

reality check

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by [pucksandpower](#)

Summary

When their son comes home with split knuckles and a suspension for throwing the first punch, Shane and Ilya just want to know one thing: what did the other kid do to deserve it?

Or in which the Hollander-Rozanovs learn that raising good kids sometimes means teaching them when the rules are worth breaking.

Shane's phone rings at 12:39 PM on a Wednesday, which is already strange because people don't usually call during the day unless something's wrong. He's in the kitchen making Sachiko's favorite snacks for when she gets home from school — apple slices with that specific brand of almond butter she likes, the one with honey — when he sees the number.

Ottawa West Secondary School.

His stomach drops.

"Hello?"

"Mr. Hollander? This is Principal Matheson from Ottawa West Secondary."

Shane sets down the knife he's been using, his hand suddenly unsteady. "Yes?"

"I'm calling about Viktor. There's been an incident at school today, and we need you and your husband to come in immediately."

"An incident?" Shane's voice comes out higher than he intends. "Is he hurt? Is he okay?"

"He's not injured, but there was a physical altercation, and—"

"A physical altercation? Viktor?" Shane almost laughs because the idea is so absurd. Viktor, who cried for an hour when he accidentally stepped on a snail when he was nine. Viktor, who mediates arguments between his friends instead of participating in them. Viktor, who's never even raised his voice at his little sister despite her sometimes stealing his things and hiding them around the house.

"Yes, Mr. Hollander. Viktor punched another student. We have a zero-tolerance policy for violence, and—"

"We'll be right there," Shane interrupts, his heart hammering. "Twenty minutes."

He hangs up and immediately calls Ilya, who answers on the second ring.

"Solnyshko, I am at store. They are out of the good pasta, the one Vitya likes. Should I—"

"Ilya." Shane's voice cracks slightly. "We need to go to Viktor's school. Now."

The line goes quiet for a beat. Then: "What is wrong? Is he hurt?"

"No, he's—they said he punched someone. They said he was in a fight."

"Vitya?" Ilya sounds as disbelieving as Shane feels. "Our Vitya?"

"That's what they said."

"I am coming home now. Two minutes."

Shane leans against the counter, his mind racing through possibilities. Viktor's been quiet lately, maybe a little withdrawn, but Shane had chalked that up to typical teenage stuff. Hormones. Growing pains. The universal adolescent need to assert independence from one's parents. Had Shane missed something? Had they both missed something?

The front door bangs open, and Ilya strides in, still wearing his jacket, car keys jangling in his hand.

"Okay," Ilya says, slightly breathless. "Okay. We go now. Is probably mistake, yes? Maybe is different Viktor."

"There's only one Viktor Hollander-Rozanov at that school, Ilya."

Ilya runs a hand through his hair, which is still thick despite being in his mid-forties, though there are silver threads now mixed in with the light brown curls. "Then is mistake in other way. Vitya does not fight. Is not who he is."

But Shane's remembering the way Viktor went quiet at dinner two nights ago when Sachiko asked him how school was. The way he'd pushed food around his plate and said "Fine" in a tone that clearly meant it wasn't fine at all. Shane had meant to follow up, had meant to talk to him, but then Sachiko had spilled her juice and the moment had been lost in the chaos of cleanup and bedtime routines.

"We should go," Shane says quietly.

The drive to the school is tense. Ilya's knuckles are white on the steering wheel, and he keeps muttering things in Russian under his breath. Shane catches "ne mozhet byt" more than once, which he knows means "It can't be."

"Whatever happened," Shane says, trying to convince himself as much as Ilya, "There has to be an explanation. Viktor wouldn't just hit someone for no reason."

"Of course not," Ilya snaps, but Shane knows the anger isn't directed at him. "Our boy is good. Is sweet. Is-" He struggles for the word. "Is gentle."

Shane's throat tightens. Viktor is gentle. He's the kid who brings home injured birds and nurses them back to health in shoeboxes. Who reads to Sachiko every night before bed even though she's perfectly capable of reading to herself. Who still, at fourteen, will curl up next to Shane on the couch during movies and rest his head on Shane's shoulder.

The school parking lot is half-empty, most students still in afternoon classes. Shane and Ilya walk quickly toward the main entrance, and Shane notices the way Ilya's jaw is set, the way he's holding himself like he's about to step onto the ice for a crucial playoff game.

"Let me do the talking," Shane says as they approach the main office.

Ilya shoots him a look. "When have I ever let you do all talking?"

"Ilya, I mean it. We need to stay calm and-"

“I am calm,” Ilya says, pushing open the door with slightly more force than necessary.

The secretary at the front desk looks up, and her eyes widen in recognition. Even after all these years, it still happens. Shane Hollander and Ilya Rozanov, two of the greatest hockey players of their generation, walking into an Ottawa high school.

“We’re here to see Principal Matheson,” Shane says, forcing his voice to remain level. “About Viktor Hollander-Rozanov.”

“Oh. Oh yes, of course. Just one moment.” She picks up the phone, murmurs something Shane can’t quite hear, then gestures toward a hallway. “His office is the second door on the right. He’s expecting you.”

Shane’s heart is pounding as they walk down the hallway. Ilya reaches over and grabs his hand, squeezing once. It’s meant to be reassuring, but Shane can feel the tension in Ilya’s grip.

Principal Matheson’s door is open. Through it, Shane can see Viktor sitting in one of the chairs facing the desk. His son’s head is down, his dark hair falling into his eyes, and there’s something about his posture — shoulders hunched, hands clasped in his lap — that makes Shane’s heart clench.

“Vik,” Shane says, and Viktor’s head snaps up.

“Dad,” Viktor says, and his voice cracks on the word. His eyes are red-rimmed but dry, and when Shane looks closer, he can see a small mark on Viktor’s right hand, the knuckles slightly swollen.

Ilya’s across the room in two strides, kneeling in front of Viktor’s chair, hands on his son’s knees. “Vitya, are you hurt? Let me see.”

“I’m fine, Papa,” Viktor says quietly, but he holds out his hand anyway.

Ilya examines it carefully, his touch gentle despite the barely contained fury Shane can see simmering beneath his husband’s surface. “Is not too bad. We ice when we get home.”

“Mr. Hollander. Mr. Rozanov.” Principal Matheson stands behind his desk, a thin man in his fifties with wire-rimmed glasses and a tie that’s slightly askew. “Thank you for coming so quickly.”

Shane forces himself to focus on the principal instead of his son. “What happened?”

“Viktor was involved in a physical altercation during lunch period,” Matheson says, sitting back down and folding his hands on his desk. “He punched another student in the face, causing significant injury. We have a strict zero-tolerance policy for violence at this school, and-”

“Significant injury?” Ilya interrupts, still kneeling beside Viktor. “What is ‘significant injury’?”

“A split lip and possible fractured cheekbone. The other student’s parents are in the waiting area now, considering whether to press charges.”

Shane feels like the floor has dropped out from under him. “Press charges? He’s fourteen.”

“The other student is fifteen, and his parents are understandably upset.”

“Understandably,” Ilya repeats, his accent thickening the way it always does when he’s angry. He stands, and Shane knows that posture, knows the way Ilya’s holding himself. It’s the same way he used to stand when facing down opponents twice his size. “Tell me, Principal Matheson, what did other boy do?”

Matheson frowns. “I don’t think that’s-”

“What. Did. He. Do.” Ilya enunciates each word carefully, dangerously. “My son does not hit people. So if he hit someone, is reason. What was reason?”

“Ilya,” Shane says quietly, putting a hand on Ilya’s arm. To Matheson, he says, “We’d like to understand what led to this.”

Matheson looks between them, clearly uncomfortable. “Viktor, as I told you, is facing a three-day suspension for-”

“You are not answering question,” Ilya says flatly.

Shane squeezes Ilya’s arm, then turns to Viktor. Their son is staring at his hands, his jaw tight. “Vik, can you tell us what happened?”

Viktor’s quiet for a long moment. When he speaks, his voice is barely above a whisper. “He was being a dick to Min-jun.”

“Language,” Shane says automatically, then catches himself. “Who’s Min-jun?”

“He’s new. His family just moved here from Korea like two months ago. He’s in my grade, and his English isn’t great yet, but he’s trying really hard, and-” Viktor’s voice cracks again. “And Mason was making fun of him. At lunch. In front of everyone.”

Shane’s stomach twists. “What was he saying?”

“Just stupid stuff. Asking him if he eats dog. Making fun of his accent. Pulling at the corners of his eyes.” Viktor looks up, and Shane sees anger there now, not guilt. “Min-jun was just sitting there taking it because he doesn’t want to cause trouble. He’s already having a hard enough time making friends without speaking English perfectly. So I told Mason to shut up and leave him alone.”

“And then what happened?” Ilya asks, his voice softer now.

“Mason said maybe I should go back to Russia if I love foreigners so much. Said at least I probably understand what it’s like to be-” Viktor stops, his mouth tightening.

“What?” Shane prompts gently.

“He called Min-jun a slur. The one for Asian people. And then he laughed and looked around like he expected everyone else to laugh too.” Viktor’s hands curl into fists. “So I punched him.”

The room goes very quiet.

Shane looks at Ilya, who’s staring at Viktor with an expression Shane can’t quite read. Then Ilya turns to Principal Matheson.

“So,” Ilya says, his voice dangerously calm. “Other boy was bullying student. Making racist comments. Harassing him. And you want to suspend my son for stopping it?”

“Mr. Rozanov, I understand Viktor may have had good intentions, but violence is never the answer-”

“Is never the answer?” Ilya’s voice rises. “When someone is being racist bully, what is answer? Should Vitya sit there and watch? Should he go tell teacher who will probably do nothing?”

“We have proper channels for reporting bullying-”

“Proper channels,” Ilya repeats, and Shane hears the contempt in his voice. “How many times has this Mason kid bullied before? How many times have students gone through ‘proper channels’?”

Matheson shifts uncomfortably. “I can’t discuss other students’ disciplinary records-”

“That means yes,” Ilya says. “Means this is not first time. Means ‘proper channels’ do not work.”

Shane clears his throat, trying to find the middle ground between Ilya’s fury and the diplomacy this situation needs. “Principal Matheson, I understand that violence is against school policy. But surely you understand that what this other student was doing was also against school policy. Is he being disciplined?”

“The situation is being reviewed,” Matheson says stiffly.

“Reviewed,” Shane repeats. “But Viktor gets an immediate three-day suspension.”

“Viktor threw the first punch.”

“After Mason used a racial slur against another student,” Shane says, and he can hear his voice hardening. “After Mason was actively bullying someone. After Mason, based on what you’re not saying, has probably done this before.”

“I understand you’re upset, but-”

“No,” Ilya interrupts. “You do not understand. We raised our children to be good people. To stand up for what is right. To protect people who cannot protect themselves. As far as I can see, Vitya did exactly what we taught him.”

“Mr. Rozanov, I appreciate your passion, but we cannot have students taking matters into their own hands-”

“Why not?” Ilya leans forward, planting his hands on Matheson’s desk. “If school will not protect students from bullies, what choice do they have?”

Shane steps forward, placing himself slightly between Ilya and the desk. “Let me ask you something, Principal Matheson. If someone was using racial slurs and bullying students when you were in school, what would have happened to them?”

Matheson opens his mouth, closes it.

“I’ll tell you what would have happened,” Shane continues. “They would have gotten their ass kicked, and everyone would have agreed they deserved it. Now, I’m not saying that’s right. I’m saying that my son saw someone being victimized and stepped in. The method he chose isn’t ideal, but the instinct to protect someone who’s vulnerable? That’s exactly what we’ve taught him to do.”

“Mr. Hollander, I understand you’re a public figure, and I don’t want this to become a media situation-”

“Oh no,” Ilya says, and there’s something dark in his voice. “You do not want media situation? Maybe you should have thought about that before you decide to punish victim and let bully walk away.”

“Viktor is not the victim here-”

“Yes, he is,” Shane says firmly. “Min-jun is a victim. Viktor stood up for him, and now you’re punishing him for it. How exactly does that encourage students to do the right thing?”

Matheson’s face is flushed now. “I cannot set a precedent that physical violence is acceptable under any circumstances-”

“Then you better be damn sure you’re setting a precedent that racism and bullying aren’t acceptable either,” Shane says. “Because if Viktor gets suspended and Mason doesn’t, that’s a very clear message about what this school values.”

“Both students will be disciplined-”

“How?” Ilya demands. “How will Mason be disciplined? Same as Vitya? More? Or just ‘reviewed’?”

Matheson’s silence is answer enough.

“Thought so,” Ilya says. He straightens up, and Shane knows this body language too — it’s the one Ilya uses when he’s done talking, when he’s made his decision. “Come, Vitya. We are

going home.”

“Mr. Rozanov, Viktor still needs to serve his suspension-”

“Then he will serve it,” Shane says. “But we’re leaving now, and we’ll be following up on this. I want to know exactly what disciplinary action is being taken against Mason, and I want to know why a pattern of bullying behavior has been allowed to continue.”

“I’m sure we can arrange a follow-up meeting-”

“You’re sure,” Ilya says flatly. “I am sure too. I am sure that if my son gets suspended and bully does not, then media will be very interested in story. Shane Hollander and Ilya Rozanov’s son suspended for defending victim of racism. I think newspapers will love that story. What do you think, Solnyshko?”

Shane wants to say that threatening media involvement is too much, that they should handle this properly, but looking at Viktor’s face — at the way his son is sitting there, scared and confused and probably wondering if he’s in trouble with his parents too — Shane finds he doesn’t care about playing nice.

“I think,” Shane says carefully, “That our lawyers will also be very interested. Especially if Mason’s parents decide to press charges against a fourteen-year-old for defending a victim of racial harassment.”

Matheson’s face goes pale. “I don’t think that will be necessary-”

“Then I suggest you think very carefully about how you handle this situation,” Shane says. “Come on, Vik.”

Viktor stands quickly, and Shane can see the relief in his son’s eyes. Ilya immediately puts an arm around Viktor’s shoulders, pulling him close.

“You did good, Vitya,” Ilya says quietly as they head toward the door. “You did right thing.”

“Papa, I-” Viktor’s voice is thick. “I was scared you’d be mad.”

“Mad?” Ilya stops walking, turning to face Viktor fully. “Why would we be mad?”

“Because I hit someone. Because I got in trouble.”

Shane’s heart breaks a little. He reaches out, cupping Viktor’s face gently. “Vik, listen to me. We’re not mad. We’re proud of you.”

“But you always say violence isn’t the answer-”

“Violence shouldn’t be the answer,” Shane corrects. “But sometimes, when someone is being hurt and no one else is stopping it, sometimes you have to step in. You didn’t hit Mason because you were angry or because you wanted to fight. You hit him because he was hurting someone else, and you made it stop. There’s a difference.”

“Though next time,” Ilya says, examining Viktor’s hand again, “You keep thumb outside of fist when you punch. Like I show you. This way, you do not hurt yourself.”

“Ilya,” Shane says, exasperated.

“What? Is important! Look, his thumb is swelling. If he keeps thumb outside-”

“Can we maybe not give our son fighting tips in the principal’s office?”

“Fine, fine. We discuss technique at home.” But Ilya’s grinning now, and he holds out his fist to Viktor. “But seriously, Vitya. Am proud of you. You see something wrong, you stand up. Is good. Is what man should do.”

Viktor bumps Ilya’s fist with his own, and the smile that crosses his face is small but genuine.

They walk down the hallway together, Shane on one side of Viktor and Ilya on the other, and Shane’s struck by how tall Viktor’s gotten. He’s going to be taller than him soon, probably. Already his shoulders are broadening, his frame filling out. He’s not their little boy anymore, the scared eight-year-old who woke up in a hospital bed and learned his biological parents were gone.

The memory hits Shane suddenly, viscerally. Walking into that hospital room six years ago, seeing this small child with bandages and bruises, eyes wide and terrified and so, so alone. The way Viktor had looked at them, recognized them from TV, and whispered “You’re Shane Hollander” like he couldn’t believe it was real.

The way Ilya had sat down next to the bed and taken Viktor’s hand and said, “And you are very brave boy.”

The way Viktor had started crying then, this awful, broken sound, and how Ilya had carefully, so carefully, gathered him up and held him while he sobbed.

The way Shane had looked at Ilya holding this grieving child and known, with absolute certainty, that they were going to do whatever it took to make sure Viktor was okay. That they were going to become foster parents, were going to navigate the system, were going to love this boy and give him a home and a family.

Six years. Six years of Viktor slowly unfurling, slowly trusting that they weren’t going anywhere, slowly believing that he was safe and loved and theirs.

And then, three years ago, Sachiko. Seven years old now, adopted when she was four, her Japanese mother’s death from cancer leaving her in the care of an aunt who couldn’t handle raising a child alone. Sachiko, who Viktor doted on from the moment she arrived, who he read to and played with and protected fiercely.

Shane loves both his kids so much it physically hurts sometimes.

They reach the main office, and Shane can see through the glass door into the waiting area. There’s a couple sitting there, and a teenage boy with an ice pack pressed to his face.

“That is Mason?” Ilya asks Viktor quietly.

Viktor nods.

Shane looks at the boy. He’s big, bigger than Viktor, with the kind of athletic build that probably makes him popular. The split lip is visible even with the ice pack, and there’s already dark bruising along his cheekbone. Viktor got him good.

“And those are his parents?”

Another nod.

The couple looks up as Shane, Ilya, and Viktor walk into the waiting area. The woman’s eyes widen in recognition. The man’s narrow.

“You’re his parents?” The man says, standing up. He’s tall, heavy-set, with a red face and thinning hair. “You’re the ones raising the little thug who attacked my son?”

Shane feels Ilya tense beside him, feels the way his husband’s entire body shifts into a defensive posture.

“Your son,” Ilya says, his voice very quiet and very dangerous, “Was being racist bully. My son stopped him.”

“Stopped him?” The woman stands now too, her voice shrill. “Your son broke Mason’s cheekbone!”

“Maybe is improvement,” Ilya says flatly. “Maybe now he think twice before he calls people slurs.”

“How dare you-” the man starts.

“How dare I?” Ilya steps forward, and Shane grabs his arm. “How dare you raise son who thinks is okay to bully and harass other students. How dare you act like victim when your son was one causing harm.”

“Our son was sitting at lunch minding his own business when your son attacked him-”

“That’s bullshit,” Viktor says, his voice stronger than Shane’s heard it all day. “Mason was tormenting Min-jun. He’s been doing it for weeks. Everyone knows it.”

“Don’t you dare call my son a liar,” the woman snaps.

“I’m not calling him a liar,” Viktor says. “I’m saying he’s a bully and a racist, and someone needed to make him stop.”

“Why you little-” The man takes a step toward Viktor, and suddenly Ilya’s between them, and Shane’s pulling Viktor back, and the tension in the room is explosive.

“You do not talk to my son,” Ilya says, and there’s something in his voice that makes the man stop dead. “You do not even look at my son. Your son is problem here. Your son is one who should be ashamed. And you-” He looks at both parents with undisguised contempt. “You should be ashamed too. Because this is your fault. You raise him. You teach him that is okay to treat people like this.”

“We did not teach him to bully anyone-”

“No?” Ilya’s eyebrows rise. “Then where he learn it? Where he learn that is okay to use slurs? To make fun of people for being different? He learn somewhere. And I am guessing he learn at home.”

“You can’t prove that,” the man says, but he sounds defensive now.

“Don’t need to prove,” Ilya says. “I just need to look at you and see how you act. You come here, you blame everyone but your own son. You talk about pressing charges instead of asking why he was being terrible person. You raise bully, and then you act surprised when someone punches him for it.”

“Our son is the victim here!”

“No,” Shane says, stepping forward. Viktor’s still behind him, Shane’s hand on his shoulder. “The victim is the kid Mason was tormenting. The victim is every student who’s had to watch Mason behave like this and wondered why no one stops him. Our son isn’t a thug. Our son is the only person in that cafeteria who had the courage to stand up and say this isn’t okay.”

“By assaulting someone!”

“Your son was assaulting someone,” Shane says, his voice hard. “Maybe not physically, but what he was doing? That’s assault too. That’s violence. It’s just a different kind.”

“That’s not the same-”

“It is exactly the same,” Ilya interrupts. “And you know what? I am glad Vitya hit him. I am glad that your asshole son got reality check. Because world is hard place for assholes. And better he learn now, when is just bruised face from teenager, than later when is lawsuit or jail or worse because he does this to wrong person.”

“Are you threatening my son?” The man’s face is purple now.

“No,” Ilya says. “I am telling you truth. Your son is on bad path. And only people who can fix it is you. You are parents. You need to be better parents.”

“Better parents? You’re telling us about parenting? You’re two fa-” The man catches himself, but everyone in the room knows what he was about to say.

“What?” Ilya says, his voice dropping into something cold and sharp. “Say it. You are two what?”

The man’s mouth opens and closes.

“That’s what I thought,” Ilya says. “You are bigot, just like your son. So maybe start there when you try to fix him. Start with fixing yourself.”

“Ilya,” Shane says quietly. “We should go.”

But Ilya’s not done. He looks at Mason, who’s been silent this entire time, watching everything with wide eyes.

“You,” Ilya says, pointing at him. “You listen to me. You are fifteen years old. Is not too late for you. You can be better person than this. But you need to choose. You can keep being bully, keep thinking you are better than other people because of where they are from or how they look. And maybe you get away with it for while. But eventually, world will teach you lesson, and it will not be gentle. Or you can learn lesson now. You can apologize to boy you hurt. You can be better. Is your choice.”

Mason stares at Ilya, the ice pack still pressed to his face. He doesn’t say anything.

Ilya turns back to the parents. “I hope,” he says, “That you thank Viktor someday. Because he gave your son chance to learn this lesson now, when consequences are just bruised face and hurt pride. He could learn it later, when consequences are much worse. So really, you should be grateful.”

“Grateful?” The woman sputters. “You’re insane!”

“Maybe,” Ilya agrees cheerfully. “But I am insane person with good son who stands up for what is right. What kind of person are you?”

He doesn’t wait for an answer. He turns, puts his arm back around Viktor’s shoulders, and steers him toward the door. Shane follows, his hand still on Viktor’s other shoulder.

Behind them, he can hear the couple’s outraged voices, but Shane doesn’t care. Let them be outraged. Let them complain. Everything Ilya said was true, even if it was harsh.

They walk out into the afternoon sunlight, and Viktor takes a deep, shaky breath.

“Papa,” he says quietly. “Did you mean all that?”

“Every word,” Ilya says firmly. “You did right thing, Vitya. We are very proud of you.”

“Even though I hit him?”

“Especially because you hit him,” Ilya says. “Sometimes, when someone is being terrible, words are not enough. Sometimes you need action. You took action. You protected someone who needed protecting. That is what good man does.”

“But Daddy always says-”

“I know what Daddy says,” Ilya interrupts gently. “And he is not wrong. Violence should not be first choice. Should not be thing you want to do. But when you see someone being hurt,

when you see injustice, you do not just stand there. You act. Even if it means getting in trouble. Even if it means you might get hurt too. You act because is right thing to do.”

They reach the car, and Shane unlocks it. Viktor climbs into the back seat, and Shane can see him curling in on himself slightly, the adrenaline of the last hour starting to fade.

Shane gets in the passenger seat, and Ilya starts the car. They sit there for a moment, none of them speaking.

Then Viktor says, very quietly, “I was really scared.”

Shane turns around in his seat. “Of what, Vik?”

“That you’d be disappointed in me. That you’d think I’d-” His voice cracks. “That you’d think I’d turned into someone bad. Like my-”

He stops, but Shane knows what he was going to say. Like my birth father. Viktor’s biological father had a temper, had been known to get into fights. It was one of the things Viktor had worried about when he was younger, this idea that violence was in his blood, that he’d inherited something dark and uncontrollable.

“Vitya,” Ilya says, turning around to face their son. “Look at me.”

Viktor looks up, and his eyes are wet.

“You are nothing like him,” Ilya says firmly. “Your biological father, he fought because he was angry. Because he could not control himself. You fought because you saw someone being hurt and you wanted to protect them. That is completely different. You understand?”

Viktor nods, but he doesn’t look convinced.

“Vik,” Shane says gently. “You are the kindest person I know. You’re empathetic and caring and gentle. One punch doesn’t change that. Especially when that punch was thrown for the right reasons.”

“But what if—what if I liked it?” Viktor whispers. “What if part of me wanted to hit him?”

Shane exchanges a glance with Ilya, then turns back to Viktor. “Did you like it?”

Viktor’s quiet for a long moment. Then, “No. It felt awful. My hand hurt, and everyone was staring, and Mason was bleeding, and I just ... I felt sick.”

“Good,” Shane says. “I mean, not good that you felt sick. But good that you didn’t enjoy it. That tells you everything you need to know about who you are.”

“Your grandfather,” Ilya says suddenly. “My father. He was not good man. He hit me, he hit my mother. He fought because he was mean and drunk and angry at world. I worry, sometimes, that I am like him. That I have that anger in me.”

Shane's heard this before, late at night when Ilya's defenses are down, but he knows Viktor hasn't.

"But you know what?" Ilya continues. "I am not him. Because when I fought, when I was playing hockey and got into fights, was for reason. Was to protect teammates. Was to stand up for something. And I never, never hit someone I love. I never hit someone weaker than me just because I could. And you are not like your biological father, Vitya. You are not like my father either. You are better than both of them. You are exactly who we raised you to be."

Viktor's crying now, silent tears streaming down his face. "I just wanted him to stop. Min-jun looked so—he looked so small and scared, and everyone was laughing, and I just ... I couldn't stand it."

"Of course you could not stand it," Ilya says. "Because you are good person with good heart. And sometimes, good people have to do hard things to protect others. Is not easy. Is not fun. But is necessary."

Shane unbuckles his seatbelt and climbs into the back seat next to Viktor, pulling his son into a hug. Viktor comes easily, burying his face in Shane's shoulder the way he used to when he was younger.

"We're so proud of you," Shane murmurs into Viktor's hair. "So incredibly proud. Not because you got into a fight, but because when you saw something wrong, you didn't look away. You didn't wait for someone else to handle it. You stepped up."

"Even though I got suspended?"

"Even though you got suspended," Shane confirms. "Though for the record, we're going to fight that suspension. And we're going to make sure Mason faces actual consequences for what he did."

Ilya starts the car, and they pull out of the parking lot. Viktor stays pressed against Shane's side, and Shane keeps his arm around his son's shoulders.

"Papa?" Viktor says after a few minutes.

"Yeah, Vitya?"

"When you said I should keep my thumb outside my fist ... can you show me? Like, the right way?"

Shane can see Ilya grinning in the rearview mirror. "Of course. When we get home, we practice. I show you proper form. How to throw punch that does not hurt yourself."

"Ilya," Shane says, exasperated again. "We are not teaching our son how to fight."

"Why not? Is useful skill. And besides, if he is going to punch bullies — which apparently he is — then should do it correctly."

"He shouldn't be punching anyone!"

“But if he does-”

“If he does, which he won’t, because this was a one-time thing-”

“If he does,” Ilya continues, ignoring Shane, “Then should do it right. Look, Solnyshko, is practical. Like teaching him to drive. You do not want him to drive, but he will, so you teach him to do it safely.”

“Punching people is not like driving!”

“Is exactly like driving. Is skill that can be dangerous if done wrong, so better to teach properly-”

“Oh my god,” Shane says, but he’s smiling now despite himself. “You’re impossible.”

“I am practical,” Ilya corrects. “And good father. Right, Vitya?”

Viktor’s laughing now, the tension finally breaking. “Right, Papa.”

They drive in comfortable silence for a few minutes. Then Viktor says, “What happens now? With the suspension?”

“Well,” Shane says, “You’ll be home for three days. We’ll need to get your homework from your teachers, and you’ll need to keep up with your classes. And we’re going to have a family meeting tonight about all of this.”

“Am I in trouble?”

“No,” Ilya says firmly. “But we need to talk about it. About when it is okay to fight, when it is not. About other ways to handle situations like this. About consequences and choices.”

“Okay,” Viktor says quietly.

“And,” Shane adds, “We’re going to talk about this Min-jun kid. I want to know more about him. Maybe we can invite him over for dinner sometime.”

“Really?” Viktor perks up. “You’d do that?”

“Of course,” Shane says. “If he’s new to the country and struggling to make friends, maybe we can help. We know what it’s like to be outsiders. And maybe it would help Min-jun to know that there are people who understand what he’s going through.”

Viktor’s quiet for a moment, then, “He’s really nice. Like, he’s funny when you get him talking. And he’s really good at math — he helps me sometimes even though his English isn’t perfect. He just ... he doesn’t deserve what Mason was doing to him.”

“No one deserves that,” Shane agrees. “Which is why what you did mattered.”

They pull into the driveway, and Shane realizes they still have a couple hours before they need to pick up Sachiko from school.

“Okay,” Ilya says, turning off the car. “Now we go inside, we ice your hand, and then I show you proper punch technique.”

“And then,” Shane adds, shooting Ilya a look, “We’re going to call the school board and figure out how to handle this situation properly.”

“Can do both,” Ilya says cheerfully. “Is called multitasking.”

Inside, Ilya immediately goes to the freezer and pulls out an ice pack, wrapping it in a dish towel before handing it to Viktor.

“Fifteen minutes on, fifteen off,” Ilya instructs. “Keep elevated.”

Viktor sits at the kitchen table, obediently holding the ice pack to his knuckles, and Shane finishes putting away the snacks he’d been making before the phone call that upended their afternoon.

“You hungry, Vik?” Shane asks.

“A little.”

Shane makes him a sandwich, and Viktor eats it one-handed, the ice pack still pressed to his other hand. Ilya hovers, checking Viktor’s knuckles every few minutes like he’s assessing an injury during a game.

“Is not too bad,” Ilya says finally. “Swelling should go down by tomorrow. But Vitya, seriously, you need to learn proper form. You hit him with your knuckles instead of second knuckle joint. Is why your hand hurts so much.”

“I wasn’t really thinking about form,” Viktor mumbles. “I just ... reacted.”

“I know. Is okay. But if you practice-”

“Ilya,” Shane warns.

“What? I am just saying-”

“You’re encouraging our son to get into more fights.”

“I am encouraging our son to know how to defend himself and others if necessary,” Ilya corrects. “Is different.”

Shane sighs, but he knows he’s fighting a losing battle. Ilya’s stubborn when he thinks he’s right, and honestly, Shane can’t completely disagree with the logic, even if he wishes he could.

Viktor’s phone buzzes, and he pulls it out, his eyes widening as he reads the screen.

“What is it?” Shane asks.

“It’s Min-jun,” Viktor says, wonder in his voice. “He’s asking if I’m okay. He says-” Viktor’s voice gets thick. “He says thank you. He says no one’s ever stood up for him like that before.”

Shane’s throat tightens. He exchanges a look with Ilya, who’s gone very still.

“Tell him,” Ilya says quietly, “That he does not need to thank you. Tell him that is what friends do.”

Viktor types quickly, then looks up. “He wants to know if he can come visit me during the suspension. If it’s okay with you guys.”

“Of course,” Shane says immediately. “He’s welcome anytime.”

Viktor smiles, the first real, unguarded smile Shane’s seen from him all day, and starts typing again.

The rest of the afternoon passes in a strange kind of peaceful tension. Shane calls the school board and leaves a detailed message about the situation. Ilya, true to his word, takes Viktor to the basement and shows him proper punching technique, using the heavy bag that’s been hanging there since they moved in.

Shane can hear them from upstairs, Ilya’s voice patient as he instructs. “No, Vitya, like this. See? Thumb outside. Power comes from here, from your legs and core. Is not just arm.”

When it’s time to pick up Sachiko, Viktor comes with them. In the car, Viktor leans his head against the window, looking exhausted.

“You okay?” Shane asks.

“Yeah,” Viktor says. “Just tired. Today was ... a lot.”

“Da,” Ilya agrees. “Is emotionally exhausting, standing up for what is right. But is worth it.”

They pull up to Sachiko’s elementary school, and Shane can see his daughter immediately, her Hello Kitty backpack bouncing as she runs toward the car. She climbs in next to Viktor, her gap-toothed smile wide.

“Vik!” She exclaims. “You’re home early! Did you have a good day?”

Viktor looks at Shane and Ilya, a question in his eyes. Shane nods slightly. They’ll tell her, but they’ll do it together, at home.

“Something like that,” Viktor says, ruffling Sachiko’s hair. “How was your day, Sachi?”

“Good! We learned about butterflies, and I got a gold star on my spelling test!” She pulls out a paper to show them, and Shane praises her as Ilya drives them home.

Once they’re inside, Sachiko notices Viktor’s hand. “Vik, what happened?”

Viktor looks at his parents again, and this time Shane takes the lead.

“Sachi, come sit down. We need to talk about something.”

Sachiko’s face goes serious immediately. At seven, she’s already learned that “We need to talk” means something important happened. She climbs onto the couch between Shane and Ilya, and Viktor sits in the armchair across from them.

“Viktor got into a little trouble at school today,” Shane starts carefully.

“What kind of trouble?” Sachiko asks, her eyes wide.

“The good kind,” Ilya says, and Shane elbows him.

“There’s no good kind of trouble,” Shane says.

“Is too,” Ilya argues. “Sometimes trouble is necessary. Tell her, Vitya.”

Viktor takes a breath, then explains the situation to Sachiko in simple terms. How his friend was being bullied. How the bully used mean words. How Viktor made him stop.

Sachiko listens intently, her small face thoughtful. When Viktor finishes, she’s quiet for a moment.

Then she says, “Did it hurt? When you punched him?”

“Sachiko-” Shane starts.

“Yes,” Viktor says honestly. “My hand hurt. And I felt bad, even though he deserved it.”

“But you protected your friend,” Sachiko says. It’s not a question.

“Yeah.”

“Like how you protect me?”

Viktor’s face softens. “Yeah, Sachi. Like that.”

Sachiko nods once, decisively. “Then you did the right thing. If someone was being mean to me, I’d want you to make them stop.”

“We hope,” Shane says gently, “That if someone’s mean to you, you tell a teacher first.”

“But what if the teacher doesn’t listen?” Sachiko asks, her seven-year-old logic cutting right to the heart of the issue.

Shane doesn’t have a good answer for that.

“Then,” Ilya says, “You tell us. And we make sure teacher listens. And if they do not, then we go to principal. And if principal does not listen, we go to school board. We keep going until someone listens.”

“But what if-”

“No what ifs,” Ilya says firmly. “If you are ever in trouble, if anyone is ever mean to you, you tell us. Always. We will always listen. We will always protect you. Both of you.” He looks at Viktor when he says this, making sure his son knows the promise extends to him too.

“Okay,” Sachiko says. Then, pragmatically, “Can we have pizza for dinner?”

The sudden shift makes all of them laugh, and the tension breaks. Shane orders pizza, and they spend the evening being as normal as possible. Sachiko chatters about her day, Viktor helps her with a social studies worksheet, and Ilya tells terrible jokes that make everyone groan.

But later, after Sachiko’s in bed and Viktor’s in his room doing homework, Shane and Ilya sit together on the couch, Shane’s head on Ilya’s shoulder.

“You were pretty intense today,” Shane says quietly.

“Was necessary,” Ilya says. “They were trying to punish Vitya for doing right thing. Could not let that happen.”

“I know. And I’m glad you said what you did. I just ... I worry sometimes that we’re teaching him the wrong lessons.”

“What do you mean?”

Shane’s quiet for a moment, trying to find the words. “I mean we’re telling him it’s okay to use violence if the cause is just. But where’s the line? How does he know when it’s justified and when it’s not?”

“He knows,” Ilya says firmly. “Did you see his face? He felt terrible about it, even though he knew it was right. That means he understands. Means he will not do it lightly.”

“But what if next time-”

“Then we deal with next time,” Ilya interrupts gently. “But today? Today our son saw someone being hurt and he made it stop. He could have walked away. He could have pretended not to see. But he did not. And that is who we raised him to be.”

Shane’s quiet, thinking about Viktor at eight years old. Thinking about the way he’d flinched at sudden movements, the way he’d been so careful never to upset anyone, so afraid of being a burden or causing trouble.

“He’s come so far,” Shane says softly.

“Da,” Ilya agrees. “And we have come far too. We are good parents, Shane. We make mistakes, sure. But we love our children and we teach them right from wrong. That is what matters.”

“Do you think we did the right thing? At the school?”

Ilya's quiet for a moment. "I think we did what was necessary. Maybe was not diplomatic. Maybe I was too harsh. But those people, they needed to hear it. And Vitya needed to see that we are on his side."

"Always," Shane agrees. "Even when we're mad at him, even when he makes mistakes, we're on his side."

"Exactly."

They sit in comfortable silence for a while, just existing together the way they have for over twenty years now. Through the rivalry, through the secret relationship, through coming out, through becoming parents. Through everything.

Shane's phone buzzes, and he checks it. "It's an email from the school board. They want to schedule a meeting tomorrow."

"Good," Ilya says. "We will go together. We will make sure this is handled right."

"And if it's not?"

Ilya grins, and it's the same competitive grin Shane remembers from their playing days. "Then we make life very difficult for them until it is."

The next morning, Viktor's in the kitchen eating cereal when Shane comes downstairs. His hand looks better, the swelling mostly gone.

"Morning, Vik," Shane says, starting the coffee maker.

"Morning, Dad." Viktor's quiet, stirring his cereal without really eating it.

"What's on your mind?"

Viktor's quiet for a long moment. Then, "Do you think I'm a violent person?"

Shane stops what he's doing and sits down across from Viktor. "No. Absolutely not."

"But I hit someone. I gave him a split lip and broke his cheekbone."

"Because he was hurting someone else," Shane says. "Context matters, Vik. You're not violent. You're protective. There's a difference."

"How do I know the difference?"

"Ask yourself: why did I do this? If the answer is because you were angry, because you wanted to hurt someone, because you wanted power over someone — that's violence. But if the answer is because someone was being hurt and you wanted to stop it, because you saw injustice and needed to act — that's protection."

Viktor absorbs this, then nods slowly. "I didn't want to hurt him. I wanted him to stop hurting Min-jun."

“Exactly.”

Ilya appears in the doorway, hair still mussed from sleep. “Good morning, family. Vitya, how is hand?”

“Better.”

“Good. Today we continue training.”

“Training?” Viktor looks confused.

“Da. If you are going to be hero who punches bullies, you need to know how to do it without hurting yourself.” Ilya’s grinning, and Shane can see Viktor fighting back a smile.

“I’m not going to make a habit of punching people,” Viktor says.

“No, probably not,” Ilya agrees. “But is good to know, just in case.”

Later that morning, after Sachiko’s off to school, Shane and Ilya head to the school board meeting. Viktor stays home, working on the assignments his teachers emailed over.

The meeting is tense. There are board members, the principal, and a representative from Mason’s family — though notably, not Mason’s parents themselves.

Shane presents their case calmly and clearly. Ilya backs him up with barely contained fury. They explain the situation, provide context, and make it very clear that they expect Mason to face consequences for his actions.

“We understand Viktor used physical violence,” Shane says. “And we’re not saying that was the ideal solution. But we are saying that the school failed to protect Min-jun from ongoing harassment and racist bullying. Our son stepped in when the system failed. And now you’re punishing him for it.”

The board members shift uncomfortably.

One of them, an older woman with kind eyes, speaks up. “Mr. Hollander, Mr. Rozanov, I want you to know that we take bullying very seriously. And racial harassment is completely unacceptable.”

“Then why,” Ilya says flatly, “Is Mason getting off with just ‘review’ while Viktor gets three-day suspension?”

There’s a long silence.

Finally, the woman says, “You’re right. We need to do better. Mason will be suspended for five days for his actions, and he’ll be required to complete sensitivity training and issue a formal apology to Min-jun. Additionally, we’re going to review our anti-bullying policies to ensure situations like this don’t happen again.”

“And Viktor?” Shane asks.

“His suspension will be reduced to one day, which he’s already served by missing school yesterday. It will be recorded as an excused absence for family reasons rather than a disciplinary action.”

Shane can feel the tension leaving his shoulders. It’s not perfect, but it’s something. It’s acknowledgment that Viktor wasn’t the villain here.

“Thank you,” Shane says.

As they’re leaving, the woman catches up with them in the hallway.

“Mr. Hollander, Mr. Rozanov,” she says quietly. “I wanted to say that what your son did took courage. And you’re right. The system failed. We should have caught Mason’s behavior sooner. We should have protected Min-jun better. I’m glad Viktor was willing to stand up, even if the method wasn’t ideal.”

“Thank you,” Shane says again, meaning it this time.

“And,” she adds with a small smile, “Between you and me? Mason’s had this coming for a long time. Maybe this will finally be the wake-up call his family needs.”

When they get home, Viktor’s on the couch reading. He looks up anxiously when they walk in.

“Well?” he asks.

“Mason’s getting a five-day suspension and has to do sensitivity training,” Shane says. “And you’re going back to school tomorrow.”

Viktor’s face lights up. “Really?”

“Really,” Ilya confirms. “School board agrees you did right thing. Also, this was recorded as excused absence, not suspension. So will not go on your permanent record.”

Viktor looks like he might cry again. “Thank you. For fighting for me.”

“Always, Vitya,” Ilya says, pulling his son into a hug. “Always.”

That evening, Min-jun comes over for dinner. He’s small for fourteen, with nervous eyes and a shy smile. He bows slightly when he meets Shane and Ilya, his English heavily accented but earnest.

“Thank you for having me,” he says carefully. “It is very kind.”

“Is no problem,” Ilya says warmly. “Any friend of Vitya is welcome here.”

At dinner, Min-jun slowly opens up. He talks about Korea, about how different everything is here, about how hard it’s been to make friends when he can barely communicate.

“But Viktor helps me,” he says, smiling at their son. “He sits with me at lunch. He helps with my homework. He-” Min-jun’s voice gets thick. “He made Mason stop.”

“You don’t need to thank him,” Shane says gently. “That’s what friends do.”

“There is saying,” Min-jun says quietly, “‘A friend in need is a friend indeed.’ Viktor is true friend.”

Viktor blushes, and Sachiko, who’s been listening raptly, pipes up. “Vik’s the best brother ever too. He reads to me every night.”

“You have very nice family,” Min-jun says to Viktor. “You are lucky.”

“I know,” Viktor says, looking at Shane and Ilya. “I really am.”

Later, after Min-jun’s gone home and both kids are in bed, Shane and Ilya are cleaning up the kitchen together.

“You know,” Shane says, “When we first became parents, I was terrified we’d screw it up.”

“We still might,” Ilya says pragmatically. “They are only fourteen and seven. Is long way to go.”

“But today,” Shane continues, “Seeing Viktor stand up for Min-jun. Seeing him understand right and wrong even when it’s complicated. Seeing him be kind and brave and good-” His voice breaks slightly. “We’re doing okay, aren’t we?”

Ilya sets down the dish he’s washing and pulls Shane into his arms. “We are doing better than okay. We are raising good humans. Is best thing we have ever done.”

“Better than Stanley Cups?”

“Better than Stanley Cups,” Ilya confirms. “Better than anything.”

They stand there for a long moment, holding each other in their quiet kitchen. Upstairs, their children sleep safely. Tomorrow, Viktor will go back to school, head held high. Sachiko will learn more about butterflies. Life will continue, messy and complicated and beautiful.

And Shane thinks about eight-year-old Viktor, lost and alone in a hospital bed. About four-year-old Sachiko, confused and grieving. About how he and Ilya, two hockey players who’d spent years hiding their love, had somehow built this life together. This family.

It’s not the life Shane imagined when he was young, playing hockey in his backyard and dreaming of the NHL. But it’s better. It’s so much better.

“I love you,” Shane says into Ilya’s shoulder.

“I love you too,” Ilya murmurs back. “And I love our children. And I love this life we build together.”

“Even the complicated parts?”

“Especially the complicated parts,” Ilya says. “Is the complicated parts that make it real.”

And standing there in their kitchen, in the home they’ve made, with their children sleeping upstairs, Shane knows Ilya’s right. The complicated parts — the fights, the struggles, the moments of doubt — those are what make the good parts matter. Those are what make them a family.

The next morning, Viktor goes back to school with his head high. Shane and Ilya watch him walk through the doors, and Shane reaches for Ilya’s hand.

“He’s going to be okay,” Ilya says.

“Yeah,” Shane agrees. “He really is.”

And he is. Viktor walks into school, and Min-jun’s waiting for him by the lockers. Mason’s not there — five-day suspension — and the other students who’d watched the cafeteria incident look at Viktor with something like respect now.

At lunch, Viktor and Min-jun sit together like always. But this time, two other students join them. Then three more. And slowly, carefully, Min-jun starts to build the friend group he deserves.

And Viktor learns that standing up for what’s right sometimes means getting in trouble. Sometimes means getting hurt. But it also means being able to look at yourself in the mirror and know you did the right thing. That’s a lesson his dads taught him — Shane with his quiet integrity, Ilya with his fierce protection of the people he loves.

That’s a lesson worth getting suspended for.

Three months later, the Hollander-Rozanov family is in the stands watching Viktor play in a hockey game.

And there, sitting with them in the stands, is Min-jun. His English is better now, and he’s laughing at something Sachiko said, comfortable and happy and safe.

Shane leans his head on Ilya’s shoulder and watches his son skate.

“Look at him go,” Ilya says proudly. “He keeps his stick on ice, his head up. Good form.”

“He learned from the best,” Shane says.

“Damn right he did,” Ilya agrees, grinning.

Viktor scores a goal, and the whole family cheers. Even Min-jun is on his feet, yelling encouragement in a mix of Korean and English.

This is what matters. Not the Stanley Cups or the fame or the records. This. These people. This love.

Ilya reaches over and takes Shane's hand, squeezing once.

"Good life, Solnyshko," he says quietly.

"The best life," Shane agrees.

And it is.

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