Little One (Our Malyshka)

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Little One (Our Malyshka)

by fizzfics

Summary

In which Shane and Ilya retire and adopt a little girl from Russia

Angst/fluff/domestic bliss/cute family bits

Chapter 1: 1.

It made sense that they would retire at the same time.

Shane and Ilya had started their professional hockey careers together, and they would finish them together. They had had an incredible run, even their most vitriolic haters had to admit it. They were now both thirty-five, they'd been married for five years, and had been at the top of their games until their final seasons. Shane's back injury five weeks into the season had been the final straw when it came to their decision to retire, but they had been talking about it for the last three seasons.

They were tired, they were old by the standards of their sport, and they were sick of travelling. They were ready to settle in one place - Ottawa, in the home they had moved into when had Shane left Montreal - with their dog, Anya. They were eager to continue with the charity work, and had expanded from causes focusing solely on mental health and suicide prevention, to those supporting kids with neurodivergence and learning disabilities.

They were happy. They were in love. They were content with their lives. Almost. There was just one thing that they both agreed they wanted and that was currently missing.

'Pamela just called,' Shane said to Ilya when he got out of the shower. They were supposed to be getting ready for their final press conference, where they would announce their retirement and thank the fans for their support. Everyone expected Shane to finish up, given he was still limping from the injury to his lower back, but there were only rumours that Ilya would give it all up too. Not that Ilya saw it that way. Ever since he had married Shane, he hadn't needed hockey in the way he once had. He liked it, sure, but he didn't need it. Besides, he had no interest in travelling with the Centaurs without his husband by his side.

'What did she say?' Ilya was sure that he could guess, based on the look on Shane's face.

Shane just shook his head.

Ilya swallowed and nodded, trying his best to hide his disappointment. 'Is okay. Next time.'

'You said that the last time. And the time before.'

'Yes, and I will probably say it again next time. What else am I supposed to say?'

'I don't know. Can't you just, like, produce a baby out of thin air for us to love and cherish?'

'You think I am magician?'

'It would be nice if you were.'

'Sure. Ideal world, Hollander. Are you going to get dressed or do I have to announce your retirement for you? The car will be here soon.'

In the car on the way to the ceremony, Ilya took Shane's hand in his. He lifted it to his mouth and pressed a gentle kiss to the back of the knuckles. It was his way of telling Shane how badly he, too, wanted a baby, and how bitterly disappointed he was every time their adoption agent, Pamela, called to let them know they had not made the cut. How he knew how much it hurt Shane that they had been overlooked yet again.

Shane squeezed Ilya's hand but his jaw was tight as he looked out of the window. 'I just don't understand it,' he said.

Ilya sat back against his chair and prepared to have the same conversation they had had so many times before. He knew it helped Shane to process out loud, but he sometimes found it hard to go over every detail again and again.

'I mean, what is so wrong with us?' Shane asked, turning back to look at Ilya.

Ilya knew he did not expect an answer, but he gave one anyway. 'There is nothing wrong with us, sweetheart. Is just the way these things work.'

Shane continued as if Ilya had not spoken. 'We're young-...'

Ilya smirked. 'I am.'

'We're healthy-...'

'Sure, think about all those protein shakes you drink.'

'I mean we're fucking millionaires-...'

'Cha-ching.'

'Why wouldn't they want us to be the parents of a baby nobody else wants?'

Ilya sighed. 'Shane.'

'Sorry, I know that's not the reason kids are put up for adoption.'

'Yes, you have read all the books. You have been very good.'

'I just don't *get it.'*

'You are forgetting the obvious.'

'Don't say it's because we're gay.'

'Well, I am bisexual, but yes, I think we have to consider that might be factor.'

'It's discrimination.'

'When has that ever stopped anyone?'

‘It’s not fair.’ Shane’s voice broke and he looked out of the window again. Ilya knew he was trying to hide his tears.

Ilya reached across and tugged Shane’s chin back so that they were facing one another.

‘You’re right. It is not fair,’ Ilya said, wiping a tear away from Shane’s cheekbone with his thumb. ‘But it will not be unfair forever. I promise. Someone will pick us and our baby will come home, and that will be the right one for us. All of these other ones are not meant for us anyway. I believe our child will come to us when we are all ready and it will just feel… right. Please try not to worry. Things will be easier now we are not on the road, too.’

Shane sniffed but nodded. Ilya patted his cheek and moved his hand up to rest in Shane’s hair.

‘Do you think…’ Shane cut himself off.

‘Do I think what, milyy?’

‘That they’re out there yet? Our baby, the one that’s meant for us? Do you think someone is pregnant with them yet? Or maybe they’ve already been born?’

‘I don’t know. Maybe. Is nice thought.’

~

That night, after the press conference which had wiped them both out, Shane’s parents came over for dinner. While David and Shane played tug-of-war with Anya, Yuna and Ilya prepared a side-salad to go with the pizza they had ordered.

‘So,’ Yuna said, dicing a tomato. ‘He says he’s fine. How is he really?’

‘He is fine about retiring, I think,’ Ilya said after some consideration. ‘Once he had decided he committed to it, like everything he does. I think he realised his back will never be the same.’

‘And what about everything else that’s going on?’

‘He’s sore. In more pain than he will admit, but I try to make sure he rests and takes his painkillers.’

‘And?’

Ilya smiled, a little sadly. ‘If you have something to ask me, Yuna, I think we are at point where you can just ask.’

‘Have you heard anything from the agency?’

‘Yes. But nothing good.’ Ilya avoided looking at her. He knew that Yuna and David were desperate to be grandparents, and he couldn’t take their disappointment too. Not on top of Shane’s and his own. The thought of them as grandparents nearly killed him. He wanted to

give it to them so badly, especially after all they had done for him. They would be the best grandparents. Almost as good as Ilya knew Shane would be as a father.

'I'm sure it will happen for you guys soon,' Yuna said diplomatically.

Ilya braved looking at her face and smiled half-heartedly. 'I hope so.'

I really fucking hope so.

Chapter 2: 2.

‘Do you think we should change our names?’ Shane’s voice woke Ilya early the next morning.

Ilya groaned into his pillow and then peeked at Shane. ‘What the fuck, Hollander. It is seven in the morning.’

Shane was sitting bolt upright in bed, reading, as he always was these days, a book about adoption. ‘Sorry, I thought you were awake.’

‘Liar.’

‘Anyway, what do you think?’

Ilya rubbed his eyes. ‘What do I think about what?’

‘About changing our names?’

‘What is wrong with names we have?’

‘I was thinking that maybe if we applied without celebrity names, it would increase our chances.’

‘Is dishonest?’

‘Not if we legally changed them. It wouldn’t be a lie.’

Ilya sat up and looked into Shane’s eyes. ‘I like my name. I like your name. I like our name. I worked hard to be a Hollander-Rozanov. Now stop saying things and go and make coffee.’

‘I already brewed a pot.’

‘Then where is it?’ Ilya waved his cup-less hand in the air. Shane rolled his eyes but dutifully went to fetch Ilya a cup of coffee. When he returned Ilya accepted both the cup and a kiss before accepting Shane’s apology for waking him.

‘I’m just trying to cover all of our bases.’ Shane added quietly.

‘I know you are, and I love you for that. But I really think that trying to relax and let it happen would be for the best right now. Just enjoy being retired, don’t be so quick to make everything into a project.’

‘You’re right. I know you’re right.’

Ilya winked over the rim of his coffee cup. ‘Can I have it in writing?’

‘Asshole.’

‘That I don’t need in writing, thank you.’

‘What do you want to do today?’

‘Well, I was hoping to sleep in on the first day of my retirement, but I guess that is out. Dog walk?’

‘Dog walk.’

Ilya whistled for Anya and they both pulled on some activewear before leaving the house. At the door, even with Anya yipping in excitement behind them, Ilya pressed Shane to the wall and kissed him hungrily. Shane kissed him back, entwining his hands in his hair and tugging slightly. Ilya grinned against Shane’s mouth. Then, with a final peck, he moved away and opened the front door.

‘Hey, no fair!’

‘That is for waking me up so early.’

‘You said you forgave me.’

‘I lied.’

~

As Anya tore ahead of them in the woods, Shane and Ilya walked together, hands swinging. Sometimes they ran with Anya and raced one another, but since Shane had hurt his back they had been forced to become slower and more gentle. Occasionally Shane would test his limits, but he would pay for it afterwards so Ilya usually tried to coax him back to a walk before things went too far.

‘What do you think we’ll get?’ He asked Ilya, side-stepping an uneven root.

‘For what? Dinner?’

‘No.’ Shane rolled his eyes. ‘A baby.’

‘Oh. Well, hopefully human.’

‘Be serious. Boy or girl?’

‘I have never really thought about it, Shane.’

‘Really?’

‘I don’t want to be disappointed if I say, “yes, I really want a girl” and we get a boy. I will be just as happy with a boy so there is no point spectaclesing-...’

‘Speculating.’

‘Speculating. What is spectaclesing?’

‘Nothing. Spectacles are another word for glasses but you don’t spectaclies.’

‘English is very silly language.’

‘Sillier than Russian?’

‘Da, of course.’

‘I mean, I’d be happy with either too but I think I’d be nervous if it was a girl. I’d still be over the moon, of course, but I’d be a little more scared.’

‘Why?’

‘We don’t know anything about girls. I’m an only child and you only had a brother.’

‘You know Hayden’s girls.’

‘That’s true. But I don’t have to keep them alive day-to-day.’

Ilya was quiet for a moment and then he said, ‘I’m scared of all of it. No matter what is between baby’s legs.’

‘You are?’

‘Of course. I am excited, too, but it scares the shit out of me.’

‘But you’re not scared of anything.’

Ilya snorted. ‘Be real, Shane. I’m scared of lots of things.’

‘Like what?’

‘Getting a baby, not getting a baby, losing you, losing Anya, losing your parents.’

‘Loons.’

Ilya shoved him. ‘I mean it. You have a great dad, so it makes sense that you will be a great dad. I had a shitty dad, so it makes sense that-...’

Shane halted in his tracks, pulling Ilya to a stop beside him. ‘No, Ilya, no way. You’re amazing with kids. You’re going to be the best dad.’

‘I worry about that. You worry about if we will ever get a kid, I worry about not being good enough when we do.’

Chapter 3: 3.

Chapter Notes

i literally can't stop so plz enjoy (and talk to me in the comments !)

The following week, while Ilya was at the grocery store, Shane's phone rang.

He picked it up, expecting it to be Ilya asking about an ingredient, or wondering if Shane wanted a treat, but he nearly dropped the phone when he saw that it was Pamela.

He answered and listened as she breathed heavily, as if she had only just sat down after the busiest morning of her life.

'Okay, I'm going to cut to the chase, Shane. I have a little girl. She just arrived and she needs a stable home as soon as possible.'

'Arrived?'

'From Russia. Kind of ironic, isn't it?'

'An international adoption?'

'Not as such. A group of them just arrived in Canada, all from the same place in Yekaterinburg. It was a bad situation, I don't have all of the details. Anyway, the process would be the same as far as you were concerned. Fostering with a view to adopt, and we just see if you're a good fit.'

'Okay, um wow. When can we come and get her?'

Pamela paused and Shane's heart guttered. She always paused before she delivered bad news. 'The thing is, Shane, she's not a baby. She's five years old.'

'Oh.'

'I know you two wanted a baby that you could raise from as young as possible as your own but the thing is that babies are harder to come by than you might think. And you can still raise a small child as your own, the adjustment period is just a little different.'

'Right.'

'And think of it this way, there's no toilet training involved!'

Shane squeezed his eyes shut, trying to get his head around it. ’It’s just-… It’s not what we had discussed.’

‘I know, but this little girl really needs a home and I think she would be perfect for you guys. Will you at least come and see her?’

‘Yes. What am I thinking, of course we will come.’ It would take him a while to adjust to the idea that they weren’t getting a baby, but he couldn’t let any child that was waiting for them just sit in the agency waiting room and wonder why they didn’t come.

‘Great. That’s so great. I’ll see you this afternoon?’

‘Yes, that sounds great.’

When Ilya came home ten minutes later, ladened down with shopping bags, Shane rushed to tell him the news. All Ilya asked in return was, ’What is her name?’

‘Pamela.’

Ilya frowned. ‘She is same as adoption lady?’

‘Oh, no, Pamela is the adoption lady.’

Ilya stared at him. ‘Then what is her name?’

Shane winced. ‘I forgot to ask.’

‘You didn’t ask our daughter’s name?’

'There was a lot going on! And she’s not our daughter yet.’

Ilya nodded carefully, though his eyes were shining. ‘Foster daughter, I know.’

‘No, I mean, we’re just going to see her first. And then we can decide.’

‘Decide what? Isn’t this what we have been waiting for?’

‘It’s just, she’s not a baby.’ Shame bloomed in Shane's chest.

Ilya blinked. ‘So?’

‘We always said we wanted a baby.’

Ilya furrowed his brow and reached for Shane, taking his face in his hands. He could tell that Shane was feeling anxious and he wanted to support him, but Ilya also couldn't see what the issue was. ‘What we always said was we wanted a child, yes? Who cares how old she is.’

‘Ilya, I know you’re excited but older children need different care, they need more support. All the books say-...’

‘Dorogoy, I don’t care what the books say. If she needs support, we will give it to her. And if she is Russian, we are best people to support her because we can speak to her. I know what it is like there. Shane, this is good thing. Please, try not to be so… Shane about it.’

‘So “Shane” about it?’

‘You are very adorable when you worry but there is no need to overthink this.’ Ilya pressed a kiss between Shane's eyebrows and reached for his car keys.

‘It’s an adoption, Ilya. A child’s life. We should be overthinking it.’

'Nope. Come on, get in car.’

‘We have to put the groceries away.’

‘No, we have to get our daughter. Come.’

‘Okay, I’ll just do the cold stuff.’

'Hollander, now!’

Chapter 4: 4.

Shane drove so that he would have something to do with his hands. He was a nervous wreck. Ilya sat with his hand on Shane's thigh, drawing patterns with his fingertip, but even that wasn't enough to keep him calm.

He had spent months preparing for a baby, and even that had still scared the shit out of him. He had decorated the nursery, he had read the books, he had studied the YouTube videos of how to make bottles and put on nappies. He had done his research. It had never occurred to him that they would be potentially bringing home a five-year-old.

Ilya squeezed his thigh. 'You are freaking out.'

'I'm not freaking out.'

'Why are you freaking out?'

'Because I don't know how to look after a five-year-old girl,' Shane burst out.

'You have been looking after Hayden's girls for years, including when they were five,' Ilya reminded him.

'But she speaks Russian.'

'So do we. Well, I do, but you are getting quite good.'

'Pamela made it sound like she has been-… I don't know. Abused or something…'

'Okay, yes, that is a worry.' Ilya's voice darkened. 'But we will deal with it.'

'I just-… I'm just-…'

'Shane, I know. I'm scared too. But we have prayed for a child and a child has come to us. We can do it.'

~

A little girl was sitting with her back to the wall, playing with a stack of blocks. She was small, even for her age, and had golden brown curls that fell just over her shoulders. Her eyes, which peeked out from beneath the mess of ringlets were big and hazel-coloured. If Shane hadn't known better, he would have thought that she was Ilya's biological child. She did, however, have a smattering of freckles over her nose which Shane, silly as it was, felt quite proud to see.

Shane spoke to Pamela. 'You said the situation was bad, is she-... I mean, was she-...'

'There were the usual signs of neglect. She's had a bath and you'll have to take a cream with you for some of the bug bites and scratches on her, to keep them from getting infected. But

she's really not as bad as she might have been.' Shane suspected most of the damage would have no physical proof, but he didn't say anything more. Instead, he watched as Ilya approached the little girl.

He crouched slowly, getting on the girl's level but keeping a generous distance. 'What is your name, *malyshka?*

In a small, hoarse voice, which had clearly not been used for some time, the little girl said, 'Irina.'

Ilya's mouth fell open and he looked from the little girl, to Shane and back again.

'Is beautiful name,' he choked out in Russian. Then, he rose and, in English, to Pamela, he said, 'What paperwork is there? We want to take her home.'

'We can do that just in here.' Pamela indicated to the small office behind her.

'Are you sure about this?' Shane asked Ilya quietly.

'She has my mother's name.' Ilya said, as if this answered every possible question. 'She is ours. I feel it.'

Shane nodded. He trusted Ilya's gut more than he trusted his own. 'Okay. Let's do it.' He turned to Pamela. 'Will she be alright out here while we do the paperwork?'

'Oh sure, there's plenty of toys.'

'I meant-…'

'It's a private office, Shane. She'll be perfectly safe.'

Ilya knelt back in front of Irina, who eyed him carefully. In Russian he said, 'We won't be long, little one. You play here until we are done and then we can all go home. If you need us, we will be in there.'

Irina did not reply and Shane could tell she wasn't quite sure if she was supposed to trust them yet. In spite of this, any time he or Ilya took a break from the seemingly endless paperwork to look out of the office window and check on her, she seemed to be craning her neck to keep them in her sights.

~

While Ilya wrestled with and swore at the booster seat they'd been instructed to install in the car before driving Irina home, Shane made a call to his parents. As succinctly as he could, he explained what had happened and asked them to go to the house and pick up Anya - they didn't want to overwhelm Irina with an overexcited dog on top of everything else - and to promise not to drop by for an unannounced visit until he told them that Irina was settled

enough. They swore to do as he asked and hurried off the phone, though Shane could tell they were overcome with emotion.

'Shane, this fucking thing will not clip in,' Ilya yelled from the backseat. When Shane turned to look at him, only Ilya's ass was hanging out of the car as he used his body weight on the seat. It wasn't an unpleasant view, and Shane felt himself relax a little just at the sight of it.

'Don't swear.'

'She doesn't speak, English.'

'Just don't. It's a bad habit.'

'Fine. But we will not even get her home to be bad influence on if this fucking thing will not clip in.'

'Let me see.' Together they spent a further five minutes trying to get the booster seat secured. They had just begun a debate about the merits of Ilya holding Irina in his lap on the backseat and putting the seatbelt over them both when the little girl herself sidled up to them from where she had been standing on the sidewalk. 'Hey, sweetie,' Shane said absently, without thinking about the language barrier.

She squeezed between them and reached into the car. 'Watch your fingers, little one,' Ilya warned in Russian as she reached beneath the booster. Then, as if by magic, the whole thing clipped in and was as secure as if it had been forged that way.

'How'd you do that?' Shane asked, again in English. Ilya translated for Irina. She shrugged and pointed at a small lever neither of them had noticed.

Ilya stared at Shane. 'She is genius. Our daughter is genius. Call school for Einsteins, Shane.'

'That was pretty impressive. But you shouldn't call her that yet, the books say not to. Even if she can't speak English.'

'What do I call her? My foster daughter? Is silly. When she is older she will make fun of us for it.'

'So be it. Just... Please don't get attached too fast in case it doesn't work out.'

'You are always so cyclical.'

'You mean cynical,' Shane corrected him.

'No, I mean, your thoughts always go round in circle like bike wheel.'

'Oh... Then, yeah, you had it right.'

Ilya asked Irina if he could lift her up to the booster and she was soon buckled in. Ilya beamed the whole drive home, alternating between telling Shane, in English, how smart Irina

was, and Irina, in Russian, how much she would like their house.

Shane glanced at Irina in the rear-view mirror. She looked so small sitting there, her hands folded politely in her lap. He wondered what had brought her to Canada. What had happened to her in Russia? Where were her parents?

When they arrived back at the house, Ilya helped Irina out of the car. She stared up at the house and Ilya was, for the first time in his life, a little shy about his wealth. He and Shane had worked hard in their field, but the amount of money they had been paid to do it had been quite ridiculous. He'd blown a lot of it on cars and drugs and girls in the early days, and they gave a lot to their charity, but he still had more than he would ever need. The house was too big for a couple, they had always said that, and to little Irina it must surely look like a palace.

He tried to shake off the feeling. If things worked out, he would leave this house to her someday, or else sell it and buy her whatever she wanted. Maybe they were standing in the driveway of her ivy-league education. He wanted that. He wanted to provide for her. For her and Shane both.

Shane unlocked the front door and was relieved when Anya did not come bounding out. 'We have a little dog,' Ilya said to Irina in Russian. 'She is not here right now, but she will come back in a few days. She is the cutest thing. You will be good friends.'

Irina did not reply, but timidly followed Shane into the large house. Shane walked quickly to the small bathroom closest to the front door and closed its door behind him.

Ilya made sure Irina was alright and then followed Shane, knocking on the door. 'Are you okay?'

'Fine.'

'Liar.'

'Just freaking out. It's just-... Not what I thought would happen when I woke up today.'

Ilya's voice softened, 'I know, but it is a good thing that has happened.'

'Yeah, I just-...' Shane's voice broke. 'I don't want to fuck this up, Ilya.'

'Hey,' Ilya opened the door and looked to where Shane was hunched over the sink. 'Don't swear. Is bad habit.'

'Can we do this? Really do this?' Shane implored his husband for reassurance.

'I think we can. We don't have much choice in the matter, she is standing in our living room. Probably wondering where we have gone.'

'Right. Okay, right.' Shane splashed his face with cold water and then made to stride past Ilya.

Ilya caught him and held him in place with a hand over his heart. It was racing. 'Just try to stay calm, sweetheart. For first few days, don't be her dad. Just pretend she is one of Hayden's kids. Be fun and friendly and make sure she has a snack but don't worry about the rest of it.'

'How are you so good at this?'

'I'm just naturally cooler than you.'

'Oh, right. I should have known.' Shane muttered sarcastically.

Chuckling, Ilya followed Shane back out into the house as he sought Irina out in the living room. She had picked up an old dog toy of Anya's. It was a brown bear wearing a Boston Bears jersey - a relic from Ilya's time with the team. Shane was about to protest about germs and how they should wash it for her first, but Irina was already clutching it to her and nuzzling her face against it. He kept his mouth shut.

'She has already chosen my team.' Ilya smirked.

'We both played for the Centaurs.'

'Only at the end. I was mostly Boston.'

'Only at the end? I played for the Centaurs for like six years.'

'She still chose me.'

'Whatever.'

Ilya squeezed Shane's shoulder reassuringly. 'I know you want to wash the bear, but not straight away, okay? Let her have it if she wants it.'

'Okay. I just wish she'd want one of the actual human child toys we have upstairs for her.'

'Most of those are too babyish. We should take her shopping tomorrow.'

Sure. Um, can you ask her if she's hungry?'

Ilya nudged him. 'You can say that in Russian, I know you can. Or try English, she will have to learn it too. Fuck it, say it in French if you want.'

'I told you, don't say fuck in front of her.'

'She doesn't understand English yet,' Ilya said yet again.

'Still.' Shane cleared his throat, suddenly nervous. Ilya touched his back reassuringly, being sure to avoid the site of Shane's injury. 'Vy golodny, Irina?'

She stared at him and then flashed her eyes to Ilya who smiled. 'Yes, he speaks it too,' he said in Russian. 'Not everything, but he has been learning for a long time.' Irina kept looking

between them. 'Maybe you could tell him if you are hungry or not?' He suggested.

'I don't know what there is to eat.' This was the longest sentence he had got out of her and it thrilled Ilya.

'We have anything you could want,' he promised her. 'And anything we don't have, we will go and get for you.'

'Anything?'

'Anything,' Shane said confidently in Russian.

Ilya kissed the back of his neck and moved towards the kitchen cupboards. In Russian he listed off some options. Soup, crackers, bread, various fruits and vegetables, potato chips, brownies, doughnuts. She went for the doughnuts.

Ilya let her choose first and she went for the pink one with sprinkles, so he took chocolate with sprinkles. Even Shane, who usually found this brand of doughnuts much too sweet, took a glazed doughnut.

He refused to miss out on their first meal as a family.

Chapter 5: 5.

Irina's bedroom had formerly been one of the many spare rooms in the too-large house. When they had started the adoption process, they had renovated it into a nursery. That afternoon, Ilya and Shane swapped the crib that had been in there for one of the four single beds they had in another, larger, room which Hayden's kids usually shared whenever they came to stay.

The nursery was painted a pale yellow and had duckling decals around the baseboards. When they showed Irina the room, Ilya promised Irina that they could redecorate it however she wanted. She hadn't replied. Instead, she wandered over to the furthest wall and pressed her hand to one of the ducks, as if she was petting it.

Ilya clutched at his heart and looked to Shane. 'I can't handle it.'

'She is pretty cute.'

'Pretty cute? How dare you? She is prettiest and cutest child that has ever lived. She could be model.'

'I thought she was a genius.'

'Don't be so old-fashioned, Shane. She can be genius and model at same time if she wants to be.'

Shane watched the way Ilya interacted with Irina and his heart swelled. It was as if Ilya had been a father for years rather than a few hours. He was so comfortable with Irina and she was becoming more confident with him too.

Shane was so happy for Ilya. They were finally on their way to building their family.

Yet part of Shane couldn't help but keep pressing on the bruise of his anxieties. He felt shy around Irina, he didn't know how to talk to her. Ilya spoke to her like he was her father and she seemed to respond well to it, but Shane wasn't ready for that. But still, when he looked at her, his heart panged. There was a recognition there. He wanted to protect her, wanted to provide for her. He just didn't know how to bridge the gap.

~

That evening, they ran her a bath and let her pour from every one of the luxurious oils and gels that they left in the guest bathroom for Svetlana and Rose's visits. The result was a concoction of sweet florals and vanilla water, and enough bubbles that Irina could vanish beneath them.

She took her clothes off and left them in a pile, climbing slowly into the water. Ilya and Shane watched on in horror. Her back and arms were covered in bruises and long gashes.

They stood out stark against her pale skin. Some were almost healed but others were fresh. Too fresh.

Ilya's jaw was tight. Through gritted teeth he said, 'Those are not just scratches, Shane.'

'I know. But we'll make them better.' Shane said quickly, unsure of how else to respond.

Shane had his own anxieties about the whole thing. He didn't like how casually Irina took her clothes off for virtual strangers. He didn't like that she seemed used to the stiffness in her body caused by cuts and bruises. Whatever she had been through, it had been horrible. But they were going to help her. He had to believe that.

She hissed in pain and tried to swim away when Shane pressed a washcloth, ever so gently, to one of the cuts. Ilya caught her and soothed her in Russian and she did not flinch again as Shane kept cleaning her wounds.

'Almost done, malyshka,' Ilya promised, stroking her damp hair. 'Then soft warm bed.'

When she was cleaned up and the cream Pamela had given them had been generously applied, Ilya wrapped her in a big towel and carried her to her bedroom. They didn't have any pyjamas for her - yet another thing to buy the next day - so they dressed her in an old t-shirt of Shane's which served as a nightgown. It drowned her but she seemed comfortable enough for one night.

They didn't have any books for her yet either, so Shane decided that just this once she could watch some cartoons on his phone before bed. He chose slower-paced clips, like Franklin the Turtle and Little Bear so that she would not be too excited before sleeping and she watched them eagerly, even though they were in English. She let him lie beside her in the bed and even rested her chin on his chest as she watched. Shane was over-the-moon.

Ilya kissed both of their foreheads and went to get ready for bed himself. It had been the biggest day of his life and he was exhausted. Before he got into bed, though, he got into the shower. Beneath the rain of hot water, he let himself cry.

Tears of love and gratitude for Shane and the family they were being allowed to build, and tears of anguish and sadness for the tiny, sweet girl who had been hurt so badly. For the daughter he knew she would become.

The little girl he was going to cherish for the rest of his life.

~

'She's not in her bed.' Shane was hysterical as he shoved Ilya awake.

Ilya blinked at him. 'Wh-what?'

'Irina. She's not in her bed. I tucked her in at bedtime, you saw me, and then I checked on her just now and she's not there.'

Ilya looked at the time on his phone. It had only been an hour since Shane had told him that she was definitely asleep. He himself had been asleep for a maximum for forty minutes. If she had left the bed, she had not gone far.

Ilya got up and moved towards Irina's bedroom. 'What? You don't believe me?' Shane half-shrieked.

Ilya shushed him. 'I believe she is not in her bed, but I do not think she has left her room.'

'Ilya, I obviously checked her room. She could be halfway across Canada by now.'

'No, she could not. Even if she has left the room, all of the doors are alarmed. She has not left the house.'

Ilya twisted the handle to Irina's room and padded inside, Shane close behind him. Then, Ilya surprised Shane by getting down on his knees, and then lying flat on his belly, facing the bed.

Ilya's body physically relaxed before he tilted his head and whispered, 'Come see.'

Confused, Shane did what he was told and joined Ilya on the floor. He followed his gaze and looked under the bed where, he gratefully saw, Irina was asleep with her bear under her arm.

'Should we get her out?' He murmured to Ilya, but Ilya shook his head.

'No harm for one night. She is safe and she is asleep, that is all that matters. Come back to bed now, yes?' He stood up and pulled Shane with him.

When they were back in the hallway, Shane said, 'I thought I lost her.'

'On her first night? No way. She will run away plenty of times but not until teen years.'

'Are you trying to give me a heart-attack?'

'Shane. She is fine. Please stop worrying.'

'How did you know she'd be under there?'

'It was a hunch. I've seen the places they make kids like her sleep in Russia. Tight bunk beds, as many as they can fit in a room. She probably does not ever remember sleeping without wooden boards and a mattress an inch from her nose.'

'God, that's awful.'

'Is Russia, Shane.'

Shane shook his head. 'There's so much we don't know about her.'

'We will know. In time.'

Shane sighed. 'But you have the advantage.'

‘It’s not a competition. We are not on the ice now.’

‘No, I know, but I just feel bad. I should have been working harder on my Russian. I should have done more research on international adoption.’

‘Shane, even you cannot predict future. You could not have known she would be ours.’

‘You really think she’s ours? The kid you knew was meant for us?’

‘I do. I-…’

‘What?’

‘It will sound silly.’

‘Tell me anyway.’

‘I think my mother sent her to us. Maybe as a wedding present.’

‘Um.’

‘She was born the same month we got married. She is Russian. She carries my mother’s name.’ His eyes implored Shane and he couldn’t help but concede. ‘How could she not be meant for us?’

‘That is-…’

‘Silly, I know.’

‘Actually I was going to say that’s a compelling argument.’

‘I love it when you talk dirty to me.’

Chapter 6: 6.

The next morning, a box of books about adopting older children, adopting from Russia, and speaking Russian arrived at the front door. Shane had paid an exorbitant amount to have them shipped overnight.

Ilya picked up one of the Russian books and frowned. ‘You do realise you have a free teacher right here.’

‘I like books.’

‘Can book do this?’ Ilya ran his hand up the in-seam of Shane’s thigh.

‘Don’t, she might come down and see us.’

‘You are so boring since you became a dad.’

‘I’ve always been boring.’

Ilya rounded Shane and pressed his stomach to Shane’s back, kissing his neck. ‘Is true. But there were so many less books back then.’

At that moment, Irina padded down the stairs, holding her bear and rubbing sleep from her eyes. Her curls were rumpled and Shane once again saw the resemblance between her and Ilya. His hair looked exactly like hers in the mornings, albeit his was much shorter. ‘Doborye utro, Irina,’ Shane said as confidently as he could. Ilya nudged him, proud of his pronunciation.

‘Doborye utro,’ she murmured back.

Ilya took over, lifting Irina onto one of the breakfast bar stools and asking her if she was hungry. He piled her plate with fruit, toast and jam, and gave her a bowl of yoghurt, to try and figure out what she might like to eat. She had a few bites of everything, but mostly played with the fruit. She and Ilya took turns making faces out of blueberries and orange slices, giggling at each other’s creations.

Shane loved to watch Ilya with her. They seemed so at ease together and Ilya lit up in a way that Shane had never seen before. He had always known Ilya would be a great dad when the time came. He had never imagined he would be *this* good.

While Shane did the breakfast dishes, Ilya began teaching Irina some basics in English.

‘So you would say “hello.” That is the greeting. Then “my name is Irina.” And then even though you probably do not care, you say “how are you today” because it is polite.’

‘Don’t tell her that she won’t care.’

‘I never care when I say it.’

‘Yeah, well, we still have time to make sure she doesn’t turn into you.’

After breakfast, they took Irina to their local store and helped her pick out a child’s sized toothbrush, shampoo, conditioner and soap (each bottle shaped like a different Disney princess), pyjamas, some clothes, books and as many toys as they could carry.

It was Irina who, in the end, told Ilya in Russian that she thought they probably had enough to be going on with.

~

That night, Ilya and Shane were fast asleep, wrapped around one another. After Irina had been put to bed, they had watched a movie together and then slowly made their way to their own bed. They made love for the first time since they had brought their little girl home, and had fallen asleep amidst the echoes of their ecstasy. They felt completely at peace.

Until they woke to the sound of Irina screaming.

Ilya was first out of the bed, but Shane was right on his heels. They sprinted across the house towards the sounds of the screaming and crying. Ilya’s mind was racing. Could there be somebody in the house? But the alarms hadn’t gone off and Anya hadn’t barked. But, of course, Anya was not there.

They barrelled into Irina’s bedroom and saw that, no, nobody was in the house. Irina was under the bed again, but this time she was not sleeping peacefully.

They worked together to pull the thrashing girl from under the bed. When they had freed her, Ilya pulled her to his chest and rocked her right there on the floor. She was sobbing hard and shaking. Shane knelt beside them and asked Ilya what they should do. Ilya just shook his head and kept rocking the little girl, whispering to her in Russian. Finally, he began singing a lullaby he remembered from his own childhood. One his mother would sing to him when he woke from a nightmare.

Eventually Irina stilled, crying still but not screaming. ‘It was just a bad dream, malyshka,’ Ilya assured her. ‘Nothing will harm you here. We will protect you.’

‘They will come and get me,’ she sniffled.

‘Nobody is coming for you, and if they do, we will fight them off. Look at Shane, he is very tough. He will look after you.’

Irina reached her arms up and hooked them around Ilya’s neck, burying her face in his shoulder. She was tired, he could tell, but there was no point trying to put her back to bed.

‘I’ll stay up with her,’ he told Shane.

‘Alone?’

‘Don’t you want to go back to sleep? You look exhausted, sweetheart.’

He reached over and pressed his hand to Shane's cheek. He nuzzled against it and shook his head. 'I want to be there.'

'We'll bring her into our bed and read some books, then. Maybe if she gets comfy enough she'll fall back asleep and we'll be right there if she has another nightmare.'

'Good idea. I'll pick out some books.'

They curled up together, Irina still sniffing occasionally, although she did relinquish hold of Ilya to sit in the middle of the two of them while they looked at the books. First, Shane read the words in English, and then Ilya would say them in Russian. Mostly, they thought, Irina looked at the pictures.

Irina did fall back to sleep shortly thereafter, as did Shane, but Ilya found that every time he got close to sleep, he woke himself with nightmarish thoughts sound-tracked by her screams.

The next morning, Ilya was irritable. He had slept so badly and his brain was working too slowly for what he needed. He was trying to ask Shane to pass him the pineapple so that he could chop it to put it in the blender for a juice he was making, but the word for pineapple would only come to him in Russian and Shane wasn't getting what he wanted. In the end, Ilya swore loudly in both English and Russian before pushing past Shane to get to the pineapple.

'Ilya, the swearing, please.'

'I just wanted the fucking fruit, okay?'

Shane lifted his hands in mock-surrender. 'I didn't know that was what you wanted, I'm sorry. I'm trying.'

'I don't-… I just-…' Ilya swore again and put his hands over his face.

'What's wrong? Why are you getting so frustrated?'

'I've been here how many fucking years now and the English just doesn't fucking work!'

Shane was surprised to see tears gathered in the corners of Ilya's eyes. 'Hey, it's okay.' He put his hands on Ilya's wrists and kissed his knuckles. 'It's always harder when you're tired. Say what you need in Russian if you need to and I'll try and keep up.'

'I'm sorry, I did not mean to yell at you. Or swear.'

'It's okay.' Shane replied in Russian. His Russian was slow and stalled, but it always warmed Ilya's heart just to listen to him try. He knew Russian was difficult and Shane had been so diligent with learning it over the years. For him. 'You don't have to apologise.'

'Sometimes when I can't remember simple things I get really scared.'

'You don't have dementia, Ilya.'

‘Not yet, maybe. But it’s genetic.’

‘I know and if it happens we will deal with it.' Shane put one hand on the back of Ilya's neck and pressed their foreheads together. 'Your dad didn’t show signs until his late sixties. Even if you do get it, which is not guaranteed, you have so much time. And think how much science and medicine will have advanced by then, too.’

‘I’m just-... Yeah, tired.’ Ilya pulled back, but kissed Shane gently before disentangling himself entirely to return to his juice.

‘Are you feeling okay?’

Ilya shook his head. ‘I don’t know what’s wrong with me. I should be happy.’

‘There’s no “should” about things like that. You know that.’

‘But look at us. We have our baby, like we wanted. We are real family. We are retired and can spend rest of our lives together, every minute if we want, but I am just-...’

‘Kind of sad?’ The way Shane was looking at him convinced Ilya of what he needed to do. They had been here before.

‘I’m gonna call Galina and make an appointment.’

‘That’s a great idea.’ Shane kissed him tenderly, so tenderly it made Ilya want to cry. He encircled Shane’s waist with his arms and kissed him back, trying to make the kiss tell Shane how much he adored him so that he didn’t have to translate it.

They heard the padding of feet as Irina entered the kitchen, and Ilya turned towards her. ‘Morning, Irochka.’

Shane smiled at him, a little confused. ‘What’s that you’re calling her?’

‘Irina is too formal, she is not our co-worker. We will call her nicknames now.’

‘If you say so. Um, what was it again?’

‘Irochka, but you can say Ira instead if you want to.’

Shane sounded out the words, trying to get them right. Ilya pressed a kiss to the side of Shane’s mouth. ‘Good job, sweetheart.’

Chapter 7: 7.

The following two weeks happened blissfully. They saw almost no one - Shane was militant about not pushing too much onto Irina at once - and were wrapped in their bubble of domestic peace.

They spent time with Irina during the day, helping her with her English, playing with her, reading to her. At night, without comment, she would climb into their bed and fall asleep. Things were easy, almost suspiciously easy. Shane allowed himself to feel almost completely happy.

Almost.

There was no denying, in his eyes at least, that Irina preferred Ilya to Shane. He couldn't blame her for this. Ilya was relaxed and fun and made her dinner plate into a game. He spoke Russian and he seemed to be able to read her emotions even when she was silent. He was the one she ran to for a cuddle when she scraped her knee running in their yard. He was the one she asked for first in the mornings.

Shane got it - he had always wanted Ilya more than he wanted anyone else too. He had a magnetism to him that people craved. He'd noticed it when he'd finally been able to introduce Ilya to people as his boyfriend and then, soon after, his husband. Immediately they felt at ease with Ilya and Shane soon felt that he had been surpassed. He had never really minded before. He knew that Ilya was the more exciting of the two of them. He was more fun. He was sweeter and more energetic and a good conversationalist. Shane had been proud to show him off.

But part of Shane had always expected that their child would like them both equally. Maybe it was why he had wanted a baby. Maybe if he could have formed a bond early, when the child really needed him to look after them, he could have been in the running for equal love from them.

He tried to not let it bother him. He loved Ilya and he knew that Ilya needed as much love as he could get, from wherever he could get it, especially after all of the shit his family had put him through. But that didn't mean it didn't hurt Shane, just a little, to see how obviously Irina preferred him.

~

One day, three weeks into her stay with them, they took Irina with them when they went into the offices for their charity. There weren't many people around and she was able to run around as freely as she wanted while they explained to her about hockey and what they did there.

She was mostly interested in the vending machine.

'May I have money for the candy machine?' She asked in Russian.

Ilya made to reach for his wallet, but Shane got there first, digging some for her out of his jeans pocket. ‘Here, sweetie. Go wild.’

Ilya raised his eyebrows at Shane but didn’t say anything. He probably thought Shane was trying to buy Irina’s love, but it genuinely wasn’t that. Shane remembered how Ilya’s family had used him for his money and he didn’t want Ilya to feel like that was all he was good for.

While Shane helped Irina press the right buttons on the machine and feed her money into it, Ilya’s phone began to ring. It was Coach Wiebe, his and Shane’s old coach from the Centaurs. Ilya frowned at the screen and told Shane he had to take the call.

He shut himself in an empty office and answered. ‘Hello?’

‘Ilya! How’s retirement treating you?’

‘Very well, Coach. I have spent zero hours in a sweaty locker room with annoying men so could not be better.’

‘Ever think about changing that?’

Ilya scoffed. ‘What?’

‘You ever think about coming out of retirement?’

‘I retired like a month ago. You are losing that badly already?’

Ilya could almost hear the roll of Wiebe’s eyes. ‘No smartass. I’m moving to Michigan and the Centaurs need a coach.’

Ilya paused. ‘And you want me to do it?’

‘You were the first person I thought of.’

‘What about Shane?’

‘Shane’s a dynamite player but you were always the one the guys looked up to. You were our captain for a reason.’

Now it was Ilya’s turn to roll his eyes. ‘No, I don’t mean why aren’t you asking him, obviously I am best choice,’ he said, playing on the good-hearted competition he and Shane had maintained even when they had played on the same team. ‘I mean, am I supposed to just leave him at home to travel with the team?’

‘He’s a big boy, Rozanov, I’m sure he’ll survive. Besides, plenty of couples do it.’

‘Is not just Shane, we have-… We have a dog.’ He didn’t feel like trying to explain that they now had a daughter who was not actually their daughter but would be soon, he hoped.

‘Plenty of families manage too, Ilya. Listen, consider it. The money’s not bad, you still have the off-seasons at home, and keeping a hand in with hockey will help your charity too. Just

think about it. I gotta go.'

'Okay, I will think about it.'

He hung up and rejoined his family.

Shane looked over as he approached. 'Who was that?'

'Coach Wiebe.'

'What did he have to say?'

Ilya shrugged. 'Was just asking me about retirement.'

Chapter 8: 8.

That evening when it was time for bed, instead of going to her room, Irina once again toddled to theirs and got into their bed.

‘Should we get in too?’ Asked Shane.

Ilya shook his head and said, in English, ‘Let’s just sit with her until she falls asleep, I want to talk to you about something downstairs.’

Shane frowned. ‘Everything okay?’

‘Don’t look so worried, Hollander.’ Ilya pressed on the crease between Shane’s eyebrows. ‘You will get wrinkles.’

‘Come on, just tell me.’

‘I promise is nothing bad. Probably is not anything at all. I just want to tell you about the phone call I had today.’

‘From Coach Wiebe?’

‘Da. He had more to say than just asking me about retirement. That's all.’

When Irina had finally dropped off to sleep, Ilya and Shane went downstairs and Ilya poured himself a vodka. Shane stuck to water. On the couch, their legs tangled together, Ilya told Shane all that their old coach had said.

‘Do you want to take it?’ Was all Shane asked.

Ilya shrugged. ‘That doesn’t matter. What matters is what you think.’

‘No way. If it’s something that will make you happy then you should do it. You’ve made enough sacrifices for me, you should do something for you.’

Ilya considered it all for a moment. Only one thought came to him. ‘I don’t want to leave you and Irina.’

‘Is that the only thing holding you back?’

‘Well…’

‘We can travel with you,’ Shane suggested.

Ilya shook his head. ‘She will be in school soon, Shane. Don’t the books say something about stability?’

‘Okay, yes,’ he conceded. ‘But we can figure it out. My parents can look after her for a few days a week, or she and I can come to you on the weekends. Or worst case, we FaceTime you every night.’

‘Shane, we did long distance for so long.’ He felt Shane stiffen against him, remembering the hardships of that time. At least when they were both in the Centaurs, they had travelled together. Before that, when they had had conflicting schedules and nobody knew they were together, it had been torture. ‘This was supposed to be our time to be together.’

‘Okay, then, we’ll home-school her. She can socialise with the team mascot.’

‘Be serious.’

Shane’s face softened and, Ilya thought, turned a little sad. ‘You miss your team, Ilya.’

‘What?’

‘I know you love us and we love having you around but you need friends too. Lots of dads work away, Irina would be fine. I just don’t want you to sacrifice your happiness because it would be easier.’

Ilya narrowed his eyes. ‘You are trying to get rid of me.’

‘I am *trying* to make sure that you are fulfilled by more than just us.’ Shane reached over and squeezed his hand. ‘You are the perfect dad to her, any moron could see that, but you are allowed to still be a person, too. You are allowed to have friends and a job that you love. If you want to coach the team, coach the team. Even if you only do one season, at least you won’t have any regrets down the line.’

Ilya swallowed and nodded. ‘Okay. I will call him in the morning and discuss details.’

‘That’s a good idea. I was thinking, actually… Why don’t we go to the cottage?’

‘Is a little early, no?’ Ilya asked.

‘Early for what? We don’t have a season to prepare for. Well, not one to train for anyway.’

Ilya nodded. ‘True. Okay, when do you want to go?’

‘Tomorrow? My parents took Anya to theirs two days ago. I figure we can get them to bring her over in a day or two and we can introduce Irina to all three of them.’

‘Okay. Sure, if you think she’s ready.’

‘I do, don’t you?’

Ilya laughed. ‘I thought she was ready after like four days.’

‘Maybe I was being a little over-protective.’

‘You? Never…’ Ilya winked at him.

Shane kicked him and then asked, ‘Anything else you need to talk about?’ He could tell that something was still bothering Ilya.

Ilya was embarrassed to say it, but he and Shane had, for a long time, promised to be honest with one another. Often, when his head was being unkind to him, Ilya failed at that. So when he felt able to do it, he always tried to be open with Shane. So he said, ‘Does it-… Does it hurt when you look at her?’

To his relief, Shane did not laugh. ‘What do you mean?’ His voice was genuine as he asked it.

‘Sometimes when I look at her… It’s like I love her so much, I’m in physical pain. That can’t be normal, right? After only a few weeks?’

Shane shrugged. ‘You love hard, Ilya, you always have. And the two of you have a special bond.’

Ilya sank lower in his seat. ‘She breaks my heart, Shane.’

Shane sat up, coming closer to Ilya. He reached over and began to stroke Ilya’s hair. It was a comfort move and one of Ilya’s favourites. His mother had always stroked his hair when he was upset as a child, and it instantly made him feel better.

‘How?’

‘It’s because-… because she is just how I imagine my mother was before my father got to her. She is so beautiful and so funny but no sadness yet. Even with having a hard life and being so young she just has goodness shining out and I’m so scared that I will ruin her.’

There were tears in Shane’s eyes now, the idea of Ilya’s mother and all she could have been always got to him. He saw her beauty and zest for life in his husband and cursed the memory of Ilya’s father for all he had done to steal it.

‘You could never ruin her, Ilya.’

‘I could. If I let her see my depression, or if I start to lose my mind-...’

‘Ilya. There is nothing wrong with who you are. You saw your mother’s depression, the very worst of it, and your father’s dementia, and yet you grew up to be the most beautiful and loving person I have ever known. If she grows up to be even a little like you, she will be a very lucky girl.’

‘I love you.’ Ilya’s voice broke as he said it.

Shane pressed a kiss to Ilya’s mouth. ‘I love you so much. You have no fucking idea.’

They sank further into one another, alternating between kissing and talking to one another for the rest of the night. Ultimately, they fell asleep on the couch together and were discovered

the next morning by Irina, who scolded them for never having joined her upstairs. She brightened up again when Ilya tickled her and promised she could have a doughnut for breakfast even if Shane said no.

Shane just smiled at them.

Chapter 9: 9.

That afternoon, they drove Irina to the cottage for the first time. It was not too far from their all-year-round Ottawa home, but it had never occurred to Shane or Ilya to sell it. It was a sacred site in their relationship, and they adored going there. The wide open space and blue skies instantly put them both in a good mood, no matter what else might be going on in their lives. This was the place, the first place, they were able to be entirely themselves. And now, they felt honoured to welcome Irina to it.

The next morning, as agreed, Shane's parents drove Anya over to meet Irina. When the door opened, Anya, as she always did, made a beeline for Ilya and jumped into his arms from the ground.

'Irochka, these are Shane's parents,' Ilya motioned to David and Yuna. 'And this,' Ilya laughed as Anya wriggled in his arms to try and lick his face. 'Is Anya. She is obviously very excited to meet you.'

Irina watched Anya a little warily, unsure if she wanted the dog to attack her the same way she was attacking Ilya.

'Don't worry, malyshka, she won't hurt you.'

Ilya placed the dog on the ground and snapped his fingers. Immediately, Anya stilled and when Ilya told her first to sit and then to lie down, she did so without hesitation.

'That will never stop irritating me,' said David. 'I've known her since she was a puppy, I've dog-sat her countless times and she still will not listen to me when I tell her to sit.'

'She doesn't listen to me either,' Shane offered as consolation. 'It's just him.' He smiled fondly at his husband from across the room.

'Yes, she knows I am her Papa and that she must listen to me.' Ilya grinned and turned his wrist to indicate that Anya should spin in a circle. She did as she was told and Irina gasped. 'See, malyshka,' Ilya said. 'She is a very good dog. I think if you and she spend a little more time together she will listen to you just as she listens to me.'

'Can I pet her?'

'Of course you can.' Irina stooped and stroked Anya gently behind the ears. Anya's tail began to wag and Irina beamed up at Ilya. 'See, you already have the magic touch.'

Yuna cleared her throat and Ilya looked away from Anya and Irina.

'Oh, yes, sorry. Irochka, say hello to Shane's parents. They are also very nice. Maybe not quite as nice as Anya, but very nice too.'

Irina looked shyly over at Shane's parents and took a few steps forward, so that she was standing at Shane's side. Shane grinned at Ilya, who nodded at him.

Yuna bobbed down to Irina's height and smiled at her. Yuna knew no Russian, so she kept her words in English as simple as she could. 'My name is Yuna. You can call me… Um…'

'Maybe just that, for now,' Shane advised. 'The books says to ease in gently.'

Ilya smirked. 'Shane is expert.'

'Yes. You can call me Yuna, Irina.'

'Irochka, remember the words we practised in English?' Ilya prompted.

Irina swallowed and said, shyly, 'Hello. My name is Irina. How are you today?' Then she ran to hide behind Ilya and clung to his legs, peering out from around him.

He reached down and covered her hair with his hand. 'Great job, malyshka.'

'She's so beautiful.' Yuna put her hand over her heart and returned to a standing position. 'How much English does she know?'

'Pretty much just that right now,' said Shane. 'We're working on it.'

David nodded at Ilya. 'Lucky that she found a Russian to take her in.'

'Shane's Russian is very good too, now.'

Shane shrugged. 'Not as good as I want it to be but I'll work on it.'

'Will you teach her French too?' David asked.

'I think it's for the best given where we live.'

'Three languages before the age of six. That'll look great on college applications.'

'She won't need it.' Yuna waved her hand. 'She'll get in on a hockey scholarship.'

'Mom, come on.'

'Oh, what? You're not going to teach her hockey too?'

'Maybe. One day at a time.'

~

That night, while David and Yuna tackled the dinner dishes and gushed over their new granddaughter to each other, Ilya took Irina up for her bath and Shane did a quick tidy of the house. It was amazing how quickly four adults, a small child and a dog could make a mess of a space.

As he walked past the bathroom door, he heard Ilya chatting to Irina in Russian.Shane caught a phrase he recognised.

‘You will grow up to love hockey.’

Shane stuck his head around the door. ‘Don’t pressure her.’

‘Is not pressure, is fact. Hockey is best game ever and her dads are best ever hockey players.’

‘I’m sure if she likes hockey she will work hard and be good at it but she might not like it.’

Ilya rolled his eyes. ‘Everyone who plays hockey likes it. And you know, Irochka,’ he switched back to Russian. ‘Soon I will be back on a hockey team but this time I will be the coach. Do you know what that is?’

‘The leader?’

‘Yes, I will be the leader. I will be in charge of keeping them at the top of their game.’

Shane smiled and continued down the hallway to keep tidying.

‘It’s important,’ Irina said to Ilya.

‘Yes, it’s very important. Almost as important as my job right now.’

She frowned up at him from beneath a pile of suds.‘What is your job right now?’

‘Keeping you and Shane safe.’

‘Are you doing a good job?’

‘I don’t know, what do you think? Do you feel safe?’

Irina considered this for a moment and then slapped a mountain of bubbles. ‘You are doing a good job.’

Chapter 10: 10.

Chapter Summary

TW: gun violence

Chapter Notes

thank you everyone for ur support on this fic so far !

i also just want to say (because someone accused me of using ai to write this ...)

FUCK AI, I AM A HUMAN BEING WITH A HYPERFIXATION ON GAY RUSSIAN HOCKEY PLAYERS.

i would never use ai to write fanfiction (i refuse to use it in any part of my life but especially this). ai destroys the environment, it steals from writers (including us fanfic girlies) and it produces really shitty work imo. the insinuation that i would use ai is incredibly insulting to me for all of the reasons but especially the last one.

most of you won't know this but i am actually a professional writer (non-creative) irl so if you think the quality of this work is good... surprise it's not bc a robot did it, it's bc i went to fucking grad school.

i know that commenter probably meant no harm but it done pissed me off tbh (i hate ai sm i could scream).

anyway, could all my fellow humans plz comment nice things so i don't just get mad and delete this fic entirely lmao xoxo

Irina screeched with laughter as Ilya held her over his head in the lake, both of them dripping wet. He was supposed to be teaching her to swim, but they were having too much fun splashing each other and playing mermaids. Shane watched wistfully on until Ilya asked him for the time.

‘Lunchtime,’ Shane replied dully.

‘Okay, Irochka, let’s go inside and let Shane make us sandwiches.’

‘Let me?’

‘Da.’

Shane rolled his eyes but smiled and reached for Irina when she came past on her way towards the house. She smiled but dodged the hand aiming for her head.

Shane couldn’t help the way his face fell. Ilya caught it as he, too, climbed out of the lake. ‘What’s the matter with you?’ He asked.

‘Nothing, I’m fine.’

‘Shane?’

‘Hmm?’

‘Can we save some time and skip to the bit that is inevitable? Y’know the bit where you tell me what is actually bothering you?’

It came pouring out of him straight away. ‘It’s just that she likes you so much more than she likes me.’

Ilya groaned. ‘Shane.’

‘I’m serious.’

Ilya shook his head, refusing to consider it. ‘Is ridiculous thing to say.’

‘But-...’

‘I am Russian,’ Ilya snapped. ‘I sound like people she knows. Is just familiar, probably feels safe.’

‘But I try to talk in Russian too.’

Ilya sighed and brought himself back down. He knew, really, that Shane was not trying to be ridiculous and that what he was saying was coming from a place of genuine concern, but it was hard not to be annoyed by it.

Of course Irina liked Shane, she probably even loved him. It was hard not to love Shane once you knew him. Shane was dependable and secure and he knew the answer to every one of Irina’s strange little questions. Shane was, to Ilya’s mind, the perfect dad. So it was incredibly irritating to have to keep reassuring him of the fact.

‘I know, and you are doing very well,’ Ilya promised him. ‘But your accent leaves much to be desired, you know that. It can be a little confusing for her.’

‘Yeah, I guess.’

‘How about tomorrow, you take her for whole day,’ Ilya suggested. ‘Go do something fun.’

Shane immediately panicked. ‘But my Russian isn’t good enough.’

‘It will have to be.’ Ilya clapped Shane on the shoulder. ‘I’m not a translator anyway. You have enough to get by and she is a smart girl. She will point at something if she wants it. Don’t worry so much.’

‘But-...’

‘Shane. She is your daughter. That’s your girl, too. Just try to be there, that’s all she needs. Forget the books. Just be there.’

~

The next day, as Ilya had suggested, Shane took Irina out alone for the first time. He had thought long and hard over what they should do. He had considered a water park, the lake, a mall. But in the end, Shane drove her to the one place he knew better than any other. The rink.

Irina loved to watch the skaters fly across the ice. Some were, Shane knew, hockey players, both amateur and semi-professional. They squinted as they recognised him but, thankfully, nobody came to interrupt his time with Irina. Others were figure skaters, proven by their elegance on the ice.

‘This is my favourite place,’ Shane said in Russian.

She peered up at him, her huge hazel eyes framed by dark lashes. ‘Why?’

Shane was relieved that she had understood him, and even more relieved that she had deigned to respond to him. It was going to be a long day otherwise. ‘Well, before I learned how to play hockey, I had to learn to skate. This is where everything started for me.’

‘Here?’

‘Yes, Ira. I like to skate because out there…’ He struggled for the Russian. ‘Brain goes empty. Is nice.’ Irina looked out at the ice as if she thought an empty brain was a very sad thought. She slipped her hand into Shane’s as they watched the skaters move. ‘Besides,’ Shane squeezed her hand. ‘If I had not learned to skate, I would not have met Ilya. I owe this place a lot.’

‘Maybe…’ She considered for a moment. ‘Maybe I like to skate too.’

‘I can teach you how, if you like.’

She thought again and then shrugged. ‘Maybe not today.’ That was not never. That was a step in the right direction.

In the car on the way home, Irina bobbed her head in time to the music on the radio and Shane watched her, delighted, in the rearview mirror. He really felt he had made progress with her today, and he was thrilled about it.

The song on the radio finished and the news began. Shane was about to switch channels when he heard the words, “Boston Bears” and “stadium” and “shooting”.

He put his foot on the gas.

When they got home he found Ilya glued to the television, watching the live coverage. Shane hustled Irina up the stairs to play in her room and promised he would come and find her in a minute. Then he made a beeline for Ilya.

‘Are you okay?’

Ilya’s eyes were full of tears. ‘Did you see this shit?’ he managed to croak out.

Shane sank down beside him on the couch. ‘Yeah it’s awful.’

‘It was the family and friends’ game, Shane.’

Shane’s blood ran cold. ‘Jesus. Is anyone hurt?’

‘Many people.’

‘Anyone we know?’

‘I don’t know yet. I can’t get hold of anyone from the team.’

Shane wrapped his arms around Ilya, pulling him towards him. Ilya buried his face in Shane’s chest. ‘It’s horrible,’ was all Shane could think to say as he rocked Ilya.

‘Shane-...’

‘I know, but you don’t.’ Ilya had been about to say, ‘What if I still worked for Boston?’ but Shane couldn’t bear to think about that. He couldn’t go through imagining the scenario he had envisioned when he had found out that the Centaurs’ plane had almost gone down with Ilya on it.

‘What if-…’

‘Please don’t say it,’ Shane said.

‘I have to.’

‘Ilya-...’ Shane was really pleading now.

‘What if something like this happens when I am coaching the Centaurs.’

Shane screwed his eyes up and shook his head. ‘I can’t-…’

‘Shane, we have to finalise the adoption. We need her to be legally ours, both of ours. They could take her away otherwise, if something happens to one of us.’

Shane’s biggest fear finally came out of his mouth. ‘What if she doesn’t want us.’

‘What?’

‘I love her just as much as you do. I want to keep her forever, I really do. But what if that’s not what she wants? Shouldn’t she have a say?’

‘She’s five, she barely has a say in what she gets for dinner.’

‘Well, maybe she should have a say. She might only be five, but she’s still a person.’

‘Fine. Ask her then.’

‘We’ll talk to her about it tomorrow. You’re too upset right now.’

‘I just can’t believe someone would have this kind of hate in their hearts.’

Shane sighed. ‘I wish I couldn't believe it.’

‘Maybe we are doing the wrong thing,’ Ilya sniffed. ‘Trying to bring her up in a world like this.’

‘Maybe. Or maybe we’re the only ones that could make this world good enough for her.’

Chapter 11: 11.

Chapter Notes

> just wanted to say thank you to so many of you who are commenting such beautiful things under this fic - you truly make my day every day and i am so grateful for you !!
>
> for those of you who are commenting not nice things, i assume you are bots but in case you're not... fuck you.
>
> love most of y'all xoxoxo

Over the course of that night, Ilya and Shane learned that nobody on either of the playing teams, or their families, had been killed, although Carlton Shaw had been injured in a stampede of people trying to get to his little girl in the rush. The crowd had been less lucky. Over two hundred people had been injured, some very seriously, and seven people had lost their lives. It was an immeasurable tragedy.

The shooting played on both of their minds as they discussed their plan for speaking to Irina. He felt badly about it, but despite the sadness and fear he felt for the events in Boston, all of Shane's energy was going towards the anxiety he felt about their upcoming conversation,

'You should be the one to talk to her about it. It needs to be clear so it needs to be in Russian,' Shane told Ilya.

'Alright, but you will be right there with me. I'm not doing it alone.'

Shane nodded. 'If you think it's best.'

'If I think it's best? Hollander, are you nuts? We are team, this is most important thing we will ever do, of course we are doing it together.'

'You're right, sorry.'

'Okay, so I just say it simply.'

'Yeah, don't overcomplicate it.'

At that moment, Irina came down for her breakfast, which Shane quickly made for her. He was so nervous, his hands were shaking, and he spilled both the cereal and the milk before he dropped her bowl all together. It shattered on the floor and both Shane and Ilya had to move fast to keep Anya from walking over shards to get to the cereal.

Finally, with a fresh bowl of cereal in front of Irina, Shane and Ilya sat down beside her at the breakfast table. While she ate, Ilya stroked a strand of her hair back behind her ear.

‘Irochka, are you happy here?’

She nodded and spooned another mouthful of cereal in.

‘Because we are very happy to have you here with us. We would like to have it be like this forever, what do you think?’

‘I live here forever?’

‘Da. Never go back with Pamela and the others. Never go back to Russia, or, not for a long time anyway.’ If Ilya had one regret, it would be that. Irina would never go to Russia if Shane and Ilya were her parents. Maybe, one day, when she was grown she could go, but she would never be able to go with her parents.

Irina looked at Ilya. ‘You would be my parents?’ She caught on fast, Ilya had to give her that.

‘Da.’

She glanced at Shane. ‘Both of you?’

‘Da. You know we are married, and we love each other. So we would both be your dads.’

She widened her eyes. ‘Two dads?’

‘Is allowed in Canada.’

She thought about this for a moment and then, with a tiny nod, said, ‘Okay.’

‘Okay? Okay as in, you would like that?’

‘Da. I like it here. I like you two. I like two dads.’

Ilya’s face split into a wide grin and he scooped Irina into his arms. ‘You will have best life with us, malyshka. We will love you so much and take such good care of you.’

She giggled and clung to Ilya, holding him tight and burying her face in his neck. Shane waited for Irina to hug him too, but no hug came. He contented himself with how happy Ilya looked.

Later that day, Ilya was stir-frying the vegetables for dinner while Shane flicked through one of the adoption books to find something he had highlighted a few days before. Ilya hummed to himself and smiled, admiring the way Shane looked in his glasses.

Irina tugged on Ilya’s shirt to get his attention.

‘Papa?’

Ilya and Shane both froze. But where Ilya began to grin, Shane could barely breathe. His heart was breaking.

He was glad for Ilya that she had called him ‘dad’ first, and it made sense she would only say it to one of them initially. It even made sense that it would be Ilya because she had used the Russian word. But still. He loved her. He thought of her as his daughter.

He wanted her to want to call him dad.

‘Yes, malyshka?’

‘How do you say it in English? I don’t know what the right word is for Shane.’

‘You can call him Papa too, if you want, although it might get confusing. In English it would be Dad or Daddy. He won’t mind whatever you call him.’

Irina got a focused look on her face. She walked up to Shane and slipped her hand into his.

‘Daddy, will you teach me to skate?’

She said the first part in English, and then fell back into Russian, but Shane caught every word. He sank to his knees and wrapped his arms around her, tears falling into her hair.

‘Of course, I will, baby. Of course I will.’

Ilya’s eyes filled with tears too as he watched Shane hold their daughter. Because that was what she was. There was no denying it now. She was theirs, she had always been theirs and always would be.

It was the first day of the rest of their lives.

The next day, Ilya formally accepted the position as coach of the Centaurs, and Shane called Pamela to get their paperwork in order. Irina asked Shane about school and he promised she could start in September. He also promised they would work even harder on her English. She was happy with that. They were all happy.

They couldn’t see how anything could go wrong.

~

Three days later, Ilya left the cottage and drove to a Centaurs training session. Coach Wiebe welcomed him with a hug, as did most of his old teammates. None of them, apart from Wiebe, knew what Ilya was doing there.

‘Missed us that much?’ Zane laughed.

Ilya shrugged. ‘Something like that.’

‘Are you staying to watch practice?’

Ilya nodded. ‘I want to see how much worse you are without me.’

‘And your husband?’

Ilya winked. ‘No, just me.’

After the training session was done, the team gathered on the ice. Wiebe called Ilya over to join them. He hated walking on ice in his shoes, but he didn’t have time to put on skates, so he hurried over as best he could.

‘Alright guys, that was a great session. And I’m especially glad of that because it means that your new coach has been able to see exactly what you can do.’ A few of the players gasped and looked between Ilya and Wiebe. ‘That’s right, boys. I’m moving to Michigan, but luckily the best man for the job has offered to step into my shoes. Ilya raised an awkward hand. Wiebe continued, ‘You know he’s a dynamite player, and he was a great captain-...’

‘Best we ever had,’ Wyatt grinned.

‘Exactly, and I know he’s going to be a great coach. He’ll lead you from victory to victory if you let him. So listen to what he says, watch him closely, and don’t backchat too much.’

‘No, you can backchat.’ Ilya said. ‘Is good for morale. But don’t cry when I give it right back to you.’

‘Now, this is all top secret until the end of this season - it’s only a couple more weeks anyway. We don’t need anyone thinking we’re weak while we’re in a transitionary moment. We’ll announce at the end of August and Ilya will officially take over in October for the next season, though he’ll be at training as much as he can be from now on. For now, keep it secret.’

‘Speaking of secrets,’ Ilya said. ‘I only tell you this because she might be at training sessions in the future, but I don’t want to see anything about it in the press. Shane and I are fostering a little girl, and we intend to adopt her. Her name is Irina and... she’s our daughter.’

Bood and Wyatt both jumped on Ilya at the same time, crying out, ‘Atta boy, Rozy!’ and ‘Who knew Hollander had it in him?’

They were a little confused, perhaps, but he was glad they had the right spirit, and Ilya couldn't help but grin at them as the team celebrated this new and unexpected win.

Chapter 12: 12.

A few days later, Ilya put down the dumbbell when he heard the door to the home gym open. A moment later, Irina wandered in a moment later.

‘Irochka, where is your dad?’ He still got a thrill out of saying the words ‘dad’ and ‘papa’. He wasn’t sure he would ever get over it.

‘He had to take a phone call. He said I could come and find you. Is that okay?’

‘Of course it is. Do you want to work out?’

‘Work out what?’

‘I mean exercise. Get big strong muscles like me and Daddy.’ He couldn’t help but flex for her.

She giggled and nodded. ‘Okay.’ She moved towards him and he found her some tiny weights. They had a thick layer of dust on them - neither he nor Shane had so much as looked at them before. Before he could hand them to Irina, however, she asked him a question.

‘Papa, what happens when people die?’

Ilya froze. ‘What do you mean?’

‘Where do they go?’

‘Why do you ask?’

‘Daddy’s parents come to visit but when I asked if your parents were coming he said they couldn’t because they are dead.’

He swallowed. ‘Oh.’

‘And the people on the news died too.’

He shook his head. ‘You should not be watching the news, Irochka.’

‘Where are they? The dead people.’

‘I don’t know exactly. We cannot see people after they die.’

‘Oh… How did your parents die?’

Ilya sighed. ‘My father was old and he got sick. My mother-... my mother was very sad, which is kind of a sickness too.’

‘Was it scary?’

‘It is just something that happens. But I think that our souls stay with the people we love the most on the earth. So when my mother died, I think her soul came to live in my heart. And when I die, my soul will go to you and Shane. And his will go to you.’

‘You’re going to die first?’

‘Well, I don’t know for sure. He is older by few weeks so maybe he will die of old age before me.’ He couldn’t help but smile at his little joke, despite the way the whole conversation made his heart ache.

‘Who will look after me when you die?’

‘We are not going to die, malyshka, not for a long long time. You will be a very old woman by the time we die.’

‘Like one hundred?’

‘Probably even older than that.’

‘Okay… Can I sleep in my own bed tonight?’

Ilya smiled. ‘Of course, malyshka. You can sleep wherever you like.’

‘Will you leave the door open, in case I change my mind?’

‘Yes, Irochka. We will always leave the door open for you.’

~

As he and Shane prepared for bed, revelling in their first night alone in weeks, Ilya said, ‘She asked me about death today.’

‘What?’ Shane immediately panicked.

‘She wanted to know where we go when we die.’

‘What did you say?’

‘I said I didn’t know but I think our souls attach to whoever we love most. I said that when I die I’m going to attach to you two-...’

‘You’re not dying before me, we talked about it.’

Ilya furrowed his brow. ‘When?’

‘After the plane crash.’

Ilya rolled his eyes. ‘That plane didn’t crash.’

‘Whatever. After that I told you that you aren’t allowed to die before me because I can’t lose you.’

‘I didn’t promise anything. Besides, I can’t lose you either.’

‘Okay so we’re agreed, murder-suicide.’

Ilya groaned. ‘You are so dramatic, Hollander.’

Later in the night, Ilya woke to Shane tapping him. When he opened his eyes he saw Shane’s face warped with pain and his whole body was stiff.

‘What is it?’ He reached over to touch Shane’s arm. ‘Your back?’

Shane tried to nod and winced. ‘Yeah. Help, please.’

Ilya got out of bed and went to Shane’s side. ‘What can I do?’

‘Help me up, I need to walk and stretch it out.’

‘Okay, just try and be quiet so we don’t wake her. Her door’s open in case she has a nightmare.’

‘I know. I don’t want to frighten her.’ Ilya supported Shane’s weight as he got up and out of bed, his jaw tight with the pain. Then Ilya held him up as they began to pace the hallways of the cottage. ‘Can you talk to me? I need a distraction.’

‘About what?’

‘Anything. What are you thinking about?’

‘About how worried I was when you got hurt.’

‘I know, I remember.’

‘Was better than the time you… what phrase did you use? Rang your bell?’

‘Had my bell rung. Yeah, I don’t remember that one as much.’

‘I suppose I should be thankful that when you hurt your back you could talk to me. And they knew we were married so they let me go with you.’

‘Yeah that next-of-kin thing sure comes in handy.’

‘Still,’ Ilya’s voice darkened. ‘It is never easy to see you on the ice like that. I didn’t know if you would ever walk again. And seeing you in that kind of pain-… At least when you hit your head you fell unconscious pretty much straight away. Although I did think you were dead, which wasn’t so great.’

‘I wouldn’t have minded sleeping through the back, that’s for sure.’ Shane winced again and tightened his grip on Ilya’s shoulder.

‘Is it getting any better?’

‘It will. Just keep going, please.’

‘Between her nightmares and your back, I will never get a full night’s sleep again.’

‘Thank you for getting up. And thanks for helping me.’

‘Hollander, I will walk you around this stupid house for the rest of our lives if you need me to.’

‘It’s Hollander-Rozanov now, remember?’

‘How could I forget?’

Chapter 13: 13.

Chapter Notes

> thank you all for your beautiful and supportive comments ! i'm doing my best to reply to them all but it is a lot to keep up with (positive connotations only) so i'm sorry if i miss yours ! please keep chatting to me anyway xxx

The next morning, Shane was stiff but only uncomfortable instead of in a lot of pain. It always pleased Ilya when he could see that he had made a difference, even if only a small one. He topped everything off by organising Shane's painkillers for him, fetching him water, and offering him a heatpack. Shane took the pills but rejected the heatpack, preferring to muscle through. He was in the kitchen, cutting fruit for Irina's breakfast, but he was moving much slower than usual. He breathed through it.

Ilya frowned at him from the kitchen door. 'What will happen when I'm away?'

'What do you mean?'

'With your back.' Ilya walked over to him and pressed gently on the tight muscles in Shane's back, testing them for pain. 'What if it seizes up like that and you're alone with her?'

Shane shrugged, enjoying the feeling of Ilya's hands on him. 'I'll call my dad to come over. He can lift me just as well as you can.'

'What if you're not near your phone?'

'I'll ask Irina to get it for me,' Shane said as if it was obvious. 'I think my Russian can stretch that far, don't you?'

'But-…'

'Ilya, baby.' Shane turned to face him. 'You're not the only one capable of taking care of us. We will be okay.'

'Is lie. Liar told you that. Only me.' He buried his face in Shane's neck.

'You are the best at it, sure.' Shane pressed a kiss to Ilya's temple. 'But Irina and I will look after each other, okay?'

'Fine. If you say so.' Ilya kissed Shane's cheek and stretched his arms over his head. 'Hey, I was thinking I could take her with me to practice today. What do you think?'

'I think that's a great idea. She likes the rink already, I bet she'd like to see them practicing.'

‘Do you want to come with us?’

‘Sure. I have some work to do for the foundation on my laptop, so Ira and I can sit in the stands together.’

~

The team were over-the-moon to see Shane and even more excited to meet Irina. Even with the language barrier, the Centaurs managed to make her feel welcome and include her in what they were doing. They all fussed over her, offering to buy her treats from the vending machine and telling Ilya and Shane how adorable she was.

Irina was shy but seemed to like everyone she met. Regardless, she stayed close to at least one of her fathers at all times, looking primarily to Ilya for translation help, and otherwise holding onto the leg of Shane’s jeans and pressing herself against his legs for comfort. Shane tried not to show how ecstatic he was that she was treating him as a safe base, but Ilya could read it in everything Shane did and said.

Right before Wiebe called everyone to attention and made the point that they were actually there to practice and not just to fuss over Irina, Harris came over with a Rozanov 81 jersey. ‘It’s gonna be too big but this will make the cutest photo,’ he said, handing the jersey to Ilya who slipped it over Irina’s head.

‘What about number twenty-four?’ Shane frowned at Harris.

‘Sold out, buddy.’ Harris winked at him.

‘Well that’s alright then.’

Shane had to admit, it was making for a very cute photo. Ilya crouched beside Irina, who beamed up at Harris from amongst the swathes of fabric. Ilya held a hockey stick in one hand and had the other arm wrapped around their daughter. Irina held onto the stick with both hands. Shane’s heart swelled as he watched them together. They looked so perfect, it almost hurt.

When the photo had been taken, Shane held his hand out for Irina. She hurried towards him, tripping on the jersey, but he caught her before she hit the ground. ‘Okay, superstar,’ he laughed, tickling her through the jersey. ‘Let’s sit in the stands and watch Papa do his thing.’

Ilya kissed them both before they departed, and Shane sat Irina beside him a few rows back from the rink. He had come prepared with some toys and chocolate bars from the vending machine, but he needn’t have bothered. Irina was captivated by what she saw on the ice.

Ilya and Wiebe were a great team, dividing and conquering to get the team in check. Ilya began with some teasing jokes like, ‘I know my kid is cute, Bood, but get your head in the game,’ and, ‘Barrett if you need some motivation I can get your boyfriend to stand in the fucking goal,’ but he soon fell into game mode himself.

Shane recognised the look on Ilya's face and it sent a thrill through him. That was the look Ilya had when he played, when he was actually on the team, and on the ice. When he was playing to win. That was the look of the killer. The animal. The king.

He was back.

~

Ilya followed his team into the locker room after practice, chatting to Wiebe about the areas for improvement. He felt alive. He hadn't realised how much he had missed hockey, and he was excited for the upcoming season in a way that felt so natural. He took his phone out to text Shane to say that he would be out in a few minutes, but he was distracted by an Instagram notification.

@OttawaCentaursSocials tagged you in a post.

Ilya frowned and clicked on the notification. All the blood drained from his face when he saw the photo of him and Irina crouched with the hockey stick between them. The caption read: *Like father like daughter! Look who came home to visit his old team!*

A second later, Ilya heard Harris' chipper voice as he entered the room. 'Anyone free to do a quick video for-... Ilya?'

Before anyone could react, Ilya had slammed Harris against the lockers. 'What did I fucking say?'

'What?'

'I told you I didn't want the press to know.'

Strong hands pulled at Ilya's shoulders, hurling him off of Harris. 'Get off him, Coach.'

'Ilya, wh-…'

'Irina. You posted her.'

'I didn't know I wasn't supposed to.'

'I told you-…'

'Harris wasn't there, Roz.' He heard Bood say. 'You told us on the ice.'

'Is common sense then. Do not post a child without permission? You have endangered my family.'

Harris stared at him in horror. 'How?'

'We are trying to adopt her. Now anyone can see her. We are not supposed to post about her.'

'Rozanov, relax.'

m‘I cannot fucking re-…’ A moment later, there were cool hands on his face and the arms that had been restraining him released. Ilya fell forward into Shane’s arms.

‘Hey, hey, hey. Shh. It’s alright.’

‘It’s not alright,’ Ilya snarled. ‘Did you see what he did?’

Ilya was horrified to find tears springing to his eyes. He was the coach - how would they ever respect him after this?

‘I know, I saw, but it’s okay. We’ll figure it out.’

‘They’ll take her away, Shane.’ Ilya moaned like a wounded animal. The keening, terrified sound escaped before he could catch it. Dimly, he was embarrassed by his reaction, but he couldn’t seem to bring himself back down.

‘No, they won’t. Just breathe, baby.’

Ilya did as he was told, huffing into Shane’s shoulder with his eyes squeezed shut. It took several minutes of concentration but, eventually, Ilya’s heart rate returned to normal and he felt more capable of rational thought.

‘Are they all watching?’ He whispered into Shane’s shirt.

‘What? No. They left as soon as I came in here. I think they knew you needed some space. Don’t worry about that.’

‘Where’s Irochka?’

‘My mom’s got her. She came by with some documents for me to sign. I saw the post and came to talk to Harris about it when I heard you yelling.’

Ilya straightened up and wiped the last of his tears away with the collar of his shirt. ‘I should apologise. I think I really scared him.’

‘I would be more worried about Troy.’ Shane chuckled. ‘He looked ready to punch your lights out for touching Harris.’

‘Is fair. I would do the same if someone grabbed you like that.’

‘Well, to be fair to you, Harris should have known better.’

lIlya sniffed. ‘Yeah but still.’

‘Ilya, can I ask… Did you take your meds today?’

‘Of-…’ He had been about to say that, of course he had. He was on a strict schedule, especially since Irina had come home to them. He never wanted to accidentally forget and to do something that would scare or upset her. But as he reflected on that morning, he realised that he had missed a step in his routine. ‘Fuck, no, I don’t think so.’

Shane had suspected this. He had thought about it while he and Irina watched from the stands. Ilya had been tired from walking Shane around the house most of the night and it had thrown off his routine. His emotions were at a high and it wasn't his fault. It had been okay on the ice, when Ilya had needed to have all synapses firing. But the comedown had been too hard.

'Here,' Shane handed Ilya the car keys. 'You go take your meds from the spare bottle in the glove compartment. I'm going to go and talk to Harris and sort it all out.'

'You will apologise on my behalf?'

'Of course. Then Irina and I will join you in the car and we can all go home and relax.'

Chapter 14: 14.

Shane and Irina joined Ilya in the car twenty minutes later. Across the parking lot, Yuna waved to Ilya but kept her distance, moving toward her own car.

‘Yuna did not want to say hello?’

‘She had to get going. And she didn’t want to overwhelm you while we wait for the meds to kick in.’

Ilya’s face darkened. ‘She is scared of me.’

‘No one is scared of you, Ilya.’

Ilya shrugged and a very small smile appeared on his face. ‘Is fair, I tried to kill a man for posting a photo.’

‘You wouldn’t have killed him. Besides, he took the post down straight away. People will still have seen it and probably the press will speculate but he’ll handle it. It was his mistake. We don’t have to engage with any of it. Just delete the app from your phone for a few days.’

‘That’s a good idea.’ As Ilya did so, he flicked his eyes to the rearview mirror and smiled at Irina in her booster seat. ‘Irochka, you want to watch movie of little yellow guys?’ He asked her in Russian.

‘Despicable Me,’ she corrected him in English..

Ilya frowned at Shane. ‘I don’t know this word. How does she know this word?’

‘From the movie, I guess,’ Shane replied absently as he pulled out of the parking lot. It was one of Irina’s favourites. They had watched it as a family at least three times already. Shane was already making a plan to be in a different room when it came on this time.

‘What was it again, malyshka? Dinspeekable?’

‘Despicable, Papa.’

Ilya shook his head. ‘No, I think you made that up.’

Irina giggled and switched back to Russian. ‘I did not make it up. It is the name of the movie.’

‘No, you make up words in English to confuse your papa I think.’

‘No!’

‘Yes. Is conspiracy between you and Daddy. You have agreement to confuse me.’

Irina fell about in peals of laughter and didn't stop until they were almost home. It was the most beautiful sound in the world. When she saw the name of the film on the television, she began to laugh again, and both Shane and Ilya couldn't help but join in.

~

The following week, Ilya told Shane that they were expecting a guest. Ilya's best friend, Svetlana, was coming to stay for the weekend. Svetlana rarely planned everything ahead of time and Shane had grown used to her impromptu visits. He had thought she might start to give them more of heads-up now that she knew that they had Irina but, of course, he had expected too much of her.

She arrived in her usual glamorous fashion and, as might have been expected, Irina was instantly fascinated by her. Svetlana let Irina wear her sparkly shoes and they all watched fondly as she tottered around in them. Then she was allowed to sift through Svetlana's purse. She sorted through mints, perfume samples, coins in multiple currencies, and a package of false eyelashes. Shane intervened only when he spotted the packet of cigarettes, the lighter and the loose condoms.

A few hours after her arrival, Shane and Svetlana were standing on the porch, watching Irina and Anya playing down below. Ilya opened the porch door and joined them.

Ilya plucked the cigarette that Svetlana had been about to light from her fingers and extinguished it on the porch bannister.

Svetlana scowled at him. 'What are you doing? I know you quit but that is a bit extreme.'

'Don't smoke around my kid, Svetlana.'

'She is not even over here. You are so protective now. Such Daddy behaviour. Shane, do you find it just too sexy?'

'It is pretty sexy,' he had to admit. Ilya smirked and sidled up to Shane, pressing his hips against Shane's lower back.

For a few minutes they watched Irina and Anya chase one another around the yard. Every once in a while, Anya would look over and Ilya as if to check she was really allowed to chase his prized possession.

'She is very cute but why didn't you just ask me for a baby?'

'What?' Shane blanched.

'You don't have a baby.' Ilya pointed out.

'Not yet, but I could. It would be sweet. You raise it and I visit once a year with expensive gifts.'

Ilya frowned at her. ‘Who is the father?’

‘One of you.’ She shrugged. ‘I am not fussy.’

‘You’re not?’ Ilya pouted.

‘You mean like sperm donation?’

‘I assume you don’t want to have sex with me, Shane?’ She raised her eyebrows and then indicated to Ilya. ‘And you don’t want him to have sex with me again, right?’

‘Ideally.’

‘Then yes, donation.’ She shrugged.

‘Svetlana, if you’re serious… In the future we would really like to have more kids.’

‘Of course I am serious. You should ask Rose too. She needs a bit of drama, the press are ignoring her right now.’

~

That night, as they lay in bed, Ilya rolled over to look at Shane.

‘Shane?’

‘Hmm?’

‘If we decide to have a baby that way, instead of adopting, whether it’s with Svetlana or Rose or someone else, I-… I don’t want to use my sperm.’

Shane hesitated for a second and then said, ‘Okay?’

‘I just don’t want to pass any of my genetic shit down. It wouldn’t be fair. I’ve got dementia on one side and depression on the other.’

‘I’ve got shit too.’

Ilya shook his head. ‘You are just short.’

‘Hey!’

‘Just, when it comes to making the decision, it will be yours we use, not mine. I can’t live forever watching for if the bits of me that are bad have been passed down.’

‘No bits of you are bad, but if you feel strongly about it then yes, sure.’

‘Thank you.’

‘I was gonna say I’m sad they won’t look like you but Irina already looks like your biological kid.’

Ilya chuckled. ‘Exactly, so next time we get perfect mini-Shane. Plus if we go for Svetlana, they will be on catwalk by age three.’

‘She is very pretty.’

‘And smart. Could be a good choice, really.’

‘You know you don’t have to feel bad about existing, right? The shit you got in the genetic lottery, that’s not your fault, and it’s not all bad.’

‘Like what is good?’

‘You are a powerful hockey player. You speak multiple languages. You have pretty eyes…’

Ilya narrowed his eyes. ‘You are trying to get in my pants, Hollander.’

Shane grinned at him. ‘It’s Hollander-Rozanov now.’

Chapter 15: 15.

Chapter Notes

> hey team, just a note to say i'm so glad ur enjoying this fic but please don't hound me for updates in the comments - i've uploaded a chapter nearly every day for two weeks & that's a shit ton of work & rn i'm away from home with limited internet access. i'm doing my best ! i hope u enjoy this chapter xx

'Do you want a ginger ale with your lunch?' Ilya called to Shane from the kitchen.

'Nah, I'm good.'

The doorbell rang and Ilya jogged out of the kitchen to go and answer it. Irina hung from Shane's bicep, swinging and giggling as he raised and lowered his arm. She weighed almost nothing, so it wasn't hard to do, except that Shane was laughing so hard at her delight that he almost couldn't stand up straight.

'Be careful with your back, sweetheart.' Ilya touched the back of Shane's head gently as he went past to get the door.

'I'd get three more back surgeries to keep doing this.'

Ilya grinned and opened the door. His smile fell away when he saw Pamela standing her, gray-faced. He knew instinctively that this was not a friendly visit. He braced his arm on the door, as if hoping to prevent her from coming in although he knew it was silly to do so.

'Sounds like a very happy family in there.' Pamela said both kindly and sadly, nodding towards the sounds of Shane and Irina's laughter.

'Why have you come?' Immediately, Ilya thought of the Instagram post.

'We have to talk, Ilya. All three of us. May I come in?'

'Who is it?' Shane called out.

'Pamela.'

There was a scuffle and a moment later Shane was beside Ilya, holding Irina on his hip. Ilya pressed a kiss to the top of Irina's head, breathing in her scent of vanilla and earth.

'What's going on?' Shane asked, panic covering his face. Irina looked between them, confused and, Ilya could see, fear seeping into her body.

‘Malyshka,’ Ilya whispered into her hair. ‘Why don’t you take Anya to play out in the garden? We will have a little talk with Pamela and then come and join you.’

In Russian, she asked, ‘You will come? I am not going back?’

He replied in Russian, unwilling to let Pamela hear his oath to her. ‘I will not let them take you back, I swear to you.’ Ilya’s teeth gritted against the pain of the idea.

‘Okay, Papa,’ Irina said in English and slid out of Shane’s grasp, calling to Anya and making a beeline for the back door.

Shane, Ilya and Pamela sat down at their kitchen table. She cut right to it. ‘There is a complication.’

Shane swallowed. ‘What is it?’

‘It seems there is a woman back in Russia claiming that Irina is her daughter and that she put her into the orphanage temporarily and was coming back for her. She wants her back.’

That was not what they had been expecting. A small part of both Shane and Ilya felt relieved that they didn’t have to blame Harris, or themselves for this obstacle. But the reality suddenly felt a whole lot heavier.

‘She cannot have her,’ Ilya growled.

‘Ilya…’ Shane put his hand on Ilya’s arm but Ilya ripped it away.

‘No, she is our daughter, ours. We would never abandon her and then show up how many years later and ask for her back. We always show up, we are the stable home you told us we must be. She is ours.’

He devolved into chattering Russian so Shane started talking over him. ‘She doesn’t really have a claim, does she?’

‘We’re trying to find out. If she really is the mother but she gave up her paternal rights then, no, she has no claim. But if she didn’t-... Well, as I say, it’s just a complication.’

‘So we can’t adopt Irina.’

Pamela shook her head. ‘Not yet.’

There were tears in Ilya’s eyes now. ‘This is bullshit,’ he croaked.

‘I completely agree,’ Pamela said to him. ‘Believe me. If it was up to me, everything would be signed and sealed already. I know you are good people and everything I’ve seen on my visits, including today when you had no idea I was coming, shows me that she adores you. You are a family, any idiot could see that. I’m sorry I had to bring this news to you.’

When Pamela left, Ilya buried his face in his hands and sobbed while Shane rubbed his back.

‘This crazy woman probably saw Harris’ post and wants money,’ he said to Shane.

Shane was numb. He was barely able to take in what had happened. ‘She hasn’t asked for any money,’ he mumbled.

‘We will run away with her.’

‘Having us put in prison wouldn’t help.’

‘They can’t take our baby, Shane.’

Shane snapped to attention. ‘I won’t let them do that, okay. I’m going to fix it. There’s probably a book that-...’

‘There is no fucking book. This is real. This is real life and I can’t lose her, Shane. I really can’t. I’ll die if they take her-...’ Sobs took over and wracked Ilya’s body.

‘Hey.’ Shane pulled him to his chest. ‘Hey, are you okay?’

‘I couldn’t handle it.’

‘Me neither, but we won’t have to. How’s your head, baby?’ Shane looked into Ilya’s reddened eyes. ‘When was the last time you saw your therapist?’ When Ilya shrugged, Shane said. ‘Maybe it’s time for a check-in?’

‘What if they try to take her while I’m in there?’ Fear clutched at every cell in his body.

‘That won’t happen. But why don’t Irina and I wait for you in the waiting room, just in case?’

Ilya blinked at him. ‘You would do that?’

‘Of course. We’re a family, we stick together.’

Ilya could only kiss him.

Chapter 16: 16.

Two days later, they were in the waiting room of Ilya's psychologist. Shane had never been to these offices before, and he was pleased to see they were clean, comfortable and there was a pile of children's toys and books in the corner for Irina to play with. He had brought his laptop to do some research on their options but he suspected he would soon be roped into playing with something with his daughter.

When Galina called Ilya in, he turned frightened eyes to Shane. 'You won't leave, right?'

Shane squeezed the hand holding his 'Never.'

'Papa, I'm going to build a house that looks like ours while you're in that room,' Irina announced, pouring out a tub of bricks from the children's toy section.

'Da, do that Malyshka. I will inspect it when I come back out. Stay with your dad.'

'Daddy will help me build it,' Irina replied as if it was very silly of Ilya to assume any other alternative.

Ilya reached into his bag and threw a bottle of hand sanitiser over to Shane. He knew that Shane would be less than excited to touch the communal blocks.

~

Ilya tried to focus on the session even though every part of him wanted to walk out of the door and get his family out of Canada. He cursed his fame, and Shane's. He craved anonymity for this, only this. But he couldn't have it and he knew, humbly, he shouldn't really ask for it.

He told Galina everything and, as she always did, she patiently listened to him as he let his fears out.

'What is the worst case scenario here, Ilya?' She asked him when he was finally done talking in his stream of Russian.

'The state takes Irina away and we never see her again,' he replied automatically.

She nodded. 'Okay. And if the worst happens, how do you think you will respond.'

He shook his head, his face a mask of disgust. 'I can't think about it. Why would you ask me that?'

'I think you should think about it. We know it is a real possibility, yes? We should be prepared.'

Ilya swallowed the lump in his throat. 'I know I will fall apart. That I will become someone awful. That Shane will be burdened. I can't do that to him.'

‘Ilya, if you lose Irina, do you think you will also lose Shane?’

‘Maybe. He loves her so much. Maybe I will not be enough for him anymore.’

‘Has Shane given you any indication that he loves you less than he did before she arrived?’

‘If anything I think he loves me more. Watching me be a dad, be responsible, I think it kind of turns him on.’

‘There you go. If Irina is taken away, the two of you can face up to that together.’

‘I don’t want to face it at all.’

‘You have faced hardships before, Ilya. You are an incredibly resilient man. I know you can do this if it comes to it.’

Ilya did not tell her that, if his family was taken from him, he did not intend to do anything ever again.

~

Ilya returned to the waiting room, his eyes red-rimmed. He gushed appropriately over the house Irina had built and took too-many photos of it on his phone.

Shane caught his eye and spoke in English. ‘Feel better?’

Ilya shrugged. ‘I don’t feel worse. How were things out here?’

‘Could have been worse…’ Shane winced. ‘My mom called and I told her what’s going on. She’s inconsolable.’

Ilya frowned. ‘Is that same as upset?’

‘Basically.’

Ilya cleared his throat. ‘Galina asked me if we have explained things to Irina yet.’

Shane sighed. ‘We should. I know we should. I just-…’

‘Don’t know how to do it?’

‘Yeah.’

‘I was thinking we should wait until we know if there is a claim being made. If not, then we just proceed with the adoption as planned. If there is, we telll her.’

‘Okay, deal.’

~

That night, in bed, Ilya turned over to face Shane. His husband was reading one of his adoption books, his face serious and worried beneath his glasses. Ilya's whole body ached with love for him.

'Shane?'

'Hmm?' Shane underlined something on the page in pencil.

'Do you think I'm a bad person?'

'What?' He looked, horrified, at Ilya. 'Of course not.'

'I mean, do you think the bad things I've done-… Do you think God has kept count?'

'No, baby.'

'But-…'

'You haven't done anything bad.'

Without noticing he was doing it, Ilya touched the cross around his neck. Shane trapped it with his own hand. 'We've been over this, Ilya. Our love is not a sin. It never could be.'

'I know and I would never take it back even if God himself told me to. It's just that, there must be a reason this is happening. It feels like-… I think He realised I was finally happy and is taking her away to punish me. For my dad maybe, or my brother. My mother-…'

'Well if this is a punishment then he's punishing me too.'

Ilya bit the inside of his cheek, genuinely considering this. 'And you have never done anything wrong. So maybe is not that.'

'It's not that, Ilya. I promise it's not that.'

'Then what is it? Why is this happening to us?'

Shane couldn't answer that question. Even after mulling it over in this own brain since the moment Pamela had told them that Irina still had a mother, he hadn't been able to claw an answer from the air.

He feared, as Ilya did, that there was a reason their happiness was being stolen. He didn't believe in a higher power, though. He thought, instead, that they had just had more than their fair share of joy. They'd hit their limit. How dare they ask for more than that?

How dare they have the careers they had had, the careers they were still enjoying? How dare they have beautiful homes and a great dog? How dare they have such a great relationship with his parents? How dare they have a love as rare and exquisite as theirs? Nobody could be that happy in one lifetime.

Nobody deserved the joy of a child on top of that.

But then he looked at Ilya as his husband dropped slowly to sleep and he realised that only one of them was as happy as all of that.

Only one of them had had a great life all the way through. Only one of them had parents who loved him. Only one of them had always felt safe and wanted and adored.

This had been Ilya's shot at complete happiness for the first time.

He had the careers, and he had Shane, yes, but this was Ilya's first real chance at a family that loved him without condition.

Shane was going to fight like hell to give him that chance.

Chapter 17: 17.

The next few days were hell.

Any minute they might have heard about the possible claim and would find out whether or not Irina would be theirs forever.

Shane was stressed out of his mind, but he was so much more worried about Ilya. His husband was barely sleeping, or eating, or doing literally anything. Shane kept catching him just staring into space and it was scaring the shit out of him. He begged Ilya to see Galina again but Ilya was too scared to be separated from Irina. He would barely let her out of his sight, always preferring that she stay in the same room as him just in case.

She was simply the only thing guaranteed to get his attention was Irina who Ilya refused to let see how hard he was finding things.

The only positive was that Yuna and David came to stay with them while they waited for news about the adoption. They cooked, cleaned, played with Irina and Anya, and just generally kept their boys alive.

One afternoon, Shane was looking for Ilya and found him with his mother. Ilya had fallen asleep with his head in Yuna's lap yet she was still stroking her fingers through his hair.

Shane looked sadly down at his husband while his mother gave him the very same look. It was impossible not to notice the dark circles under her son's eyes, or to ignore the way he scoured the internet for any kind of loophole that might help them. She was scared for the both of them, and horrified by the thought of losing her granddaughter before she had even really known her.

'He's struggling right now, isn't he?' She whispered to Shane. 'I mean, I know you're both struggling, but it seems to really be taking its toll on him.'

Shane nodded. 'He takes everything on himself. He thinks he did something wrong or that he's being punished by God for finally being happy.'

She shook her head and looked down at the angelic-looking Ilya. 'My poor boy.'

'I don't know what to do, Mom.' Shane's voice cracked.

'All we can do right now is stick together,' she said firmly, refusing to cry with him. 'We're a family, all five of us. We'll ride the road together.'

Shane gestured to Ilya. 'I can take over if you need me to.'

She shook her head. 'I don't want to disturb-…'

But at that moment the doorbell rang and Ilya jolted awake anyway.

Shane, his blood running cold, hurried to get the door while Yuna tried to soothe Ilya who had, apparently, been having a nightmare.

As Shane had feared, Pamela was at the door. He tried to block her from Ilya's view but failed miserably. Ilya was at his side a second later.

Once more, Pamela wasted no time. 'There is a claim.'

'Oh my god,' Shane heard his mother say behind them.

He expected Ilya to speak, maybe to swear in Russian, but he was being scarily quiet.

'But it is being contested. We will be arguing that she is an unfit mother due to the abandonment-...'

Ilya frowned. '*Is* she an unfit mother?'

Pamela blinked at him. 'She abandoned her child.'

'But was there a reason for it? Circumstances?'

Shane nudged him. 'Ilya?'

'In Russia, things are different.' Ilya shook his head. 'Life is harder. There might be a reason she had to do it. I mean, where is Irina's father?'

Pamela was looking at Ilya as if he had just grown a new head. 'There's no word on him.'

'So she is a single mother, maybe no income. She puts Irina somewhere she thinks will be safe and comes back to find her gone? How is that unfit?'

'Ilya, I'm sorry if I'm misunderstanding you but… do you want her to win her claim? You don't want to adopt Irina?'

Ilya shook his head vehemently, 'Of course not but-... Look, that little girl is special. I can't live with the idea that we are stealing her from somebody that loves her too.'

'I can find out.'

'Thank you. Is all I ask.'

'I'm on my way home now, I just thought I'd drive by. I-… I'll look into it all for you.'

'Thank you, Pamela. We appreciate it.' Shane spoke robotically.

When they had shut the front door behind Pamela, Shane disappeared into the house. Ilya pressed his forehead to the back of the door and swore at himself. Yuna, thankfully, had disappeared to find Irina and David.

Ilya's heart and head was racing. He was terrified of what they were going to have to face. He wanted to hold Irina, but he couldn't face Shane's parents yet. He just needed Shane. It was

time to face up to what he had done, what he had said.

He found Shane sitting on the end of their bed, staring into space. Ilya sank down beside him. Shane didn't move away from him which Ilya took to be a good sign.

'You're mad at me,' said Ilya. It was not a question, nor was there any blame attached to the words. It was a fact, in Ilya's eyes at least.

Shane disagreed. 'I'm not mad at you.'

'I would be mad at me, if I was you. I'm kind of mad at me anyway.'

'I'm not mad. I'm sad and a bit scared. Mostly, I'm confused.'

'I'm sorry.' Ilya slipped his hand into Shane's and held them in his lap. 'I never want to make you sad, and I never ever want to scare you. Confused just sometimes happens.'

'Can you explain it to me? Why you said those things?'

Ilya took a shuddering breath. 'When I was three, my mother tried to leave my father. My brother was seven and he didn't want to go but she made him come. He cried and screamed the whole time so her family would not let us stay. She had to go back to my father because she had no other help. She did what she could to look after us, and put her own happiness on the line. You know what it cost her in the end. What if Irina's mother is like mine?'

'What if she isn't?'

'I know-…'

'No, Ilya, please listen. What if her mother is the reason she was used to being beaten and bruised? The reason she took her clothes off without shyness? The reason she has nightmares and is terrified someone is coming to take her away? Don't you think that if Irina's mother was as good and wonderful as yours, she would be asking for her? Irina has never once mentioned a mother.'

'She gave her up as a baby-…'

'Even still, Irina doesn't even wonder about her. Ilya, think about those words. *She gave her up*. She gave up on her. Your mother put herself back into hell to be with you, to protect you as best she could. Irina's mother didn't do that. And yes, maybe there were reasons for it, but she still did it. And now that little girl is here with us and she's happy, you know she is. And she makes us so happy. That can't possibly be the worse of the two options.'

'Shane, sweetheart-…

'I'm-... I just-... I need you for this. I need you in this with me. I need you to fight for this. Fight for her and us. You said she was ours, if you believe that then fight for it. Fight for our family, Ilya. Fight for the happiness that we deserve.'

'Okay. Okay, I can do that.'

But a small part of his still wondered and worried. Maybe it always would.

Shane sighed. ‘We have to tell her.’

‘I don’t know if I can.’

‘She needs to know.’

‘I know.’

Shane almost whimpered. ‘I don’t want to tell her.’

‘Me neither, but you’re right.’

‘Together?’

‘Together. Always, sweetheart.’

Chapter 18: 18.

Irina did not take the news well.

She immediately panicked, believing that she would be snatched away at any minute. She sprinted away from her fathers, dodging both of her grandparents and both locked and barricaded herself in her bedroom.

‘Why is there even a lock on that door?’ David scolded the boys.

‘It was just a spare room before. Guests deserve privacy,’ Shane said pointlessly while Ilya spoke softly in Russian, crouched on the floor, his lips close to the crack between the door and the carpet. Irina refused to let them in.

In the end, Shane watched as Ilya, who had the bad luck of being the only one of the two of them without a back injury, shimmied up a tree in their backyard and risked his life climbing from a branch and into her bedroom window, which she did not know how to lock.

Between them, once the door had been unlocked (and removed by David while the boys spoke to their daughter in their own bedroom), Ilya and Shane managed to explain that there would be no immediate removal of her from their care. Rather, they would, at some point, go to a courthouse and it would be decided there.

In the meantime, Irina became increasingly clingy. She refused to sleep in her own bed again, would scream the second she couldn’t see one of them, and preferred at all times to be held by at least one of her fathers. In the kitchen, when Ilya cooked, she held onto his belt loops and moved like a shadow. When Shane took phonecalls, she clung to his leg until he, inevitably picked her up and carried her around on his hip. She was prone to fits of crying in a way she had never been before, and she was disinterested in the things she had previously liked.

When the court date was set, she reacted even worse. Her nightmares came back with a vengeance and she became picky with her food, often claiming that she had no appetite. The whole experience was exhausting for all of them, and both Shane and Ilya found themselves both dreading and wishing for the court date to arrive just to put an end to all of their suffering.

~

The night before they went to court to face the claim and try to win, Ilya sat on back garden stairs alone. It had been three-and-a-half months in the making and he was really fucking tired.

He had been smoking, had gone through nearly a whole pack. Shane had seen him, of course he had, but he had been kind enough not to say anything. Ilya was thinking about his mother, the first Irina. He thought of her sweet smile and how her shoulders moved when she giggled.

How she had loved to ice-skate. How she had wanted to be an ice dancer before she met Ilya's father. How she had had dreams and desires and beliefs just like little Irina.

How he had lost her too soon.

He couldn't do it again.

He wouldn't do it again.

When he heard the door open, he turned, expecting it to be his husband, but it was Irina. Ilya shoved his pack and lighters away and opened his arms to her. She had been brave to leave Shane's side, especially that night.

'You smell funny,' she muttered into the skin of his neck.

Ilya blew his last breath of smoke over her head. 'Someone is barbequing, I think. That is the smell, not me. I am normal.'

'Oh. Why are you sitting out here?'

He thought for a moment and then said, simply, 'It is peaceful.'

She sniffed. 'Are you sad, Papa?'

'Only a little. Come here.' She crawled further into his lap and he rocked her in his arms, his tears falling into her hair.

'Are they going to take me away tomorrow?' She asked the question to the night air and it felt like a spear went through Ilya.

'I don't know, malyshka. I hope not.'

'You said you wouldn't let them take me.'

His heart guttered. 'I know. I'm sorry if I cannot keep that promise. I will try. You must know that. If they take you, know that we wanted you to stay forever.'

She began to tremble against him. 'I'm scared.'

'No, don't be scared. Here.' Ilya unfastened his crucifix from around his neck. 'This was my mother's,' he said, dangling it in front of her. 'And she was bravest woman that ever lived.' He placed the chain around Irina's neck. 'So whenever you feel scared, Irochka, I want you to touch this and remember how much we love you. Okay?'

'That's what you do?'

'Yes.' He nodded and fastened the clasp at the nape of her neck. 'One time, I was on a plane and we had to emergency land and I held onto this so tightly and I asked my mama to make sure that I got home safe to your dad. And she did it.'

‘So if I ask to come home, she will make it happen?’

‘Maybe. I hope so.’

‘I hope so too.’ She squeezed the cross and shut her eyes tight. ‘Please Babushka, let me stay. I want to stay.’

It was almost too much for Ilya. He began to cry even harder although he tried desperately to make sure Irina didn’t notice. He was sure she could tell but, bless her, she just leaned back against his and stared out into their backyard.

The back door opened again and, without saying anything to Ilya, Shane reached down and picked Irina up. She held tight to his neck, hiding her face in the crook of it, while Shane dangled one of his arms to entwine his fingers in Ilya’s hair.

Ilya pressed his face to Shane’s thigh and soundlessly sobbed.

Chapter 19: 19.

Chapter Notes

> tysm for all of your comments !! please let's keep chatting for the final two chapters (ahh!)

Shane's hands trembled as they worked on his tie. He had been trying to knot it properly for nearly ten minutes and, despite having tied a tie after nearly every hockey game since he was eighteen, he couldn't seem to get it. He was alone in the bedroom. Ilya was down the hall brushing Irina's hair and helping her pick the right dress for the occasion.

The house was heavy with a quiet sadness. There was a very real chance that Irina would never step foot in it again.

Shane heard a knock at the door and a moment later his mother popped her head in.

'How are we doing?'

'I can't do my tie.'

She reached for him. 'Let me.'

A moment passed in loving silence as she, with her steady hands, tied his tie for him and smoothed it flat against his chest.

'Mom?'

Shane wasn't sure what he had been about to say. Maybe 'I'm so scared', or 'why is this happening?' But in the end, he didn't get a chance to say anything. As always, Yuna knew exactly how to make him feel better.

'I'll be right there, honey. I won't leave you. Not today.'

Ilya arrived in the doorway. He had opted not to wear a tie but looked, nevertheless, as handsome and put together as he ever had. Even with the lack of sleep and stress he'd experienced over the last few months, he shone in a way Shane had never seen replicated in another human being.

Well, not until he had met Irina.

'Ready?' Ilya asked Shane and Yuna.

Yuna answered for them both. 'As we'll ever be, I think.'

Yuna and David drove separately to the courthouse, giving Shane and Ilya some time alone with Irina. She was quiet in the backseat, clutching her Boston bear to her chest.

Shane gripped the steering wheel as tightly as he had the day he and Shane had driven to pick her up and bring her home. Once again, Ilya had his hand on Shane's thigh. He squeezed it gently and, just for a moment, smiled to himself.

'What are you thinking about?' Asked Shane.

'The day you came out.'

Shane rolled his eyes. 'I didn't come out, we were-…'

'No, not to the world. To them.' He nodded to the car in front of theirs on the road. 'To your parents. I remember holding you after your dad ran away from the cottage and your heart was beating so hard I could feel it in my own chest.'

'I thought I was gonna have a heart attack.'

'That's what I thought was happening too.' Ilya chuckled. 'And now look at us. Look at you. Look at what we are fighting for and who is fighting with us.'

'We are pretty lucky, huh?'

'We are really lucky. Let's take that luck in there with us, yes?'

'Deal.'

~

Ilya wished, in a way, that he hadn't given Irina his cross. He kept touching his chest and looking for it. When she crawled into his lap to get a better look at what was going on, he buried his face in her hair and prayed to his mother to protect them. To give them this.

Most of the proceedings had nothing to do with them. Lawyers spoke, and the adoption agents. A Russian woman who had accompanied the group of children from the orphanage to Canada. Shane, Ilya, Irina, David and Yuna sat on a bench behind official-looking people in expensive suits and wondered what gave them the right to decide who Irina's family should be. Ilya scanned the court room over and over, trying to find the woman who claimed to be Irina's mother. No one seemed to fit the right age group, or race. Was it possible she was late? Would she come at all?

He didn't dare get his hopes up.

Then the judge spoke.

'Do either of the foster parents have anything to say before we proceed?'

Shane looked to Ilya and could tell, without asking, that he couldn't speak. He had looked at him this way all those years ago, at one of their earliest joint press conferences. When they

had sat with their feet touching to make sure the other was okay.

Shane had answered for Ilya then, and he could do so now.

He cleared his throat, stood up and said, ‘Yes, your honour.’

‘Please proceed to the microphone and address the court.’

Shane hadn’t been expecting that, but he rose to the challenge. With his family staring into his back, Shane straightened his jacket and planted himself in front of the microphone. He exhaled slowly to calm himself and then began.

‘We both feel that the best place for Irina is with us. We take her wellbeing very seriously. Not only do we ensure she is well-fed, clean, clothed, safe and warm, but we also make sure that she is having the kind of childhood a well-rounded adult would look back on and say “yeah, I had the *best* childhood”. When she came to us, she had been neglected and abused. She flinched at loud noises and she had nightmares almost every night. Now she is learning English and French, she is learning to read, she plays with our dog Anya in our big open yard. She loves the minions.’ This received a titter of laughter across the courtroom. ‘She has the loudest and most infectious laugh of anyone we know. We adore her completely but that is not the only reason we think she should stay with us. We also want her to stay because if she didn’t, she would be worse off.’

‘Even if she could be with her biological family again? With her mother?’

Shane’s jaw tensed. ‘Even so. We believe that there are things stronger than blood and the love we have for that little girl is stronger than anything on this earth.’

‘Thank you. We will reconvene in one hour to hear the contest.’

Chapter 20: 20.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

‘You spoke so well, Shane.’ David clapped his son on the back while Yuna fussed with a small stain on the hem of Irina’s dress.

Ilya and Shane said nothing, either to each other or anyone else. They held hands though, and each kept the other hand on Irina, alternating between touching her shoulder or stroking her hair, as though they feared her mother would suddenly appear and grab her.

It wasn’t lost on either of them that this could very well be their last chance to be with Irina, to hold her and tell her that they loved her, but they couldn’t bring themselves to do anything too final. It would feel like they were jinxing it.

An hour passed before the court resumed. Shane and Ilya sat with Irina between them. Yuna sat on Ilya’s left, while David sat on Shane’s right, each with their arms around their respective son’s shoulders.

Ilya’s arm draped over Irina’s lap so that he could keep holding Shane’s hand, and she leaned her head against Shane’s bicep. She seemed to realise that this was the all-important moment, and Ilya saw her fiddling with his crucifix.

They waited.

The judge took his time getting settled and calling the court to order. Every second was a lifetime. Ilya worked hard to control his breathing as his eyes, once more, scanned the room for Irina’s mother.

They waited.

The judge called out, ‘If there are any persons here present who know of any lawful impediment in regards to the adoption of Irina Litsyn, please come forward.’

They waited.

The lawyers whispered to each other. Shane watched Pamela as she looked around the room.

They waited.

And waited.

The judge frowned. ‘I thought there was a biological parent involved in this case.’

Ilya saw a lawyer shrug, *actually* shrug at the judge.

They waited.

The judge sighed. ‘I’ve had enough of this. The mother is not present, I take that as an indication that she does not wish to proceed with this case. Full custody is granted to Shane David Hollander and Ilya Grigoryevich Rozanov.’

The gavel banged.

David and Yuna whooped and hollered, ignoring the dirty looks they got from the courthouse staff. Shane and Ilya sat frozen, their hands clasped tight together.

It was over. She was really theirs.

Forever.

‘It’s because I asked Babushka!’ Irina said excitedly to Ilya, tugging on his suit jacket.

Yuna was wide-eyed. ‘Was she ever here?’ She asked Pamela as she came over to them.

Pamela was wide-eyed and seemed a little shell-shocked. ‘I’ve received word from my office. We know she landed in Canada but after that she seems to have disappeared. Maybe it was just a ruse to get into the country-…’

‘No, no way.’ Ilya said quickly.

Yuna asked, ‘Maybe she wasn’t really her mother?’

Ilya turned to Shane with blazing love in his eyes. ‘Maybe she heard what you said and knew it was true.’

‘Either way, nobody is taking her from you now.’ Pamela grinned. ‘I’ll leave you to celebrate. I am so so happy for you guys.’

And so she was theirs.

Her name became Irina Yuna Hollander-Rozanov. But they always called her their malyshka. Their little one.

~

THREE MONTHS LATER

‘Ira, baby, we’re going to be late,’ Shane called out in Russian. His daughter was playing with Anya on the floor of the living room but she looked up, grinning, at Shane when he entered.

‘Papa?’

‘I told you he was meeting us there, he has to get the team ready.’

She scampered up and grabbed the backpack he had prepared for her from his outstretched hand.

‘Where’s my jersey?’

‘We’ll put it on at the stadium. Can’t give away the surprise.’

~

It was the first game of the season and Ilya was sick with nerves. Not for the game - he had a good team and he knew he had coached them well in the months since he had taken over from Wiebe, but because this would be his first public appearance with Shane and Irina.

The world was about to meet his daughter, his whole world.

They had discussed at length how to handle things when it came to Irina and her fathers’ combined fame. Ilya had always enjoyed his notoriety. He’d had fun with it, played with it. But he was also wary of exposing his daughter to it unnecessarily.

It was Shane, surprisingly, who said they should never hide her. Not put her in the public eye for the sake of it, but he had had enough of hiding in his life.

He turned at the sound of the door to the coach’s box opening and grinned wide when he saw his family. Irina ran to him and he swung her up into his arms.

‘My malyshka,’ he breathed into her hair. ‘Are you excited for the game?’ He set her back down, cupping her face in his hands.

‘The Centaurs are going to win,’ she said in perfect English.

‘That’s right. What are you wearing?’ He frowned as Irina giggled and spun around to show her the back of the jersey she was wearing.

HOLLANDER 24

Ilya scowled at Shane. ‘Is that your doing?’

‘She wanted to wear the best number, I don’t know what to tell you.’

Ilya’s eyes trailed over Shane and his heart skipped a beat. ‘And what are you wearing?’

Shane smirked and spun, the same way Irina had. His jersey made Ilya’s smile return.

ROZANOV 81

‘Well that’s something at least.’

‘The fans will eat it up. Harris said so.’

Ilya rolled his eyes and smiled fondly. ‘Irochka, you will have to choose a side soon.’

‘Both sides,’ she said determinedly, and Ilya decided to look into having some custom jerseys made.

‘We really should have Hollander-Rozanov on the back of both jerseys, regardless of number.’

‘I suspect people would get confused.’

‘True. We do look very alike.’ Shane winked.

‘Roz, game’s about to start.’ Ilya nodded at the assistant who had appeared in the doorway and turned towards the ice. Shane sat himself down beside him, Irina on his lap.

Both Shane and Ilya knew the cameras would be watching them. Not only were they the two biggest recently-retired stars. Not only was Ilya the coach, being supported by his husband. Not only were the fans obsessive about the two of them generally. Now they also had an adorable little girl as part of the deal.

The fans were going to go nuts.

Over the course of the game, the cameras came back again and again to watch Shane and Irina’s reactions in the box. Shane often leaned over to murmur observations to Ilya as he watched his team with hawk-like eyes. Ilya listened intently every time, trusting Shane, and only Shane, to help him with his judgement calls.

Shane had brought a bag of toys and snacks for Irina, assuming she would get bored after a few minutes. But to his delight and surprise, she kept a focus on the ice almost as intense as her papa’s. Occasionally she asked Shane questions about the rules, getting by half in Russian and half in English.

He knew then that they had a hockey fan on their hands and the idea scared and thrilled Shane in equal measure.

The Centaurs won by an unprecedented margin and the fans went ballistic. At the final moment, the camera followed Ilya’s gaze as he blew a kiss to the sky, and then kissed both Shane and Irina in celebration. The clip played for months on every sports channel and, for once, Ilya didn’t mind.

~

Six months later, Irina was thriving.

She was learning to skate, and was soon to join the local hockey team for her age-group.

Her English was getting better by the day.

She was weirdly good at Monopoly and insisted on beating both of her fathers at it at least once a week.

She was kind and smart and loveable.

She adored Anya more than most else in the world.

She loved her dads and her grandparents.

She was making friends.

She hadn’t had a nightmare in nearly a year.

And she was about to become a big sister.

Chapter End Notes

we made it team ! thank you all for your supportive comments and all the love on this fic - i have started working on a sequel which i will post a link to here once it is up & i hope to see you all there for more of this lil family xxxx

here is the link to the sequel !!!

https://archiveofourown.org/works/77695211/chapters/203508911

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!