He looked tired—Ilya could see the shadows under his eyes even through the low-resolution stream—but he looked fierce.

The puck dropped. Shane won it clean back to the defense.

Ilya watched, transfixed. For the next two hours, he wasn't in a cramped apartment in Russia where he had to lie about who he was. He was on the ice. He was anticipating the passes, wincing at the hits, muttering critiques under his breath.

"Skate, Fabian, skate!" he hissed as the rookie defenseman got beat on the outside.

But mostly, he just watched Shane. He watched the way Shane led the team, filling the void Ilya had left. He watched Shane tap the goalie's pads after a save. He watched Shane score a gritty goal in the second period, jamming home a rebound from the crease.

The camera panned to the Centaurs bench during a TV timeout. The play-by-play announcer's voice filled the small room.

"Of course, the Centaurs are still missing a key piece of their puzzle tonight. Ilya Rozanov, Shane Hollander's husband and the Captain of the Centaurs, is still out indefinitely dealing with a family matter. The team has released a statement saying there is no prediction on when he will return."

Ilya flinched. Hearing it said out loud—*Shane Hollander's husband*—in this apartment, in this country, felt dangerous. It felt like a secret being shouted through a megaphone.

He reached out and slammed his finger onto the mute key. The sound cut out instantly. He couldn't risk Sofia waking up and hearing English words she might recognize, or worse, Svetlana hearing the title he had just denied in a court of law.

He watched the rest of the game in silence.

When Shane celebrated his goal, he didn't do his usual jump into the glass. He just raised his stick, touched his chest—right over his heart, where Ilya knew the ring was hidden—and pointed briefly at the camera.

Ilya pressed his hand to the laptop screen, covering Shane's pixelated figure.

The loneliness hit him then, a physical ache in his chest. He missed the smell of the locker room. He missed the sound of his skates cutting the ice. He missed his team.

God, he even missed the Hollands. He missed Shane's parents and their loud, chaotic farmhouse. He missed Mrs. Holland's roast chicken and the way she would pile his plate high, tutting that he was "too skinny for a Russian bear." He missed being *part* of something.

Here, he was just Ilya. Uncle Il'yusha. The brother of the dead addict. The man with the secret life.

But there, on the screen... that was where he belonged.

The game ended. Ottawa won in overtime. Ilya watched until the feed cut out, leaving him in the darkness once more.

He closed the laptop, lying back down in the silence. It was 5:30 AM now. The sun would be up soon.

"Soon," he whispered into the dark, clutching the blanket. "We will be home soon."

## Chapter 7

Three weeks later, the letter came.

It arrived on a Tuesday, a crisp, official-looking envelope with Canadian government stamps. Svetlana brought it in with the groceries, her hands trembling as she handed it to Ilya.

He tore it open right there in the hallway.

*Visa Grant Notification. Sofia Alexeevna Rozanova.*

Ilya slumped against the wall, sliding down until he hit the floor, clutching the paper to his chest. It was done. They could leave.

The next twenty-four hours were a blur of packing. Sofia's entire life fit into two suitcases. The rest—the furniture, the old appliances—Svetlana would sell or keep.

The morning of their departure dawned bright and cold. It was 7:00 AM in St. Petersburg, which meant it was late night in Ottawa.

Ilya's phone buzzed on the kitchen counter. It was Shane. It had become their routine: Shane would call before he went to bed, just as Sofia was waking up for school—or today, for the airport.

"Hey," Shane's voice was warm and sleep-rough. "Is she up?"

"She is getting dressed," Ilya said, glancing down the hall. "She is... anxious."

"Put her on."

Ilya walked to Sofia's room. She was sitting on her bed, fully dressed in her warmest coat, staring at her shoes. She looked small and terrified.

"Sofia," Ilya said gently in Russian. "Shane is on the phone. He wants to say good morning."

Sofia looked up. She took the phone without a word.

"Privet, Shane," she whispered.

"Privet, Sofia," Shane's voice came through, loud and clear. He stumbled through a few practiced Russian phrases. "*Ty... gotova... letet?*" *Are you ready to fly?*

Sofia managed a weak smile at his accent. "Da. Almost."

They talked for a few minutes—mostly Shane asking simple questions and Sofia answering in monosyllables. But it grounded her. It reminded her that there was someone on the other side of the ocean who wanted her there.

After she handed the phone back and went to brush her teeth, Ilya put the phone back to his ear.

"She's scared," Ilya murmured, stepping into the kitchen for privacy. "She is jumpy, Shane. Every noise makes her flinch. She... she keeps checking her pockets to make sure she has her passport, even though I have it."

"She's been through hell, Ilya," Shane said soothingly. "Of course she's scared."

"I am scared," Ilya admitted, the confession torn from him. "I don't know what to do. What if I mess this up? What if taking her away from everything she knows traumatizes her more? She is ten. She has a life here. Friends. Language. I am taking her to a place where she knows no one."

Ilya gripped the edge of the counter, his knuckles white. "I am going to ruin her life."

"Stop," Shane said firmly. "Listen to me, Ilya. You are not ruining her life. You are saving it. Your brother... he loved her, I know, but he was a drug addict who left her alone in an apartment with a corpse for a week. You can't fuck her up more than that. Hell, I'm surprised you didn't kidnap her years ago."

Ilya let out a shaky breath, a half-laugh escaping. "I thought about it."

"We have a plan," Shane continued, his voice steady and reassuring. "We have the best child therapists in Ottawa on speed dial. The international school is ready for her—they have counselors, and there's a whole program for Russian-speaking kids so she won't be isolated. She'll have a translator with her all day until her English catches up."

"She hates English," Ilya mumbled.

"She'll learn to love it when she realizes it gets her extra dessert from my mom," Shane countered. "She is going to be okay, Ilya. Because she has us. And we don't quit."

Ilya closed his eyes, leaning his forehead against the cool windowpane. "I can't wait to be home," he whispered. "And not just because of the sex."

Shane chuckled, a low, warm sound. "I miss you too, idiot. The sex will be great, but honestly? I just want to sleep next to you. The bed is too big."

"Soon," Ilya promised. "We fly out in 12 hours."

"I'll be waiting at arrivals. With a sign. And probably a giant stuffed bear because I panicked at the toy store."

Ilya smiled. "She will love it."

The pickup from school—her last day—was brutal.

Sofia walked out of the heavy iron gates of her school, her backpack slung over one shoulder. She didn't look back at the building. She walked straight to Ilya, who was waiting by the taxi.

She got in without a word.

As the taxi navigated the slushy streets toward the airport, Sofia started to cry. Silent, heavy tears that tracked down her cheeks. She pressed her hand against the window, watching St. Petersburg roll by—the canals, the pastel buildings, the gray sky.

"I don't want to go," she whispered in Russian, her voice barely audible over the hum of the tires. "I know I have to... but I don't want to."

Ilya reached out and took her hand. It was cold.

"I know, baby," he said in Russian. "It is scary to leave home."

"What if no one likes me?" she asked, turning her tear-streaked face to him. "What if I am weird because I don't speak English?"

"You won't be weird," Ilya promised. "Ottawa is... it is a mix of everyone. At your new school, there are lots of kids who speak Russian. You will make friends."

He squeezed her hand. "And the team... my teammates... they have kids your age. They are nice. They play hockey and video games. And Shane's parents... the Hollands... they are already arguing about who gets to bake you cookies first. They are very loud, and they hug a lot, but they have the biggest hearts."

Sofia sniffed, wiping her nose on her sleeve. "Do they know about... about Papa?"

"They know he died," Ilya said carefully. "And they know you are coming to live with us. They just want to help."

He pulled her into his side, wrapping his arm around her shoulders. "You are not going to be alone, Sofia. You have an army waiting for you. And you have me. And Shane."

Sofia leaned her head against his shoulder. She looked at his hand, resting on her knee. His ring finger was still bare.

"When we get there," she whispered, "will you put your ring back on?"

Ilya looked down at his hand, imagining the weight of the platinum band settling back into place.

"The second the plane touches the ground," he vowed. "The very second."

Sofia closed her eyes. "Okay," she murmured. "Let's go home then."

The airport was a nightmare of noise and fluorescent lights. Sheremetyevo was crowded, the air thick with the smell of coffee and too many bodies.

Sofia stuck to Ilya's side like a second shadow. She clutched the back of his coat, her knuckles white, her eyes darting around at every sudden movement, every loud

announcement over the PA system. The trauma of the last few weeks was bubbling under her skin, making her tremble.

They made it through security and passport control. Ilya watched the border agent stamp Sofia's new passport, the sound final and decisive.

When they boarded the plane, things got worse.

It was Sofia's first time flying. The narrow tube of the jet bridge seemed to swallow them. As they stepped onto the plane, the air became stuffy and pressurized.

They found their seats in business class—Ilya had paid for the extra space, knowing they would both need it. He settled Sofia into the window seat and buckled her in.

"It is okay," he murmured in Russian, sensing her escalating panic. "Look, you can see the wing."

Sofia stared out the window, her breathing coming in short, shallow gasps. Her hands gripped the armrests so hard her fingernails were colorless.

"I can't," she wheezed, her chest heaving. "It's too small. I can't breathe."

The engines roared to life, a deep, vibrating thrum that shook the floor.

Sofia let out a strangled cry. She clawed at the buckle. "Let me out! I want to get off! Uncle Il'yusha, please!"

Ilya unbuckled his own belt instantly, leaning over her, blocking the rest of the cabin from view. He put his hands on her shoulders, grounding her.

"Sofia, look at me," he commanded softly but firmly in Russian. "Look at me. Breathe."

"I hate this!" she sobbed, tears spilling over. "I hate you for making me do this! I want to go home!"

The words stung, but Ilya absorbed them. He knew it wasn't about him. It was about the loss of control, the terror of the unknown.

"I know," Ilya said, keeping his voice calm and steady. "I know you hate it. I know you are scared. But I am right here. I am not going anywhere."

"Whatever happens," she gasped, "don't let go."

"Never," Ilya promised. He took her hand, engulfing her small fingers in his large, calloused ones. "I am holding you. See?"

The plane began to taxi. Sofia squeezed her eyes shut, tears leaking out, her grip on his hand bone-crushing.

"Papa is gone," she whispered, the truth finally surfacing through the panic. "And Sveta can't keep me. So I have to go."

It was a heartbreaking admission of defeat, but also of acceptance.

"We are going to a new home," Ilya said, stroking her hair with his free hand. "A safe home."

As the plane accelerated down the runway, pushing them back into their seats, Sofia didn't scream. She just buried her face in Ilya's shoulder and held on, trusting him to carry her into the sky.

The flight to Canada was a blur of exhausting layovers and stale air. They flew from St. Petersburg to Frankfurt, and then caught the long-haul flight to Ottawa.

Ten hours later, the pilot's voice crackled over the intercom, announcing their descent.

"Ladies and gentlemen, we are beginning our final approach into Ottawa Macdonald-Cartier International Airport."

Ilya looked out the window. Below them, the familiar grid of Ottawa was sprawled out, dusted in white snow. It looked beautiful. It looked like safety.

Beside him, Sofia was asleep, her head resting on the tray table. She had panicked during takeoff again, but had eventually exhausted herself into a fitful slumber.

Ilya gently shook her shoulder. "Sofia. Wake up. We are here."

She blinked awake, looking disoriented. She looked out the window, her eyes widening at the endless snow.

"Is that Canada?" she whispered in Russian.

"That is Canada," Ilya said. "That is home."

Customs was a nerve-racking thirty minutes. Ilya held his breath as the officer reviewed their paperwork, scrutinized the custody order, and checked the visa. But finally, the stamp came down.

"Welcome home, Mr. Rozanov," the officer said. "Welcome to Canada, miss."

Ilya led her through the sliding glass doors into the arrivals hall.

The noise hit them first—chatter, laughter, announcements. Ilya scanned the crowd, his heart pounding in his chest.

And then he saw him.

Shane was standing near the barrier, wearing a Centaurs hoodie and jeans. He was holding a sign that said *WELCOME HOME* in glittery letters, and tucked under one arm was the biggest stuffed polar bear Ilya had ever seen.

Ilya stopped walking. He dropped his carry-on bag. He looked down at his left hand, still bare, the tan line fading but visible. He needed that weight back. He needed to be whole again.

He looked down at Sofia. "Are you ready?"

She nodded, clutching his hand.

Ilya looked up and met Shane's eyes. Shane's face lit up with a smile so bright it outshone every light in the terminal. He dropped the sign and started to walk toward them, ignoring the security line.

Ilya let go of the suitcase handle and strode forward. He met Shane halfway.

Shane didn't hug him immediately. He reached into the pocket of his jeans—the pocket over his heart where he had promised to keep it safe—and pulled out the band.

"You forgot this," Shane whispered, his voice thick with emotion.

He took Ilya's hand, his fingers warm and steady, and slid the ring back onto Ilya's finger. It settled there, cool and heavy and right.

Ilya let out a sob he hadn't known he was holding back. "Thank you."

Then they collided. Shane's arms crushed Ilya's ribs, burying his face in Ilya's neck.

"You're here," Shane whispered into his neck, his arms crushing Ilya's ribs. "You're actually here."

"I am here," Ilya choked out, burying his face in Shane's shoulder. "I missed you."

They held on for a long moment, ignoring the stares of the people around them. Then, slowly, Ilya pulled back. He kept one arm around Shane's waist and turned to look at Sofia, who was standing a few feet away, eyeing the giant polar bear with suspicion.

"Shane," Ilya said, his voice thick with emotion. "This is Sofia."

Shane crouched down, balancing the bear on his knee so he was eye-level with her. His expression was gentle, open, filled with kindness.

"Privet, Sofia," Shane said softly in Russian. "Dobro pozhalovat'." *Welcome.*

Sofia stared at him. She looked at the bear. Then she looked at Ilya, checking for reassurance. Ilya nodded.

Slowly, shyly, she stepped forward. She reached out and touched the bear's soft fur.

"Privet," she whispered back.

Shane's smile softened. "This is for you," he said in English, then gestured to the bear. "For Sofia."

She took the bear, hugging it to her chest. It was almost as big as she was. "Spasibo," she murmured.

"Let's go home," Shane said, standing up and grabbing Ilya's hand, lacing their fingers together. His thumb brushed over Ilya's wedding ring.

The drive to the townhouse was quiet. Sofia fell asleep again in the backseat, clutching the bear. Ilya reached over the console and held Shane's hand the entire way, needing the physical connection to ground himself.

When they pulled into the driveway, the porch light was on. It cast a warm glow over the snow-covered lawn.

They walked inside. The house smelled of vanilla and cleaning products—Shane had clearly stress-cleaned.

And then there was the click-clack of claws.

Anya came bounding around the corner, tail wagging so hard her whole body shook. She stopped when she saw Sofia, tilting her head.

Sofia dropped her backpack. Her eyes lit up. "Sobaka!"

Anya trotted over, sniffing Sofia's hand gently, then gave it a tentative lick. Sofia giggled, the sound pure and light in the quiet house. She dropped to her knees and wrapped her arms around the dog's neck.

Ilya watched them, his arm around Shane's waist. The knot of tension that had been sitting in his chest for three weeks finally, truly unraveled.

"We did it," he whispered.

Shane kissed his temple. "Yeah. We did."

## Chapter 8

"Okay," Shane said, rubbing his hands together nervously. He looked at Sofia, then pointed up the stairs. "Sofia. *Poydem?*" *Let's go?*

It was one of the three verbs he had mastered, and he pronounced it with a uniquely Canadian twang that made Ilya's lips twitch despite his exhaustion.

Sofia looked at Ilya for confirmation. Ilya nodded. "Go with him. He wants to show you your room."

She clutched the polar bear tighter and followed Shane up the stairs. Anya, deciding that the small human was now her primary charge, trotted closely at Sofia's heels, her tags jingling softly.

Ilya stayed at the bottom of the stairs for a moment, listening.

"This," Shane's voice drifted down, followed by the sound of a door opening. "*Tvoy... komnata.*" *Your room.*

Ilya walked up the stairs silently, stopping in the doorway.

The guest room was gone. In its place was a sanctuary painted a soft, calming lavender. The sterile white duvet had been replaced with a fluffy purple comforter. There were fairy lights strung across the headboard, casting a warm glow. There was a desk with a new set of art supplies, and a bookshelf already stocked with books—some in English, but Ilya spotted several spines with Cyrillic titles that Shane must have specially ordered.

It didn't look like a temporary holding cell. It looked like a room for a little girl who was loved.

Ilya felt a burn behind his eyes. He leaned against the doorframe, watching Shane gesture enthusiastically at the closet.

"Clothes," Shane said, miming a shirt. "Tomorrow. Shopping."

Sofia stood in the middle of the room, looking around with wide, unbelieving eyes. She reached out and touched the fairy lights. Then she looked at the dog bed in the corner—Shane really had thought of everything—where Anya had already curled up.

"It is... purple," Sofia whispered in Russian.

"Do you like it?" Ilya asked from the doorway, keeping his voice soft.

Sofia spun around. "He did this?" she asked in Russian, pointing at Shane.

"Yes," Ilya said. "He painted it while we were waiting for the visa."

Sofia looked at Shane, who was watching her with an anxious, hopeful expression. She didn't smile, not quite, but her shoulders dropped an inch. "Spasibo," she mumbled to him.

Shane beamed. "You're welcome."

Ilya walked into the room and sat on the edge of the new bed. He patted the space beside him. "Come here, little bird. We need to talk about the plan."

Sofia sat down, placing the polar bear on her lap. Her guard went up instantly, that flicker of fear returning to her eyes. "What plan? Are you leaving?"

"No," Ilya said firmly in Russian. "I told you. I am not leaving. But you know I play hockey, right? Like Papa told you."

"Yes."

"Well, my job is here. And starting next week, you will have a job too."

Sofia frowned. "A job?"

"School," Ilya corrected with a small smile. "You are enrolled in the Ottawa International School. It is a very fancy place. And the best part? You will be in a program with other Russian speakers. You will have a helper who speaks Russian in your English classes until you learn the language."

Sofia picked at the fur on the bear's ear. "Will the kids be mean?"

"If they are, you tell me, and I will put them into the boards," Ilya said, deadpan. Sofia giggled, a startled little sound. "But no. They are used to kids from all over the world. You will make friends, I promise."

"Okay," she said quietly. "But... what about when you play hockey away? In other cities?"

"That is the other part of the plan," Ilya said. "Usually, when Shane and I travel, the team goes together. But for now... you are coming with us."

Sofia's head snapped up. "I am?"

"Yes. For the away games, you will fly on the plane with us. You will miss a little bit of school, but the teachers know. It is not permanent," Ilya explained. "Eventually, you will stay with Shane's parents—the Hollands. They live nearby. They are very nice, and they want to be in your life, But not until you are ready. Not until you know them and feel safe with them."

"So I stay with you?" she verified, her voice small. "In the hotels?"

"In the hotels," Ilya confirmed. "We have four home games this week, so we are here for a while. We have time to settle in. But when we go... you go."

Sofia let out a long breath, her body sagging against him. "Okay. That is good."

"And one more thing," Ilya said, his tone turning serious. He took her hand. "You have been through very scary things, Sofia. Things that are too big for a ten-year-old to carry alone."

She looked down at her lap.

"We have found a doctor," Ilya said gently. "Not a doctor with needles. A doctor for talking. A therapist. She speaks Russian."

Sofia stiffened. "I don't want to talk to a stranger. I'm not crazy."

"You are not crazy," Ilya assured her, squeezing her hand. "You are hurt. Inside. And just like a broken leg needs a doctor to set the bone, a hurt heart needs help to heal. And listen to me—this is important. Whatever you say to her... whatever secrets, or fears, or angry thoughts you have... she will never tell me. Or Shane. Or anyone. It is your safe place."

Sofia looked at him, searching his face for the lie. "She won't tell you if I say I hate you?"

Ilya's lips quirked. "Not even then. Though I hope you don't hate me too much."

Sofia was silent for a long moment. She looked at the purple walls, at the dog sleeping in the corner, and finally at Shane, who was pretending to organize books on the shelf to give them privacy.

"I don't hate you," she whispered in Russian. "I'm just tired."

"I know," Ilya murmured, pulling her into a side hug. "I know. You are safe now, Sofia. We have got you."

"Okay," she said, her eyes drooping. "Okay."

Ilya looked up at Shane. Shane turned, catching Ilya's eye, and gave him a thumbs up.

"She's okay?" Shane asked in English.

"Yeah," Ilya said, switching languages, his voice thick. "She's home."

They left Sofia in her room, the door wide open so she could hear the sounds of the house—the hum of the fridge, the creak of the floorboards, the low murmur of voices. It was a strategy to let her know she wasn't locked away, that she was part of the ecosystem now.

They walked downstairs in silence, the emotional weight of the last hour settling around them.

The moment they crossed the threshold into the kitchen, out of the direct line of sight from the stairs, Shane turned. He didn't say anything; he just reached out and pulled Ilya in by the lapels of his jacket.

The kiss was soft, desperate, and utterly necessary. They had been careful in the car, careful at the airport, careful in the hallway—holding back the easy, constant affection that usually

defined their life together so they wouldn't overwhelm a terrified ten-year-old. But here, in the sanctuary of their kitchen, the dam broke.

Ilya let out a ragged sigh, melting into Shane's touch. He tasted like coffee and home. Ilya wrapped his arms around Shane's waist, holding him tight, grounding himself in the solid reality of his husband.

"I missed you," Shane murmured against his lips. "God, I missed you."

"I am never leaving again," Ilya whispered back, pressing his forehead against Shane's. "Not without you."

They stood there for a long time, just breathing each other in, listening to the faint sounds of Anya settling in upstairs with Sofia.

"We have to feed her," Ilya said eventually, reluctantly pulling back.

"Yeah. And the game starts in an hour," Shane said, glancing at the clock. "It feels weird not being there. Especially against Boston."

"Boston," Ilya scoffed, moving to the fridge. "My old prison."

"Your old team," Shane corrected, though he was smiling. "They drafted you first overall in 2008. Show some respect."

Tonight, the strict nutritional plan was going out the window. Ilya bypassed the kale and the lean turkey. He grabbed potatoes, carrots, onions, and the beef Shane had bought. He pulled out the dill.

"Russian food?" Shane asked, leaning his hip against the counter.

"Comfort food," Ilya corrected. "She needs to smell something familiar. And... honestly? So do I."

By 6:00 PM, the kitchen smelled rich and savory, the scent of *solyanka* filling the air. It was a hearty, thick soup that Ilya hadn't made in years because of the sodium content, but watching Sofia eat two full bowls with a hunk of crusty bread made it worth every calorie.

After dinner, they moved to the living room. Ilya set up his laptop on the coffee table, connecting it to the big screen TV so they could watch the broadcast properly.

"This is the team," Ilya explained to Sofia in Russian, pointing at the screen as the Centaurs skated out for warmups. "See the C on that jersey? That is usually me. And the A? That is Shane."

Sofia watched with wide eyes, clutching her polar bear. "Why aren't you there?"

"Because we are here with you," Ilya said simply.

The game began. It was a grinder against the Boston Raiders, physical and fast. Ilya and Shane fell into their usual rhythm of commentary, pointing out missed assignments and good forechecks, translating the gist for Sofia.

Then, during the first intermission, the camera cut to the analyst desk.

"Of course, the story tonight isn't just about who is on the ice, but who isn't," the lead commentator said, his face grave. "Ilya Rozanov and Shane Hollander are both scratches for tonight's game, citing 'family issues'."

Ilya stiffened.

"We haven't seen or heard anything about Rozanov outside of these 'family issues' for the past month," the second commentator chimed in, leaning forward eagerly. "He essentially disappeared from the face of the earth. And now with Hollander out too? This team is going to struggle without their leadership core."

"It does make you wonder," the first commentator added, lowering his voice conspiratorially. "The pair have been married for the past three seasons and have seemed strong on and off the ice. But for Rozanov to vanish, and Hollander to refuse all media availability for weeks? You have to ask if there's trouble in paradise."

Shane moved so fast he blurred. He grabbed the remote and hit Mute, plunging the room into silence.

"Do they have anything better to talk about?" Shane muttered, tossing the remote onto the sofa cushion. "Vultures."

Sofia looked between them, her brow furrowed. She looked at the silent screen, then at Ilya's tense jaw and Shane's angry expression.

"What did they say?" she asked in Russian, her voice trembling slightly. "Why did you turn off the sound?"

Ilya took a breath, forcing his shoulders to relax. "They were just talking about why Shane and I are not playing tonight," he explained in Russian.

Sofia shrank back against the cushions. She looked down at her bear. "Is it... is it my fault?" she whispered. "Because I came here?"

Ilya's heart broke. He opened his mouth to reassure her, to tell her that the media were idiots, but Shane beat him to it.

Shane shifted on the couch, turning his full attention to Sofia. He looked her right in the eye.

*"Net, sladkaya,"* Shane said.

Ilya froze. He stared at his husband.

Shane spoke slowly, his accent thick and clunky, enunciating every syllable with careful precision. *"Eto... ne... tvoya... vina. Sovsem."*

*No, sweetie. It is not your fault. At all.*

Sofia looked up, surprised. "You speak Russian?"

Shane looked at Ilya for help. Ilya, whose heart was currently melting into a puddle on the floor, quickly translated.

"He is learning," Ilya told her, his voice thick with love. "He learned that just for you."

Shane reached out and patted Sofia's knee awkwardly. *"Ty... vazhna,"* he tried, looking at Ilya to check if he got it right. *You are important.*

Ilya nodded, smiling so wide it hurt. "Perfect."

Sofia looked at Shane, really looked at him, and for the first time, the wariness in her eyes softened into something like trust. She gave a tiny nod.

"Okay," she whispered.

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"Okay," she whispered.

Later, when the game ended and the adrenaline of the win faded, Ilya guided Sofia back upstairs. She moved sluggishly, the emotional exhaustion finally catching up to her.

He helped her find her pajamas—new ones Shane had bought, soft flannel with stars on them—and waited outside while she changed. When he went back in to tuck her in, she looked small in the big bed, clutching the giant polar bear Shane had given her.

"Tomorrow," Ilya said softly in Russian, sitting on the edge of the mattress and smoothing the duvet, "we are going to have a busy day. You will come to the practice facility with us."

Sofia blinked up at him, sleepy and wary. "To the hockey place?"

"Yes. You will meet the team. They are very loud, but very nice," Ilya promised. "Shane has told them all about you. They are excited to meet you."

He brushed a stray hair off her forehead. "And after that? We go to the mall."

"The mall?"

"Yes. A very big mall. We will get you everything you need. New shoes, clothes, books, toys... whatever you want." Ilya leaned in, a conspiratorial grin tugging at his lips. "Get the expensive things. Shane is paying."

A small, sleepy smile touched Sofia's lips. "Okay."

Ilya stood up, walking to the door. He pointed across the hallway to the slightly ajar door of the master bedroom.

"That is my room," Ilya said, his voice turning serious again. "Mine and Shane's. If you wake up, if you have a bad dream, if you just need a glass of water... you come and find us. Okay, sweet little bird? The door is never locked for you."

Sofia looked at the open door across the hall, then back at Ilya. The tension in her shoulders seemed to unspool just a fraction more.

"Okay, Uncle Il'yusha," she whispered. "Goodnight."

"Goodnight, Sofia."

Ilya left the door open a crack, just as she liked it, and walked across the hall to where his husband was waiting.

## Chapter 9

The next morning, the smell of bacon frying was the first thing to penetrate Ilya's jet-lagged brain.

He rolled over, reaching for Shane, but the other side of the bed was cold. He groaned, stretching his aching limbs, and shuffled out to the hallway.

Downstairs, Shane was moving around the kitchen with efficient quietness, flipping pancakes. He looked up when Ilya entered, a soft smile touching his lips.

"Morning, Cap," Shane said, offering him a mug of coffee. "Sleep okay?"

"Like the dead," Ilya mumbled, taking the mug and pressing a kiss to Shane's cheek. "What time is it?"

"Eight. We need to leave for the rink in an hour."

Ilya nodded, sipping the coffee. "I should wake Sofia."

"I'll do it," Shane volunteered, wiping his hands on a towel. "I need the practice. And you look like you need ten more minutes with that coffee."

Ilya raised an eyebrow. "You are brave. Ten-year-olds are not morning people."

"I handle you in the morning," Shane teased. "I can handle a kid."

Shane walked up the stairs, his heart beating a little faster than usual. He knocked softly on the purple door.

"Sofia?"

No answer. He pushed the door open. Sofia was buried under the purple duvet, only a tuft of dark hair visible. She was fast asleep, clutching the polar bear.

Shane sat on the edge of the bed. He gently shook her shoulder. "Sofia? Hey."

She groaned, shifting away from him. She muttered something rapid and slurred in Russian. Shane furrowed his brow, trying to parse the sounds. It sounded like *five more minutes* or maybe *go away*.

He took a breath and tried his prepared phrase. "*Sofia... pora... vstavat'.*" *It is time to get up.*

Sofia poked her head out from the covers. She blinked at him, groggy and confused. "Shane?" she asked in Russian.

"Da," Shane smiled. "Good morning. *Dobroye utro.*"

She rubbed her eyes, sitting up slowly. She looked small and disheveled. "Dobroye utro," she whispered.

"Come on," Shane said in English, gesturing to the bathroom. Then, remembering, he switched languages. "*Poydem.*"

He helped her pick out clothes—jeans and a hoodie that looked a little tight in the shoulders—and waited while she washed her face. When she came out, her hair was a tangled mess.

"Do you want... uh..." Shane mimed tying a hair tie.

Sofia nodded, handing him a bobble from the dresser. He made quick work of brushing her dark hair into a neat high ponytail.

When they walked into the kitchen, Ilya was sitting at the island, typing furiously on his phone. He looked up immediately, his face softening. He set the phone down, abandoning the email to the immigration lawyers.

"Good morning, little bird," Ilya said in Russian, beaming at her. "You look very pretty today."

Sofia grinned. She spun around in a circle, the oversized polar bear held out by one paw as she twirled. She giggled, the sound bright and happy.

Shane caught Ilya's eye over her head. They shared a look—a small, silent nod. *We're doing this. It's working.*

The practice facility was quiet when they arrived, giving them time to get Sofia settled.

"This is the war room," Ilya told her in Russian, leading her into the coaches' office suite. Coach had graciously offered his spare office for the week. "You can sit here. You have your coloring, your iPad... and if you need us, you just come out that door, okay?"

Sofia looked around the room, eyeing the whiteboard covered in diagrams. "Okay."

By the time the rest of the team started trickling in, the buzz was immediate.

"Rozanov!" Fabian was the first to spot him, clapping him on the shoulder. "Good to have you back, man. Sorry about... you know."

"Yeah, Cap. Glad you're back," another teammate added.

Then the whispers started. "Is that the kid? Is she here?"

"Shane told us," the goalie said quietly to Ilya. "About the adoption. That's... that's amazing, Ilya. Really."

Ilya nodded, appreciating their low voices. "She is in the office. She starts school next week. For now... she is Assistant Coach."

The guys laughed.

Practice was high-tempo. Ilya felt the rust shaking off with every stride, the familiar burn in his lungs grounding him. But every twenty minutes, like clockwork, either he or Shane would skate to the bench, drink some water, and peek through the glass into the office hallway to make sure she was okay.

She was always there, head bent over her drawing or watching cartoons on the iPad, seemingly content.

"The mall," Ilya announced as they drove away from the rink, the afternoon sun glaring off the snowbanks. "We are going shopping."

Sofia sat in the back, looking out the window. She didn't look excited. She looked overwhelmed.

The Rideau Centre was busy. The noise, the lights, the sheer volume of people speaking a language she didn't understand made Sofia shrink into herself. She walked between Shane and Ilya, clutching Ilya's hand with a death grip.

They went into a clothing store for kids. Racks of colorful clothes stretched out in every direction.

"Pick whatever you want," Ilya said in Russian, gesturing broadly. "Do you like this? Or this?" He held up a sequined sweater.

Sofia stared at it. She shrugged, looking at the floor.

"Sofia," Ilya said gently, kneeling down. "You need clothes. Everything you have is too small. What do you like? Blue? Pink? Black like your emo uncle?"

Sofia scuffed her shoe against the tile. "I don't need anything," she mumbled in Russian. "It is too expensive. I am... I don't want to be a burden."

Ilya felt like he'd been slapped. "You are not a burden," he said fiercely. "Never. I have plenty of money. Shane has plenty of money. We want to buy this for you."

"But..." she hesitated, her voice dropping to a whisper. "Papa never bought me new clothes. After Mama left... he said we didn't have money for that. He said I had to make do."

Ilya closed his eyes, a surge of rage at his dead brother warring with the grief.

He heard a sharp intake of breath behind him. He looked up. Shane was standing there, having understood the gist of the Russian—*Papa never bought... money... make do*. Tears were standing in Shane's eyes.

"I need a second," Shane choked out. He turned and walked out of the store, wiping his eyes with his sleeve.

Ilya turned back to Sofia. "Your Papa... he had problems," Ilya said carefully in Russian. "But we are different. Okay? Please. Pick a shirt. For me?"

Sofia hesitated, then reached out and touched a soft blue hoodie. "This one?"

"Perfect," Ilya smiled. "We'll get it in every color."

They managed to pick out a few outfits, though Sofia checked the price tag on every single item with anxious eyes.

They were walking out of the store, bags in hand, when a group of teenagers stopped them.

"Oh my god! Are you Ilya Rozanov?" one girl squealed in English. "And Shane Hollander? Can we get a photo?"

Ilya stepped in front of Sofia instinctively. "Not today," he said, his voice polite but firm. "We are busy."

"Just one?" the boy in the group pushed, holding up his phone. "Come on, man, we're huge fans."

"No," Shane said, stepping up beside Ilya, his voice hard. "He said no. Back off."

The teenagers looked offended, muttering as they walked away, but the damage was done.

Sofia was looking around wildly. People were staring. She didn't understand the words, but she understood the tone. She understood the phones pointing at them. She understood that her uncle and Shane were tense, defensive.

"What is happening?" she cried in Russian, her voice rising in panic. "Why are they angry? Did we do something wrong?"

"No, no," Ilya tried to soothe her, reaching for her shoulder. "They are just fans, Sofia. It is okay." he said in Russian

"I don't understand!" she cried in Russian, pulling away from him. Tears streamed down her face. "I don't understand what they are saying! It's too loud! Everyone is looking!"

She looked small and lost in the middle of the mall concourse, surrounded by strangers speaking a language that sounded like static to her ears. The disorientation, the trauma, the stress of the day—it all crashed down at once.

"I want to go," she sobbed. "Please, Uncle Il'yusha. Take me away."

Ilya looked at Shane. Shane was already grabbing the bags.

"Let's go," Shane said.

They abandoned the rest of the shopping trip. They walked quickly to the car, Sofia crying silently the whole way, clutching her new blue hoodie to her chest like a lifeline. They hadn't

bought shoes. They hadn't bought toys. But they had to get her out.

When they got back to the townhouse, the silence of the car ride shattered the moment the front door closed. Sofia didn't wait to take off her boots; she bolted up the stairs, the sound of her small feet heavy with distress.

Ilya followed her immediately, signaling for Shane to stay back. He found her in the middle of her purple room, throwing the blue hoodie onto the floor.

"I want to go home!" she screamed in Russian, her face blotchy and wet. "I hate it here! I hate the people! I hate the noise!"

Ilya closed the door softly behind him and knelt down, though she backed away from him as if he were the enemy.

"Sofia, *milaya*," Ilya pleaded in Russian, holding his hands out. "Please. Breathe. You are safe here."

"I am not safe!" she shouted, her voice cracking. "I don't understand anything! I want to go home! Take me back to Russia! Take me back to the apartment!"

"We can't," Ilya said, his voice trembling with the effort to stay calm. "We cannot go back, Sofia. This is home now."

"This is not home!" she sobbed, sinking to the floor and pulling her knees to her chest. "My home smells like tea and dust! This place smells like... like nothing! It smells like strangers!"

"It will smell like us soon," Ilya tried, inching closer.

"No!" She buried her face in her knees, rocking back and forth. "I want my Papa. I want Sveta. I want to go home. Please, Uncle Il'yusha, please take me back."

The begging broke him. It tore through the composure he had been meticulously maintaining since the funeral. But he couldn't show it. He couldn't let her see that he was just as terrified as she was.

"I can't take you back," Ilya whispered, reaching out to stroke her hair. She flinched but didn't pull away. "I can't. But I am here. I am right here."

She cried for what felt like hours, though it was probably only twenty minutes. It was a jagged, exhausting release of weeks of trauma. Eventually, the shouting turned to whimpers, and the whimpers turned to heavy, uneven breathing.

She didn't move from the floor, so Ilya sat with her, rubbing her back in slow, rhythmic circles until her body went slack against the carpet. She had cried herself to sleep.

Gently, terrified of waking her, Ilya lifted her up. She was so light. He placed her on the bed, pulling the purple duvet over her shoulders, and tucked the polar bear under her arm.

He stood over her for a moment, watching her sleep. Her face was still stained with tears.

*I am failing her*; he thought, the guilt tasting like bile in his throat.

He turned and walked out of the room, leaving the door cracked open.

He took two steps into the hallway and stopped. Shane was there. He was sitting on the floor against the opposite wall, knees drawn up, waiting.

Shane looked up. He took one look at Ilya's face—at the mask that had finally slipped—and scrambled to his feet.

"Ilya?"

Ilya crumbled.

He took a stumbling step forward and Shane caught him, wrapping his arms around Ilya's shoulders and pulling him into his chest. Ilya buried his face in the crook of Shane's neck, his hands gripping the back of Shane's shirt so hard it threatened to tear.

He broke down, silent, shaking sobs racking his body.

"I can't fix it," Ilya gasped into Shane's skin. "Shane, she wants to go home. She hates me. I can't... I don't know how to fix it."

"Shh," Shane soothed, one hand cupping the back of Ilya's head, holding him tight. He pressed a kiss into Ilya's hair. "You've got her. We've got her. It's just day one, Ilya. It's just day one."

"She was so scared," Ilya wept. "I dragged her here and she is terrified."

"She's safe," Shane whispered, rocking them slightly. "She's grieving, and she's scared, but she is safe. You didn't fail her. You got her out. You saved her life."

Ilya clung to him, letting Shane's steady heartbeat anchor him against the storm.

Eventually, when Ilya's legs threatened to give out, Shane gently pulled back. "Come on," he murmured. "Bedroom."

He led Ilya into their master suite. It was only four in the afternoon, the winter sun still casting long shadows against the blinds, but Ilya felt like he had been awake for a week.

Shane helped him out of his jacket, his hands warm and steady. He unbuttoned Ilya's shirt, pushing the fabric off his shoulders, and guided him to sit on the edge of the mattress.

"Sit," Shane commanded softly. He knelt, but instead of just untying Ilya's shoes, his hands moved up Ilya's thighs.

Ilya watched him, his eyes burning with exhaustion and a sudden, desperate need. "Shane?"

"You need to get out of your head, Ilya," Shane whispered, looking up at him with dark, devoted eyes. "Let me help you."

Shane didn't wait for an answer. He leaned forward, his hands working the buckle of Ilya's belt. It wasn't about romance, or even passion, really. It was about medicine. It was about grounding Ilya in his body so he could stop drowning in his mind.

When Shane's mouth finally closed over him, Ilya let out a broken, shuddering breath. His head fell back against the pillows, his hands tangling in Shane's hair. The sensation was a sharp, blinding anchor in the storm of his thoughts. For the first time in weeks, the worry about visas, the fear for Sofia, the grief for Alexei—it all blurred into the background, replaced by the overwhelming reality of Shane.

Shane took his time, thorough and worshipful, until Ilya was gasping, arching off the mattress, the tension snapping like a rubber band.

Afterward, the room was quiet, save for their breathing. Shane crawled up the bed, wiping his mouth, and kissed Ilya deeply.

"Better?" Shane asked against his lips.

Ilya nodded, his limbs heavy and loose. "Yeah."

"Good. Now sleep. take a nap, you need it and im right here"

Ilya didn't argue. He curled onto his side, pulling Shane down with him. It was early, and the world was still waiting outside the door, but for now, Ilya was safe.

## Chapter 10

Two days later, the adrenaline of the rescue mission had completely evaporated, leaving behind a grinding, exhausting reality that felt heavier than a triple-overtime loss.

It was 10:00 PM on a Thursday. Ilya had finally managed to get Sofia to sleep after an hour of reading to her in Russian. The house was quiet, but it was a tense, fragile silence, like the air before a thunderstorm.

Shane sat on the floor of his home office, his back pressed against the doorframe. He had a tumbler of water in his hand that he hadn't taken a sip of in twenty minutes. He stared at the contact name on his phone screen: *Hayden Hayes*.

He needed a lifeline. He needed someone who wasn't Ilya—because he couldn't burden Ilya with his own insecurities right now—and someone who wasn't Coach or the PR team.

He hit dial.

It rang three times before Hayden picked up. The background noise suggested a chaotic household—the hum of a TV, a child shouting something about Lego, and the clatter of dishes.

"Hollander?" Hayden's voice was warm, surprised. "I thought you'd be buried under a mountain of paperwork or babyproofing the house. How's life on the d-ad side?"

Shane let out a breath that was half-laugh, half-sob. "Hayds. I... I have no idea what I'm doing."

The background noise on Hayden's end dipped, like he'd stepped into another room and closed the door. "Talk to me, Shane. What's going on? Is she okay?"

"She's... she's safe," Shane said, rubbing a hand over his face. "She's physically fine. But she's traumatized, Hayden. Deeply. And I am... I am completely useless."

"Useless how?"

"In every way that matters," Shane confessed, the words tumbling out now that the dam had broken. "She speaks almost no English. I speak... maybe twenty words of Russian, and half of them are sex terms that don't really help when a ten-year-old is crying because she misses her dead father. I try to talk to her, and she just looks at me with these big, terrified eyes, like she's waiting for me to yell at her. Or worse, she looks at me like she hates me."

"Whoa, slow down," Hayden said gently. "First of all, she doesn't hate you. She's ten. She's scared. You're a stranger who lives in a strange house in a strange country where the snow smells different. Hate is just fear with nowhere to go."

"She told Ilya she hated me," Shane whispered, the confession hurting his throat. "Back in Russia. She blamed me for them having to leave. She said if it wasn't for me, Ilya could have stayed there."

"Ouch," Hayden winced. "Okay, that stings. But is it true?"

"Technically? Yes. If Ilya wasn't married to a man, maybe he could have stayed. Maybe he could have fought for custody there. But... it's not safe for him. He knows that. But she doesn't. To her, I'm just the reason she lost her home right after she lost her dad."

"Shane, listen to me," Hayden's voice was firm, "You are the reason she has a home. You are the reason she isn't in a state orphanage sleeping on a cot with fifty other kids. Ilya couldn't do this alone. He needs you. She needs you, even if she doesn't know it yet."

"I just feel like I'm failing her," Shane said, picking at the carpet. "Every interaction is a struggle. Yesterday, I tried to make her lunch. I made a grilled cheese. Classic, right? Every kid loves grilled cheese. She looked at it like I'd put poison on the plate. She wouldn't eat it. She just... sat there. Ilya had to come in and make her some kind of soup because she wouldn't touch my food."

"It's not about your cooking, even though we both know your culinary skills are... utilitarian," Hayden joked lightly. "It's about control, Shane. She's lost control over everything. Where she lives, who she lives with, what language she hears. Food is the one thing she can control. My twins went through a phase where they would only eat white foods. Rice, bread, pasta. If it had color, they screamed. It's normal kid stuff, dialed up to eleven because of the trauma."

"So what do I do?" Shane asked, desperate for a playbook. "Do I force her to eat? Do I let her starve? I feel like I'm walking on eggshells. I'm afraid to discipline her, I'm afraid to comfort her... I'm afraid to even look at her sometimes because I don't want to freak her out."

"You don't force her," Hayden said. "You offer. You leave snacks around that she can take without asking. A bowl of apples in her room. Granola bars. Let her know that food is available and she doesn't have to perform for it. And as for the rest... you just have to be there. You have to be a consistent, boring presence."

"Boring I can do," Shane muttered.

"I'm serious. Don't try to be 'Fun Dad' right now. Don't try to win her over with big gestures. Just be the guy who is always there. The guy who drives the car. The guy who smiles at her even when she scowls. The guy who keeps the house warm." Hayden paused. "How's Ilya holding up?"

"He's shattering," Shane admitted, looking at the closed door. "He's trying so hard to be strong for her. He speaks Russian to her constantly, trying to bridge the gap. He's slept on the floor of her room last night just so she didn't feel abandoned at night. But I see him. He's exhausted. He's grieving his brother, he's worried about the team, he's worried about me feeling left out... and he's terrified he's going to mess her up."

"You guys are a team," Hayden reminded him. "That's your biggest strength. You cover for each other on the ice, you cover for each other here. If Ilya is the emotional anchor because of the language, you be the logistical anchor. You handle the school paperwork. You handle the doctors. You keep the fridge full. You walk the dog."

"Anya is actually the only one she likes," Shane said with a small smile. "She loves the dog."

"There you go!" Hayden exclaimed. "That's your in. The dog is your bridge. You walk the dog together. You don't have to talk. You just walk. You show her how to clip the leash on. You show her how to give treats. It's non-verbal bonding, Shane. It takes the pressure off the language."

Shane nodded, even though Hayden couldn't see him. "That's... that's actually a really good idea."

"I have four kids, Shane. I know things," Hayden laughed. "But seriously. The language barrier... it sucks, but it's not forever. Kids are sponges. In six months, she'll be correcting your grammar. Until then? Google Translate is your friend. Picture books. Charades. It's okay to look silly. Actually, it's better if you look silly. It makes you less intimidating."

"I feel pretty silly already," Shane sighed. "I spent twenty minutes yesterday trying to explain 'shower' versus 'bath' using hand gestures. I think she thinks I'm interpretive dancing."

Hayden snorted. "See? Memories. You're making memories. Look, Shane... about the 'she hates me' thing. My daughter told me she hated me last week because I wouldn't let her wear pajamas to school. It's the age, combined with the grief. Don't take it personally. She's directing her anger at the safest target. If she's yelling at you, it means she feels safe enough to yell. If she was truly terrified of you, she'd be silent."

Shane absorbed that. Sofia was silent a lot, but she had yelled at the mall. She had screamed about wanting to go home.

"She had a panic attack at the mall," Shane said quietly. "Some fans recognized us. Tried to take photos. She freaked out. She didn't understand what was happening. We had to leave."

"That's rough," Hayden sympathized. "Ottawa is a fishbowl. Maybe... maybe keep her away from the public eye for a bit. Stay home. Build a fortress. Let her see that you can protect her from the world. If you need to go out, go somewhere quiet. A park. The woods. Somewhere where you're just Shane, not 'Hollander the Superstar'."

"Yeah," Shane murmured. "Yeah, we need to do that."

"Exactly. Shrink the world until she feels big enough to handle it." Hayden paused, his voice softening. "You're doing a good thing, Shane. A hard thing, but a good thing. Don't measure your success by whether she smiles at you today. Measure it by whether she feels safe enough to fall asleep."

Shane looked up at the ceiling, thinking of the purple room upstairs where a little girl was finally sleeping under a duvet he had picked out.

"She's asleep now," Shane said.

"Then you won today," Hayden declared. "That's a win in the column. Take it."

"Thanks, Hayds," Shane said, feeling the tight knot in his chest loosen just a fraction. "Really. Thank you."

"Anytime, buddy. Call me whenever. And hey... get some sleep yourself. You can't be a solid rock if you're crumbling from exhaustion."

"I will. Give my love to the twins."

"Will do. Hang in there, Hollander."

Shane hung up. He sat there for another minute in the silence of his office. Then, he took a sip of his water.

*Shrink the world, he thought. Walk the dog. Be the boring guy.*

He stood up, his legs stiff from sitting on the floor. He walked out of the office and headed for the kitchen. He opened the pantry and found a basket. He filled it with granola bars, a bag of pretzels, two apples, and a box of juice.

He walked quietly up the stairs. The door to Sofia's room was still cracked open.

Moving like a ghost, Shane slipped inside. He placed the basket of snacks on her desk, right where she would see it when she woke up. No pressure. No performance. just food, available if she needed it.

He paused by the bed. Sofia was sprawled out, one arm flung over the polar bear. She looked peaceful.

"Goodnight, Sofia," he whispered in English, knowing she couldn't hear him.

He backed out of the room, leaving the door ajar, and went to find his husband.

Ilya was sitting up in bed, his glasses perched on his nose, an iPad resting on his knees. He wasn't reading, though. He was just staring at the screen, his expression tight with worry.

"Who were you talking to?" Ilya asked softly as Shane climbed into bed.

"Hayden," Shane said, stealing the iPad and setting it on the nightstand. He wrapped his arms around Ilya's waist, burying his face in the familiar warmth of his neck. "I needed... I needed a pep talk."

Ilya stiffened slightly, then relaxed, his hand coming up to stroke Shane's hair. "And? Did he tell you to run while you still can?"

"He told me to be boring," Shane mumbled into Ilya's skin. "He said I'm trying too hard. That I just need to be there. Like furniture. But, you know, supportive furniture."

Ilya let out a huff of laughter. "You are very expensive furniture, Hollander."

"He also said to use the dog," Shane added, pulling back to look at Ilya. "Said animals bridge the gap when words don't work."

Ilya looked thoughtful. "Anya likes her. And she likes Anya."

"Exactly. So tomorrow morning... I'm going to walk the dog. And I'm going to ask her to come. No pressure. No big speeches in broken Russian. Just walking."

Ilya searched Shane's face, his dark eyes vulnerable. "You are a good man, Shane. Better than I deserve. Certainly better than this mess deserves."

"Shut up," Shane said gently, kissing him. "We're a team. We cover for each other. Now turn off the brain, Rozanov. We have a dog to walk in the morning."

The next morning, the basket of snacks was gone from the desk.

Shane noticed it when he walked past the open door on his way downstairs. A wrapper from a granola bar was in the trash can. *Victory*.

He went down to the kitchen and started a pot of coffee. He didn't make a big breakfast spread this time—no performative pancakes. He just made toast and cut up some fruit, leaving it on the counter.

When Sofia padded into the kitchen ten minutes later, clutching her bear, she looked wary. She eyed Shane, then the toast.

"Dobroye utro," Shane said, keeping his voice low and casual. He didn't smile too big. He just nodded.

"Dobroye utro," she mumbled, taking a piece of toast.

Shane drank his coffee, leaning against the counter. He waited until she had finished eating. Then, he whistled.

Anya came trotting in from the living room, her nails clicking on the hardwood. She sat at Shane's feet, looking up expectantly.

Shane grabbed the leash from the hook. He looked at Sofia. He held up the leash.

"Anya," Shane said, pointing to the dog. Then he pointed to the door. "Walk?"

It was English, but the pantomime was clear.

Sofia looked at the dog, then at the snowy window, then at Shane. She hesitated.

Shane didn't push. He just clipped the leash onto Anya's collar and started putting on his boots. He acted like he was going anyway, with or without her.

He was tying his left lace when he heard the soft *zip* of a coat being fastened.

He looked up. Sofia was pulling on her boots.

Shane felt a surge of triumph so strong he almost grinned, but he tamped it down. *Be boring.*

"Okay," Shane said.

They walked out into the cold Ottawa morning. The air was crisp and clean. The street was quiet.

Shane handed the leash to Sofia.

She looked surprised, her eyes widening. "Me?" she asked in Russian, pointing to her chest.

"Da," Shane said. "You."

She took the leash, wrapping it carefully around her gloved hand. Anya, sensing the change in command, slowed her pace to match Sofia's shorter stride.

They walked for twenty minutes. They didn't speak. Shane didn't try to teach her English words for 'snow' or 'tree'. He just walked beside her, hands in his pockets, letting the silence be comfortable instead of heavy.

When Anya stopped to sniff a particularly interesting fire hydrant, Sofia giggled. It was a small sound, but in the quiet morning air, it sounded like music.

She looked up at Shane, her cheeks pink from the cold. She didn't say anything, but she didn't look away immediately either.

Shane offered her a small nod. She nodded back.

when they arrived at a small park Shane pulled out Anya's favourite frisbee from his jacket pocket and unclipped her leash, "you wanna throw it for her?"

she looked at him for a moment before opening her mouth and closing it again.

"let me show you," Shane said softly, before throwing the frisbee for Anya who went chasing it. Sofia watched as the dog ran across the park before Shane called her back,

when she came back Shane coached down her her height and started betting her "You are such a good girl," he invited Sofia to join him which she did petting the dog, it wasn't much but it was a small win. that was until Anya had decided Sofia was her new favourite human, Shane watched as the pair ran around the park playing before coming back to him, when they got back to him however Anya was a bit more excitable wanting the treats that Shane had placed in his pocket incase he needed them, this caused her to run a bit to fast and knock Sofia over.

Shane ran over to her checking she was okay but she was on the floor rolling around laughing, "you're only ment to be tripping ilya up," Shane laughed helping Sofia up and clipping Anaya back onto her leash.

they didn't have a full conversation that wasn't really possible but it was better than nothing

## Chapter 11

A week had passed since the disaster at the mall, and a fragile ecosystem had begun to develop in the townhouse.

It was a ecosystem of two distinct zones. With Ilya, Sofia was becoming vocal, almost chatty. She would sit on the counter while he cooked, narrating her thoughts in rapid-fire Russian, complaining about the weird Canadian snow or asking endless questions about when they could get a cat to keep Anya company. She clung to him like a burr, needing his physical presence to feel grounded.

With Shane, the air was different. It wasn't hostile anymore—the "I hate you" outburst hadn't been repeated—but it was wary. She watched him with wide, assessing eyes. She ate the food he put out, she walked the dog with him in the mornings, but she rarely spoke to him, and if he moved too quickly, she would flinch and drift closer to Ilya.

The morning of her first day of school arrived with a heavy, gray sky and a palpable sense of dread hanging over the breakfast table.

Ilya had woken Sofia up gently, whispering in Russian until she blinked open her eyes. She had been clingy immediately, burying her face in his stomach and mumbling that her stomach hurt, that she didn't want to go. It took twenty minutes of soothing and a promise of ice cream later to get her out of bed.

He laid out her new uniform—a white polo and a navy skirt—and waited while she dressed. When she came out of the bathroom, her hair was a tangled crow's nest.

"Come here," Ilya said, sitting on the edge of her bed. He picked up the hairbrush. "Let me fix this. You want to look sharp for the new school, yes?"

"I guess," she grumbled in Russian, sitting between his knees.

Ilya tried. He really did. But Ilya's hands, usually so dexterous with a hockey stick, felt like clumsy paws when dealing with fine, slippery hair. He pulled too hard twice, making her wince, and the resulting ponytail was lopsided, with bumps of hair sticking out at odd angles.

Sofia reached up, touching the mess. She frowned at her reflection in the mirror.

"It is bumpy," she critiqued in Russian. Then, quiet and reluctant: "Shane does it better."

Ilya froze for a second, surprised by the admission. Shane had done her hair twice in the last week during their morning routine, usually while Ilya was in the shower.

"You are right," Ilya admitted with a self-deprecating smile. "He has practiced on his sisters. I only practice on... well, I don't have hair to practice on."

He walked to the door and whistled. "Hollander! You are summoned!"

Shane appeared a moment later, toothbrush hanging out of his mouth, looking panicked, his eyes darting to Sofia to check for tears. "What? Is she okay?"

"She is fine," Ilya said, leaning against the doorframe. "She has fired me as her stylist. She says you do it better."

Shane's eyes widened. He looked at Sofia. She didn't smile at him, but she didn't look away either. She just turned her back to him and held out the hair tie.

A slow, soft grin spread across Shane's face. He quickly ran to the bathroom, spat out his toothpaste, and came back.

"Okay," Shane said gently, kneeling behind her. "Let's fix this."

The difference in her body language was subtle but telling. With Ilya, she leaned back against his legs. With Shane, she sat straight, holding herself still. She didn't chat. She didn't wiggle. But she let him work.

Shane worked with gentle, practiced hands, smoothing out the bumps and securing the tie without pulling a single strand.

"Good?" Shane asked in English, stepping back.

Sofia touched the smooth ponytail. She gave a stiff nod. "Good," she whispered in English.

Shane looked like he'd just won the Vezina.

The drop-off was a two-man operation. They walked her to the front gate of the Ottawa International School. The principal, who had been briefed on the situation, met them there with a Russian-speaking aide named Elena.

Sofia looked at the big brick building, then at Ilya. Her lower lip trembled, and she grabbed Ilya's hand, burying her face in his coat sleeve.

"I don't want to," she whimpered in Russian. "Don't leave me here."

Ilya's heart shattered. He crouched down, ignoring the damp pavement, and framed her face with his hands.

"I will be back at 3:00," Ilya promised in Russian, his voice fierce. "Right here. I will not be late. You have the phone in your bag. If you are scared, you text me. Okay?"

"3:00," she repeated, checking the watch they had bought her at the mall, her eyes wet.

"Go on," Ilya nudged her gently. "Be brave. You are a Rozanov."

She took a deep breath, gripped her backpack straps, and walked toward Elena. She looked back once, just before the doors closed, her eyes finding Ilya first, then flickering briefly to Shane before looking away.

As soon as she was gone, Ilya let out a breath that rattled in his chest. He felt unsteady.

Shane squeezed his shoulder, a solid, grounding weight. "She'll be okay, Ilya. Kids are resilient."

"I hope so," Ilya whispered, leaning into Shane's touch for just a second before straightening up. "I really hope so."

The rest of the day was a blur of pre-game anxiety and clock-watching. When 3:00 PM finally rolled around, they were waiting at the gate. Sofia came out looking tired but dry-eyed.

"How was it?" Ilya asked immediately as she climbed into the car.

"It was okay," she shrugged, switching to Russian. "The math is easy. The English is hard. Elena is nice. A boy named Dmitri gave me half his sandwich."

"That is a good start," Ilya said, relieved. "Dmitri sounds smart."

They didn't go home. It was a game night, which meant the routine was sacred, even with a ten-year-old in tow. They drove straight to the Canadian Tire Centre.

They bypassed the locker room and headed straight for the coaches' offices. When they opened the door to the spare office where Sofia had been staying, it wasn't empty.

Sitting in two guest chairs, looking slightly out of place but entirely welcoming, were Yuna and David Hollander.

Sofia stopped dead in the doorway, hiding behind Ilya's leg. She peeked out, eyeing the strangers with deep suspicion.

"Mom, Dad," Shane said, stepping forward to hug them. "Thanks for coming."

"Of course we came," Yuna said, her eyes crinkling with warmth. She looked past Shane to the little girl peering out from behind Ilya. She didn't rush forward; she stayed seated, letting Sofia set the pace.

Ilya gently pulled Sofia forward. "Sofia," he said in Russian. "This is Yuna and David. They are Shane's parents. *Babushka* and *Dedushka*."

Sofia stared at them. They looked nothing like her Russian grandparents. Yuna was Korean, elegant and smiling; David was a big, white man with a kind face that looked exactly like Shane's.

"Privet, Sofia," Yuna said. Her accent was atrocious, but the effort was clear.

Sofia blinked. "Privet." She looked up at Ilya, her voice dropping to a whisper. "Do I have to stay with them alone?"

"They don't speak Russian," Ilya explained to her. "But they are going to stay with you while we play. They are here to keep you safe."

Sofia looked panic-stricken. She stepped closer to Ilya, gripping his hand. "But I can't talk to them. What if something happens?"

"Nothing will happen," Ilya assured her. He pointed to the table where Yuna had already laid out a deck of cards and a sketchbook. "You can play cards. You can draw. They are very good at just... hanging out. And they are Shane's family. They are good people."

Sofia hesitated. She looked at Shane, who gave her an encouraging nod, and then at Yuna, who held up the deck of UNO cards and raised an eyebrow playfully.

"Shane," Ilya said, checking his watch. "We have an hour before warmups. We stay."

Usually, this hour was for taping sticks, stretching, and getting into the zone. But today, the zone was here, in a small office with a terrified little girl.

They sat on the floor. Shane taught Sofia how to play UNO using mostly gestures and sound effects. Sofia watched him carefully, her wariness slowly receding as she realized he was just being silly. David told a story about Shane as a kid that Ilya translated, making Sofia giggle when she learned Shane used to be afraid of the dark.

By the time they had to leave for warmups, Sofia was sitting next to Yuna, showing her the polar bear. She wasn't relaxed, not fully, but the terror had abated.

"We have to go to work now," Ilya told her. "We will be back as soon as the game is done."

Sofia nodded. She looked small between Shane's parents. "Okay. Win."

Ilya kissed her head. "We will try."

The game against the Lightning was a grind—a fast, brutal affair that ended in a 3-2 victory for the Centaurs. Ilya scored the game-winner on a one-timer from Shane, the crowd noise deafening.

But the moment the final horn blew, neither of them lingered for the three stars. They stripped off their gear in record time, showered quickly, and practically jogged back to the office in their suits.

Ilya opened the door slowly, terrified of what he might find. Tears? Panic? A language barrier meltdown?

Instead, he found silence.

Sofia was sitting at the desk, head bent over a piece of paper. Yuna was sitting next to her, also drawing. They were passing a blue marker back and forth.

Yuna said something soft in English, pointing at Sofia's drawing. Sofia nodded and added a detail.

Ilya felt his throat close up. He looked at Shane, who had stopped dead in the doorway, his eyes shining with unshed tears. It was a scene of such quiet, domestic peace that it felt like a miracle.

Sofia looked up and saw them. Her face lit up.

"You won!" she said in Russian.

"We did," Ilya said, walking over. "What are you doing?"

"Drawing," she said, holding up the paper. It was a picture of a hockey rink. There were two stick figures in the middle holding hands. One had a 'C' on his chest, the other an 'A'. And in the stands, there was a smaller stick figure holding a giant bear.

"Shane's mama draws good," Sofia told him seriously. "Better than me."

Ilya looked at Yuna. "Thank you," he mouthed.

Yuna stood up and hugged him, tight and motherly. "She's a sweetheart, Ilya. You're doing a good job."

"We're trying," Ilya whispered.

They got home late. Sofia fell asleep in the car again, exhausted by the day's emotional marathon. Ilya carried her up to bed, tucking her in and leaving the door cracked.

When he got to the master bedroom, Shane was already there, loosening his tie.

Ilya closed the door—not all the way, never all the way anymore—and leaned against it. "That went... better than I thought."

"My mom is a wizard," Shane said, tossing his tie on the chair. He walked over to Ilya, wrapping his arms around his neck. "And you... you played incredible tonight. For a guy who hasn't slept in a month."

"I wanted to win for her," Ilya admitted, resting his hands on Shane's waist.

"Well, you did." Shane kissed him, slow and deep. "And now... we celebrate."

Ilya groaned, the tension of the day finally bleeding out of him. "Quietly."

"Oh, I can be quiet," Shane smirked, backing Ilya toward the bed. "I can be very, very quiet."

Shane backed Ilya all the way to the edge of the mattress until the backs of Ilya's knees hit the frame. He didn't stop kissing him—deep, devouring kisses that tasted of relief and exhaustion. Ilya's hands were everywhere, gripping Shane's waist, sliding up his back, tangling in his hair, needing to confirm that this was real, that they were back in the same room, on the same continent.

They fell onto the bed in a tangle of limbs, the duvet bunching up beneath them. It was a clumsy, desperate sort of grace. Hands fumbled with belt buckles and buttons in the semi-darkness, the only light coming from the streetlamp outside filtering through the blinds.

"I missed you," Ilya gasped against Shane's neck as Shane peeled his shirt off, tossing it blindly onto the floor. "God, Shane."

"I know," Shane whispered back, pressing a string of open-mouthed kisses along Ilya's collarbone, his hands working quickly to skin Ilya out of his dress pants. "I'm here. I've got you."

When they were finally skin to skin, the friction was electric, a shock to the system that burned away the lingering cold of the rink and the stress of the day. Ilya pulled Shane down on top of him, the weight of his husband a heavy, grounding blanket that silenced the anxious noise in his head.

## Chapter 12

Two months later, the snow in Ottawa had turned to the slushy, gray mess that signaled the beginning of spring, but the atmosphere inside Diane's office was bright and warm.

Ilya sat in the leather chair, staring at the document on the desk in front of him. It was a Certificate of Canadian Citizenship, stapled to a final adoption decree.

*Sofia Alexeevna Rozanova. Parent: Ilya Romanovich Rozanov.*

There were no caveats. No "temporary" stamps. No looming threat of Russian social services.

"It's done," Diane said, a rare smile breaking her professional demeanor. "The appeal period has passed. The Russian Federation has closed the file. She is a Canadian citizen, and she is your daughter."

Ilya picked up the paper. His hands were steady now, unlike the day he had signed the divorce papers. He traced Sofia's name.

"She is mine," Ilya whispered, the reality of it settling deep in his bones. "She is safe."

"She is," Diane agreed. She opened a second folder and slid it across the mahogany desk. "Which brings us to the second order of business. The... reconciliation."

Shane, who had been bouncing his knee nervously the entire time, leaned forward. "The marriage license?"

"Ready for signatures," Diane said, handing him a pen. "Since the divorce was uncontested and expedited due to 'irreconcilable differences'—which we fabricated quite nicely—you are legally free to remarry. We can file this today, and you will be back to being Mr. and Mr. Hollander-Rozanov in the eyes of the Canadian government by Monday."

Shane took the pen. He looked at Ilya. "Ready to make an honest man of me again, Rozanov?"

Ilya laughed, a sound of pure, unadulterated joy. "I don't know, Hollander. Being a bachelor has been very boring. I suppose I can take you back."

They signed the papers with a flourish. There was no ceremony this time, no suits, no vows spoken in a garden. Just the scratch of ink on paper in a high-rise office. But as Ilya watched Shane sign his name next to his, it felt more sacred than their wedding day. This wasn't just a union of love; it was a union that had survived a war against bureaucracy and fear.

"Congratulations," Diane said, taking the folder back. "You are officially a family again. Legally, anyway."

"We were always a family," Shane said, grabbing Ilya's hand and squeezing it tight. "But the paperwork helps."

They drove straight from the city center out to the sprawling farmhouse in the countryside where Shane's parents lived.

Over the last eight weeks, the Shane's parents place had become Sofia's second home. What had started as emergency babysitting during games had evolved into a cherished routine.

When they pulled up the gravel driveway, the front door opened before they even put the car in park.

Sofia came running out, not wearing a coat, just a thick wool sweater. She looked different than the terrified ghost who had arrived two months ago. Her cheeks were pink, her hair was braided in a complex plait that Yuna had clearly engineered, and she was laughing.

"Uncle Il'yusha! Shane!" she shouted, her English accented but confident.

She didn't run to Ilya first this time. She ran to Shane, tackling him around the waist as he stepped out of the SUV.

"Whoa!" Shane laughed, catching her. "Easy, tiger. Where is your coat?"

"It is warm!" she insisted, pointing at the sun. It was five degrees Celsius.

"It is not warm," Ilya corrected, coming around the car to hug her. "Go inside before *Babushka* yells at us."

Sofia giggled. "Babushka is making pierogi. But with... cheese? Like Canadian?"

"Cheddar pierogi?" Shane grinned. "My mom is embracing fusion cuisine."

They walked inside, greeted by the smell of dough and melting cheese. Yuna Holland was in the kitchen, covered in flour, while David sat at the table, losing a card game to a ten-year-old's empty seat.

"Did you sign it?" Yuna asked immediately, abandoning the rolling pin to hug them both.

"Signed, sealed, delivered," Shane confirmed. "We are married. Again. And Sofia is officially Canadian."

"Oh, thank goodness," Yuna sighed. "I was worried I'd have to fight the Russian government myself. And I would win, but the travel is terrible."

Sofia tugged on Ilya's sleeve. "Did you bring the paper? Can I see?"

Ilya pulled the adoption decree out of his bag. Sofia took it carefully. She couldn't read all the legal English, but she recognized her name and Ilya's name.

"It says you are my dad now?" she asked in Russian, looking up at him.

Ilya knelt down. "It says I am your parent. Yes."

Sofia nodded slowly. She handed the paper back. "Okay. That is good. Dedushka says now I can get a Canadian passport and we can go to Disney World."

Ilya looked at David, who shrugged unapologetically. "She needs to see the Mouse, Ilya."

"We will go to Disney World," Ilya promised. "In the summer."

"Come on," Shane said, checking the clock. "We have to get you to Dr. Evans. You don't want to be late."

Sofia groaned, a theatrical sound that was pure pre-teen. "Do I have to? We just played *Go Fish*."

"Yes, you have to," Ilya said firmly. "Dr. Evans is helping you. And she has the good lollipops."

"Fine," Sofia sighed. She ran to hug Yuna and David. "Bye *Babushka*, bye *Dedushka*!"

"Bye, sweetie," Yuna kissed her cheek. "See you for the game on Saturday."

The car ride to the therapist's office was familiar territory now. Sofia sat in the back with Anya, who went everywhere with them, while Shane drove and Ilya sat shotgun.

The radio was playing low, some pop song Sofia liked. She hummed along, looking out the window at the melting snow.

Ilya turned down the radio slightly. He looked at Shane, who gave him a subtle nod. *Do it*.

"Sofia," Ilya said, switching to Russian. "I need to ask you something."

"What?" she asked, not looking away from the window.

"Now that the paperwork is done... now that I am officially your dad..." Ilya hesitated, his heart thumping. "How would you feel if... if Shane adopted you too?"

The car went silent. Shane's knuckles were white on the steering wheel. He couldn't understand the Russian, but he knew the tone.

Sofia turned her head. She looked at the back of Shane's head, then at Ilya. She chewed on her lip, a habit she had picked up from Shane.

"If Shane adopts me," she asked slowly in Russian, "does that mean I have two dads?"

"Yes," Ilya said. "It means you are a Hollander-Rozanov. It means we are both your parents. Equal."

Sofia thought about this. She looked at Shane again. Over the last two months, Shane had been the one to teach her how to skate in the backyard rink. He was the one who made her

toast in the shapes of animals. He was the one who sat on the floor and let her practice her English reading until he fell asleep.

She leaned forward, poking Shane's shoulder.

"Shane?" she said in English.

Shane jumped slightly, glancing in the rearview mirror. "Yeah, kiddo?"

"Uncle Il'yusha asks if you want to be my dad too," she said, her English careful and precise.

Shane's eyes instantly filled with tears. He cleared his throat, his voice rough. "Yeah. Yeah, Sofia. I would really, really like that. More than anything."

Sofia sat back, a small, mischievous smile playing on her lips. She switched back to Russian for Ilya.

"Okay," she told Ilya. "But only if he does my hair. You pull too hard."

Ilya laughed, the tension breaking instantly. "Deal. He is the hair dad. I am the soup dad."

"And the hockey dad," Sofia added. "Shane is the... fun dad."

"Hey!" Ilya protested. "I am fun!"

"You make me do homework," she deadpanned.

Shane glanced back, grinning. "What did she say?"

"She says yes," Ilya translated, reaching over to squeeze Shane's thigh. "But only because you are better at braiding hair."

Shane laughed, a wet, happy sound. "I'll take it. I'll take it."

They drove in comfortable silence for a few minutes before Sofia spoke up again.

"Uncle Il'yusha?"

"Da?"

"For the game on Saturday... the last one..." She fiddled with the ear of her polar bear. "Can my friend Chloe come? She is in my class. She wants to see you play."

Ilya looked back at her. "Chloe? The one who speaks French?"

"Yes. She is nice. She doesn't ask about... about Papa. Can she sit in the box with Babushka?"

Ilya looked at Shane. They had been incredibly protective of Sofia's privacy. The media knew Ilya had a niece living with him, and there had been photos of them entering the arena, but they had kept her out of the spotlight. No interviews, no social media posts.

"Ideally, we keep the suite just family," Ilya said slowly. "To keep you safe from cameras."

"But everyone knows I am there," Sofia argued logically. "And Chloe is my best friend. She thinks you are cool."

Shane caught the drift. "She wants a friend in the suite?"

"Yeah. Chloe."

Shane smiled. "It's the last home game of the regular season. Why not? We can tell security to be extra careful. It might be good for her to have a friend there, not just my parents."

Ilya nodded. He looked at Sofia. "Okay. Chloe can come. But tell her no photos for Instagram, okay? We have to be careful."

"I know," Sofia rolled her eyes. "Secrets."

"Privacy," Ilya corrected. "There is a difference."

They pulled up to the brick building where Dr. Evans had her office. It was a warm, welcoming place, nothing like the sterile offices in Russia.

Shane put the car in park. He turned around to look at Sofia.

"You good?" he asked in English.

Sofia nodded. She grabbed her backpack. Then, unexpectedly, she leaned forward and kissed Shane on the cheek.

"Thanks, Dad," she whispered in English, testing the word out.

She opened the door and hopped out before Shane could react.

Shane sat there, frozen, his hand coming up to touch his cheek. He looked at Ilya, his eyes wide and stunned.

"Did she just..."

"She did," Ilya said, his own vision blurring. "She called you Dad."

Shane let out a shaky breath, leaning his head back against the seat. "Okay. Okay. I need a minute."

"Take your minute, Hollander," Ilya said softly, unbuckling his seatbelt. "I will walk her in. You... you compose yourself. We have a wedding license to file."

Shane laughed, wiping his eyes. "Yeah. Yeah, we do. Go. I'll be here."

Ilya stepped out of the car, watching Sofia skip up the walkway to the door. She looked happy. She looked settled. She looked like she belonged.

And for the first time in months, Ilya didn't feel the cold shadow of the past chasing them. He just felt the sun on his face.

Saturday arrived with the electric hum of playoffs in the air. The Centaurs were playing for the division title, and the Canadian Tire Centre was buzzing hours before puck drop.

Ilya and Shane met Sofia, Chloe, and Chloe's mother, a polite woman named Sarah, near the family lounge entrance.

Chloe was a tall girl with braces and a Sens jersey that she had clearly been forced to cover up with a generic hoodie. She looked at Ilya and Shane with wide eyes.

"Hi," Chloe squeaked.

"Hello, Chloe," Ilya said, extending a hand. "I am Ilya. This is Shane."

"I know," Chloe breathed. She nudged Sofia. "They're huge."

Sofia giggled, switching to English. "I told you. Giants."

"Thank you for bringing her," Shane told Sarah, shaking her hand. "My parents are already up in the suite. They're expecting you. There's plenty of food."

"It's our pleasure," Sarah smiled. "Sofia is a delight. Chloe hasn't stopped talking about her new Russian friend."

"Okay, go," Ilya shooed them gently toward the elevator. "Go eat all the popcorn. We have to work."

"Good luck!" Sofia called out in English, grabbing Chloe's hand and dragging her toward the elevators.

The game was a masterpiece of tension and release. The Centaurs played with the kind of synchronized lethality that had won them the Cup years ago. Ilya was a force of nature, channeling every ounce of his gratitude and relief into his skating. Shane was the anchor, the playmaker, setting up two goals and scoring one himself.

When the final buzzer sounded, the scoreboard read 5-2. The Centaurs had clinched the division. The number one seed was theirs.

The locker room was a riot of celebration, loud music, and shouting. But for the first time in two months, the PR director approached Ilya's stall.

"Media requested you and Shane," she said, looking apologetic. "Since it's the division clinch... and you're back."

Ilya looked at Shane. Shane nodded. They couldn't hide forever.

They walked to the podium together, still in their gear, sweat dripping down their faces. The flashbulbs were blinding.

The first few questions were standard—puck possession, the power play, the upcoming playoff series. Then, a reporter from a national paper raised his hand.

"Ilya, Shane, obviously it's been a disjointed season for you both. We've seen you around the arena with a young girl recently. Can you tell us who she is and if she played a role in your absences?"

The room went quiet.

Ilya leaned into the microphone. His expression didn't change, but his eyes went cold.

"That is my niece," Ilya said, his voice flat. "Next question."

The reporter didn't back down. "Is it true that you were in Russia for two months handling a custody dispute? Shane, you also missed two weeks. Was that related to the situation? There are rumors about marital strain—"

"No comment," Shane cut in sharply.

"But the timeline suggests—"

"I said no comment," Shane repeated, his voice dropping an octave into his 'don't mess with me' register.

"Is the marriage—"

Ilya slammed his hand on the podium. The sound echoed through the room, silencing the murmurs.

"This is a hockey game," Ilya snapped, his Russian accent thickening with anger. "We just won the division. We are the number one seed. If you want to talk about forechecking or goaltending, we talk. If you want to interrogate us about our personal lives, or my family, or my marriage, you can leave. We are done here."

He stood up abruptly, his chair scraping loudly against the floor. He didn't wait for a dismissal. He stormed off the podium, Shane right on his heels.

They walked back to the locker room in silence, the adrenaline of the confrontation mixing with the post-game high.

"You okay?" Shane asked quietly as they reached the showers.

"I hate them," Ilya muttered. "Vultures."

"They're just doing their job. Badly," Shane said, reaching out to squeeze Ilya's hand briefly before they entered the steamy room. "But you handled it. 'That is my niece.' Perfect."

"I wanted to punch him."

"I know. Me too. But we have a suite to get to."

Twenty minutes later, showered and dressed in their sharpest suits, they took the elevator up to the private boxes.

When they opened the door, the noise hit them first. Not the roar of the crowd, but the high-pitched shrieks of two pre-teen girls.

Sofia and Chloe were chasing each other around the kitchen island, laughing hysterically. Sofia was wearing a Centaurs jersey that swallowed her whole, and she had face paint smeared on one cheek.

Yuna and David were sitting on the couch with Sarah, drinking wine and watching the girls with amused smiles.

"dyadya! Papa!" Sofia yelled when she saw them, forgetting herself in the excitement. She froze for a second, looking at Chloe, then decided she didn't care.

She ran over and hugged Ilya, then Shane.

"Did you see?" she asked in Russian, bouncing on her toes. "They put us on the big screen! Babushka waved!"

"I saw," Ilya smiled, the anger from the press conference evaporating instantly. "You looked like a movie star."

"Chloe says I am famous now," Sofia beamed.

"Famous for eating popcorn," Shane teased, poking her stomach.

Sofia swatted his hand away, laughing. "Chloe! Come meet them properly!"

Chloe walked over, looking a little more shy now that they weren't in hockey gear. "Good game, Mr. Rozanov. Mr. Hollander."

"Thank you, Chloe," Ilya said. "And please, call us Ilya and Shane. Mr. Rozanov is my father."

"Okay," Chloe grinned. "Sofia said you were grumpy with the reporters. We saw it on the TV in the lounge."

Ilya winced. "Ah. Yes."

"It was cool," Chloe declared. "You looked like a superhero protecting his secret identity."

Ilya looked at Shane, who was trying desperately not to laugh. He looked at Sofia, who was looking at him with pure, unadulterated pride.

"A superhero," Ilya repeated, testing the word. He looked at his husband, then down at his daughter. "Yes. I suppose that is what uncles are for."

## Chapter 13: epilogue

The noise inside the arena was not a sound; it was a physical force. It vibrated in the teeth, in the bones, in the very foundation of the building.

Stanley Cup Final. Ottawa vs. Florida.

In the family suite, the tension was thick enough to choke on. Yuna Holland was gripping David's hand so hard her knuckles were white. Sarah and her husband were standing near the glass, nervous energy radiating off them. Even Svetlana, who had flown in from St. Petersburg two days ago on a visa Ilya had moved mountains to secure, looked pale, murmuring quiet prayers in Russian.

But the girls? The girls were vibrating.

Sofia and Chloe were draped over the railing, screaming themselves hoarse. Sofia was wearing Ilya's away jersey, the sleeves rolled up five times, and had a Centaurs flag tied around her neck like a cape.

"One minute!" Chloe shrieked, pointing at the clock. "They just have to hold it for one minute!"

On the ice, the Centaurs were in a defensive shell, protecting a fragile 2-1 lead. Ilya was out there, of course. He hadn't left the ice in the last two minutes. He was a machine, blocking shots, clearing the zone, his face a mask of terrifying focus. Shane was right there with him, winning a critical faceoff in the defensive zone, tying up the Florida center so the winger could chip the puck out.

"Ten seconds!" David Holland shouted, standing up.

The crowd began the countdown. *Ten. Nine. Eight.*

Florida dumped the puck in one last time. Ilya chased it into the corner. He pinned it against the boards, eating the clock, taking a cross-check to the back without flinching.

*Three. Two. One.*

The horn sounded.

The arena exploded. Fireworks, streamers, a wall of sound that felt like a jet engine.

On the ice, gloves and helmets flew into the air. Shane tackled Ilya before he could even turn around, and then they were buried under a pile of white jerseys.

In the suite, Svetlana burst into tears, hugging Yuna. Sofia was jumping up and down, screaming, "We won! We won!"

Down on the ice, the pile slowly dispersed. Ilya and Shane found each other again. They stood in the center of the mayhem, chest to chest, breathing hard, sweat dripping down their faces.

Ilya reached out, grabbed the front of Shane's jersey, and pulled him in. He kissed him hard, open and proud and completely uncaring of the twenty million people watching on television. It was a kiss of victory, of relief, of a year that had started in tragedy and ended in triumph.

When they broke apart, breathless, Ilya turned to the bench. He spotted Coach, who was wiping his eyes while trying to look stern.

"Coach!" Ilya roared over the noise. "Get her down here!"

Coach cupped his ear. "Who?"

"My daughter!" Ilya yelled, pointing up at the suite. "Get Sofia! She needs to be here!"

Coach grinned and signaled to security.

Five minutes later, the gate near the Zamboni entrance opened. A small figure in an oversized jersey came running out onto the ice, slipping slightly in her sneakers but recovering fast.

"Dad! *Dyadya!*"

The naming convention still confused people. To the outside world, it made no sense that she called Shane "Dad" in perfect, Canadian-accented English, but called her biological uncle "*Dyadya*" or "Uncle Il'yusha" in Russian. But it worked for them. It was their history, written in names. Shane was the dad who had taught her to be a kid again; Ilya was the uncle who had saved her life and carried her history.

Shane saw her first. He dropped to his knees on the ice, opening his arms. "Sof!"

She slammed into him, hugging him fierce and tight. "You did it! You got the Cup!"

"We did it," Shane corrected, kissing her cheek. "We all did it."

Then she turned to Ilya. He was standing a few feet away, watching them with a look of such profound love it made his chest ache.

"*Dyadya!*"

Ilya didn't wait. He scooped her up effortlessly, lifting her high into the air. She shrieked with laughter as he spun her around, the world a blur of cheering fans and falling confetti.

"We are the champions, little bird!" Ilya shouted up at her in Russian.

"We are the champions!" she yelled back in English, throwing her arms out wide.

Ilya lowered her until they were nose to nose. He looked at his husband, standing beside them with the biggest grin Ilya had ever seen. He looked at his niece—his daughter—safe and

happy and home.

He pressed his forehead against hers. "Yes," Ilya whispered. "We are."

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