

cupid & co

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](https://archiveofourown.org/works/84906156) at <https://archiveofourown.org/works/84906156>.

Rating:	Not Rated
Archive Warning:	No Archive Warnings Apply
Category:	M/M
Fandom:	Heated Rivalry (TV)
Relationship:	Shane Hollander/Ilya Rozanov
Characters:	Shane Hollander , Ilya Rozanov , Rose Landry , Svetlana Vetrova , Kip Grady
Additional Tags:	Strangers to Friends to Lovers , Single Parent Shane Hollander , Barista Ilya Rozanov , Alternate Universe - Coffee Shops & Cafés , Hockey , Hockey Coach Shane Hollander , Fluff , Getting Together , Domestic Fluff , Matchmaking , Protective Shane Hollander , Soft Ilya Rozanov , Grumpy/Sunshine Relationships , French lessons , Idiots in Love , Mutual Pining , Light Angst , Cozy , Age Difference , Tooth-Rotting Fluff , Sweet , Ilya Rozanov Loves Shane Hollander , Shane Hollander Loves Ilya Rozanov , Louise Hollander , Protective Ilya Rozanov , Found Family , Shane Hollander & Ilya Rozanov's Terrible Communication Skills
Language:	English
Series:	Part 6 of hockey didn't happen
Stats:	Published: 2026-05-16 Completed: 2026-05-19 Words: 10,503 Chapters: 3/3

cupid & co

by [shaneverse](#)

Summary

Shane Hollander only goes to the café near the rink because his daughter loves the hot chocolate.

The fact that Ilya Rozanov remembers Louise's order, gives her free cookies, and looks suspiciously happy whenever they walk in is completely irrelevant.

Louise, however, seems to think the barista would fit perfectly into their little family.

Notes

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- Translation into Русский available: [cupid & co](#) by [isolated_track](#)

Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

huge thank you to berey for giving me the original idea for this fic and letting me immediately run insane with it 🥹 i love you dearly <3

p.s. yes, ilya is a defenseman in this fic <3

Shane's Saturday morning routine was sacred.

It started with freezing bleachers, terrible rink coffee, and Louise somehow gaining more energy after two straight hours of hockey practice.

By eight in the morning, Shane already felt half-dead.

He'd been awake since five-thirty, scraping ice off his ancient Honda Civic while Montreal was still pitch black, then sitting through practice with numb fingers and a thermos full of coffee that tasted vaguely like burnt dirt.

Still, Saturdays were his favorite part of the week.

"Dad, did you see my crossover?" Louise asked for the fourteenth time, her tiny hand tucked inside Shane's winter glove as they walked through the gray slush coating the sidewalk. Her oversized hockey bag hung from Shane's shoulder, bumping against his hip with every step. "Coach Svetlana said my knees were bent perfectly. Like a real *penguin*."

"I saw, Lou. You were practically flying."

Louise beamed.

The *Steamy Mug* sat squeezed between a dusty bookstore and a dry cleaner's that permanently smelled like starch.

It wasn't fancy, but it was theirs.

For the past six months, their post-practice routine had included Luca Haas: overly chatty, permanently sleep-deprived, and somehow always ready with a plastic dinosaur for Louise and a large black coffee with oat milk for Shane before they even reached the counter.

But when Shane pushed the heavy wooden door open, the little brass bell chiming above them, Luca wasn't there.

Instead, there was a stranger behind the espresso machine.

Shane slowed immediately, a familiar flicker of protective instinct settling in his chest.

The new barista looked *terrifying*.

Tall. Broad-shouldered. Dressed entirely in black beneath the café apron. Dark tattoos disappeared beneath the rolled sleeves of his thermal shirt, messy dark blond curls falling into his face beneath the harsh café lights, a permanent scowl pulling at his mouth.

He looked like the kind of man who would snap a hockey stick over someone's knee without blinking.

"*Oh*," Shane muttered, slowing as they approached the counter. He instinctively tugged Louise a little closer to his side, shifting the heavy hockey bag higher on his shoulder.

The man behind the counter didn't look up immediately. He was aggressively wiping down the steam wand, knuckles white around the rag.

When he finally lifted his head, blue eyes swept slowly over Shane before dropping to Louise.

Shane cleared his throat. "Hi. Uh, is Luca not working today?"

The man's mouth pulled into a flat, unimpressed line.

"Luca played beer league hockey on Thursday," he said, his voice low and rough beneath a thick Russian accent. "Tried to check a man twice his size. Broke his arm. He is idiot. I am covering."

"Right," Shane said awkwardly. "Well. That's too bad. I guess we'll just order-"

"*Whoa*," Louise breathed.

Shane looked down.

His daughter had completely abandoned self-preservation. She'd let go of his hand and was practically hanging over the counter on her tiptoes, staring up at the Russian with huge, fascinated eyes.

"Lou, honey, step back a bit," Shane murmured, reaching for the hood of her bright pink jacket.

But Louise was already committed.

She pointed a mitten-clad finger directly at the barista. "Your arms are huge. Do you play hockey too? Luca said only real tough guys get to play in the adult league. Did you break his arm?"

Shane felt his soul briefly leave his body.

“*Louise Marie*,” he hissed, horrified, looking back up at the barista with an apologetic grimace. “I’m so sorry. She just says whatever enters her brain-”

The barista stared at Louise.

Louise stared right back, cheeks pink from the cold, pom-pom hat slightly crooked.

For three painful seconds, the café went quiet except for the low hum of the refrigerator and the hiss of the radiator.

Then the corner of the man’s mouth twitched.

“I did not break his arm,” the barista said, still completely deadpan. “But I told him he skates like drunk newborn deer. He did not listen. And yes. I play defense.”

Louise gasped dramatically, mittens flying to her cheeks. “I’m a defenseman too! Coach Svetlana says I have a really big poke-check. I knocked Tommy over today and he cried, but I didn’t get a penalty because I got the puck first.”

“Is that so?”

The man leaned his forearms against the counter, lowering himself slightly toward her. The sleeves of his thermal stretched over his arms, a pale scar cutting through one eyebrow.

“Good,” he said seriously. “Defense is for smart players. For people who like hitting things and do not apologize after.”

Louise looked delighted by this information.

“What is your name, defense-girl?”

“Louise. But my dad calls me *Lou-Lou* when I’m good and Louise Marie when I color on the walls or say things I’m not supposed to.”

The barista let out a low sound that took Shane a second to realize was a laugh.

“I am Ilya,” he said. Then blue eyes lifted back to Shane. “You want the usual?”

Shane blinked. “The usual?”

Ilya gestured toward a neon pink sticky note taped beside the register, covered in messy handwriting.

“Luca left notes,” he said, squinting slightly as he read it. “Single dad with pretty eyes and loud kid come every Saturday at ten. Large black coffee with oat milk. Hot chocolate with exactly four marshmallows for the gremlin.”

Heat rushed instantly to Shane’s face.

Single dad with pretty eyes? He was going to kill Luca.

“Right,” Shane said weakly. “Yeah. That’s us.” His voice cracked halfway through the sentence. *Perfect*. “Just that, please. And ignore the pretty eyes part. Luca is an idiot.”

Ilya didn’t comment on that. He simply turned back toward the espresso machine.

Shane watched him for a second longer than necessary.

Everything about Ilya looked rough - the tattoos, the scowl, the broad shoulders -but his hands moved carefully around the cups and espresso machine, quick and practiced beneath the warm café lights.

“Hey, Ilya?” Louise called, kicking her boots lightly against the counter.

“Mm?” Ilya grunted over the hiss of the milk steamer.

“Do you speak French? I’m learning it at school.”

“No. I speak Russian and English,” Ilya said, pouring steamed milk into Shane’s coffee. “French has too many letters for one word.”

“I can teach you,” Louise offered immediately, puffing out her chest. “Today’s word is *bonjour*. It means hello.”

Ilya set Shane’s coffee on the counter before reaching for a paper cup for the hot chocolate.

Shane watched him grab the marshmallow jar, already expecting the usual four.

Instead, Ilya shoved an entire handful into the drink.

Then another handful.

By the time he finished, the hot chocolate had practically disappeared beneath a ridiculous mountain of marshmallows.

And, without a word, Ilya grabbed a chocolate chip cookie from the pastry case, wrapped it in wax paper, and slid it beside the drinks.

“Oh, we didn’t order the cookie,” Shane said quickly, already reaching for his wallet. “I can pay for it.”

“Is fine,” Ilya said, staring at the register instead of him. “It is old. Was getting thrown away anyway.”

Shane looked down at the cookie.

It was obviously *fresh*.

When he looked back up, Ilya’s jaw was tight, blue eyes fixed very intensely on the espresso machine behind Shane instead of the conversation happening in front of him.

Something warm flickered low in Shane’s chest.

“Thank you,” he said softly.

Ilya handed the ridiculous mountain of hot chocolate to Louise, who looked moments away from ascending directly into heaven.

“Now,” Ilya said seriously. “What was word again?”

“*Bonjour*,” Louise repeated.

Ilya frowned slightly in concentration. “*Bone-jewer*.”

Louise immediately burst into giggles. “No! *Bonjour*! You sound like a tractor.”

“I am Russian,” Ilya said defensively, one corner of his mouth twitching upward. “We do not do the fancy French sounds. Go eat your sugar, Lou.”

Shane gathered the drinks, ignoring the strange flutter low in his chest as he guided Louise toward their usual table.

When he glanced back over his shoulder, Ilya was already wiping down the steam wand again, his expression unreadable.

Still, he looked a little less tense than before.



After another brutal week at the rink - one crying kid, one incident involving vomit directly on Shane’s skates, and Louise starting a very serious debate about penguins being built for hockey - the freezing wind outside somehow felt even worse than usual.

By the time they reached the café, Shane was desperate for warmth.

The Steamy Mug was busier than usual, a line stretching almost to the entrance. But the second the bell jingled overhead, Ilya looked up.

His gaze found Shane instantly through the crowd.

Without saying anything, Ilya reached for a ceramic mug and a paper cup before they’d even reached the counter.

The immediate recognition sent an embarrassing rush of warmth through Shane’s chest.

When they finally reached the counter, their drinks were already waiting for them. Large black coffee with oat milk. Hot chocolate buried beneath an absurd amount of marshmallows. And beside them, a blueberry muffin wrapped neatly in wax paper.

“Old?” Shane asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Practically moldy,” Ilya said immediately. “*Very dangerous*.”

Shane laughed softly. “Right. Thanks, Ilya.”

He reached for his wallet, fingers stiff from the cold. When he handed over his card, his fingertips brushed briefly against Ilya’s hand.

Shane froze.

The contact lasted less than a second, but Ilya’s hands were warm enough to make Shane suddenly aware of how cold his own were.

“Your hands are freezing,” Ilya said, frowning slightly.

“Forgot my gloves,” Shane admitted, shoving his hand back into his pocket. “The good ones, I mean.”

Ilya looked deeply unimpressed by this information.

Before he could say anything, Louise popped up on her tiptoes beside the counter.

“Ilya! I have a new word.”

The scowl disappeared immediately.

“I am ready,” Ilya said seriously, leaning against the counter. “I practiced the sounds.”

“It’s *chien*,” Louise announced proudly. “It means dog.”

Ilya looked at Shane for confirmation before attempting, “*Shee-en*.”

“Better!” Louise cheered. “You sound like a smaller tractor today.”

“I take what I can get,” Ilya muttered, handing Shane the receipt. “Go warm up your hands, *pretty eyes*. Before they fall off.”

Shane nearly tripped over his own boots.

He grabbed the drinks and escaped toward their usual table, heart pounding hard enough to feel embarrassing.



By the third Saturday, Shane had to admit the routine hadn’t been ruined.

It had just... *changed*.

Luca was apparently out for the rest of winter league season, which meant Ilya Rozanov had become a permanent fixture behind the counter. And somehow, over the span of three weeks, Louise had decided Ilya was the greatest person alive.

Outside, snow clung to the café windows in icy swirls, turning the street beyond into a blur of gray and white.

Inside, Shane sat at their usual table with his coffee warming his hands while Louise carried out her new favorite Saturday activity: following Ilya around the café like a tiny, hockey-obsessed shadow.

“And then I slid all the way into the net,” Louise announced dramatically from beside the counter. “Like a bowling ball. Coach Svetlana had to pull me out by my skates because I got stuck.”

Ilya was in the middle of a rush, three people waiting behind her, but he still listened while working the espresso machine.

He didn’t interrupt her once or tell her to move, just nodded occasionally while making drinks.

“Did you keep your stick on the ice when you fell?” Ilya asked over the sound of the grinder.

“Yes,” Louise lied immediately.

“Good. Otherwise you are just tiny hockey sled.”

Louise looked delighted by this description.

Ilya handed a pastry bag to the next customer before reaching beneath the counter for a different cup.

Shane noticed it instantly.

It wasn’t one of the usual paper cups. It was a cheap plastic kid’s cup, light blue and covered in cartoon penguins wearing scarves.

Something softened unexpectedly inside him.

Ilya had bought that for *her*.

Without acknowledging it, Ilya filled the penguin cup with hot chocolate, added his usual ridiculous amount of marshmallows, and handed it to Louise.

“What is French lesson today?” he asked. “Make it quick. People already look afraid of me.”

Louise grinned, the gap in her smile fully visible. “*Merci*. It means thank you.”

Ilya paused, wiping his hands on a towel. “*Mare-see*.”

Louise gasped. “Wait, that was actually good. You don’t sound like a tractor anymore. You sound like a truck.”

“Progress,” Ilya muttered.

As he turned back toward the espresso machine, his gaze lifted over Louise’s shoulder and landed directly on Shane.

Shane froze with his coffee halfway to his mouth.

For a second, they just looked at each other.

There was nothing polite or casual about the way Ilya looked at him. Just quiet, steady attention that made warmth crawl uncomfortably up Shane's neck.

Then Ilya gave him a small nod before turning back to the next customer.

Shane immediately hid behind his coffee cup.

"Dad!"

Louise climbed back into the booth, carefully setting down her marshmallow mountain.

"Ilya said my crossovers are going to be deadly if I keep practicing," she announced proudly. "He said I'm gonna be a *sniper*."

"Did he?" Shane smiled, wiping a smudge of chocolate from her chin. "He seems very smart about hockey."

"He is. And he's nice," Louise said firmly before shoving an entire marshmallow into her mouth.

She chewed thoughtfully for a second, kicking her boots beneath the table.

Then she leaned forward, lowering her voice dramatically.

"Dad?"

"Yeah, Lou?"

"I think Ilya needs a hug."

Shane nearly inhaled his coffee. "What?"

"Because his face always looks like this," Louise explained, immediately doing a terrifyingly accurate impression of Ilya's permanent scowl. "And he wears all black like a *sad bat*."

Shane laughed despite himself.

"You should hug him," Louise continued seriously. "Your hugs fix people."

Heat crawled instantly up Shane's neck.

"You should invite him to my birthday party next month," Louise continued, ignoring him completely. "We're having cake. Everybody likes cake. Even sad bats."

Shane glanced back toward the counter.

Ilya was dealing with a difficult customer - a woman in a fur coat aggressively complaining about the foam on her cappuccino.

Ilya didn't argue.

He just stared at her silently until she stopped talking on her own.

A minute later, she grabbed her drink and fled the café looking vaguely unsettled.

Once she was gone, Ilya exhaled slowly and dragged a hand through his messy blond curls, suddenly looking exhausted.

"We'll see, Lou," Shane said quietly, unable to stop the small smile pulling at his mouth.

When they finally got ready to leave, Shane pushed open the café door and cold air rushed inside.

Before stepping out, he glanced back automatically.

Ilya was already looking at him.

For a second, neither of them moved.

Then Shane lifted a small wave.

Ilya didn't smile, but something softened slightly in his expression before he gave a small nod back.

Chapter 2

By the sixth week of Luca's broken arm, Shane had been forced to confront a terrifying reality: he genuinely had no idea how he and Louise had survived Saturdays before Ilya Rozanov.

Somewhere along the way, the transition had happened so quietly Shane hadn't even noticed it at first.

Ilya was no longer just the terrifying replacement barista with tattoos and permanent scowl. He had become part of the routine. Permanent. Expected.

It showed up in small ways.

Like Ilya memorizing that Louise wanted exactly seven mini marshmallows, not six or eight.

Or the way he'd started stocking Shane's favorite oat milk after hearing him mention it once.

Or the absolutely terrible way Ilya pronounced *Papillon* during Louise's latest French lesson, enduring her hysterical laughter with the patience of a man being psychologically tortured.

Shane was becoming attached.

Deeply. Hopelessly. Embarrassingly attached.

There was something dangerously addictive about the way Ilya took care of things. He wasn't smooth or particularly flirtatious. If anything, he was blunt, awkward, and intimidating enough to make strangers avoid eye contact.

But whenever Shane walked into the café looking exhausted, Ilya would silently shove a hot coffee into his hands, push a pastry toward him, and gruffly tell him to sit down before he collapsed.

And maybe that was the problem.

Shane was so used to being the one taking care of everyone else that he'd forgotten what it felt like to have someone look after him, too.

He liked it far more than he probably should have.

Which was exactly why he was currently pacing behind the bench at the local rink, stomach twisted into nervous knots.

Earlier that week, while wiping down the pastry case, Ilya had been officially invited to his Saturday hockey game.

By Louise, loudly.

Shane had immediately jumped in, apologizing and assuring Ilya he absolutely did not have to spend his morning off inside a freezing cold rink watching five-year-olds fall over.

Ilya had just stared at him while wiping his hands on his apron.

“Okay.”

That had been four days ago.

Shane still had no idea what “okay” meant.

Okay, I heard the invitation and will politely ignore it?

Or okay, I will absolutely be there?

“Coach Shane!” one of the kids yelled suddenly. “Tommy is eating the ice again!”

Shane snapped out of his spiral and blew his whistle sharply.

“Tommy! Buddy, we do not eat the rink ice! It’s not a snow cone!”

Shane dragged a hand down his face, leaning against the boards.

The arena was freezing, loud with shouting parents and the constant scrape of tiny skates against the ice. He’d been checking the entrance every few minutes since warm-ups started, searching for a towering figure dressed entirely in black.

But the bleachers were still filled with the usual exhausted parents clutching travel mugs.

Ilya hadn’t come.

A sharp, embarrassing wave of disappointment settled heavily in Shane’s chest.

Of course he didn’t come, Shane told himself while kneeling to fix a crying kid’s skate lace. He’s a twenty-something guy working two jobs and going to school. Why would he spend his Saturday morning freezing to death at a children’s hockey game?

Shane shoved the feeling down and forced a bright smile onto his face, tapping the little boy’s helmet once the lace was fixed.

“Alright, buddy. Back out there. Keep your stick on the ice.”

Shane stood, brushing snow off his knees.

Then, out of habit, he glanced toward the lower corner of the bleachers behind the penalty box.

Louise’s spot.

She always sat there with her coloring books while the other kids played so Shane could keep an eye on her between drills.

The spot was empty.

Shane's heart stopped.

The blood drained from his face so fast it made him dizzy. His eyes locked onto the empty seat, Louise's Paw Patrol coloring book abandoned on the bench.

"Lou?" he breathed.

Shane spun around, scanning the arena lobby, the concession stand, the bathroom hallway.

Nothing.

He stepped onto the bench, gripping the top of the glass hard enough for his knuckles to ache, breath catching painfully in his throat. Another few seconds and he was genuinely going to stop the game and lock down the entire rink.

His eyes darted frantically across the bleachers.

Row after row after row.

Then he saw it.

High up in the back corner of the stands, far away from the screaming hockey parents, sat a massive figure dressed entirely in black.

And perched on his shoulders was Louise.

Shane froze, all the air leaving his lungs in one shaky exhale.

Ilya Rozanov sat in the top row with Louise balanced securely on his shoulders, his hands wrapped loosely around her ankles to keep her steady.

Louise looked absolutely delighted, pink coat bright against the dark arena as she overlooked the rink.

A Ziploc bag of mini marshmallows rested in her lap.

As Shane watched, completely stunned, Louise grabbed one and dropped it directly into Ilya's mouth.

Ilya ate it with complete seriousness, eyes still fixed on the ice.

And somehow, by some cruel cosmic joke, they were both wearing dark navy winter scarves.

They looked like they belonged together.

Something warm and painful twisted sharply in Shane's chest, strong enough to make him grip the boards a little harder.

Because Ilya wasn't distracted. He wasn't checking his phone or looking miserable.

He was actually watching the game.

When one of Shane's players managed a messy little poke-check near the boards, Ilya even gave a small nod of approval.

He came.

The realization echoed loudly through Shane's head.

He actually came.



When the final buzzer sounded, the chaos only got worse.

Kids swarmed the ice. Parents crowded the benches. Equipment bags and tiny skates littered the lobby by the time Shane finally escaped the locker room, exhausted and sweaty, damp hair sticking to his forehead.

“Dad!”

Shane looked up just in time to see Louise sprinting across the rubber mats, completely ignoring the giant *NO RUNNING* signs hanging on the walls.

She wasn't alone.

One small hand was wrapped firmly around Ilya's tattooed wrist, dragging him through the lobby with alarming determination. Ilya followed a step behind her, broad and imposing in his black coat, looking less like a willing participant and more like a kidnapped bear being escorted against his will.

“He came!” Louise announced loudly the second they reached him. “Ilya came to watch the game! And he let me sit on his shoulders because Mr. Henderson had a big stupid hat.”

“Hey,” Shane said automatically. “We don't call people stupid, remember? That's one dollar in the swear jar, missy.”

Louise gasped. “Stupid isn't a swear!”

“It is in this house.”

Louise narrowed her eyes suspiciously before immediately losing interest in the conversation entirely.

“Ilya said my yelling was terrifying,” she announced proudly.

“I did say this,” Ilya confirmed solemnly.

Shane laughed before finally looking back up at him.

Up close, Ilya still felt big somehow, broad shoulders filling the entire lobby space around him.

“You... actually came,” Shane said, the words coming out quieter than intended.

Ilya shoved one hand deeper into his coat pocket, expression carefully blank despite the faint pink tint at the tips of his ears.

“I said I would.”

“You didn’t have to,” Shane said softly, warmth unfurling dangerously low in his stomach. “It’s freezing in here. And don’t you have a shift in like an hour?”

“Was fine,” Ilya said with a shrug. “Defense was terrible. But children have heart.”

Shane barked out a startled laugh. “Wow. Coming from you, I think that’s basically a glowing review.”

“I am generous today.”

“Coach Shane! Great game!”

Shane turned just in time to see Brenda marching toward them with a clipboard tucked against her chest.

Brenda smiled brightly at Shane before her attention shifted upward.

Straight to Ilya.

“*Oh!*” she said cheerfully, holding out her hand. “I don’t think we’ve met yet. I’m Brenda, Tommy’s mom.” Her smile widened. “I didn’t realize your husband was coming today, Shane!”

The entire lobby seemed to go silent.

Shane felt heat explode violently across his face.

Beside him, Ilya went completely still.

“Oh my God,” Shane choked out instantly. “No. No, no, no-”

Brenda blinked.

“We’re not married,” Shane continued frantically, waving his hands so aggressively he nearly smacked Louise in the face. “He’s not my husband. We’re not- we don’t- he’s just Ilya!”

Brenda’s expression shifted abruptly into horror.

“Oh! I’m so sorry,” she rushed out. “You two just looked so... I mean, the matching scarves, and he had Lou on his shoulders, and-”

“He’s a very good *bat*,” Louise added helpfully.

“Right,” Brenda said weakly. “Well. Great game today. See you next week.”

Then she practically fled.

Shane wanted to die.

He stared fixedly at the rubber mat beneath his skates, physically incapable of looking at Ilya while heat continued crawling all the way up to his ears.

“I have shift,” Ilya said suddenly. His voice sounded rougher than usual. “I should go.”

Before Shane could even attempt to recover from the social catastrophe currently unfolding around him, Ilya turned and headed for the doors.

Long strides. Black coat. Gone in seconds.

The glass doors slammed shut behind him.

A horrible ache settled instantly in Shane’s chest.

“Well,” Louise said, crossing her arms. “That was rude. He didn’t even say goodbye in French.”

“Lou,” Shane groaned, dragging both hands down his face. “Please. Let’s just go to the car.”



By the time Shane and Louise stepped outside, a snowstorm had completely swallowed the parking lot.

Wind howled across the arena, violent enough to shove snow sideways in thick white sheets. The temperature had dropped so fast Shane could barely feel his fingers through his gloves.

“*Damn*,” he muttered under his breath, immediately lifting Louise into his arms so she wouldn’t have to fight through the growing snowdrifts.

When they reached the car, Shane was freezing.

He wrestled Louise into her car seat, slammed the door against the wind, and climbed into the driver’s seat with a shiver.

Then he turned the key.

Click-click-click.

Shane went still.

“No,” he whispered immediately. “No, no, no. Come on.”

He tried again.

The engine wheezed weakly before dying completely.

For a second, Shane just sat there gripping the steering wheel, staring through the snow-covered windshield while panic slowly crawled up his spine.

The battery was dead.

“Okay,” Shane breathed, forcing himself to stay calm. “Okay. That’s fine.”

It absolutely was not fine.

The cold was already creeping through the car. Shane could see Louise shivering in the backseat, curled deep into her little pink coat.

That decided it immediately.

Shane climbed out first, the freezing wind hitting him like a punch to the chest. Snow whipped violently across the parking lot, stinging his face hard enough to hurt.

The café’s neon sign glowed faintly through the storm a few blocks away.

Close enough. *Hopefully.*

Shane yanked open the back door and immediately started tugging his own winter coat off.

“Dad?” Louise asked.

“It’s okay, baby,” Shane said quickly, already wrapping the heavy coat around her as tightly as he could. He pulled the hood up over her hat, covering nearly her entire body with it. “I just need you warm, okay?”

“But you’ll be cold.”

“I’m big. I’ll survive.”

Louise looked deeply unconvinced by this logic but let him bundle her up anyway.

Then Shane lifted her into his arms and stepped into the storm.

The walk felt endless.

The wind fought them every step of the way, vicious enough to make Shane’s boots slide across the snow-covered sidewalk. Louise kept her face buried against his neck while Shane held her close beneath his coat, trying to shield every exposed inch of her from the freezing air.

By the second block, Shane could barely feel his fingers.

By the third, his lungs burned every time he inhaled.

When the warm yellow glow of the café finally appeared through the swirling white snow, Shane almost cried from relief.

He shoved his shoulder against the heavy wooden door and stumbled inside.

The bell above them rang violently.

The café was silent.

Just the low hum of the espresso machines and the storm rattling against the windows.

Behind the register, Ilya looked up.

And the second he saw them, something in his expression changed instantly.

Shane was still clutching Louise against his chest, both of them covered in snow. His hair was damp and sticking to his forehead, his hands shaking so violently he could barely keep hold of her.

Ilya moved immediately.

One second he was behind the counter.

The next, he was shoving through the swinging door so fast it nearly slammed off its hinges.

“What happened?”

The words came out rough and sharp, almost angry with panic.

Before Shane could answer properly, Ilya was already in front of him, without hesitation.

“Car,” Shane managed through chattering teeth. “Battery died. I couldn’t-“

Ilya swore sharply in Russian.

Then his hands were suddenly everywhere at once.

He carefully pulled Louise out of Shane’s frozen grip, stripping off her snow-soaked mittens before taking her tiny hands between both of his.

“Fuck,” Ilya muttered, rubbing warmth back into her fingers. His eyes snapped furiously up to Shane. “You walked here in this?”

Shane swallowed hard. “It was only a few blocks-”

“That is not answer.”

The words came out rough and immediate.

“You call me,” Ilya continued, visibly angry now. “I come get you.”

Shane stared at him blankly through the cold fog in his brain.

Call him?

He didn't even have Ilya's number.

The realization hit him with bizarre force right in the middle of the blizzard-induced near death experience.

"Phone died," Shane admitted weakly instead.

Ilya's jaw tightened hard enough to visibly flex.

He kept rubbing warmth back into Louise's hands, blowing hot air against her fingers between muttered Russian curses.

Then he looked back at Shane.

"Radiator," he ordered immediately. "Back corner. Sit down. *Now*."

Shane didn't have enough energy left to argue.

He stumbled toward the back corner of the café and practically collapsed into the armchair beside the old iron radiator, pulling Louise onto his lap instinctively the second she climbed into his arms.

Only then did Shane realize how violently he was shaking.

He buried his face briefly against Louise's damp hair, trying to steady his breathing while the heat from the radiator slowly started thawing the ache in his hands.

Behind the counter, Ilya moved fast.

Cabinet doors opening. Ceramic clattering. The sharp hiss of the steam wand cutting through the quiet café.

Less than two minutes later, Ilya appeared beside them carrying a tray.

He hadn't even asked what they wanted.

A giant hot chocolate for Louise. A dark Americano for Shane. Two cinnamon buns heated until the icing had melted down the sides.

Then Ilya disappeared again before Shane could even thank him.

A few seconds later, he came back carrying an enormous wool blanket.

Ilya stopped in front of the chair and shook it out once before draping it carefully around Louise first, tucking the heavy wool securely around her tiny shoulders.

"Better, gremlin?" he asked, voice quieter now.

Louise sniffled once before immediately reaching for a cinnamon bun from beneath the blanket cocoon.

“Yes,” she declared. “Thank you, Ilya.”

Ilya nodded once before stepping closer.

Shane was still shivering hard enough to make the coffee in his hands tremble. Without saying anything, Ilya grabbed the loose edge of the blanket and leaned down beside the chair, pulling the thick wool tighter around Shane’s shoulders and carefully tucking it around his back to keep the heat in.

As he adjusted the collar, the backs of Ilya’s knuckles brushed lightly against the bare skin at the nape of Shane’s neck.

Shane inhaled sharply.

Ilya froze instantly.

Heat bloomed beneath Ilya’s fingertips, impossibly warm against Shane’s freezing skin, and for one suspended second neither of them moved.

Slowly, Shane lifted his head.

Ilya was leaning over him, close enough that Shane could feel the warmth radiating off his body and catch the clean scent of snow, coffee, cedar, and dark wool clinging to his coat.

His hand still hovered near Shane’s neck like he’d forgotten to pull away.

And then Shane saw it.

The brief flick of Ilya’s eyes down to his mouth before they snapped back up again.

“I told you,” Louise suddenly mumbled through a mouthful of cinnamon bun. She pointed a sticky finger at Ilya. “He’s a very good bat.”

The spell shattered instantly.

Ilya jerked back like he’d been burned.

He cleared his throat roughly, nearly clipping the armchair as he stepped away too fast. “I... I get towels,” he muttered, visibly refusing to look directly at Shane anymore. “For snow.”

Then he practically disappeared into the back room.

Shane sat frozen beneath the heavy wool blanket, his pulse hammering so hard it hurt. He could still feel the ghost of Ilya’s knuckles against the back of his neck like a physical imprint burned into his skin.

He was in so much *trouble*.

Outside, the storm only got worse.

Snow slammed violently against the café windows, turning the streets beyond into a blur of white and gold streetlights. The weather had driven everyone away, leaving the café eerily quiet for a Saturday morning.

For the first time since Shane had met him, there was no line of customers demanding Ilya's attention.

Once the feeling finally returned to Shane's fingers and Louise stopped shivering beneath the blanket, the frantic adrenaline faded, leaving behind a strange, heavy calm.

When Ilya eventually came back out with a stack of towels, he didn't return behind the counter.

Instead, he grabbed one of the wooden chairs from a nearby table, turned it around, and sat across from them with his forearms folded over the backrest.

At some point, he'd also printed an entire stack of random coloring pages for Louise from the café office printer.

Louise immediately launched into an aggressively detailed explanation of the social politics within her hockey team while coloring furiously across the papers spread all over the coffee table between them.

Somewhere during her rant about who was no longer allowed to be goalie after "the juice box incident," Shane learned that Ilya had apparently spent the entire game silently judging the children's defensive positioning.

"Number twelve on other team," Ilya said seriously, sipping his coffee. "Terrible passing decisions. No vision."

"He's five," Shane pointed out through a laugh.

"Still true."

Louise gasped. "That's Noah! He picks his nose during drills."

"Ah," Ilya nodded solemnly. "Then his problems are bigger than hockey."

Shane nearly choked on his coffee laughing.

And somehow, after that, the conversation stopped feeling awkward entirely.

It drifted naturally from hockey to work, from work to school, from school to life.

Shane learned that Ilya was twenty-four and studying mechanical engineering while juggling construction shifts during the week and the café on weekends. He learned that Ilya had moved from Russia six years ago and apparently survived almost entirely on caffeine, stubbornness, and four hours of sleep.

“I do not recommend this lifestyle,” Ilya admitted dryly.

“Sounds healthy,” Shane muttered.

“Doctors would be fascinated by how alive I still am.”

Louise looked up from her coloring pages. “My dad forgot to eat lunch three times this week.”

“Lou,” Shane groaned.

Ilya’s eyes narrowed immediately. “Three times?”

“It was busy at the rink-“

“That is not excuse.”

Shane stared at him. “You sound exactly like my mother.”

“Your mother sounds smart.”

Shane laughed again before he could stop himself, warm and helpless and entirely too comfortable sitting there wrapped in Ilya’s blanket while snow battered the windows outside.

Ilya rested his chin against his folded arms on the back of the chair, watching Louise color with an expression so soft it almost didn’t belong on his face.

“My apartment is very quiet,” he admitted after a while. “I am usually at work or school anyway.”

Something about the way he said it made Shane’s chest ache unexpectedly.

Lonely.

The word sat heavily between them even if Ilya never actually said it.

Shane curled his fingers more tightly around his mug. “That sounds exhausting.”

Ilya shrugged one massive shoulder like it didn’t matter. “Is simpler this way. I am not good with people. People think I am... *angry*.” His mouth twisted slightly. “They usually do not talk to me.”

His eyes lifted then, landing on Shane.

“Except you,” he added quietly. “And the gremlin.”

“The gremlin doesn’t have a sense of self-preservation,” Shane said with a smile, leaning deeper into the thick wool blanket that still smelled faintly like coffee and Ilya’s cologne. “And I realized pretty quickly that you’re a lot softer than you look, Ilya Rozanov.”

A faint flush crept up Ilya’s neck almost immediately.

“I am not soft,” he muttered defensively, glaring down at his coffee cup.

Shane hummed. “You bought her a penguin cup.”

“It was on sale.”

“You memorized her marshmallow count.”

“Inventory management.”

“And you came to the game today.”

That made Ilya go quiet for a moment, his fingers tapping once against the side of his coffee cup before he finally shrugged one shoulder.

“You invited me.”

The simplicity of the answer hit Shane harder than it should have.

Before Shane could figure out how to respond to that, Louise suddenly shoved one of the coloring pages across the coffee table.

“I drew us!”

Both men looked down immediately.

The page was complete chaos. Bright pink scribbles, crooked hockey sticks, floating marshmallows for reasons only Louise understood.

A tiny stick figure in a pink coat.

A second figure with square glasses that was clearly Shane.

And beside them stood an enormous black crayon figure with an aggressively grumpy face.

The three figures were holding hands.

Above them, written in crooked backwards letters, was one single word.

FAMILY.

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

once again thank you to my princess berey for giving me this idea and accidentally making me emotionally attached to these idiots

i love you very much <3

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Saturday morning arrived bright and brutally cold.

The blizzard from the previous week had passed, leaving Montreal buried beneath thick glittering snow that crunched beneath every step. Sunlight bounced harshly off the ice-covered sidewalks, sharp enough to make Shane's eyes ache.

It was a big day.

A monumental day, according to Louise.

She officially turned six years old today.

Shane had been awake since four-thirty in the morning. He'd already baked two dozen cupcakes, survived a catastrophic neon pink frosting incident, assembled goodie bags filled with temporary tattoos and plastic whistles, and somehow managed to get Louise into her hockey gear without a single birthday-related meltdown.

Frankly, he deserved financial compensation for that alone.

Louise skipped beside him down the familiar sidewalk toward the Steamy Mug after practice, practically vibrating with excitement beneath her pink winter coat.

"And Coach Svetlana said I could be team captain for the scrimmage because it's my birthday," Louise babbled, her breath fogging in the freezing air. "And I told Tommy he couldn't come to my party if he ate snow again, so he didn't. And we're having pizza. And pink cupcakes." She gasped dramatically. "Do you think Ilya likes pink cupcakes, Dad? I saved him the one with the most sprinkles."

Shane smiled despite himself.

"I'm pretty sure Ilya is already aware of the birthday cupcakes, Lou. You've only mentioned them every Saturday for the last three weeks."

“That’s because it’s important information,” Louise informed him seriously. “Also I told him there would be garlic bread.”

“Ah,” Shane nodded solemnly. “Well. In that case he’s definitely coming.”

“He has to come,” Louise insisted, tugging hard on Shane’s glove. “I made him a VIP invitation. I drew a penguin on it. It’s very official.”

“We’ll give it to him today,” Shane promised softly.

They reached the café a moment later.

Shane pushed the heavy wooden door open. The little brass bell jingled merrily above them.

He unbuttoned his coat, already forming a greeting in his head, already anticipating the familiar sight of broad shoulders, dark tattoos, and sharp blue eyes lifting from the espresso machine the second the bell rang.

A smile was already spreading across his face when he looked toward the counter.

The smile died instantly.

His stomach dropped hard enough to make him dizzy.

Standing behind the counter, humming a cheerful pop song while steaming a pitcher of milk, was *Luca*.

The cheerful blond barista turned around, wiping his hands on his apron. His cast was gone, though his right arm still looked slightly paler than the rest of him.

His face lit up the second he saw them.

“Shane! Lou-Lou! Hey, guys!” Luca beamed, waving enthusiastically. “The usual? God, it is so good to see you two. I have been losing my mind at home watching daytime television for seven weeks.”

Shane stopped dead in his tracks.

The café suddenly felt *wrong*.

His eyes instinctively darted toward the spot beside the pastry case where Ilya usually stood, broad and intimidating and impossible to ignore.

Empty.

Louise stepped forward immediately, her pink coat crinkling in the sudden silence. She looked left, then right, little brow furrowing deeper with every passing second.

“Where is Ilya?” she demanded.

Luca laughed softly, completely oblivious to the panic beginning to spread through Shane's chest.

"Oh, the Russian terminator?" he said cheerfully. "Yeah, yesterday was his last shift. He was only covering for me until I got cleared to come back." He flexed his healed arm proudly. "Doctor finally signed off this week, so I'm back."

Yesterday was his last shift.

The words slammed into Shane hard enough to knock the breath from his lungs.

No.

That didn't make sense.

After the storm, the radiator, sitting wrapped in the same wool blanket while snow battered the café windows for two straight hours, things had shifted quietly into something else.

They'd exchanged numbers, and Ilya texted him.

eat lunch today

your child put fourteen marshmallows in hot chocolate. this is criminal

customer just asked for extra hot iced latte. i hate people

And Shane always answered, even when the messages arrived at two in the morning between construction shifts and caffeine crashes.

So why hadn't Ilya said anything?

"Shane?"

Luca's voice snapped faintly through the fog in his head.

Shane realized he'd been standing there silently staring at the empty space beside the espresso machine for far too long.

Beside him, Louise's expression had started crumpling at the edges.

"But..." she said softly, clutching the pink envelope in her mittened hands. "But I made his VIP invitation."

Her voice wobbled dangerously.

"He has to come to my party. He makes my marshmallows."

Luca's expression softened immediately.

"Aw, *kiddo*..." He leaned against the counter a little. "I'm sorry. He's probably back to his regular jobs. Guy works, like, eighty hours a week doing construction. Absolute machine."

He smiled gently. “But hey, I can still make your marshmallows exactly the same way. Seven, right?”

Louise’s lip trembled.

“*No*,” she whispered.

The tiny pink envelope crinkled tightly in her hands.

“No,” she repeated, louder this time, tears instantly flooding her eyes. “*I want Ilya*.”

Her voice cracked painfully on the last word, and Shane’s heart broke on the spot because Louise didn’t look dramatic or angry.

She just looked *hurt*.

“He said he liked loud now,” she whispered shakily, looking up at Shane with huge watery eyes. “And I made him a penguin invitation.”

“Oh, baby,” Shane breathed.

He crouched immediately, pulling her into his arms before the first sob could fully leave her chest.

Louise folded against him instantly, mittened hands clutching tightly at the front of his coat while her small body shook, and Shane held her close with one hand cradling the back of her head as the awful realization settled heavily in his chest.

He was hopelessly in love with Ilya Rozanov.

“I’m sorry, Luca,” Shane managed quietly after a moment, standing back up with Louise still curled tightly against his chest. “I think we’re gonna skip coffee today. We still have birthday stuff to finish.”

Luca looked startled. “Oh. Yeah, of course.” He gave Louise a small sympathetic smile. “Happy birthday, Lou-Lou.”

Louise only buried her face harder into Shane’s shoulder.

Shane adjusted his grip on her and headed back toward the door.

The freezing wind hit them instantly the second he stepped outside.

Behind them, the café door swung shut.

The little brass bell chimed softly overhead.



The rest of the day passed in a blur of forced smiles and absolute chaos.

By three in the afternoon, Shane's apartment had been completely overrun by a horde of sugar-fueled six-year-olds.

Wrapping paper covered every available surface. Plastic hockey sticks littered the floor. Someone had spilled orange juice on the couch approximately fourteen minutes into the party, and Shane had simply accepted it as inevitable.

It should have been fun.

But Shane still felt strangely detached from all of it, like he was moving through the party underwater.

He smiled when he was supposed to smile, handed out pizza plates, broke up an increasingly violent argument over a balloon animal, and thanked hockey parents for coming until his cheeks physically hurt from forcing politeness.

And every single time footsteps echoed through the hallway outside his apartment, his eyes snapped instinctively toward the front door before he could stop himself.

Pathetic.

"You look like you're attending a funeral instead of a birthday party."

Shane startled hard enough to nearly drop the bowl of pretzels in his hands.

Rose stood near the kitchen island holding a glass of wine, somehow still looking impossibly elegant. Beside her, Kip was attempting to juggle three clementines for a deeply unimpressed audience of children.

"I'm fine," Shane lied immediately, catching the pretzel bowl before a kid in a Spider-Man cape could flip it onto the carpet.

"Mm." Rose took a slow sip of wine. "You're mourning the Russian barista."

Kip dropped every clementine onto the floor.

"Oh my God," he gasped. "You are in love with the coffee man."

"I am not mourning anyone," Shane shot back, face heating instantly.

He grabbed the sponge beside the sink and started aggressively wiping down an already spotless section of counter.

"Shane," Rose said flatly, "you've talked about this man nonstop for seven weeks."

"And apparently you text each other every day," Kip added while gathering clementines off the floor.

Shane nearly choked.

“It’s not like that. He sends me reminders to eat lunch,” he muttered a second later, scrubbing harder than necessary. “And pictures of terrible latte art.”

Rose blinked once. “That’s somehow more intimate than flirting.”

Kip stared at him in genuine horror. “You are literally describing a relationship.”

“It was not a relationship!”

The kitchen fell quiet for a beat except for the muffled shrieking from the living room and the squeak of the sponge against laminate.

Then Rose’s expression shifted slightly.

“Wait,” she said more carefully. “Did he actually leave without saying goodbye?”

Shane stopped moving.

For a moment, he just stared down into the sink before nodding once.

“Yeah,” he admitted quietly. “Luca was just there this morning.” His throat tightened. “And Ilya was gone.”

Rose’s face softened immediately.

Beside her, Kip looked genuinely offended on Shane’s behalf.

“Okay,” he said slowly. “Wow. I hate him now.”

“Lou cried in the café,” Shane admitted, dragging one tired hand down his face. “She thought he wasn’t coming to her birthday anymore.”

Kip’s expression crumpled instantly. “*Ouch.*”

Shane exhaled quietly.

Ilya had always been temporary.

He had known that from the beginning, which somehow made the sudden absence of him feel even worse.

Rose reached over and gently tugged the sponge out of Shane’s hand before he could scrub a hole through the laminate.

“Go back to your daughter’s party,” she said softly. “And maybe stop looking like someone just shot your husband.”

Shane groaned immediately, dragging a hand down his face. “Please never say that word again.”

Beside her, Kip visibly perked up, already inhaling to speak.

“Nope,” Shane warned, pointing at him before he could get a single word out.

Kip looked deeply offended.

Despite himself, Shane felt the corner of his mouth twitch.

He shook his head, exhausted, and started turning back toward the chaos when the doorbell rang.

One firm, heavy buzz cut through the apartment noise.

The sound hit something low and electric in Shane’s chest hard enough to make him stop mid-step.

Rose glanced toward the hallway first. “Expecting someone?”

“I thought all the parents were already here,” Kip said.

“I...” Shane swallowed hard. “I don’t know.”

But suddenly, *horribly*, he did.

His pulse kicked violently against his ribs as he forced himself toward the front door. The hallway felt strangely narrow, the apartment suddenly too warm, too loud. His hand shook slightly while unlocking the deadbolt.

Then he pulled the door open.

Ilya stood in the hallway, broad shoulders dusted with melting snow, damp blond hair falling across his forehead beneath the dim apartment lights.

And in his arms was the biggest stuffed bear Shane had ever seen in his life.

For a second, Shane could only stare.

At the ridiculous oversized bear with the giant red bow. At the motorcycle helmet resting beside Ilya’s boots. At the way Ilya’s jaw was clenched tight enough to twitch slightly when their eyes met.

Nervous.

Ilya looked genuinely nervous.

“Ilya,” Shane breathed.

For one suspended second, neither of them moved.

Then a deafening shriek tore through the apartment.

“*ILYA!*”

Louise came flying down the hallway so fast Shane barely managed to step aside before she launched herself directly at him.

The stuffed bear hit the floor with a heavy thud as Ilya caught her automatically, arms wrapping around her like instinct.

“You came!” Louise gasped, nearly climbing him in excitement. “I knew you would come!”

A shaky laugh escaped her halfway through the sentence.

“Luca said you were gone,” she rambled breathlessly, words tumbling together. “But I told Dad you wouldn’t miss the cupcakes because I saved you the pink one with the most sprinkles and-”

Ilya buried his face briefly against her shoulder before pulling back just enough to look at her properly.

“I came,” he promised quietly.

Then his eyes lifted to Shane over the top of Louise’s head.

“I had a shift at the construction site,” he explained quickly, voice rougher than usual. “My boss would not let me leave early.” His jaw tightened slightly. “The motorcycle was faster.”

Something warm and overwhelming crashed painfully into Shane’s chest.

The melting snow still clung to Ilya’s coat. The giant stuffed bear was abandoned in the hallway beside him. And through all of it, he was holding Louise carefully against his chest like she was something precious.

Suddenly every awful feeling from that morning dissolved beneath one overwhelming wave of relief.

He came back.

“You’re here,” Shane said softly.

Something in Ilya’s expression loosened instantly at the words, some tight invisible tension finally giving way.

“*Was invited,*” he replied simply.

And, that stupidly earnest answer nearly killed Shane on the spot. A helpless smile pulled at his mouth before he could stop it.

“Come in,” Shane said softly, stepping aside to let him in.

The second Ilya stepped into the apartment, conversations faltered just enough for people to notice him. Parents glanced up from paper plates and wine glasses. A few kids stopped mid-sprint to stare openly at the tattooed man holding an absurdly oversized teddy bear.

Louise immediately demanded to be put down.

When her feet hit the floor, she grabbed Ilya's hand and dragged him straight into the middle of the living room through wrapping paper and abandoned balloons.

"This is Ilya," she announced proudly to the entire room. "He is my VIP guest."

Then she pointed at him dramatically.

"And he makes the best marshmallows in the world."

Near the kitchen, Kip nearly choked on his beer.

Rose looked slowly between Shane and the blond man.

That's the barista? she mouthed silently.

Shane nodded once, already feeling his face burn.

Rose looked back at Ilya, then at Shane again with an expression that made something twist helplessly in his stomach before she slowly lifted one eyebrow like the entire situation suddenly made perfect sense.



The next two hours should have been a disaster.

Ilya looked deeply out of place in the middle of a tiny apartment overflowing with screaming kids hyped up on sugar and frosting.

But he tried anyway.

Louise refused to leave him alone for more than thirty seconds at a time, dragging him from activity to activity with relentless determination.

At one point, Shane walked into the living room and found Ilya sitting cross-legged on the rug playing Pass the Parcel with six children dressed as superheroes.

His knees were practically level with his shoulders.

He looked absolutely miserable.

"Shane," Rose murmured later, from beside him in the kitchen, "that man is catastrophically in love with you."

Shane nearly choked on a tortilla chip. "He is not."

Rose just looked at him.

Across the apartment, Louise was aggressively forcing a neon pink cupcake into Ilya's hands while he accepted it with the solemn expression of a man handling explosives.

As if he felt Shane staring, Ilya glanced up.

His blue eyes found Shane immediately.

He gave the smallest shrug, still holding the aggressively pink cupcake in one massive hand, and Shane smiled so hard his cheeks hurt.

By exactly six o'clock, the apartment lights dimmed and Shane carried the giant chocolate cake out of the kitchen, six candles flickering beneath a mountain of aggressively pink frosting.

The kids immediately swarmed the island, screaming the birthday song at full volume while Louise stood proudly on a stool with her birthday crown slipping sideways over her curls.

But right before she blew out the candles, she suddenly threw both hands into the air.

"Wait."

The room quieted.

Louise looked around seriously. "I need my blocking."

Before anyone could ask what that meant, she grabbed the sleeve of Ilya's thermal shirt and dragged him firmly to her left side.

Then she reached for Shane's apron strings and tugged him into place on her other side.

"There," she declared with satisfaction. "Now we can do it."

Across the kitchen, Kip already had his phone out.

"Oh, this is devastatingly cute," he announced. "Smile, everyone."

The camera flash went off just as Louise sucked in a giant breath and blew out all six candles in one dramatic gust.

The apartment erupted into cheers, but Shane barely heard any of it.

Because when he looked up, Ilya was already watching him.

The kitchen lights were still dimmed, leaving the apartment washed in soft gold from the streetlights outside and the fading candlelight between them.

And suddenly the sight of it hit Shane hard enough to steal the breath from his lungs.

Louise between them.

Ilya beside him.

Something in Ilya's expression softened quietly beneath Shane's gaze.

Then, slowly, he rested one hand flat against the counter between them.

Shane looked down at it for half a second before shifting closer and pressing the side of his pinky gently against Ilya's.

Ilya's breath caught.

Then his pinky curled immediately around Shane's beneath the edge of the counter where nobody else could see.



Eight o'clock came quietly.

The last exhausted parent dragged their sugar-crashing child out the door while Kip and Rose disappeared with deeply irritating smirks after helping clean up the worst of the disaster.

Louise had crashed nearly half an hour earlier and was now dead asleep on the couch beneath the giant stuffed bear, one tiny arm wrapped around its neck.

The apartment looked wrecked.

Wrapping paper covered half the floor. Pink frosting stained the counter. Someone had somehow left a juice box inside Shane's shoe.

But it was quiet now.

Shane stood at the sink washing icing off plastic cake plates beneath steaming water while Ilya dried them beside him.

They'd fallen into the rhythm naturally. Shane washed. Ilya dried. Every few minutes their shoulders brushed in the cramped kitchen space, neither of them acknowledging it.

Shane handed him another plate.

Their fingers brushed briefly against the wet ceramic.

Neither of them pulled away immediately.

After a second, Shane turned the faucet off.

The quiet that settled over the kitchen felt strangely heavy. Soap bubbles slipped slowly toward the drain while Shane stared at them for a moment, pulse thudding hard in his throat.

"Why didn't you tell me yesterday was your last day?" he asked quietly.

Beside him, Ilya went completely still.

Very carefully, he set the plate down on the counter.

For a long moment, he didn't answer. Shane could see the tension spreading slowly through his frame, shoulders rising with a deep breath before he rested both hands against the edge of the counter.

"I thought..." Ilya stopped.

His voice sounded rough when he tried again.

"I thought maybe you would be glad."

Shane turned so fast he nearly knocked his hip into the sink.

"Glad?" he repeated, staring at him. "Ilya, what are you talking about?"

Ilya finally looked at him.

The hurt in his blue eyes stopped Shane cold.

"At rink," Ilya said quietly. "The woman thought I was your husband."

Oh.

Shane felt heat crawl instantly up the back of his neck.

"You were embarrassed," Ilya continued quietly before Shane could speak. His gaze dropped briefly to the floor. "You kept saying I was 'just Ilya.'"

Shane's stomach twisted painfully.

"Ilya--"

"I thought maybe I misunderstood things," Ilya admitted. "Maybe I stepped too far into your life."

Shane stared at him as the realization settled in piece by piece.

Ilya genuinely thought Shane had been rejecting him.

"You thought I didn't want you around?" Shane asked.

Ilya gave a small shrug like the answer didn't matter anymore, but Shane still caught the tightness in his jaw.

"You were panicking," he said simply.

"Because Brenda said it in front of everyone," Shane replied immediately. "Not because it was you."

That finally made Ilya look back up at him.

Shane swallowed hard beneath the weight of those blue eyes.

“You really thought I wanted you gone?”

Ilya didn't answer right away. His fingers tightened once around the dish towel in his hands before he finally admitted, quietly:

“I did not know what you wanted.”

Something in Shane's chest cracked wide open.

“I wasn't embarrassed by you,” he said immediately.

He stepped closer without thinking, socks squeaking against the wet kitchen floor until barely any space remained between them.

“I was embarrassed by myself,” Shane admitted, voice uneven. “Brenda said it out loud and suddenly everyone was looking at us and-” He let out a breath, shaking his head once. “Part of me wanted her to be right so badly it scared me.”

Ilya went still.

Shane could hear his own heartbeat pounding in his ears.

“When Luca came back this morning and you were gone,” he said more quietly, “I genuinely thought I was going to be sick.”

The expression on Ilya's face shifted instantly, all that guarded hurt unraveling into something raw and startled.

“You wanted me there?” he asked.

Shane laughed under his breath, exhausted and emotional and far past pretending anymore.

“You bought my daughter a four-foot teddy bear and showed up to her birthday party straight from a construction shift,” he said. “You memorized her marshmallow count. You walked us through a snowstorm like you thought something might happen to us.”

His throat tightened.

“You've been there the whole time.”

Ilya stared at him like the words physically hurt to hear.

Shane hesitated only a second before reaching forward and resting both hands against the center of Ilya's chest.

The breath left Ilya in one sharp inhale.

“I didn't know what you wanted either,” Shane admitted.

For a moment, neither of them moved.

Then Ilya's eyes dropped briefly to Shane's mouth before lifting again.

"I do not know how to do this," he confessed, voice rough and uneven. "I do not know how to be part of family."

Something twisted painfully in Shane's chest.

"You already are," he said before he could stop himself.

In the living room, Louise shifted beneath the giant stuffed bear and mumbled something incoherent in her sleep.

The sound seemed to break something open inside Ilya.

His expression softened so suddenly it almost didn't look like him anymore.

Then, slowly, carefully, like he was still afraid Shane might disappear if he moved too fast, Ilya rested one hand lightly against Shane's waist.

Shane melted closer instantly.

"Ilya," he whispered.

Ilya's eyes fluttered shut for half a second like hearing his name like that physically undid him.

When he looked back down at Shane again, the question in his gaze was painfully clear.

Shane nodded once, breath catching in his throat.

Ilya leaned down slowly, carefully, like he was still giving Shane the chance to change his mind.

He never would have.

The kiss was soft enough to hurt.

Just warm lips pressing together after weeks of *almosts*. Shane made a quiet sound against Ilya's mouth immediately, fingers tightening in the fabric of his shirt as relief crashed through him hard enough to leave him dizzy.

Ilya kissed him like he'd been thinking about it for far too long.

One hand tightened at Shane's waist, pulling him closer inch by inch until there wasn't any space left between them, while the other slid into Shane's hair, rough fingers cradling the back of his head with devastating care.

He tasted like coffee and vanilla frosting.

The apartment around them faded into background noise until all Shane could focus on was the slow drag of Ilya's mouth against his and the way the man held him like something

precious.

And then-

“Finally.”

They jumped apart so fast Shane nearly slipped against the kitchen tile.

Ilya turned instantly, automatically shifting half in front of Shane on instinct alone.

There was no intruder.

Louise stood in the kitchen doorway clutching the giant stuffed bear by one ear, very much awake and looking deeply pleased with herself.

“Louise Marie!” Shane gasped, clutching a hand to his chest. “I thought you were asleep!”

“I was pretending,” Louise informed him proudly as she dragged the bear farther into the kitchen. “Auntie Rose said if I went to sleep early and left you alone in here, you’d probably do something stupid and romantic.”

Shane stared at her in horror.

“She told you that?”

“Yeah. And Uncle Kip gave me five dollars to fake snoring.” Louise proudly held up a crumpled bill. “It worked.”

Shane covered his face with both hands.

“I’m going to kill my friends,” he groaned into his palms.

Beside him, Ilya had gone strangely quiet.

Shane peeked through his fingers just in time to see Ilya’s shoulders start shaking.

Then came the sound.

Low at first. Deep and rough and completely uncontrollable.

Ilya laughed.

Not one of the quiet amused huffs Shane had gotten used to over the past few weeks. A real laugh. Loud and warm enough to fill the entire apartment.

Louise beamed instantly, clearly deciding this was entirely her accomplishment.

She marched straight up to him and tugged firmly on the sleeve of his thermal shirt.

Ilya’s laughter softened immediately. Without hesitation, he crouched down in front of her, one forearm resting against his knee as he looked at her seriously.

Some of the smugness faded from Louise's face then, giving way to something smaller.

Hopeful.

"So," she whispered, voice suddenly small in the quiet kitchen, "are you staying forever now?"

Ilya didn't hesitate.

He reached out and tapped the tip of her nose gently with one finger before looking back up at Shane.

"If your dad lets me," he said quietly.

Shane laughed softly through the tightness in his throat.

"He's staying," he said immediately. "Definitely staying."

Ilya stood then and pulled Shane back against his chest in one smooth movement, warm and solid and steady, while Louise wrapped herself around one of his legs, still clutching the stuffed bear with her other arm.

And standing there in the middle of the destroyed kitchen, surrounded by dirty dishes and wrapping paper and melted birthday cake frosting, Shane realized they already felt like a *family*.

Chapter End Notes

i loved writing this fic so much 🥹 somewhere along the way i got ridiculously attached to these three and started wishing i could turn this into a long fic just to show you every possible saturday they could have together.

there's also a very real chance i come back to them someday

maybe for a proposal. maybe a wedding. maybe both.

thank you for loving them as much as i do 💕

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