Pretty isn't Pretty

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Pretty isn't Pretty

by Sunsetz_mx

Summary

Thank god for his makeup stylist, honestly. Without her, he’d look like he’d been dragged through six time zones—and he usually had been.

He didn’t know why this insecurity was grabbing him now. Ilya had never made him feel like he wasn’t enough. Not once.

Chapter 1

Las Vegas

Shane didn't even know how many glasses of champagne he'd had. Not enough to be drunk, but enough that the edges of the room had started to glow a little, like someone dusted the whole gala with gold highlighter. It was one of the rare events he genuinely enjoyed. Everyone was nice. The brand had treated them like royalty. And he had Ilya beside him gorgeous and impossibly compelling, the kind of presence that made Shane feel both proud and breathless.

Then the event director approached them with a photographer in tow.

"Could we grab a few photos with the ambassadors? Maybe… just Ilya for this part?"

Shane just nodded easily. "Go ahead. I'll wait by the bar."

He took his place by the corner, where the lighting was dimmer and the music thudded pleasantly. From there he could see everything.

Ilya stood out instantly, tall and golden, the tailored line of his suit hugging every perfect proportion. The kind of man who turned heads without trying. Sometimes Shane couldn't believe he got to touch him. Sometimes he thought he didn't deserve to.

Ilya's eyes searched the crowd until they found him. When he winked, Shane felt heat crawl up his neck. He shook his head, flustered, grinning like an idiot.

Ilya started to walk toward him, but the director tapped his shoulder, murmuring something about one more set. And then Henry Lee stepped into the frame.

Of course Shane knew Henry the Korean-American model. Everyone knew him. Lean, graceful, that tiny waist Shane couldn't help comparing himself to. A couple inches shorter than Ilya, but the kind of breathtaking that made photographers practically drool.

The chemistry between Henry and Ilya popped immediately. Arms loose around each other's backs, easy laughs, faces angled just right. The crowd cheered at one point, loud and approving, and Shane's stomach twisted even as he forced a smile.

They really did look good together.

He wanted to cheer for Ilya too of course he did but the insecurities he kept trying to bury were already stirring, creeping up the way they always did when he least expected it. They were married, for Christ's sake, and yet this awful, familiar feeling still clung to him, patient and poisonous, waiting for the smallest crack to slip through.

And it wasn't jealousy, not exactly. Just that whisper Shane sometimes heard on bad days the one that said someone like *Henry would've been Ilya's type if he hadn't met you*.

By the time the photoshoot ended and Ilya strode back to him, Shane had shoved the feeling down far enough to manage a smile.

“You look really good,” he said.

Ilya smirked, fingers curling around his waist. “We leave? I have dazzled enough strangers for one night.”

Shane laughed. “Let’s get out of here.”

They went back to the hotel. And for a while Shane forgot everything except Ilya’s hands, Ilya’s voice, Ilya’s body telling him in a hundred ways that he was wanted.

But later, when Ilya slept soundly beside him, Shane found himself awake.

He grabbed his phone, and opened Instagram. Stories from the event were already up flashy clips, formal pictures, slow-motion pans. Shots of him and Ilya. Shots of Ilya with Henry.

The comments under those were a mix of thirst and admiration funny enough to make Shane chuckle until he saw the other comments.

Ilya and Henry look so good together.

Imagine if they were a couple.

Chemistry off the charts.

He blinked at them, something cold settling behind his ribs. Ilya was married to him. *Everyone knew that. Right?*

He got up and went to the bathroom, needing a second to breathe. The bright lights were unforgiving, and his own reflection stared back at him tired, a little washed out under the makeup. And then Henry’s image flashed across his mind.

Henry was lean, all long limbs and that impossibly small waist. Shane, on the other hand, had a hockey player’s build—solid, muscular, thick where Henry was delicate. Henry was tall; Shane was… well. Not. Henry’s skin looked airbrushed even in person, that effortless glow. Shane glanced at his own face. He took care of himself, sure, but months of travel and shitty arena climates left his skin dull no matter what he did.

Thank god for his makeup stylist, honestly. Without her, he’d look like he’d been dragged through six time zones—and he usually had been.

He didn’t know why this insecurity was grabbing him now. Ilya had never made him feel like he wasn’t enough. Not once.

But maybe… just maybe, it started back when he and Svetlana met up. Svetlana, Ilya’s old fling, the one he had once wanted to marry. Tall, striking, effortlessly charming, with a personality that made people gravitate toward her. Shane couldn’t deny it if he weren’t him, if

he were straight, he would've had a crush on her too. And he couldn't blame Ilya for ever being drawn to someone like her. Svetlana was… stunning.

The thought that maybe Ilya could have ended up with her gnawed at him. That they could have had a beautiful life together, maybe kids, maybe a quieter, simpler life for Ilya, the one Shane could never compete with. He hated that he could picture it. He hated how vividly it lingered in his mind.

He never told Ilya about it. But Ilya, perceptive as always, seemed to sense shane. Gently, he reassured him, softly reminding him that everything between him and Svetlana was firmly in the past. That there was nothing to worry about.

And then, as if to seal the moment, Ilya whisked him away to one of the most romantic dinners they had ever shared just the two of them, a world away from thoughts of "what could have been," and a quiet reminder of what they had now.

Or maybe it was the time they met Alexi, the son of Ilya's old Russian coach the one who had witnessed so much of Ilya's youth. Alexi, like Svetlana, was tall, striking, and undeniably magnetic. Shane could see, in a heartbeat, why Ilya and Alexi might have clicked. They shared that same glint of mischief in their eyes, a spark that made the world feel smaller when they were together.

Alexi was soft, almost feminine in his features, but there was also a hint of lean strength beneath it, a quiet power that balanced him perfectly. Shane looked at Alexi, then at himself, and a nagging thought crept in: maybe, in comparison, he felt… inadequate. Maybe Ilya could have had an easier life with someone like Alexi, someone the world would accept more readily, someone who wouldn't complicate things so much.

On the drive home, Shane couldn't shake the thought. It made his chest ache the idea that Ilya might have had a "better" match, that maybe the world would have loved Ilya more if Shane weren't there. And yet, he knew, painfully, that Ilya had chosen him. He had chosen Shane.

Seeing Henry and Ilya together had unlocked all those private thoughts Shane had fought so hard to bury. He knew Ilya loved him. Ilya had chosen him. They were married. By all reason, he should feel secure. And Ilya kind, patient, had never once made him feel anything less than wanted. On and off the ice, he reminded Shane, in big ways and small, that he was enough.

Still, the unease lingered, stubborn and uninvited.

Shane ran a hand over his face, exhaling slowly. Maybe he just needed to sleep this off. Maybe, with a clearer head in the morning, he could see things rationally again.

He finally crawled back into bed. Ilya, half-asleep, pulled him close immediately.

"You okay?" he murmured against Shane's shoulder, lips brushing warm kisses along his skin.

Shane hummed something that was supposed to mean yes. It wasn't. But sleep took him before he could try again.

Ottawa

Ilya knew something was wrong the moment they landed. His husband had started dieting again. He overheard Shane talking to their dietician about meal plans and he'd also ramped up his workouts. Ilya noticed Shane checking himself in mirrors more often and experimenting with makeup, which, honestly, he found endearing. Blush made Shane's freckles pop in the cutest way, lip gloss made his lips impossible to resist, and when Shane felt fancy, he'd use bronzer and brown eyeshadow to make his dark eyes stand out even more,he was breathtaking.

Ilya teased him about it, of course, but he couldn't hide the pride or the occasional twinge of jealousy when someone would stare at Shane or hit on him as if Ilya wasn't right there. And yet, despite all this, Shane was still Shane. He couldn't help but worry. He knew Shane had always had a complicated relationship with food. Living together and getting married had helped a little. Shane's habits had improved over time but now, seeing him obsess over dieting and overtraining, Ilya felt like he was watching Shane slowly sabotaging himself.

So one day, during a rare three-day break before their flight to Washington, Ilya decided to broach the topic carefully, gently, without pushing too hard.

"You are dieting again?"

Shane stilled, then shrugged lightly. "Yeah."

"Something wrong?"

"No. Nothing."

"Shane."

"Please. It's nothing."

Ilya breathed out slowly. He hadn't wanted to push. But this this hiding hurt in ways he didn't want to unpack.

"I don't like when you keep secrets from me," he said quietly. "I am your husband. In case you forget."

Shane's jaw tightened. "I just… need to watch my weight for my performance."

"Is this really about hockey?"

Shane closed his eyes. A long moment passed before he whispered, "I've just been feeling insecure lately. Not your fault. Please don't blame yourself."

Ilya's heart dropped.

“I feel like I’m not good enough for you,” Shane said, voice cracking. “Like one day you’ll realize I’m not enough. That I’m limiting you from the good things you deserve.”

The ache in Ilya’s chest was immediate, sharp.

“Do I make you feel this way?”

“God, no. It’s me. Not you. I’m sorry—I sound stupid.”

“Don’t say that.” Ilya pulled him close, arms firm around him. Shane melted against him and finally broke, tears soaking into Ilya’s shirt.

Ilya kissed his cheeks, his temples, the corner of his mouth. “I love you, sweetheart. And maybe… it is time for some help. Someone you can talk to.”

Shane wanted to protest. Ilya felt the breath gather in his chest. But then Shane looked at him really looked and something softened.

“Okay,” he whispered.

And he meant it.

Therapy helped. Shane had come so far, opening up, trusting, learning to let go of the insecurities that had haunted him. Ilya felt proud every day. And on the days it was hard when depression pressed on him, when Shane had bad mornings they held each other through it.

Ilya held him close, proud and tender, silently promising to always be there. And as he pressed his lips to Shane’s temple, feeling the steady rise and fall of his husband’s chest, he hoped, for the rest of his life, that Shane would truly know just how deeply Ilya loved him.

Ilya also hoped Shane understood, deep in his bones, the truth Ilya would spend his whole life proving:

That he was loved. Completely. Unconditionally. Forever.

Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Ilya wished, desperately, that Shane could see himself the way Ilya saw him

Sometimes Ilya wished he could split his own chest open and let Shane step inside—so he could feel, even for a moment, how Ilya saw him. Because it was painful, almost physically painful, to hold all that love and know Shane didn't see what he saw. Didn't believe it.

Ilya wished, desperately, that Shane could see himself the way Ilya saw him.

Shane always spoke about beauty like it was something that lived somewhere outside himself, something other people possessed but he only brushed up against. But Ilya knew better. Shane wasn't called "pretty boy" by accident; half the league teased him for it, half the league envied him for it, and Ilya… Ilya worshipped him for it.

Not because Shane was flawless. But because Shane's beauty lived in the details most people never noticed.

Like the way his freckles burst to life when he laughed too hard. Or the way his hair softened in the humidity after games, making him look so young that Ilya had to fight the instinct to pull him into his arms. Or the curve of Shane's mouth when he concentrated, bitten lip, furrowed brow, eyes burning with focus. Or the softness along his jaw when he woke up, still hazy, warm, blinking at Ilya like he wasn't quite real.

But it wasn't just the physical things.

It was everything that made Shane Shane.

He had a good heart in that steady, patient way that made people feel safe around him. Their rookies gravitated toward him like confused baby ducks attaching themselves to the first competent adult they encountered. Shane never discouraged it. He answered questions, corrected mistakes kindly, offered advice that was honest but gentle. He was the mother of the group, whether he wanted the title or not, fussing over hydration and sleep schedules, making sure everyone had eaten, pulling rookies aside when he could sense they were overwhelmed.

Ilya liked to tease him about it. Shane would blush, shove him lightly, mutter something about "just trying to help" but the truth was that this tenderness was a part of him as natural as breathing.

Kids adored him, too. It happened everywhere, arenas, charity events, even grocery stores. Shane would crouch down so he wasn't towering over them, talk to them with genuine interest, let them touch his jersey or babble about their Timbits teams. Something in him softened, gentled, brightened around children, and Ilya always felt something inside him melt. That instinct to protect. That instinct to build a life with a man like this.

And then there were their fur children

Anya, their overly energetic dog who treated falling leaves like mortal enemies and adored Shane with worshipful devotion. Shane baby-talked her without shame full voice, ridiculous pet names, kisses on the head. And Anya would press against him like she was trying to merge into one being with him.

Then Oli, their newer addition. Tiny, judgmental, absolutely convinced the world belonged to him. Oli climbed Shane like he was a personal jungle gym, curled on his chest when he worked on his laptop, meowed until Shane scooped him up. And Shane? He loved that cat like he'd been waiting his whole life for a creature exactly this chaotic and sweet

Watching Shane care whether it was for teammates, kids, pets, did things to Ilya's chest he couldn't articulate. It made him want to wrap Shane in his arms and tell him that his worth had nothing to do with body proportions or skin texture or height. That beauty wasn't something some people had and he didn't. That every day Ilya woke up beside him and felt lucky in a way that scared him.

He wished Shane could see it.

Could see how he lit up rooms simply by existing. Could see how people's faces softened when they looked at him. Could see how Ilya fell in love with him again every time he smiled.

If Shane could look at himself for even one moment through Ilya's eyes, he would understand why none of Ilya's pasts or might-have-beens mattered.

Because this—Shane—was the life Ilya chose.

The life he wanted. The life he loved.

And he would spend as long as it took making sure Shane finally believed that. He would love Shane loud enough for both of them.

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