

Hold me tight

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Hold me tight

by [maoli_min](#)

Summary

“There is one more thing. Given the nature of your fall and the force of impact, we ran a full battery of blood tests to check for any internal issues. Everything looks normal, except for one result that... stood out.”

Shane’s stomach tightened. Stood out?

“Given your secondary gender presentation and hormone levels, we also ran a standard pregnancy panel,” she said, her words measured and clear. “And the test came back positive.”

For a moment, the words didn’t land. They floated in the air like dust in the sunlight.

Positive.

Pregnancy panel.

Then, all at once, they crashed into him.

or

Shane Hollander discovers he is pregnant while at the hospital after getting hit in the ice by Marleau in a Boston vs. Montreal Match and after inviting Ilya Rozanov to his cottage.

Notes

Hi everyone! First-time poster here, please be gentle! Non-native English speaker: I do not speak English fluently, but I speak the language of LOVE, like my bro Ilya. I did my absolute best with this story, so I hope you enjoy it!

Chapter 1: PART ONE: the discovery

Shane was dreaming.

It was the kind of dream where the line between fiction and reality blurred, the kind that didn't fool the mind for long but made the heart wish to be fooled for a long time, if not forever.

He stood in front of a grill, the same charcoal model he kept at his cottage but rarely used. A spatula rested loosely in his hand as he flipped burgers, his gaze drifting over the calm, glassy water of the lake. Behind him, Ilya held him close, his arms wrapped snugly around Shane's waist, his lips tracing soft, lingering kisses along the nape of Shane's neck.

Shane wished they could stay like that for hours—until their legs grew tired from standing, but never from holding each other. He never would tire of that. And he wished, in a quiet, yearning corner of his mind, that maybe they could hold each other like this somewhere else, too. On the couch. Swimming in the lake. Lying in bed. Maybe with no clothes at all.

The sun was warm and generous. In the distance, loons drifted peacefully across the water. The scent of sizzling meat filled the air, mingling with the clean smell of pine and lakewater. A deep, quiet contentment washed over Shane as he leaned back into Ilya's chest, feeling the steady heartbeat against his spine. He closed his eyes and let out a soft, contented sigh. Time seemed to slow, to crystallize around them, wrapping them in a private world of sun and stillness.

Then, Shane opened his eyes.

The sun was gone. The spatula was gone from his hand. Ilya's arms were no longer around him.

He was standing in the same place in the garden, but everything felt too still. He turned his head and saw Ilya across from him, crouched by a fireplace, striking a match. The flame caught, casting a warm, dancing glow across his sharp profile, a scene that should have been comforting. But instead, the air grew heavy, almost hard to breathe.

"Ilya," Shane called out, but Rozanov didn't turn.

"Ilya?" he tried again, louder, his own voice sounding distant, muffled.

No response. Only a new sound cut through the silence—a rhythmic, hollow clattering. Like pebbles shaken in a tin. No, not pebbles.

A rattle.

A baby's rattle. Loud, persistent, echoing from nowhere and everywhere at once.

Shane's breath hitched. His hand drifted instinctively to his lower abdomen, a chill seeping deep into his bones even as the firelight flickered warm across the room.

And then Ilya turned his face into Shane's direction.

Not with a smile, not with the teasing glint Shane had grown to crave. He turned slowly, the fire casting shadows that hollowed his cheeks and hardened his eyes. His expression was solemn, intense. A look Shane hadn't seen since that night in Las Vegas, after the MLH Awards. The night filled with unspoken things, with tension that tasted like whiskey and regret, both things Shane was not very found of

That look had meant something was wrong. Something was ending before it even began.

A fresh wave of cold, sharper than before, washed over Shane. He tried to speak, to ask what was wrong, but his voice was gone, swallowed by the thick, silent air.

Ilya opened his mouth as if to say something, but no sound came out. Instead, the fire in the hearth guttered. The light shrank, pulled inward, and then vanished completely, plunging everything into a deep, consuming black.

Shane's eyes flew open to a different kind of darkness, one broken by strips of harsh, artificial light slicing through from a window.

The sound in the room was steady, mechanical, anchoring him to a reality that felt both too sharp and too fuzzy at the edges. A heart monitor. He was in a hospital.

The brightness of the room stung his eyes. Everything was washed in a sterile, whitish glow, the walls, the sheets, the blanket tucked around him. The memories were foggy, arriving in fragments: the roar of the crowd, the blur of the boards rushing toward him, the sudden, shocking impact, then nothing.

Medication hummed through his veins, softening the edges of the pain but leaving his thoughts slow and slippery, like he was trying to grasp water. He felt untethered, tripping through his own mind. The dream, the grill, the lake, Ilya's arms, the rattle, that look, still clung to him, vivid and unnerving against the clinical reality of the hospital room. But nothing of that made sense, it was just a stupid, yet terrifying, dream.

He blinked slowly, his throat dry. The beeping of the monitor marked the seconds, each one pulling him further from the cottage, from the darkness, and into the bright, aching now.

He wasn't in pain, not exactly, just heavy, tired, floating somewhere outside himself.

The door clicked open.

Shane turned his head to the new sound and his face lit up immediately.

"Ilyaaaaa," Shane said happily, clearly affected by the medicine.

Ilya stepped inside and closed the door behind him, and the room suddenly felt smaller, warmer, more real. He stopped at the foot of the bed, his expression tight, shoulders stiff.

“I... I just wanted to... Are you okay?”

Shane managed a lazy blink. “Concussion and a fractured collarbone. Out for the playoffs, but...” He trailed off, the rest of the sentence dissolving into the fog.

“Could have been worse,” Ilya said quietly, his eyes fixed on Shane’s face.

“Could have been worse,” Shane echoed, his voice feather-soft.

Ilya’s jaw tightened. “Marleau feels terrible. He did not mean to hurt you.”

“I know. Part of the game. We all get our bell rung eventually, right?” Shane’s thoughts drifted, then caught on something. Something important, something warm. “Hey... Heeeeeey.”

Ilya let out a slow breath, some of the tension leaving his frame. “Okay, okay, okay...” He crossed the room in two strides and gently reached for Shane’s hand, his fingers wrapping carefully around Shane’s palm.

Shane’s eyes fluttered closed for a second.

“Yes... better.” He said the last word with a clear European accent, as if acknowledging Ilya’s presence to his own heart.

“You scared me,” Ilya admitted, his thumb brushing softly over Shane’s knuckles.

“I’m sorry I didn’t text you last night.”

“No. It’s okay.” Ilya said, caressing the freckles that painted Shane’s face and that he loved so much.

“I was excited about last night,” Shane murmured, words sticking together like honey. “I’m mostly mad at Marleau for fucking that up.”

“He feels really bad.”

Shane’s gaze drifted toward the somewhere, unfocused, dreamy. “You know, I had a whole plan to ask you something.” And then, he looked back at Ilya’s eyes again.

Ilya’s hand stilled. “Maybe it’s better if you just rest now.”

“I was gonna ask you...”

“Hollander.”

“Will you come to my cottage this summer?” Shane turned his head slowly on the pillow, his eyes finding Ilya’s. He seemed so proud of his words, as a child that had just did an amazing job at a school presentation. And a little mesmerized too; Ilya’s eyes looked so blue, even in the dull hospital light. “Don’t go to Russia. Come to my house. We’ll have so much fun. It’s so private, no one will know.”

Ilya's expression shifted, something pained and tender flashing behind his eyes. He looked down at their joined hands and back to Shane's eyes. "Hollander, you know I can't do that."

"Hmmm," Shane hummed, undeterred, floating on a wave of medication and longing. "We could have a week. Or even two. Be completely alone. Together." He said the last word quietly, as if it was a precious secret. At the end, it really was.

The silence that followed felt thick, fragile. Ilya didn't pull away. He just held Shane's hand, his gaze distant, as if weighing every risk, every hidden promise. Seconds stretched, marked only by the beep of the monitor.

Finally, softly, almost like a secret surrendered, Ilya whispered:

"Maybe. Maybe."

The silence between them felt sacred, fragile, a quiet *maybe* hanging in the air like a promise.

Then, the door clicks open. Ilya's hand slipped from Shane's as if burned, and a nurse stepped in with a warm but professional smile on her face.

Shane let out a low "Oh, no.", as if they had been discovered, which was not the case.

The nurse's eyes flicked between them, lingering on Ilya's closeness to the bed. Her smile turned playful.

"Uh-oh. You're not gonna smother him with a pillow, are you, Mr. Rozanov?"

Ilya stood up smoothly, his public mask sliding neatly back into place, relaxed, charming, untouchable.

"Ah, no. No, no, no. But good thinking. But no, I was just leaving."

Shane watched him straighten his pose before Looking back at Shane, the distance between them suddenly yawning wide again.

"Okay," Shane mumbled, voice still softened by the meds. "Bye bye."

"Goodbye," Ilya said, low and private.

Shane blinked slowly, then cleared his throat, lifting his tone into something more casual, more *Shane Hollander, the Metro's Captain*. "Hmm. See you next season."

Ilya nodded once before heading to the exit. "Get well soon, Hollander."

"Thank you. I appreciate it."

And then he was gone, the door clicking shut softly behind him.

Shane turned his head toward the nurse and mustered a bright, dopey grin. "Hello!" he said happily, as if they were just starting the conversation fresh, as if his heart wasn't still reaching

for a hand that was no longer there.

The next time Shane woke, the fog had lifted to a thin, manageable haze. He was still tired, still sore in deep, bruised places, but his mind felt clearer, sharp enough to replay the moment with Rozanov in vivid, cringe-worthy detail.

Ilyaaaaa.

Will you come to my cottage?

Maybe.

God. He'd said all of that out loud. In his defense, he'd been full of enough painkillers to tranquilize a bear, but still. Ilya had held his hand. Ilya had said *maybe*.

The door to his room opened and was filled with familiar voices filtered in from the hallway. Before he could fully orient himself, it opened wider and his parents stepped inside.

"Shane, honey," his mom said softly, her face lined with relief as she came to his bedside. She brushed a gentle hand over his forehead, like she'd done when he was little and home sick from school.

"Hey, Mom. Hey, Dad."

His father stood at the other side of the bed, hands place in Shane's unharmed right arm, his expression was warm. "Are you feeling better?"

"I'm okay. Really. Just... clumsy."

His mom shook her head, but she was smiling. "Good." She caressed his hair. "We heard that Rozanov made you a visit. That was... unexpected."

Shane's heart gave a clumsy thud against his ribs. He kept his face carefully neutral. "Yeah. He stopped by."

"It was nice of him," his dad said, in that measured, thoughtful tone he used when he was choosing his words. "Considering... well, you know. Everything."

Considering we're rivals. Considering we're not supposed to be friends. Considering no one knows what we really are. What are we, really?

Well, his Father was not refering to that, he was talking about the fact that Rozanov's teammate had knock Shane out.

"Yeah," Shane repeated, his voice a little rough. "It was."

Something warm and fragile bloomed in Shane's chest, a feeling he quickly tried to smother.

"That was decent of him," His mother said.

Shane swallowed and looked down at his hands, neatly arranged on top of the hospital blanket. No trace of Ilya's grip remained, but he could still feel the ghost of it, warm, solid, real.

"Yeah," he whispered, more to himself than to them. "It was."

For a moment, they sat in comfortable quiet, the monitor's steady beep the only sound. Then his dad clapped his hands together softly. "Alright. What do you need. You hungry? The cafeteria's got sugar-free strawberry gelatin. I bought one already".

Shane smiled, a real one this time. "Sure. Yeah."

Maybe, Ilya had said.

And for the first time since he'd woken up in this sterile, bright room, Shane felt something other than tired or sore or medicated.

He felt hope. Thin, dangerous, secret hope.

Shane's parents were still there, a quiet, comforting presence that made the sterile room feel a little more like home. His dad had just returned with two more cups of gelatina and a coffee for himself when a gentle knock sounded at the door. The door opened, and Dr. Aris stepped inside, a woman in her fifties with kind eyes and a calm, efficient demeanor. She'd been overseeing Shane's care since he'd arrived.

"Good, you're all here," she said, offering a small smile as her eyes moved from Shane to his parents and back. "I have your final test results, Shane. Thought you'd like to hear them straight away."

Shane nodded, bracing himself for a rundown of restrictions, timelines, rehab schedules.

"First, the concussion," Dr. Aris began, scrolling through her tablet. "No intracranial bleeding, no signs of lasting damage. You got very lucky. Headaches and some foginess may linger, but there's nothing to prevent a full recovery."

Shane's mom let out a soft sigh of relief.

"As for the fractured collarbone," the doctor continued, "it's a clean break. Given your excellent physical condition, it should heal well and relatively quickly. You'll need to take it easy, of course, and you'll be in a sling for a while, but with proper rehab, you'll be back on the ice in due time."

Shane's father placed a reassuring hand on his shoulder, and Shane felt some of the tension leave his own body.

Okay. This is manageable. I can come back from this.

“That’s wonderful news, doctor,” his mother said, her voice thick with gratitude, and gave a smile to her son.

Dr. Aris nodded, but her expression shifted subtly into something more careful, more deliberate. She looked directly at Shane, her tone softening.

“There is one more thing. Given the nature of your fall and the force of impact, we ran a full battery of blood tests to check for any internal issues. Everything looks normal, except for one result that... stood out.”

Shane’s stomach tightened. *Stood out?*

“Given your secondary gender presentation and hormone levels, we also ran a standard pregnancy panel,” she said, her words measured and clear. “And the test came back positive.”

For a moment, the words didn’t land. They floated in the air like dust in the sunlight.

Positive.

Pregnancy panel.

Then, all at once, they crashed into him.

Shane’s breath caught. The room seemed to tilt. He stared at the doctor, his mind scrambling to catch up, to make sense of something that felt impossible.

His parents were utterly silent beside him.

“I understand this may come as a shock, since seemed you had no knowledge of the pregnancy when was admitted” Dr. Aris continued gently, “but I want to reassure you that the baby appears perfectly healthy. The concussion did not cause any harm, and the collarbone fracture hasn’t posed a risk. Your body protected the pregnancy well.”

The baby.

A baby.

His hand drifted slowly, unconsciously, to his stomach. He’d felt off lately, tired, moody, a little nauseous in the mornings. He’d chalked it up to stress, to the season winding down. Not this. Never this.

The dream.

The baby kettle.

“Shane?” his mother whispered, her voice fragile with disbelief.

He couldn’t look at her. Couldn’t look at his dad. He just kept his eyes locked on the doctor’s calm, professional face.

“You’re sure?” he heard himself ask, his own voice sounding far away.

“The test is definitive,” she said gently. “We can discuss next steps when you’re ready. For now, just know that both you and the baby are safe.”

The silence that followed was heavy, charged, like the air before a storm.

Shane’s father was the first to break it, his tone carefully controlled. “Doctor... how far along?”

“Based on hormone levels, I’d estimate very early. Likely just a few weeks.”

Weeks.

Shane closed his eyes.

Ilya. Boston. Their first game after the All Stars Game.

Shane wasn’t sure they had used protection all the time back then. They were beginning to express their feelings to each other after almost eight years of secret meetings. And just when emotion finally hit hard in bed, they just... forgot there could have... consequences.

When he opened his eyes again, his parents were staring at him, not with anger, but with a dawning, devastating comprehension.

Dr. Aris seemed to sense the seismic shift in the room. “I’ll give you some privacy,” she said softly. “The nurse will be in shortly. If you have any questions, at any time, just call.”

She slipped out, the door clicking shut behind her.

For a long moment, no one spoke.

Then Shane’s mother reached for his hand, her own trembling. “Oh, Shane.”

He finally met her gaze. Her eyes were wide, glistening with unshed tears, not of joy, but of worry, of fear for him.

“Mom,” he whispered, his throat tight. “I...”

He didn’t know what to say. *I’m sorry? I didn’t know? I’m scared?*

All of it was true.

But beneath the shock, beneath the fear and the dizzying reality of it all, one thought rose, clear and relentless:

I have to tell Ilya.

And then it hit him. Ilya’s face in the dream.

I have to tell Ilya... Right?

Chapter 2: the secret

Chapter Notes

Updating early because I'm INVESTED in my own story and I couldn't wait. I intend to update everyday until it's done, which will not take long, because I have the draft of all the other chapters already and it's a short fic. Thank you so much for the comments, didn't expect to have any, so I kinda of cried with the love. Hope you enjoy the chapter and see you soon with chapter three.

The flight from Boston to Ottawa was short, but every minute of it felt heavy. Shane sat by the window, his right arm secured in a sling, his body aching with a deep, persistent tiredness that had little to do with his injuries. Outside, clouds drifted like tufts of wool, indifferent and slow. Inside, his mind raced.

His parents had decided, gently and firmly, that he would stay with them for the first few weeks of his recovery, and Shane wasn't against it, he actually felt relieved.

Just until you're steady on your feet again, his mother had said. It won't be good for your recovery to do everything alone, Shane. He hadn't argued at all.

Now, in the backseat of his parent's sedan, watching Ottawa's familiar streets blur past, he couldn't stop replaying the doctor's words in his head.

Not the ones about the collarbone. Those were easy. The others.

Flashback - Hospital, five days earlier

Dr. Aris had come back a few hours after giving the news of Shane's pregnancy and sat in the chair beside his bed. His parents had stepped out to give him space, they said, but he could feel their worry like a presence just beyond the door.

"Shane," she began, her voice low and even. "I know this is a lot. I want you to know that you have options. All of them are safe, and all of them are yours to choose."

He stared at the ceiling, his throat tight.

"If you decide to continue the pregnancy, you'll be monitored you closely. Your body is strong, and there's no medical reason you can't carry to term. You'll need to adjust your rehab, avoid certain medications, and eventually, of course, you won't be able to play. But physically, you and the baby would likely be just fine."

The baby.

The words still didn't feel real.

"If you decide termination is the right path for you, that is also a safe and accessible option. We can discuss timelines, methods, aftercare. There is no rush, but there are windows."

She paused, letting the silence sit between them. Shane said nothing. He couldn't. His thoughts were a tangled static. Fear, confusion, a strange, protective ache he didn't know how to name.

"This isn't a decision you have to make today," she said softly. "Or even this week. But it is one you should make for yourself, when you're ready."

He nodded, just once, still looking at the ceiling, because it was all he could manage.

When his parents returned, he let them take over, asking the practical questions, writing down numbers, scheduling the follow-up bloodwork and talking about the NDA the Hospital would have to sign to keep the situation as private as possible. He just lay there, floating somewhere outside himself, while they anchored the conversation in a world that still felt impossibly far away.

Present – Ottawa

"Shane?"

He blinked, pulled back into the present by his father's voice. They were idling at a red light.

"You zoned out there for a minute," his dad said, eyes meeting his in the rearview mirror.

"You feeling okay, honey? Are you in pain?"

He was not okay, not emotionally. And he was in pain, but not physically.

"No, I..." Shane murmured. "Just tired."

His mother turned in the passenger seat, her expression soft. "We're almost home. You can rest soon."

A few turns later, they pulled into the familiar driveway of the house he'd grown up in. The garden was neat, the windows clean, everything exactly as he remembered. Everything exactly as it should be.

And yet, nothing was the same.

Inside, the air smelled like lemon polish and the faint, comforting scent of his mother's lavender detergent. They helped him out of his jacket, settled him on the living room couch with a small blanket and a glass of water, cause it was time for his medicine.

"Do you need anything else, honey?" his mom asked, brushing his hair back from his forehead.

“No. I’m okay. I think... I think I just want to lie down in my room for a bit, actually.”

“Of course.” Her smile was tender, patient. “Take all the time you need.”

He made his way slowly up the stairs, hugging the blanket. Each step a reminder of his body’s new limits. His old bedroom was untouched, high schools jerseys framed on the wall and trophies on the shelf, the bed made with fresh sheets. It was a museum of a life that felt like a million years ago.

He closed the door behind him and leaned against it, letting out a long, slow breath. The silence here was his own.

Then, his phone buzzed in his pocket.

He pulled it out with his left hand, his right still bound and useless. The screen glowed softly in the dim room.

A text. From Ilya.

Ilya: How was trip? Are you okay?

Two simple lines. And yet, they unraveled something tight in his chest. He could hear his voice, low and private. *Maybe.*

And he still could still see his face in the dream. Serious, distant, indecipherable in a bad way.

Shane stared at the screen, his thumb hovering over the keyboard. How could he possibly answer that?

Yes, I’m fine, just pregnant with your child.

He sank onto the edge of the bed, the phone warm in his hand, and let the weight of it all finally settle over him, the secret, the choice, the words on the screen, and the life quietly taking root inside him, waiting to be named.

He stared at the message again, but the words blurred in front of him. His mind wasn’t on the text, it was circling back, stubborn and traitorous, to the thought he’d tried to bury.

A nameless baby.

Why was he already thinking of it like that? A *baby*. Not a cluster of cells, not a “pregnancy,” not a problem to be solved. A baby. Without a name, yet, but maybe with a future.

He had options. Dr. Aris had made that clear. It could all go away, quietly, safely, with no one ever having to know. He could heal his collarbone, return to hockey, and pretend this fragile, impossible truth had never happened. His life could snap back into place like a rubber band.

So why did the thought of “going back to normal” suddenly felt like a loss?

He pressed his left hand flat against his stomach, over the soft cotton of his shirt. Nothing felt different. No flutter, no bump, no sign. And yet something *was* there. Something that was his, and... Ilya's.

No. He shut his eyes tight. He couldn't think like that. Not yet. Maybe not ever.

He forced a slow breath and opened his eyes again. The phone was still glowing in his hand, Ilya's texts waiting. A tether to the outside world, to the person who was now half of this secret.

Shane's thumb brushed over the screen. He didn't let himself think any longer, just typed with his free hand, trying to reply as if everything was normal.

Shane: The trip was fine.

Shane: Already at my parents' house in Ottawa.

He sent them before he could second-guess the flat tone, before he could wrap the words in a joke or a deflection.

He waited, his gaze fixed on the screen, on those three dancing dots that appeared almost immediately.

The dots danced, then disappeared. Then reappeared. Shane held his breath without meaning to.

Finally, the reply came through.

Ilya: Good. You should rest.

Ilya: What doctor say about collarbone? How long?

Ilya: When is healed, you will still be able to jerk off properly? Or I will have to help you?

A startled, wet laugh punched out of Shane's throat. It sounded ragged in the quiet of his childhood room. Of course. Of *course* Ilya would ask that, irritating and caring and so stupidly *them*.

His eyes stung. He wasn't sure if it was from laughter or the sheer, overwhelming relief of being spoken to like a person, not a patient.

He stared at the last line, his face growing warm. *Or I will have to help you.*

It was a joke, but the image rose anyway. Ilya's hands, careful and sure, touching him somewhere other than his injured shoulder. Ilya's mouth, that smirk, those pale eyes watching him.

He shook his head, as if to clear it. His collarbone twinged in protest.

Right. The collarbone. The doctor. The other thing. The *baby* thing.

He swallowed and typed back.

Shane: Doctor says it's clean. I may lose the sling for a few weeks.

Shane: And yes. I'll manage.

For a few seconds, he just sat there, phone in hand, in the silent room of his past, with maybe a future growing quietly inside him and the only person who should know about it texting him about jerking off.

The absurdity of it all was almost too much to hold.

He didn't know whether to cry or laugh again. So he just sat, waiting for the dots to dance once more, clinging to the fragile, stupid normalcy of the conversation like a lifeline.

Ilya: Good.

Ilya: But too bad.

Ilya: About jerking off alone.

Shane's thumb hovered. He wanted to say something back, something that kept this going, this fragile bubble of normal. But the words felt stuck. Everything he could think of, like *miss you, wish you were here, you have no idea what's happening*, was too heavy, too real.

So Shane simply set the phone facedown on his nightstand and slowly laid back on the bed, careful of his sling. The ceiling of his old room stared back at him, the same faint crack in the corner he'd traced with his eyes as a kid.

The days in his parents' house passed in a soft, slow blur. Mornings were quiet. Tea, toast, the low murmur of the radio in the kitchen. Afternoons were for naps on the couch, his collarbone aching dully beneath the sling. Evenings were sitcom reruns and his dad trying not to hover.

His parents didn't push. They asked gentle, open-ended questions.

"How are you feeling today?"

"Do you need anything?"

But they didn't say the word. *Pregnancy*. They gave him space to be quiet, to stare out the window, to retreat to his room with his phone clenched in his good hand. Shane was grateful, and guilty, in equal measure.

Because while the house was hushed, his phone was alive.

Ilya texted him constantly. It became the rhythm of his day.

Ilya: Morning. You sleep okay?

That was new, but in a good way.

Shane: Yeah. You?

Ilya: Not enough. Hotel bed sucks.

Ilya: it would not suck if you were in it.

Sometimes, it was game talk.

Ilya: We won. 4-1. Bufallo is terrible.

Ilya: I did a hat trick.

Shane: Show-off.

Ilya: 🙄

Sometimes, it was just Ilya checking in, persistent, almost protective in a way that made Shane's chest tighten.

Ilya: You eating?

Shane: My mom is force-feeding me.

Ilya: Good.

Ilya: How is pain today?

Shane: Manageable. I'm bored though.

Ilya: Good. You are boring, so it is good you're bored, yes?

And sometimes, it was the flirting, the easy, Dirty and familiar back-and-forth that made Shane forget, for a few glowing minutes, that anything was different.

Ilya: Saw you in a Billboard of underwear comercial.

Ilya: How the make your dick look bigger?

Shane: You're a pervert.

Ilya: Was thinking about taking that off you.

Shane: not helpful, Rozanov.

Ilya: Can't jerk off yet?

But always, woven through the jokes and the game scores and the teasing, was the same quiet question, asked in different ways:

Ilya: Everything okay with you? Really?

Ilya: Tell me if something is wrong.

Shane would stare at those messages, his heart beating too fast. *Everything is wrong. Everything is different. I'm carrying your child and I don't know how to tell you and I don't know what I want.*

But he never typed that. He typed:

Shane: All good. Just tired and healing.

Shane: You should focus on the games you'll lose next.

And Ilya would reply with a joke or a boast.

Shane would put his phone down and press his palm over his stomach, where the secret lived, growing, changing, real. Outside his window, spring was tipping toward summer. The playoffs rolled on. And in the quiet space between them, Shane held his truth like a stone, warm and heavy, waiting for the courage to let it go.

Three weeks had passed since Shane had gone to his parent's house in Ottawa. The sling wasn't off yet, but the pain was almost entirely gone. The physical healing was progressing, just as the doctor said it would.

The other thing, the secret thing, was progressing too.

He'd stopped pretending he wasn't doing some research. *Early pregnancy symptoms. Omega male pregnancy timelines. NHL paternity leave policies.* He'd close the tabs whenever he heard footsteps on the stairs, a flurry of guilt and anxiety making his heart race.

His parents had given him space. They'd let him be quiet at dinner, let him disappear into his room for hours. But three weeks after bringing him home, on a calm Thursday evening, the space ran out.

"Shane," his mother said softly, as he was heading toward the stairs with a vague excuse about being tired. "Could you sit with us for a bit?"

Her tone was gentle, but it wasn't a question. His father was already on the living room sofa, two mugs of tea steaming on the coffee table. The TV was off. The room was still.

Shane's stomach dropped. He knew.

He walked slowly to the armchair and sat, the familiar fabric soft beneath him. He folded his hands in his lap, waiting.

His mother sat beside his father, their shoulders touching. A united front, but not a harsh one. A worried one.

“We’ve given you time,” his mother began, his voice low and steady. “And we’ll give you more, if you need it. But, honey... we need to talk about what happens next.”

Shane nodded, his throat tight. He fixed his eyes on the steam rising from the tea.

“Have you thought about it?” his father asked. “What you... want to do?”

The question hung in the air, simple and enormous.

“I don’t know,” Shane whispered. It was the truth. He’d thought of nothing else, and he still didn’t know.

“That’s okay,” his mother said quickly, reaching out to touch his knee. “It’s a huge decision. But there are... practical things. If you choose to continue, there are things to consider. Medical care. Your career.” She paused, her voice softening further.

“Do you... know who it is?” his father asked carefully. There was no accusation in his tone, only concern.

Shane’s heart hammered against his ribs. “Yes.”

And he couldn’t say more. Couldn’t say *he’s my rival, he’s my secret, he’s everything I’m not supposed to want*. Couldn’t say his name.

“Does... does he know?” Shane’s mother asked carefully.

Shane froze. He kept his eyes on the steam curling from the tea. Then, with a single movement of his head, denied.

“Are you going to tell him?”

Shane’s hands clenched in his lap. “I don’t know.” He said simply, because he did not want to get into details about all the mental breakdown he was going through the past weeks.

His father leaned forward, his expression earnest. “Shane, listen. Whatever decision you make, we’re here for you, no matter what. But, son, you have to decide what to do soon.”

His parents exchanged a glance, a silent conversation full of worry and unasked questions.

“You’re not alone, Shane,” his mother reassured him again, his voice firm but kind.

Shane looked at them, their worried eyes, their open hands, the unconditional love that had always been his anchor. Guilt twisted in his gut. They deserved the truth. But the truth was a grenade, and he wasn’t ready to pull the pin.

They didn’t press further. They simply nodded, accepting the boundary he’d drawn. They sat with him in the quiet until the tea grew cold, a family holding a secret that was already

beginning to shape the space between them.

And Shane kept thinking how would Ilya react.

If he ever told Ilya.

Chapter 3: the decision

Chapter Notes

I'm back with a slightly bigger chapter and I think I might come back with chapter four in a few hours cause I'M INVESTED! Thank you Hollanov for making me happy again and thank you for everyone reading this fic <3

Ten weeks pregnant.

The number sat in Shane's mind like a quiet, undeniable fact. Two weeks since he lost the sting. Seven weeks since the accident. Ten weeks since last time he was alone with Rozanov in a room.

Seven weeks since *maybe*.

The sling was gone, stored in the back of his closet like a relic from another life. In its place was the careful, deliberate rhythm of physiotherapy. His shoulder still ached when he pushed too hard, but the sharp pain was gone. His body was healing, just as it was supposed to.

And it was changing, just as it wasn't supposed to.

He hadn't gained weight, not yet. But his skin felt different, softer, more sensitive. The nausea came in slow, rolling waves, usually in the late morning, a low-grade seasick feeling that made the idea of eggs unthinkable. He'd sip ginger tea instead, leaning against the kitchen counter while his mother moved around him, a planner open on the table, her phone always within reach.

She was handling everything. Shane hadn't asked her to; she'd just... started. Phone calls to the doctor that was taking care of Shane. Quiet conversations with a Shane's agent about the possibilities of a medical exemption with the excuse of the incident from the Boston vs Montreal match. Drafts of statements that could be released later, vague enough to protect the truth but clear enough to stop the speculation before it started: *Shane Hollander will be taking a health-related leave from play for the upcoming season to focus on recovery and long-term wellness*.

She was building a fortress of paperwork and planning around him, and Shane felt both incredibly grateful and utterly useless.

"You don't have to do all this, Mom," he said one morning, watching her type an email with fierce concentration.

She didn't look up. "Yes, I do. You focus on healing. And on the baby. My grandson or granddaughter must grow strong" Her eyes flicked to his stomach for the briefest second

before giving a warmful smile and return to the screen. “This is what I can do.”

This was the shape of their support: his father spotting his physio, his mother managing his future. And him? He rested. He ate bland crackers. He stared at his phone, at the text thread with Ilya.

Ilya’s playoffs were going well. Boston had knocked out Toronto and was now going to face the New York Admirals. And although there were just a few weeks left to the final game of the Stanley Cup, no one said a word about Shane’s invitation to the cottage.

Ilya: Second goal was for you 😊

Shane: Who was the first for?

Ilya: Your mother.

Shane: Not funny.

He would still laugh.

Shane would read the messages and press a hand low on his abdomen, where a new, fluttering sensation had started, not quite a movement, but a presence. A reminder. His belly hasn’t grow that much, but there was a little bump already forming down there.

He’d made his decision. He was keeping the baby. But telling Ilya... that was a cliff he hadn’t yet talked himself into jumping from. Not over text. Not on the phone. It had to be face to face. But where? When? How?

“The obstetrician can see you next week on Tuesday, 3pm” his mother said, pulling him from his thoughts. “She’s the best in the city for omega pregnancies. We’ll do the first proper ultrasound then.”

Shane nodded, a strange thrill of fear and excitement tightening his chest.

“Thanks, Mom,” he said, his voice rough.

She finally looked up, her expression softening. “We’re in this together, honey. All of us.”

All of us.

The words echoed in the quiet kitchen. She meant Shane and the baby, her and Dad. They didn’t know about Ilya yet, the conversation about the father was being postponed every week. She didn’t know that the other half of this equation was texting Shane unaware that his life was already hurtling toward a possible different future.

Shane picked up his cooling ginger tea and took a sip. The nausea had settled, for now. In its place was a slow-building resolve.

Shane went alone to the ultrasound.

He told his mom he wanted to do this part by himself, and after a long, searching look, she simply nodded. The drive to the clinic was quiet, the city moving around him in a blur of ordinary life. He parked, took a deep breath that did nothing to steady him, and walked inside.

The clinic was calm, professional. Soft lighting and quiet. He didn't have to talk to anyone in the reception, the doctor was already waiting.

The ultrasound room was dim, lit only by the glow of the monitor. The technician was a woman with kind eyes and a gentle voice. She explained each step as she warmed the gel and as she guided the transducer over his lower abdomen.

"There we are," she said softly, and the screen filled with a grayscale landscape of shadow and light.

Shane's breath caught.

"That's your baby," she said, pointing. "See the head here... the curve of the spine... and there, look, the heartbeat."

A tiny, rapid flutter, blinking like a star in the dark. A heartbeat. *His* heartbeat. *Theirs*.

Something cracked open in Shane's chest, warm and terrifying. His eyes burned. He blinked hard, staring at the pulsing light as the technician took measurements, murmuring about growth percentiles and healthy development.

"Everything looks perfect," she said, her voice warm with reassurance. "Strong heartbeat, all measurements right on track for ten to twelve weeks."

She moved the transducer slightly. "Now, it's still early, but we can sometimes see hints of the baby's sex. Would you like to know?"

The question hung in the dim air. *A boy or a girl*. A son. A daughter. Ilya's son. Ilya's daughter.

His throat felt too tight. "I'm... not sure yet," he managed, his voice rough.

"That's perfectly fine," she said, smiling. "We don't have to decide today. I can write it down for you, seal it in an envelope. You can open it when you're ready, or with whoever you choose."

Shane nodded, unable to speak.

A few minutes later, she handed him a small, plain white envelope, sealed shut. Inside was a single line of text. A secret. A future. He held it between his fingers, the paper suddenly the most important thing in the world.

In the car, he sat for a long time with the envelope on the passenger seat. He didn't open it, just stared at it, then finally pressed his hands against his crying eyes.

A sob broke loose, quiet and shuddering. He cried for the heartbeat on the screen. He cried for the secret in the envelope. He cried for Ilya, who was somewhere preparing for a game, completely unaware that his DNA was curled into a perfect, tiny shape inside Shane's body.

That's your baby. He could hear the doctor saying.

My baby. Me and Ilya's baby. His brain reminded him.

He wiped his face, took a shaky breath, and just when he was about to start the car, the sound of a notification in his phone filled the vehicle.

Ilya: You have physiotherapy today for your shoulder, yes?

Ilya: Tell doctor you have to practice fast up and down movement.

Ilya: Improve your handjob.

The laugh felt easy. A soft, wet burst of air that was more relief than amusement. It was stupid. It was crude. It was so perfectly *Ilya*. And in that moment, it was the only thing that could have cut through the weight in Shane's chest. Even through the blur of tears, through the seismic shift of everything he now carried, Ilya's presence, whether in person or through a glowing screen, still felt like coming up for air. It still felt like home.

The resolve that had been building in him for weeks finally crystallized, hard and clear.

I have to tell him.

He didn't know how. He didn't know when. But he would. Ilya had a right to know. They had a heartbeat now.

Back at the house, the familiar sounds of a hockey game filled the living room. Boston Raiders vs. New York Admirals game was on, the third period just starting. His dad was on the couch, a bowl of popcorn beside him. His mom looked up from her hand full with popcorn and a glass of wine.

"Everything went okay, honey?" she asked.

"Yeah," Shane said, his voice still a little raw. He slipped the envelope into his pocket.

"Everything's good."

He went to the bathroom, because now he felt the need to pee more often, and then came back to the living room and sat down, his eyes drifting to the screen. There he was. Number 81. Ilya Rozanov, ready for the face off. As the game went on, he kept moving with that familiar, predatory grace.

They watched in silence for a few shifts. Then, during a close-up replay of a hit along the boards, his mother made a soft, thoughtful sound.

“He’s playing hurt,” she said, pointing at the screen. “It’s his ribs I bet. See how he’s favoring his left side when he pushes off? And the way he took that hit, he didn’t rotate his torso. He’s protecting something.”

“How do you know that?” Shane asked in disbelief, knowing from a message Ilya sent a few days ago that he, indeed, had hurt his ribs. Nothing too serious, but still.

“What? Am I right?”

“I don’t know”

Shane’s father showed up from the kitchen’s door holding a dish cloth. “Your mother is a witch!”

“I’ve watched enough hockey to know a hidden injury,” she said, matter-of-fact. “Rozanov’s playing through bruised ribs. You can see it in his eyes. He’s in pain.”

Shane stared at the screen, his own hand drifting unconsciously to the envelope hid in his dresser, then to his own ribs. Whole, unharmed, sheltering a life.

“Okay, the Raiders have lost. Dinner to celebrate,” Shane’s father said.

“Dad!”

“What? We don’t hate them anymore? I can’t keep up”

“No, we do, just...” *he is the father of my baby.*

“Well, Rozanov went to see Shane in the hospital, right?” His mother stood from the sofa and headed toward the kitchen.

“Oh, so now you like him,” his dad called after her.

“Well, now I hate him less... And good for Scott Hunter!” she yelled, her voice muffled from behind the kitchen doorway.

“Why good for Scott Hunter?” Shane asked.

“I don’t know, it’s his year!”

“How can you possibly know that?”

“She’s a witch!” His dad responded playfully.

“Stop that”

“Or what?”

“Or I’ll cast a spell!”

Shane half-smiled, shaking his head as his parents’ familiar bickering faded into the background. In that ordinary, silly argument about witchcraft and hockey, there was an unspoken gift: their normalcy. They weren’t tiptoeing around him, weren’t treating him like fragile glass just because he was pregnant. They were just... being them. Teasing, grumbling, the comfortable rhythm of a household that had always been his safe place. For a moment, the weight in his chest didn’t feel so heavy. Here, in the warm, he felt safe enough to just be Shane, their son, a little broken, a little scared, but deeply, irrevocably loved.

Later that night, already in bed, Shane picked up his phone again, thumbs hovering over the keyboard.

Shane: How are your ribs?

Ilya: Killing me. How’s your head?

Shane: Better.

Ilya: Good.

Shane: Are you bummed?

Ilya: About the cup?

Shane: Yeah.

Ilya: What do you think?

“Turn off the lights when you go to bed,” Shane’s mom showed up in his bedroom’s door. Her voice was soft, but it held that particular maternal frequency that could somehow be both a suggestion and a command. “And stop staring at the screen. It’s not good for you.”

Shane didn’t look up, but a faint, tired smile touched his lips. He was twenty-six, a professional athlete, a captain, and yet, in his mother’s house, he was still a child. Some things never changed, and right now, he was overwhelmingly grateful for that.

“My head is fine,” he murmured, his thumb hovering over his phone screen. “And I’m a fully grown adult.”

His mother made a quiet, knowing sound, not quite a laugh, but something fond and exasperated. “A fully grown adult who is growing my grandchild,” she corrected gently, and the words, though teasing, landed with a profound, quiet weight in the dim room.

Shane’s free hand drifted down, resting over the subtle, new firmness beneath his sweatpants. A habit now. A reassurance. He finally glanced over at her, her silhouette framed in the doorway.

“The baby is in the dark,” he replied, his voice softening. “Their eyes will be fine.”

Their: The word felt right—a soft, open space to hold all the possibilities still sealed in the envelope upstairs. He felt his mother’s gaze on him, warm and understanding. She didn’t comment on it. She just smiled, a small, private thing in the shadows.

He came back to staring at his phone’s screen when she left, and texted Ilya.

Shane: My mom thinks the Admirals are going to win.

Ilya: No way. Scott Hunter is 100 000 years old.

Shane: He’s not that old.

Ilya: And he’s almost as boring as you.

Shane: At least you have a type.

Ilya: 😈

The devil emoji sparked a low, warm thrill in Shane’s stomach, the same one it always did. It felt normal. Easy. But nothing was easy anymore.

He leaned back against his pillow, one hand resting over the slight, firm curve low on his abdomen.

I have to tell him.

Not over text. Not with emojis and deflection. But soon.

Ilya’s season was over. The cottage was waiting. The envelope in the dresser was waiting. And the tiny, fluttering heartbeat beneath his palm was counting down the days until it could no longer be a secret between them.

But when? Where? How?

The New York Admirals won the Stanley Cup.

Shane watched from the living room couch, a bowl of grapes and strawberries he had craved all week balanced on the armrest and his phone warm in his hand. He was beginning to have little desires regarding to food.

On screen, the Admirals were spilling over the boards, a blur of red and white and pure, unrestrained joy. And there, at the center of it all, was Scott Hunter, the veteran captain, his face etched with a relief so deep it looked like pain.

Shane: My mom was right.

Ilya: I’m so irritated.

Shane: Come on, he's a nice guy.

Ilya: He's hot, so...

Shane: 😡

Shane laughed softly, shaking his head. Even in defeat, Ilya couldn't resist being Ilya.

On television, the traditional ceremony began. Hunter hoisted the Cup over his head, run towards his teammates and their screams swallowed by the roar of the crowd. Wives and children began to trickle onto the ice, tiny kids in oversized jerseys, partners beaming with pride, a tapestry of families stitched together by sweat and victory.

But as the camera panned, it lingered on Scott Hunter. He stood slightly apart, his eyes scanning the crowd near the bench. He looked... alone. In a sea of shared triumph, his smile seemed to falter, his gaze searching for something, or someone, the cameras hadn't yet seen.

Shane leaned forward, fruits forgotten.

Ilya: What is he doing?

Shane: I don't know.

Then, Scott raised a hand, gesturing firmly toward the ice. He beckoned once, twice, insistent. A moment later, a man in a simple blue denim jacket emerged from the players' entrance, looking hesitant, almost shy. He wasn't in gear. He wasn't family in the traditional, NHL-marketing sense. But Scott's whole posture changed the second he saw him.

He took the man's hand, and pulled him gently into the bright, chaotic center of the celebration. The crowd's roar dipped for a second, then swelled into something different. Not confusion, but a wave of recognition, of collective breath held and then released.

Scott Hunter cupped the man's face in his hands and kissed him, deeply, surely, in full view of the world.

The arena erupted. Not just in cheers, but in what sounded like pure, unfiltered joy.

Shane's breath caught in his throat. His hand drifted to his stomach. He was watching Scott Hunter and his partner, their foreheads pressed together now, them, and he was thinking about secrets, and sacrifices, and the terrifying, beautiful courage of choosing love in the light.

And then he thought about him and Ilya. Beneath them ran a colder, sharper current of fear Shane felt about Ilya's reaction there was something more. It was about the headlines that would follow. The "heated rivalry" the media had crafted for years wasn't just a story; it was a cage. They were supposed to hate each other. They were supposed to be two strong, cold and masculine players clashing on ice, not... this. Not building a life.

The NHL world admired Scott Hunter's moment tonight because it was a one-time spectacle of courage. But for Shane and Ilya, it wouldn't be a moment. It would be a lifetime. Every

interview, every game against each other, every public appearance would be filtered through the lens of *that*. The “rivalry” would become a joke, a lie. And the league, for all its progressive slogans, still traded on a very specific, rugged, masculine image. How much space was there in that image for two players having a child together?

He wanted to tell Ilya with the same bravery Scott had shown, but their world wasn’t built for that kind of truth. Not for them.

But then, Shane’s screen lit up with an incoming call. From Ilya.

The ringtone was loud in the quiet living room, sharp and insistent. Shane’s heart leapt into his throat.

Shane scrambled off the couch and hurried toward the empty kitchen for privacy.

He swiped to answer, pressing the phone to his ear. “What the-”

Shane was interrupted by Ilya’s voice, clear and certain. Not a question. Not a *maybe* anymore. A decision. A fact.

“I’m coming to the cottage.”

The line hummed with a tension that had nothing to do with rivalry and everything to do with the unspoken thing that had just been named between them. Shane’s hand tightened around the phone. The secret pressed against his ribs, urgent and alive, and with the terrifying, exhilarating knowledge that the time for secrets was almost over.

Chapter 4: the waiting

Chapter Notes

Thank you so much for everyone who had been commenting! It means a lot to me to see you're enjoying the story and I hope you continue to do so!

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

I'm coming to the cottage.

The phase hung in the quiet kitchen, solid as a vow.

For a second, Shane's mind went blank, wiped clean by the sheer force of Ilya's declaration. All the tangled fears, the media, the rivalry, the *how* and *when* and *where*, receded, leaving only the raw, undeniable truth.

"You are?" Shane finally breathed into the phone, the question soft, almost disbelieving.

On the other end, Ilya's voice was steady, but quieter now, leaving room for doubt. "You still want me to?"

The hesitation, the need for confirmation, sent a sharp pang through Shane's chest. "Yes!" The word burst out of him, too loud in the silent house. He lowered his voice, pressing the phone closer. "Yes, I do." He swallowed, the practical part of his brain wrestling its way back to the surface. "Why all of a sudden?"

A low, dry chuckle came through the line. "I think Scott dinosaur Hunter helped a little."

Shane's lips twitched. He leaned back against the counter, a fragile sense of relief beginning to thaw the anxiety in his veins. "See? He's not that bad."

"Calm down, Hollander," Ilya replied, the familiar teasing edge returning to his voice, a shield against the gravity of the moment. "Let's not go that far, yes?"

Shane nodded, even though Ilya couldn't see him. The silence that followed was comfortable, charged. "I'm glad." Shane said, the words feeling too small for the storm of emotion behind them. He cleared his throat, trying again. "I-I'm glad you're coming."

"Oh," Ilya purred, the sound curling warmly in Shane's ear. "You want to do dirty talking through the phone now?"

"Shut up!" Shane laughed, the sound breathless and real, his free hand coming up to cover his eyes as if Ilya could see the blush he felt heating his cheeks.

The laughter faded, and for a long moment, neither of them spoke. The line wasn't silent, it was filled with the soft, shared sound of their breathing, a quiet intimacy that felt more profound than any joke or confession. In that space, the walls between them felt paper-thin.

Then, Ilya's voice came again, stripped of pretense, quieter than before.

"I'm glad too."

The words were simple, sincere. They weren't about hockey, or rivalry, or even the cottage. They were about *this*. The connection. The choice to be in each other's space. Shane closed his eyes, his hand drifting once more to rest over the subtle curve of his stomach.

Back in his room, Shane shut the door firmly behind him, the brief warmth from the call evaporated. It was replaced by a cold, spiraling dread that started in his gut and crawled up his throat.

He's coming.

The reality of it hit him like a body check. Ilya was getting on a plane. For him. To be with him. Alone. Soon.

Shane paced the length of his bedroom, his socked feet silent on the rug. He'd tell him. He had to. That was non-negotiable. But *how*? His mind began to spin out scenarios, each more awful than the last.

The Airport. He pictured himself at arrivals, watching Ilya walk through the cars with that confident, tired grace. He'd greet him, smell his familiar scent, and then... what? "Welcome to Ottawa, by the way, I'm pregnant"? No. Impossible. It would be cruel to drop that on him the second he landed, trapped in a parking lot with nowhere to go.

The Car Ride. Two hours in a confined space on the way to the cottage. Shane white-knuckling the steering wheel. "So, how was your flight? Also, you're going to be a father." He'd probably crash the car.

The Cottage. The place he'd imagined as a sanctuary now felt like a trap. He saw it vividly: the fire crackling, the lake still and dark outside, the two of them finally alone. He'd ruin it. He'd take this fragile, hopeful thing they were building and shatter it with four words. He saw Ilya's face, not the smiling, teasing one from his texts, but the solemn, closed-off one from his dream. The Las Vegas expression. The one that meant *this is a problem*.

Phone call or text. No way. Cruel.

He'll reject you. The thought was a knife twist. He'll walk out. He'll get back on a plane and you'll never see him again.

But worse, a more terrifying whisper followed: *He'll reject the baby.*

A choked sound escaped Shane's throat. He pressed the heels of his hands into his eyes until he saw stars. Ilya wouldn't do that. He *wouldn't*. He was stubborn and proud and sometimes an asshole, but he wasn't cruel. Not about something like this.

But what if the shock was too much? What if the pressure, the media, the careers, the sheer insanity of it, was too heavy? What if Ilya looked at him not with anger, but with a cold, distant calculation? What if he said *I need to think* and left Shane alone in the cottage, with nothing but the ghost of a *maybe* and a future that suddenly felt too vast and lonely to face?

The walls of the room seemed to be closing in. He couldn't breathe. He couldn't sit with this for days, pretending everything was normal while Ilya traveled toward him, oblivious. He couldn't let Ilya make that journey under a lie. It wasn't fair. To either of them.

The chaos in his mind crystallized into a single, clear, reckless impulse.

Don't let him come to you. Go to him.

He snatched his phone from the bed, his fingers trembling as he opened his browser. He typed frantically: *flights Ottawa to Boston*.

There was one in eight hours.

His heart hammered against his ribs, a frantic drumbeat of panic and resolve. This was insane. He was still healing. He was pregnant. His parents would have a collective meltdown.

But the alternative, the agonizing wait, the staged reveal, the possibility of watching hope die in Ilya's eyes in a place that was supposed to be theirs... it was far worse.

Without allowing himself another second to think, he bought the plane ticket.

The confirmation email hit his inbox a moment later.

He was going to Boston. He was going to tell Ilya in the morning, after landing and going straight to his house.

The freak-out was over. It had been burned away by the white-hot fuel of sheer, terrified action.

The backpack was half-full – a haphazard mix of clothes, his toothbrush, the envelope from the ultrasound tucked carefully between two folded shirts – when his bedroom door swung open.

“Honey, do you need some-” His mother froze, her sentence dying as her eyes landed on the bag. “What is that?”

She stood in the doorway, her arms slowly uncrossing, her face draining of color. His father hovered behind her, peering over her shoulder, his expression shifting from curiosity to concern to utter confusion.

Shane zipped the bag, the sound harsh in the quiet room. “I have to go to Boston.”

“*Boston?*” The word was half-laugh, half-panic. “Now? Shane, it’s nearly ten o’clock at night. What are you saying?” She stepped fully into the room, her gaze darting from the bag to his face. “You’re pregnant! You can’t just fly to Boston on a whim!”

“It’s not a whim. And it’s not now, the flight is in the morning” Shane put the backpack in the chair next to his childhood desk. “It’s important.”

“What’s more important than your health?” Her voice was climbing again, thin with alarm. “Than the *baby’s* health?”

His father moved past her, into the room. His calm was more unsettling than her fear. “Son,” he said, his voice low. “This isn’t like you. Talk to us. What’s going on?”

Shane took a deep breath, the air feeling too thick. He looked from his mother’s wide, frightened eyes to his father’s steady, searching gaze. He couldn’t give them the name. He couldn’t paint the whole picture. But he could offer a piece of the truth, the piece that was tearing him apart.

“It’s about the baby’s father,” he said, the words foreign and heavy on his tongue. It was the first time he’d said it out loud to anyone. “I need to see him. I need to tell him. And I can’t... I can’t wait anymore. I feel like I’m going to explode if I wait.”

His mother’s hand flew to her mouth. The stern mask she’d worn shattered, revealing pure, maternal terror beneath. “Shane, honey, no. You can call him. You can video call. You don’t have to get on a plane in the middle of the night! What if you get sick? What if there’s turbulence? Your body is under so much stress already!”

“It has to be in person,” Shane insisted, his own voice beginning to fray at the edges. He could hear the desperation in it, and it scared him, but it also fueled him. “He deserves that. To hear it from me, looking at me. And I... I *need* to see his face when I tell him. I need to know, right then, what happens next. I can’t do this over the phone. And I can’t just send a text and stare at my screen waiting for three dots. I’ll lose my mind.”

“This is reckless,” his mother whispered, but the fight was bleeding out of her, replaced by a helpless, suffocating dread. “You’re not thinking straight. What if something happens at the airport? What if you faint? What if you fall and hurt yourself? Who’s going to be there to help you?”

“I’ll be careful. I’ll sit the whole time, Mom. It’s a one-and-a-half-hour trip.” He took a step toward them, his free hand coming up in a plea. “Mom, Dad... please. I have to do this. For me. For the baby. For... for things to be right.” His voice dropped to a raw whisper. “I can’t start this... this life... with a lie of omission hanging over us. I have to look him in the eye and tell him. I can’t wait anymore.”

The room was silent save for the ragged sound of his own breathing. His father was watching him, really seeing him, the panic, the resolve, the adult determination layered over the scared kid he still was in this house.

His father's shoulders sagged in a long, weary sigh. He looked at his wife, a silent conversation passing between them in the space of a glance. When he spoke, it was with resigned finality.

"He's right. Some conversations... they don't work any other way." He turned back to Shane. "But you're not going alone. We're driving you to the airport. And you're calling us the second you land. Every step. That's not negotiable."

It wasn't permission Shane had asked for, but it was the bridge they were offering, a way to let him go without completely letting him go. He nodded, the motion stiff with gratitude and unshed tears.

"Okay," he said, his voice thick. "Okay."

The goodbye at the airport parking lot was quick, a brittle thing. His mother hugged him too tight, her whisper a prayer against his ear: "You call us. No matter what happens, you call."

His father just squeezed his good shoulder, a silent transfer of strength. Then Shane was pulling the baseball cap low over his eyes, adjusting the sunglasses despite the evening gloom, and turning toward the bright, impersonal lights of the terminal. A man hiding in plain sight.

On the plane, the relief of an empty row was short-lived. It just gave his mind more room to race. The hum of the engines was a soundtrack to his dread. Every minute in the air felt like both a reprieve and a sentence, carrying him toward a moment that could shatter everything. He kept his hand pressed to his stomach, that was yet not too noticeable, hidden with an oversized hoodie. A silent apology to the tiny life inside for all the chaos.

Boston was damp and cool when he landed, but nothing different from Ottawa. The airport felt vast and echoing. For a wild second, the logic of a hotel, a shower, a meal... a delay... tempted him. But the thought of sitting in a hotel room, staring at the walls with the truth screaming in his head, was worse than the fear. He couldn't wait. The momentum was the only thing holding him together.

At the rental counter, his hands were steady as he handed over his license. The decision was clinical, practical armor for his emotional freefall: *If it goes wrong, I need to be able to leave. Immediately.* The idea of waiting for a ride-share outside Ilya's house, exposed, crumbling, having to endure the distant presence of Ilya, was unthinkable. If he had to fall apart, it would be in private, behind the wheel of a generic sedan, at the side of some road.

The drive to Ilya's neighborhood was a blur of streetlights and navigation prompts. His heart began to pound in earnest, a frantic drum against his ribs, as the familiar streets closed in. He'd only been here two times. One shortly before the dated Rose. One after the All-Stars Game. The one time Shane was pretty sure they were not careful enough. Now, the secrecy felt like a lead weight.

He pulled up to the big patio in front of the house and cut the engine. Ilya's regular car was there, so he was home.

For a long minute, Shane just sat there, gripping the steering wheel. This was it. The point of no return. He could still drive away. He could turn the car around and fly home holding his secret a little longer. But the secret wasn't just his anymore. It had a heartbeat. It had a future. It deserved the truth.

He forced himself out of the car, his legs unsteady. He walked up the path, each step feeling too loud. The morning air was still and the sky was clear. It was a nice day.

He stood before the door, the faint scent of Ilya's almost isolated house, damp earth and singing crickets, filling his senses.

He raised a trembling finger and rang the bell, before he knocked on the door.

The sound was shockingly loud in the quiet. As he waited, the thoughts he'd been outrunning finally caught him.

What if he's not alone? What if he has someone here? What if he takes one look at me and slams the door? What if he laughs? What if he says it's not his? What if he questions the paternity? What if he looks at me like I'm a problem he doesn't want to solve?

The porch light flicked on, blazingly bright, and Shane's breath stopped entirely. The door began to open.

It was time.

Chapter End Notes

Just so you know, chapter five is coming pretty soon and it's waaaay longer. Chapter five was the first draft of this whole story, so it's really special to me!! See you soon <3

Chapter 5: the love

Chapter Notes

This chapter is HUGE and INTENSE and I love tem so much it makes me cry. I'll warn you now that there is sexual content in this chapter, so if you do not feel comfortable, you can skip it and go to the last three paragraphs. Hope you enjoy!! (And as always, I'll be back soon with the next update <3

The door opened, and Shane stood there, backlit by the warm of the sunlight. Ilya was in sweats, his hair slightly damp. At the sight of Shane standing on his front step, he froze in surprise, eyes big.

“Hollander?” he said, his voice a mix of disbelief and immediate concern.

Shane’s throat was so tight he could barely force the air out. “H-Hi... I...”

“What are you doing here?” Ilya’s gaze swept over him, taking in the tense posture, the pallor of his face.

The words hit Shane like a splash of cold water. Logically, he knew they were just a question, a reasonable one, given the early hour and, above all, the unannounced arrival. But to Shane, who had just spent the last several hours trapped in a vortex of worst-case scenarios, they felt like a rejection. They sounded sharp, unwelcoming, a confirmation of every fear that Ilya would see him as an intrusion, a problem showing up uninvited.

Shane’s already fragile composure cracked a little further. He could see Ilya’s expression wasn’t angry, it was etched with confusion and dawning concern, his brow furrowed, his body leaning slightly forward as if ready to catch him if he stumbled. He still looked sleepy too. But in Shane’s hyper-sensitive state, the surprise in Ilya’s voice bled into annoyance, the bluntness of the question feeling like a barrier being thrown up between them.

“I... I need to talk to you? Can I... come in?”

“Yes, yes, of course!” Ilya stepped back quickly, realizing he should have let Shane enter as soon as he opened the door, like always. The door shut, muffling the world. “I thought we would only meet at the airport before going to your cottage.”

“Yeah, no, I... I didn’t... know if you would...go?” Shane mumbled uncertain of his words, hovering in the familiar entryway.

“I told you I will go.” Ilya’s brow was furrowed, his focus entirely on Shane.

To Shane, the words landed as a correction, not a promise. A firm, almost impatient line drawn under what should have been obvious. In his spiraling mind, the emphasis wasn't on *I will go*, but on *I told you*, as if Shane's doubt was a foolish burden, an unnecessary complication.

It made him feel small and foolish for having flown from another country on a desperate, panicked impulse. The solid ground of Ilya's commitment, which should have been a comfort, felt instead like a rock he'd just foolishly tripped over, exposing his own messy, chaotic fear. He wasn't the calm, collected person meeting a pre-arranged plan, as it always would go; he was a disruption, and Ilya's steady reiteration of the plan only highlighted how far Shane had strayed from it.

God, I'm just feeling too much, right? The hormones are kicking in, right?

"Why would I not go? What is happening?" Ilya closed the door and waited for something, but Shane continued in silence. "Shane, you are scaring me."

The direct concern undid another piece of Shane's fragile composure. "I... Can we sit? Please?" He asked, cause now he wasn't sure of his legs' strength.

They moved to the living room, settling next to each other in the sofa, a cushion of space between them that felt like a canyon.

Shane stared at his own hands, clenched in his lap. He had to start talking without putting much thought into it or they would be like that for hours "Since the hospital, I... I've been feeling... different."

"Different how?" Ilya leaned forward, elbows on his knees, trying to catch Shane's gaze, that was still focus on his own hand. "Is head okay?"

"Yeah, I..." *am pregnant*. "We..." *are having a baby*. Shane stammered, the words tangling on his tongue and mind.

"Is this about us?" Ilya's voice was quieter now, edged with a new kind of dread.

"Yes... Yes, it is, in a way. Not in a way, it is... it is about us, yeah..."

"You are confusing me, Hollander."

"Sorry, I... I'm not finding the words." Shane's heart hammered against his ribs, a frantic drum counting down to ruin.

A terrible yet wrong understanding dawned on Ilya's face, his features tightening. "You... Wanna end it? Between us?"

"What?" Shane's head snapped up.

"You came... here to tell me you don't... want us anymore?" The question was stripped bare, almost fragile.

Us. The reassurance of their existence together tickled Shane's heart, that was crashed by Ilya's concerned voice.

"No, Ilya, I..." Shane's voice broke. "Actually, I don't know if *you* would want... us... anymore. I don't know." Each word lower and lower, as if he was afraid of saying it too loud and making it true.

Us.

Me and you. Me and our child, he wanted to say.

The confusion on Ilya's face deepened into pure alarm. "What are you saying? What are you feeling different?"

Shane took a shuddering breath, the rehearsed lines finally lining up in his mind. "In the hospital, after you left, the doctor came to see me and... And told me about my state. And he told me that... My head would be fine; the concussion didn't cause any further harm..."

"That is great," Ilya said softly, encouragingly, but his eyes were watchful.

"He told me my collarbone would probably heal fast, well... It did..."

"Yes, you told me."

"And he also informed me that..." The next words lodged in Shane's throat, a physical blockage of fear. He couldn't say them sitting down. He felt like a hose with the water turned on and body kinked. He needed to stand up so he could say everything he needed to, or he would explode and start crying it all out. He stood up abruptly, turning his back to Ilya, needing a momentary barrier.

"Shane... don't you want to sit?" Ilya stood too, his worry palpable in the small space between them.

"No. I don't..." Shane turned to face him, his vision blurring with unshed tears. He forced the truth out, a rushed, blunt confession. "He informed me... the doctor... That the collision didn't cause any harm... to the baby."

Silence. Shane needed to go on.

"And then... I found out I am... pregnant. And I kept trying to find the courage to tell you, through all these weeks, but it just kept getting harder and harder and..."

Ilya blinked. "A baby?" But Shane kept going.

"And then you told me, after the Stanley Cup, that you would come to my cottage. And I couldn't do that to you. I couldn't keep it a secret anymore, I had to be honest. So I just bought the first plane ticket to Boston, rented the first car I saw at the airport and came here."

"Shane..."

“I came here to tell you that I’m pregnant, because I wouldn’t be able to see you leave the cottage after I told you.”

The pure thought made Shane sick again, a phantom nausea churning in his gut. He could see it too clearly: the cottage, the hopeful plans, the moment of confession... and then the stunned silence, the turning away. He imagined watching Ilya’s back as he walked to the bedroom, packed his things, walked out the door, got into his car, and drove away, leaving Shane alone in a place that was supposed to be his sanctuary. Vulnerable. Pregnant. With nothing but the echo of a heartbeat and the ghost of a maybe that had turned to dust. It was that image, the ultimate and devastating loneliness, that had fueled his manic trip to Boston. It was better to be rejected here, on Ilya’s turf, where he could make a clean, desperate escape. To have the collapse happen in a place that wasn’t already tied to the dream.

“Shane...” It was a plea, a sound of overwhelmed processing.

“And I’m telling you this because I’m keeping it. I didn’t have the courage to... To end it. I don’t know exactly why, I just... I couldn’t. So I’m almost twelve weeks pregnant now, that’s almost three months, so it happened last time we were... here... together. It still does not show up that much, a male pregnancy is different, but it’s here... The baby is here. I just needed to tell... you. So...”

He trailed off, the silence that followed absolute and crushing.

Ilya was completely still, his gaze dropped, locked on some point in the space between them, as if he could see through Shane’s hoodie to the life growing beneath. He was silent. Longer than Shane could bear. The horrible scenarios Shane had imagined in the car rushed back, drowning him. His hands began to shake. The urge to cry, to run, to vanish, became a physical pull. He couldn’t stand here and watch Ilya’s love turn to stone.

So he just tried to take a deep breath and took his first step towards the door.

“Shane...” Ilya’s voice was quiet, but it didn’t stop him. Then, louder, sharper with realization, “Shane, where are you going?”

“To the airport,” Shane choked out, his voice already wet with tears. He stopped didn’t turn around.

“What?”

“I just came to tell you that. But I understand it’s too much to take in. I don’t wanna bother...” He couldn’t finish, his voice was getting thicker and thicker in each word. He took another step.

“Hey, hey, *hey*.” Suddenly, Ilya was there, moving between Shane and the door, his hands coming up to cradle Shane’s arms, gentle but firm. Then, without another word, he pulled Shane into a tight, engulfing hug.

Shane stiffened for a second before melting into it, his face buried in Ilya’s shoulder, his own arms coming up to clutch desperately at the back of Ilya’s shirt. They stood like that for a

long time, in the quiet hallway, the only sound Shane's ragged, tearful breaths slowly evening out.

"I'm sorry," Shane whispered into the fabric.

"No..." Ilya's voice was a soft rumble against him. "Do not apologize. You don't have to."

"It was not planned at all."

"Shh, is okay... Don't say it," Ilya murmured, his hand stroking Shane's back. Then, as tender as Shane would ever imagine Ilya saying: "Our baby might hear it."

Our baby.

The two words pierced through the fog of Shane's panic like a sunbeam. He pulled back just enough to look up, searching Ilya's face. "Our baby?"

"Yes, of course," Ilya said, his expression softening into something awed and tender. "I made it too, right? Our baby?"

"So you're not..." Shane couldn't even voice the fear.

"I guess I am happy."

"You are?"

"I'm sorry I didn't say anything. I was in shock you were here, then I was in shock thinking you would end things between us, then I was in shock about becoming a father. I mean, I just woke up too. And I am still in shock, but it is happy shock, yes?"

Shane could only stare, drinking in the sight of Ilya's face, no anger, no rejection, just a dazed, overwhelming wonder. The love he'd been so afraid to name swelled in his chest, too big to contain.

"Hollander, you having panic attack?" Ilya asked, a faint, worried smile touching his lips.

"What?"

"You are silent, have big eyes."

"I'm just... In shock too... I guess"

"You thought I would be an asshole about it."

"No, I just... I didn't know what to think. A pregnancy is... A completely new thing in any relationship."

Ilya's smile grew, a real one now, crinkling the corners of his eyes. He tilted his head. "Shane Hollander, are you are saying we are boyfriends?"

"What? No!" The objection was automatic, flustered.

“So, you don’t want to be my boyfriend?” Ilya teased, his thumb brushing a stray tear from Shane’s cheek.

“No! I mean, yes, I... That’s not...”

“Shane...”

“I wasn’t saying I wouldn’t, I just...”

“Hollander,” Ilya cut in, his voice dropping to a sincere, intimate register. “You want to be my boyfriend?”

The world narrowed to the space between them. “Oh... Really?”

“Yes.”

It seemed childish, but it was a warmful recognition of their love. Ilya cupped Shane’s face in his hands and kissed him, softly at first, then deepening into something profound and claiming and full of promises. It had been months.

When they finally parted, they stayed close, foreheads touching, lips still brushing, sharing the same air.

“Is it...” Shane ventured, the last ghost of a doubt whispering. “Is it because I’m pregnant?”

“What? No! Of course not.” Ilya leaned back, looking genuinely offended before his expression gentled. “Actually, I was planning on doing this in the cottage, but if you like the idea I can ask you when we’re there too.”

“When we’re there?”

“Yes. You, me and our baby.” Ilya’s hands slid down, slipping under Shane’s hoodie to rest warmly, possessively, over the small, firm curve of his belly. He smiled, a private, fond smile meant just for the life they’d created.

Shane’s mind went utterly, blissfully blank. All the overthinking, the fear, the planning, it evaporated. In its place was a surge of pure, unfiltered feeling. Before he could think, before he could temper it with reason or caution, the words tumbled out.

“I love you.”

Ilya’s eyes widened. The surprise was there, but it was quickly washed away by a wave of warmth that seemed to light him up from within, his whole face softening with a joy so deep it stole Shane’s breath.

Shane backtracked, flustered. “I’m sorry, I have all these hormones going crazy in my body right n—”

“I love you too.”

Shane exhale loudly, as if he was holding everything together not to crumble in shame. And he kissed Rozanov deeply. This kiss was different. It was passionate, sure, a seal on the confession, but it was also a beginning.

When they broke apart, Shane was breathless, grinning like an idiot. “Oh my God, I love you so much.”

Ilya’s smile was brilliant, his eyes shining. “*Ya tebya lyublyu.*”

“Is it in Russian?”

“*Da.* Yes.”

“Say it again”

Ilya smiled wider. “Ya...” he pointed at himself. “tebya” then, pointed at Shane. “lyublyu.” and rested his hands on Shane’s belly, as a reminder that what they have made was pure love itself.

And in the quiet of the large living room, with Ilya’s hands still resting on his stomach and the future, terrifying, wonderful and theirs, stretched out before them, Shane knew he was finally where he belonged. In Ilya’s arms and heart. So he kissed him again.

The kisses deepened even more, each one erasing another second of the lonely, fearful weeks. It was no longer just relief; it was a rising tide of need, raw and undeniable. Ilya, already shirtless, pressed Shane gently against the hallway wall, one hand braced beside his head, the other a warm, protective cradle against the side of Shane’s belly.

“So you missed me so much you couldn’t wait to see me, huh?” Ilya murmured against his lips before trailing kisses down the line of Shane’s jaw to his neck, nipping lightly at the sensitive skin. “Bought the next flight to Boston and just came”

A shuddering gasp escaped Shane. “Yes... I couldn’t... wait.” The admission was more truthful than Ilya could ever know. It wasn’t just physical want; it was the need to be close, to be claimed again after feeling so terrifyingly alone.

Ilya’s hands slipped under the hem of Shane’s hoodie and shirt, pushing them up in one smooth motion. Shane lifted his arms, letting Ilya pull the layers off and toss them aside. The cool air of the house brushed his skin, but Ilya’s gaze was warm, possessive, and full of admiration.

“I’ll make you feel better, okay?” Ilya promised, his voice a low, tender rumble. He winked, a flash of playful seduction, before lowering his head.

He started a slow, worshipful descent, tracing a path of open-mouthed kisses and soft licks down Shane’s chest. He lingered over the flat plane of his stomach, his thumbs stroking the sensitive skin just above the waistband of Shane’s pants. Then, his focus shifted. He sank to his knees on the floor, his hands settling on Shane’s hips, holding him steady.

Here, he paused. His entire demeanor softened. He looked at the subtle, firm curve of Shane's lower belly, the only visible sign of the life they'd created. With infinite care, Ilya leaned forward and pressed a single, lingering kiss right at its center. Then another, just below. He nuzzled the spot, his stubble a gentle scratch against Shane's skin, his breath warm. He spent a long moment there, his eyes closed, just feeling, just connecting. When he looked up, his eyes were bright with something profound.

"You are so beautiful," he breathed, the words reverent, meant for all of him, for the man, for the life he carried, for the sheer fact of his being here.

Shane could only card his fingers through Ilya's hair, overwhelmed, a soft sound catching in his throat.

Ilya's hands moved to the waistband of Shane's sweatpants. He eased them down over his hips, letting them pool at his feet along with his boxers. Shane was fully exposed, trembling slightly, utterly vulnerable and completely wanted.

Ilya didn't rush. He looked up, holding Shane's gaze, before leaning in. He started with a soft, teasing lick along the length of his cock, a slow, slick stroke that made Shane's knees buckle. Ilya's hands tightened on his hips, holding him upright.

Then he took him into his mouth, deep and slow, swallowing him down with a practiced, devastating ease. He set a deliberate, worshipful pace; a deep, sucking pull followed by a swirl of his tongue around the head, his hands roaming over Shane's thighs and back to his hips. Every movement was both claiming and cherishing. He'd pull off to breathe, pressing soft, wet kisses along the shaft, murmuring in Russian against his skin. Words Shane didn't understand but felt in the vibration, in the devotion of the act.

It wasn't just a blowjob. It was a communion. It was Ilya saying *I see you, all of you, and I choose you* with every sweep of his tongue, every hollow of his cheeks. He read Shane's body perfectly, the hitches in his breath, the tremors in his thighs, alternating between deep, steady pulls and lighter, frantic flicks of his tongue. He could sense when Shane was close.

Shane's head fell back against the wall, a choked cry spilling from his lips as he came, his hands fisted in Ilya's hair, his entire body singing with a release that was as much emotional as physical. Ilya stayed with him through every pulse, swallowing gently, until Shane was shuddering and oversensitive.

Only after Shane released himself entirely, Ilya pulled back, resting his forehead against Shane's stomach, his own breathing ragged and his cock hard. He pressed another soft kiss to the swell of Shane's belly before looking up, his lips swollen, his eyes dark with love and desire.

He rose to his feet, pulling Shane into a deep, tasting kiss, sharing the proof of his devotion. "I love you," he whispered against his mouth. "Now, let's get you to bed. You must be tired"

"I'm not... I want you... Again... Inside me"

The words were a raw, breathless confession, spoken against Ilya's lips, and a sound his dick liked very much. They held none of their usual teasing challenge, only a pure, desperate want. It wasn't just about pleasure or reunion, it was a need for confirmation, a physical sealing of the new, fragile truth between them. To be connected, as intimately as they had been when this life began, now that they knew. To feel Ilya close, to erase the ghost of every imagined rejection with the solid, present reality of his body.

Ilya stilled, his hands now framing Shane's face. He searched his eyes, seeing the vulnerability, the hunger, the silent plea for reassurance that went beyond words. A slow, tender smile softened his features. This wasn't a demand; it was a gift of trust.

"Okay," Ilya murmured, his thumb stroking Shane's cheek. "But slowly. Gently." He kissed him again, a soft promise, before sweeping him carefully into his arms, carrying him not just to bed, but into the new, tender reality they were building together, one touch at a time.

Ilya carried him down the hall to his own. It was dark, lit only by the streetlight filtering through the blinds. He laid Shane down on the sheets as if he were something precious and fragile, which, in that moment, he was.

There was no frantic rush, no hungry tearing of clothes. It was a slow unveiling. Ilya's hands were steady and reverent as he pushed Shane's sweatpants off, he paused, his gaze soft and questioning. Shane answered by lifting his hips. Skin met skin in the cool air of the room, and they both sighed into it.

Ilya settled over him, but not with his full weight. He was a careful arch, a protective cage, his knees bracketing Shane's hips. He kissed him, deep and languid, as his hands began to map the familiar territory of Shane's body with a new kind of wonder. His touch was worship. It traveled over the planes of Shane's chest, down the subtle dip of his waist, and then, with a tenderness that made Shane's breath catch, came to rest on the gentle, firm swell of his lower belly. Ilya's palm spread wide, warm and possessive, covering the place where their child was growing.

He broke the kiss, lifting his head to look down. In the dim light, his eyes were dark and full of awe. He didn't just look; he saw. He saw the physical proof of their future, the slight curve that changed everything.

"You are so beautiful," Ilya whispered, the words hushed and full of reverence. He wasn't looking at Shane's face. He was looking at his stomach. "So fucking beautiful."

The praise, aimed at the part of him that felt most vulnerable and changed, unlocked something deep in Shane's chest. A tear escaped, tracking a hot path down his temple into his hair. Ilya leaned down and kissed it away, then kissed his lips, his jaw, the hollow of his throat, before moving lower. His mouth followed the path his hands had taken, tracing a line of soft, open-mouthed kisses over the swell of Shane's belly.

When he finally moved lower still, when he took Shane into his mouth again, it was with the same devoted patience. His hands never left Shane's skin, one splayed on his hip, the other resting again on his stomach, a constant, grounding connection. It wasn't just about the peak; it was about the journey, the re-learning, the affirmation. Every touch saying this was real.

Shane's breathing was still uneven, his body humming from Ilya's touch. But a new, pressing need coiled inside him; not just to receive, but to give. To show Ilya the same devotion, the same possession.

He shifted under Ilya's weight, his hands coming up to frame Ilya's face. He kissed him, deep and lingering, tasting himself on Ilya's tongue. When he pulled back, his voice was a raw, wanting whisper against Ilya's lips.

"I want you in my mouth. I want to taste you." Ilya's eyes darkened, a low groan vibrating in his chest. He didn't hesitate. He rolled onto his back, pulling Shane with him, settling him in the space between his legs.

Shane moved with a new, purposeful grace. He rose up, arching onto his hands and knees over Ilya, his body a pale curve in the dim light. For a moment, he just looked up at him. Ilya, laid out and waiting, his expression open with desire and something deeper, something that looked a lot like devotion. Then Shane lowered himself, his movements deliberate and slow.

He didn't rush. He traced the lines of Ilya's abdomen with his lips first, feeling the muscles jump under his tongue, before moving lower. He took his time, breathing him in, pressing soft, kissing Ilya's length, and feeling Ilya's hands gently pull his hair; not to push, but to hold on.

When Shane finally took him into his mouth, it was with a sigh of fulfillment. He set a slow, deep rhythm, one hand braced on Ilya's hip, the other wrapped around the base. Every sound Ilya made, every choked-off gasp, every whispered curse in Russian, was a thrill that went straight to Shane's core. He could feel the tremor in Ilya's thighs, the desperate hold on his hair, and it filled him with a powerful, claiming satisfaction.

He was giving Ilya this. He was making him fall apart. And all the while, the gentle, undeniable curve of his own belly brushed against Ilya's thigh—a silent, constant reminder of why this felt so different, so profound.

They weren't just lovers anymore. They were partners. They were a family, finding their way back to each other's bodies in the dark, one worshiping touch at a time.

The rhythm was building, deep and intoxicating. Ilya's breaths were coming in sharp, ragged pulls, his hips giving tiny, involuntary lifts. Shane could feel the tension coiling tightly in the body beneath him, a spring about to snap.

"Shane, stop" Ilya gasped, his voice strained. His hands in Shane's hair tightened, not to pull him off, but to still him completely. "If you don't stop... I will come."

Shane lifted his head slowly, a slick, wet sound breaking the tension. He looked up, meeting Ilya's glazed, desperate eyes. "Then come," Shane murmured, his own voice thick.

"No," Ilya breathed, pulling him up for a fierce, messy kiss. "I want to be inside you. I need to be." He guided Shane onto his back with a gentle urgency. "Get on your back. Comfortable." Shane moved, his body humming.

As Ilya reached for the nightstand drawer, Shane's hand shot out, beating him to it. He knew where it was; he'd been here before. He fumbled for the familiar bottle of lube and pressed it into Ilya's hand.

"Now," he said, the word a plea and a demand. "I need you now." But as Ilya uncapped the bottle, a cold, practical fear sliced through the heat in Shane's veins.

Their history was not one of monogamy. The baby changed the physical risks, but the emotional ones were suddenly just as vast and sharp.

"Ilya" Shane's hand closed over his wrist, stopping him. He searched his face, the question feeling too big and too small at the same time. "Have you... been with anyone else? Lately?"

Ilya stilled. He looked down at Shane, his expression softening into something painfully open. He shook his head slowly. "No. Not since the first time you were in this bed. Before you went back to Montreal. Before... Rose."

The confession landed with the weight of a vow. Months. He hadn't been with anyone since before they conceived their child, before the rollercoaster of emotions that led Shane to confess he liked Ilya a little too much, that what they had was not casual anymore.

Maybe it never was, actually.

The implication was staggering. This thing between them, this secret, had been as binding for Ilya as it had been isolating for Shane. Shane's breath hitched, a wave of emotion that was part relief, a devastating tenderness crashing over him.

"Really?" Ilya nodded. "I haven't been either, with no one. Not since Rose." He kissed Ilya in the lips one more time before saying: "I want without a condom"

Ilya sighed deeply and leaned down, kissing Shane's forehead, a seal of acceptance. "Okay," he said, his voice rough with unchecked desire, but steady with resolve.

"Okay" Shane said back.

Ilya's hand was slick and sure as he prepared Shane, his touch a blend of fierce urgency and aching tenderness. Every stroke, every press, was a promise and a reclamation. Shane arched into it, his breath hitching, his own hands gripping Ilya's shoulders, fingers pressing into the hard muscle as if to anchor himself to this reality.

"Look at me," Ilya breathed, not a command, but a plea.

Shane's eyes, dark and blown wide, snapped open, locking onto Ilya's. In that gaze, he saw everything: the shock, the wonder, the fear, the overwhelming, undeniable love. There were no more barriers, no more secrets, just this. Then Ilya was himself pushing in, and the world narrowed to the point where they joined.

It was a slow, inexorable slide, a filling so profound it stole the air from Shane's lungs. A ragged gasp tore from his throat, part pleasure, part catharsis. Ilya's forehead dropped to his,

their breaths mingling in short, sharp clouds. He was everywhere. Inside him, around him, his scent, his warmth, the solid weight of Ilya a shelter Shane had been starving for.

“*Moy*,” Ilya whispered against his lips. “*Mine*.” He said it again in english this time.

It wasn’t possessive in a harsh way; it was a truth, raw and reverent, cause he was Shane’s too. Since the beginning, since always.

Shane answered by wrapping his legs high around Ilya’s waist, drawing him in deeper. It wasn’t a frantic, punishing pace. It was deep, rolling thrusts that seemed to seek the very core of each other. Each movement was a conversation, a push that said *I’m here*, a pull that answered *don’t ever leave*. Ilya’s thrusts were measured, powerful, each one angled to make Shane see stars, his own hips meeting with a desperate, perfect sync.

Their rhythm built not like a storm. The room filled with the sounds of their union: skin on skin, shuddering breaths, broken whispers of names and nonsense and curses.

Shane’s hands scrabbled down Ilya’s sweat-slick back, holding on as if he were the only solid thing in a spinning universe. Ilya shifted, hooking an arm under Shane’s knee, opening him up further, going impossibly deeper. The new angle drew a sharp, broken cry from Shane, his back bowing off the bed. Pleasure, white-hot and blinding, coiled tight at the base of his spine, merging with the emotional torrent until he could no longer tell where one ended and the other began.

“I’m close,” Ilya gritted out, his control fraying, his movements becoming more urgent, more precise.

And Shane was there, teetering on the edge. The pressure was immense, a wave about to crash.

He kept his eyes locked on Ilya’s, drowning in the blue-grey storm he found there, and let go. His climax ripped through him without warning, a silent, seismic convulsion that arched his spine and tore a soundless scream from his throat. Every cell in his body sparking apart in a shower of light and release.

Feeling him clamp down and pulse around him, Ilya drove in one last, deep, shuddering time. A guttural groan was wrenched from his chest as he followed Shane over, his own release a hot, throbbing surrender inside the barrier between them. He collapsed forward, catching his weight on his forearms, his face buried in the crook of Shane’s neck, their bodies still fused, both trembling violently through the aftershocks.

For long minutes, there was only the sound of their ragged breathing mingling in the dark, the frantic hammering of their hearts slowly settling into one slower, synchronized beat. They were sweaty, spent, and utterly entwined; no longer two separate souls, but one tangled, blessed, and beautifully overwhelmed whole.

After, when they were both calmer, Ilya held him close, skin to skin, heart to heart, his hand a permanent, warm weight over their growing future, as if he could feel the tiny heartbeat through the shared warmth of their own.

And Shane didn't want to think beyond that. He wanted to feel Ilya forever in his arms and enjoy all the love he was getting. But he couldn't help to think he needed to tell his parents about this. About him and Ilya. And again, he didn't know *when*, *where* and *how*.

Chapter 6: the closeness

Chapter Notes

I'm back to tell you all We are getting close to the end, but this is not the end just yet!
Hope you enjoy this chapter, cause I love it maybe a little too much like my close
personal friend shane hollander <3

“What are you thinking?” Ilya’s voice was a low murmur in the quiet dark.

They were lying face to face on the rumpled sheets, legs tangled, a map of sweat and spent passion cooling between them. Shane’s fingers traced the sharp line of Ilya’s jaw, the curve of his ear, as if memorizing him anew. He didn’t even care they were all dirty. He’ll do that later... maybe in a few minutes.

Ilya’s own hand rested, a warm and steady weight, on the gentle swell of Shane’s belly, his thumb making absent, soothing circles. Shane was thinking about some precious words the learned earlies.

Ya tebya lyublyu.

Three words that had unspooled something deep and permanent in his chest. But they also echoed, faint and haunting, from a darker place. He was thinking of a specific phone call, of Ilya’s voice breaking with a tiredness so profound English had abandoned him. Their phone call while Ilya was in Russia for his father’s funeral.

Shane had offered him, *How about you tell me everything that’s on your mind, but in Russian? I won’t understand, but maybe it will help?* He hadn’t understood a word, but he’d absorbed the emotion like a sacrament. And somewhere in that torrent, a phrase, a cluster of sounds that had, even then, struck a different chord. He’d tucked it away, a mystery he was too afraid to examine.

“Did you say it... before?” Shane asked after a while, his voice soft.

“Say what?”

“That you love me.”

Ilya’s thumb stilled on his skin. “Before?”

“In the phone call. When you were in Russia... for your father’s funeral... and I said you could talk to me in Russian.”

A soft, incredulous breath escaped Ilya. His eyes, which had been half-lidded and sated, opened fully, searching Shane's face with a tenderness so acute it was almost painful. "So you paid attention." He said, not questioning, but stating.

"I didn't understand any of it, but... I remember, maybe, a few syllables. I don't know. I must be wrong."

"You're not." Ilya's voice was thick. He brought his hand up from Shane's belly to cup his cheek, his thumb stroking the skin there. "I said it... Before. During the phone call."

"You did?"

"I said..." Ilya closed his eyes for a second, as if returning to that cold, lonely night, and opened again to look at Shane's eyes. "I love you so much... That I didn't know what to do with that." The confirmation didn't shock him; it settled into him, a truth he'd always known in his bones finally given form.

Shane's eyes welled. He leaned in, holding Ilya's face between both hands, and kissed him. A soft press to each closed eyelid, the bridge of his nose, the point of his chin, and finally, a deep, grateful kiss on his lips. Ilya smiled against his mouth.

"And then I took that love and put a baby into your belly."

"Fuck you!" Shane laughed, the sound wet and bright, and Ilya pulled him in, tucking Shane's face into the crook of his neck, holding him as their shared laughter shook through them.

When they quieted, Shane murmured against his skin:

"I got pregnant before that."

"I know." Ilya's arms tightened. "And I was already in love before I said it in Russian, before we made our baby."

Shane let out a long, shuddering breath. Every time Ilya said it, so plainly, so sure, he felt himself melting, reforged into something stronger and more vulnerable all at once.

"What do we do now?" Shane whispered into the safe dark of Ilya's neck. The world outside this room felt vast and imposing, full of questions they couldn't outrun any longer. "My belly will get bigger. My parents already know I'm with child, but they don't know about you... No one knows."

Ilya's hand, which had been tracing idle patterns on Shane's hip, stilled. He didn't pull away, but Shane could feel the shift in his breathing, the subtle tension of thought. "So we tell them," Ilya said, his voice low but unwavering. "Your parents. Okay?"

The simplicity of it, the lack of hesitation, sent a wave of relief through Shane's chest. It was a first step, solid and sure. "Okay."

"Okay." Ilya pressed a kiss to Shane's temple, a seal on the agreement.

For a moment, they just breathed together in the quiet. But the practicalities, held at bay by the shock and the confession and the dizzying relief of being held, began to creep in like cold air under a door. Shane felt them settle in the pit of his stomach, colder than the warmth of Ilya's skin against his.

"I... I won't be able to play hockey," Shane said, the words tasting like ash and loss. It wasn't just a sport; it was his identity, his language, the thing that had defined him since he was a boy. Letting it go felt like losing a limb.

Ilya's arm tightened around him. "We will figure this out." His voice was steady, an anchor in the sudden swell of Shane's fear. "I know you love hockey. And the fans love you. They won't let you go that easily. Okay?"

We. Not *you*. The pronoun was a life raft.

"Okay..." Shane swallowed, the next hurdle rising in his mind. "But... I play in Canada. You play in the U.S."

"I'm a free agent next season."

The statement was so casual, so matter-of-fact, that it took Shane a second to process. He pulled back just enough to look at Ilya, searching his face in the dim light. "What are you saying?"

A slow, determined smile touched Ilya's lips, softening the usual sharpness of his features. "I can play for a Canadian team."

The offer was so enormous, so selfless, it stole Shane's breath. "Would you leave Boston?"

"Of course," Ilya said, as if it were the easiest decision in the world. "For you and for our baby."

A wild, hopeful idea sparked in Shane's mind, fragile and bright. He spoke it before he could second-guess it. "Ottawa needs a center."

Ilya's eyebrows lifted. He was playing along, but his eyes held a new, focused interest. "Oh, they do?" His voice was light, but his gaze was sharp.

"And a left wing."

"Yes?"

"Yes."

Understanding dawned on Ilya's face, widening his smile into something brilliant and surprised. "Oh... Oh! You are saying..."

"I'm saying that maybe we could... play on the same team?" Shane held his breath, the fantasy feeling suddenly, terrifyingly possible. "Like we did in the last All Stars game"

Ilya's playful demeanor fell away, replaced by sheer, naked seriousness. "Would you leave Montreal?"

Shane didn't hesitate. He couldn't. Not when Ilya was offering him the world. "Yes. For you... And our baby."

"But you love the Metros."

The protest was gentle, giving Shane an out if he wanted it. But Shane was done with exits. He was choosing the path straight through the heart of it all. "I love you more."

"Shane..." Ilya's voice broke on the name, rough with an emotion so deep it seemed to shake him. He didn't try to say more. Instead, he cupped Shane's face and kissed him, hard and sweet, a promise sealed in the warmth of his mouth.

Ilya giving up his hockey life in Boston and changing countries was one thing, but getting this kind of love back was much more than he ever thought he would get.

When they parted, Shane pressed their foreheads together. "I'm not gonna watch you give up your life for me and not change anything. I want you close. Every day. I'll need you quite a lot, more than I already need. And our baby will need us both."

Ilya nodded, his nose brushing Shane's. "So the plan is that we will bring a Stanley Cup to Ottawa, then."

Shane smiled, but it felt brittle on his lips. The shadow of his own doubt crept in. "I don't know if I will, but you'll definitely do that." He tried to sound light, teasing, but the sad truth bled through, staining the words.

"What do you mean?" Ilya's voice was soft, probing.

Shane looked down to where Ilya's hand had returned, splayed possessively over his stomach. "I know I said they need a center and a left wing, but... I don't know if they will actually accept me. My body won't be the same after our baby is born. They wouldn't hire a pregnant player, I think."

Ilya's expression turned fierce, protective. "I won't let you give up hockey, Hollander." He said the name like a vow. "We will figure this out. You can take a leave and get back on the ice after, if you want to. You will not do anything alone."

Shane smiled softly, feeling lighter already.

"You think I can catch up to other players after giving birth?"

"I feel they still will have to catch up to *you*, actually."

A flicker of his old confidence stirred. "Are you saying I'm the best player in the league?"

"*You are* the best player." Ilya said it like it was the most obvious fact in the world, as undeniable as gravity.

“Better than you?”

A genuine grin, bright and unguarded, spread across Ilya’s face. “Oh, better than me.”

Shane’s heart swelled, so full he thought it might burst. “I love you.”

“I love you more.”

“No, *I* definitely love you more.”

“Oh, so this is competition now?” Ilya teased, nuzzling his nose against Shane’s, their shared breath creating a small, warm world between them.

“Yes,” Shane whispered, smiling fully for the first time. “And since I’m speaking for two, I’m winning here.”

“So I will have to convince *my* baby to stay on my side,” Ilya declared, a playful challenge in his eyes. Before Shane could protest the pronoun, he was sliding down the bed in one fluid motion. He lowered himself until his face was level with Shane’s stomach, his expression transforming into one of comic, exaggerated seriousness.

“Oh, so now it’s suddenly not *our* baby anymore, it’s *yours*?” Shane laughed, the sound bright in the quiet room. He carded his fingers through Ilya’s soft hair.

“Baby Rozanov is on Papa’s side, right?” Ilya cooed, his voice dropping to a ridiculous, tender whisper. He pressed a soft, lingering kiss to the warm skin of Shane’s belly. “Tell Dad Shane I love him more.” He said a few more words in a gentle, flowing Russian, the syllables liquid and sweet, and Shane was laughing, his body shaking with the joy of it...

When he felt it.

A distinct, fluttering *thump* from deep inside. Not a cramp, not the gurgle of digestion or hunger. A real, undeniable, *deliberate* kick.

Shane’s laughter died in his throat. “Oh my God.”

Ilya froze, his lips still pressed to Shane’s skin. He’d felt it too—the tiny, seismic vibration against his mouth. He pulled back slowly, his eyes wide and stunned, locking with Shane’s in shared, breathless awe.

“Did our baby... just...” Ilya breathed, the words barely a whisper.

Slowly, reverently, as if approaching something sacred, he leaned back in. His lips brushed the same spot. “*Malysh, eto papa,*” he whispered, the Russian words soft as a prayer. *Baby, it’s Papa.*

They lay perfectly still for long minutes, barely breathing, waiting, hoping for another sign. But the baby had made its first tangible declaration to the world and, apparently satisfied, had fallen silent.

Eventually, Ilya lifted his head, a slow, dazzling grin spreading across his face, breaking the spell of wonder into something lighter, more joyous. “Maybe it was gas,” he said, his eyes dancing with mischief. “A very strong, coordinated fart. Olympic-level fart.”

“Fuck off,” Shane choked out, swatting at his arm, laughter bubbling up again, the earlier anxiety completely forgotten in the sheer, miraculous wonder of it.

“So...” Ilya said, sliding back up the bed and gathering Shane into his arms, pulling him close until they were curled together like twin spoons. “Can we talk now about our baby saying that he is on my side?”

“So... I’ll have to carry him for five to six more months, feed him, and he already prefers you?” Shane pretended to grumble, nuzzling back against Ilya’s chest.

“You can win at hockey, *moy lyubov*,” Ilya murmured, pressing a kiss to Shane’s temple. “I can win at parenting.” He squeezed him gently. “We’re even.”

Shane didn’t question it. He let out a long, contented sigh, every muscle going lax. He curled deeper into Ilya’s side, his head finding its perfect spot on Ilya’s chest, listening to the steady, strong heartbeat under his ear. He felt the warm, heavy weight of Ilya’s arm around him, the protective curve of his body molding to Shane’s back. A profound sense of rightness settled over him, soft and secure as a favorite blanket.

Ilya was already winning. And Shane, his heart so full he thought it might glow in the dark, felt, without a single doubt, like the luckiest omega in the world.

Ilya had showered first, insisting he’d make them something to eat as soon as he was done. When he left the bathroom, his head snapped up, and a seriousness broke across his face.

“Pregnant people have desires, yes?” he announced, his voice brimming with eager energy. He stepped close, hands coming up as if to frame the question in the air. “Do you desire something right now? I can get it!” His towel still firm around his hips.

He looked so earnest, so ready to sprint to a store at any moment if needed, that Shane felt a wave of fondness crash over him. Before Shane could answer, Ilya was already brainstorming contingencies, his eyes sparkling.

“Or is there some food you hate now? If I have it in my fridge I can throw it away, it is not a problem.” He said it with the grave seriousness of someone defusing a bomb, not considering a condiment.

Shane couldn’t help it. He closed the distance between them and wrapped his arms around Ilya’s neck, burying his face in the warm, clean skin of his shoulder and breathing him in. Ilya’s arms came around him instantly, solid and sure, and he felt the press of soft lips against the side of his neck, a kiss that was both greeting and promise.

“I think I’ll eat anything,” Shane mumbled, his own stomach asking vividly for food. “I’m starving.”

Ilya pulled back just enough to cradle Shane’s face, his thumbs stroking his cheeks. His expression shifted from excitement to deep concern. “You are feeling weak? Want to eat before shower?” His eyes searched Shane’s, looking for any sign of pallor or dizziness, his hands firm on Shane’s waist as if ready to support his full weight.

Shane shook his head, a small, tired smile touching his lips. “I’m not feeling weak, just hungry and tired.” It was the truth, a deep fatigue had settled into his bones, and the hollow ache in his stomach was more pronounced now.

The concern in Ilya’s eyes softened into tender mischief. “Do you want me to take shower with you?” he offered, his voice dropping to a low, suggestive murmur. “I can hold you and wash your hair and body for you.” His hands slid from Shane’s waist to the small of his back, drawing him closer.

A laugh bubbled out of Shane, real, bright, and freeing. He swatted playfully at Ilya’s chest. “I don’t think it’s a good idea if your intention is to feed me properly soon.”

Ilya grinned, leaning in to capture Shane’s mouth in a soft, quick peck, a taste of sweetness amid the hunger. “So go shower,” he said, releasing him with a final, gentle squeeze. “And I’ll make you something healthy and tasty, if it’s possible for those two things to go together.” He took his phone from the bed, waving it with determination. “I will google it.”

Shane’s laughter followed him as he turned back toward the bathroom. For the first time in weeks, the hunger in his stomach felt like a simple, solvable problem, and the warmth in his chest felt like home.

The hot water had washed away the last lingering tremors from the journey and the intensity of their conversation, leaving Shane clean and loose-limbed. He toweled off, smiling as he heard the gentle clatter of pans from the kitchen, the scent that drifting down the hall warm and savory.

He pulled on the clothes Ilya had left for him, a soft, worn pair of sweatpants and a large Boston Raiders t-shirt that smelled overwhelmingly of Ilya’s soap and skin.

“Asshole” Shane said laughing with Ilya’s joke.

Dressed in his rival’s clothes, carrying his child, Shane felt a surge of possessive joy so sharp it almost took his breath away.

He padded barefoot into the kitchen.

Ilya was at the stove, his back to him, intently focused on a sizzling pan. He’d changed into fresh sweats and a t-shirt, his damp hair curling at the nape of his neck.

“What are you preparing?” Shane asked, leaning against the doorway.

Ilya turned, his face brightening at the sight of Shane in his clothes and smirking at the sight of the Boston Raiders' t-shirt. "Ah! Perfect timing."

He walked towards Shane to give him a peck in the lips and looked at his feet. "Take it, not good for the baby that you to walk barefoot" He gave Shane his own slippers before walking back to the counter and Shane happily put in on.

On both plates above it there were two perfectly golden pieces of whole-wheat toast, lightly buttered. Next to them, half a ripe avocado had been meticulously sliced into neat, fanning wedges, drizzled with a little olive oil and a delicate pinch of salt. In a small bowl beside the plate sat a scoop of plain Greek yogurt, topped with a drizzle of honey and a handful of fresh blueberries. A tall glass of water with a slice of lemon completed the spread.

Shane didn't know what to say.

"It is simple," Ilya said, his voice softening, almost shy. "Easy on the stomach. The toast and avocado for good fats and fiber. Yogurt for protein, berries for vitamins. No strong smells, no spices." He looked at Shane, his eyes warm and watchful. "I read that simple sometimes is better."

The care in it, the research, the deliberate gentleness of every choice, wrapped around Shane's heart. This wasn't a gourmet attempt; it was a quiet act of protection; nourishment built with tenderness instead of flair.

"It looks perfect," Shane said, his voice thick. "Thank you."

Ilya's shoulders relaxed, a relieved smile touching his lips. "*Pozhaluysta*," he murmured. "Means You're welcome." He pulled out a chair at the small kitchen table, which he'd already set with a placemat and a cloth napkin. "Come, sit. You are eating for two, *moy lyubov*."

Shane did a mental note that he had to learn Russian. Ilya would probably teach the language their kid, and Shane loved to think about it.

He sat, and Ilya carefully placed the plate before him, then sat down across the table, watching his face expectantly. Shane picked up a slice of toast, layered a few slices of creamy avocado on top, and took a bite. It was simple, yes, but it was also the most thoughtful, comforting meal he'd had in weeks.

Ilya picked up his own fork, but his gaze rarely left Shane as they began to eat, sharing their first quiet, ordinary, and deeply nourishing meal as a family of three.

Shane had just taken the last bite of creamy avocado when he felt the familiar buzz against his thigh. He pulled the phone from the pocket of Ilya's borrowed sweatpants and glanced at the screen.

His mother's name glowed up at him, a quiet reminder of the other life waiting beyond this warm, safe kitchen. Ilya's eyes flicked from Shane's face to the phone and back, his fork

pausing mid-air. The easy comfort of the moment held its breath, poised on the edge of the next truth they'd have to tell.

Chapter 7: the family

Chapter Notes

Here I am, using ALL my free time to immerse myself into this beautiful abo mpreg hollanov world, cause the real world sucks. Thank you for reading, and please read the note at the end of the chapter in which I apologize haha

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

Shane was trying to get used to the idea of telling the truth to his parents while Ilya made a massage in his feet, they both lying in silence on the couch. Shane stared at the ceiling, nothing much to stare at there. A big white canvas he could use to organize his thoughts.

He didn't pick up his mother's call earlier, just sent her a text telling her everything was fine – which, for sure, was not another lie – and that later they would talk. Well, it was already 6 p.m., and he couldn't figure out how to call her back.

Ilya's thumbs pressed gently into the arch of Shane's foot, kneading away the phantom tension of travel and fear. He'd been quiet, letting Shane drift in his own thoughts, but his touch was a constant, grounding presence. After a long moment, Ilya broke the silence, his voice low and calm in the dimming light of the room:

“You know,” he said, not looking up from his task, “when I was younger... my mother always said the truth is like one of those little pieces of wood that hurt, a...”

“Splinter?”

“Yes, that. The longer you leave it in, the deeper it gets, and the more it hurts to pull out. Better to just... take it out fast.”

Shane let out a slow breath, his eyes still fixed on the blank ceiling.

“My mom's not going to have a tweezer ready for this one, Ilya. This is more like... surgery.”

Ilya's hands stilled for a second, then resumed their gentle motion. “Maybe. But you will not be alone.” He finally looked up, his gaze steady. “I can come with you. We tell them together.”

Shane's eyes dropped from the ceiling to meet Ilya's. The offer was so simple, so solid. It wasn't just moral support; it was a shared front. A united stand.

“Would you?” he asked, his voice softer than he intended. Ilya didn't hesitate.

“Yes. Of course.”

He gave Shane's foot a final, reassuring squeeze and shifted on the couch, turning to face him fully. "It is my responsibility, too. My baby, too. My..." He paused, the word boyfriend hovering in the air between them, new and still tender. "Boyfriend, the person I love. They should hear it from both of us."

Shane sat up slowly, pulling his feet onto the couch and tucking them beneath him. The weight on his chest felt a little lighter, distributed across two sets of shoulders instead of one. "Okay," he said, the word a decision. "Okay. Together." He breathed slowly and deep. "But when?"

Ilya didn't miss a beat. "Whenever you are ready. Today. Tomorrow. The day after. How you want it to be"

Shane shook his head, his thoughts crystallizing. "Not over the phone," he said firmly. "I can't... I can't just say this to her voice on a speaker or through video call. And I won't make you do that, either."

He looked down at their now joined hands, then back up at Ilya. "They deserve to see our faces. To see... you. In person"

Understanding warmed Ilya's eyes. "So we go to them."

"Yeah." Shane nodded, the plan taking shape with a sudden, quiet clarity. "We fly to Ottawa. We sit down in their living room. And we tell them everything."

The idea was terrifying, but it felt right, honorable, in a way a phone call could never be. Ilya squeezed his hand.

"Then we go to Ottawa." He said it like it was the simplest plan in the world. "I will book the flights. You tell them we are coming to visit. We do not have to say why yet."

Shane let out a shaky breath that was mostly relief. The endless loop of dread – how, when, where – was finally breaking. They had a direction. A path. And they'd be walking it side by side.

"When do you want it to be?" Ilya asked, still caressing Shane's hands.

"I think... Can we go to Ottawa tomorrow?" he asked, adding later: "I mean, I don't how is your schedule with the team or... You get a say too. I want it when you want it too"

Ilya smiles fondly and caressed Shane's freckles this time.

"We can go tomorrow. It is no problem"

"Okay," Shane said again, stronger this time.

He reached for his phone, not to call, but to text. His thumbs moved quickly, typing out a message to his mother that felt, for the first time in weeks, completely true:

Shane: Hey Mom. I'm coming home tomorrow.

Shane: Don't worry, everything is good.

Shane: Love you.

He showed the screen to Ilya, who smiled and gave a firm, approving nod.

"I don't want to let them anxious" Shane said, dropping his phone in the coffee table and lying his head on Ilya's lap, where he could get free patting in his hair.

Ilya's hand came to rest in his hair almost immediately, fingers carding through his soft black hair with a soothing rhythm, while the other hand was caressing Shane's stomach.

Shane closed his eyes, breathing in the quiet comfort of the moment. It was still there, the low hum of fear about tomorrow, about his parents, about everything that would follow, but it was muted now, softened by the solid warmth of Ilya's thigh beneath his head and the steady certainty of his touch.

With Ilya beside him, the weight felt shared, the path felt possible. He let himself imagine, just for a second, what it might be like if Ilya's own family were a place of comfort instead of complication; if there was another home, another set of arms, waiting to welcome them both without judgment or pain. But that wasn't Ilya's story. His story was now here, in this quiet room, building something new from the fragments they'd both been given.

"Have you talked to your brother lately?" Shane asked softly, the question floating into the stillness. Ilya's hand stilled for a heartbeat.

"Uh-uhm," he denied, the sound low and dismissive.

"Is that a good thing?"

"Probably. I don't know." Ilya's voice was flat, resigned.

Shane shifted slightly, turning his face to press into the soft fabric of Ilya's sweatpants. "I'm sorry about your family. Even if they suck, you must miss them."

"My mother didn't suck," Ilya said, his voice caring this sadness. "She was great." The words hung in the air, tender and raw.

Shane knew she had died, but the *how* was a shadow he'd never asked Ilya to step into. Shane sat up slowly, turning to face him. He cupped Ilya's cheek, his thumb stroking the sharp line of his jaw. "How did she die?" Ilya's eyes, which had been fixed somewhere distant, flicked back to Shane's and then to somewhere in his shoulders.

"By accident," he said, the words carefully measured. "She accidentally swallowed a whole bottle of pills."

The clarification hung between them, a fragile shield. *Accident.*

Shane's heart ached. He didn't press. Instead, he asked:

“How old were you?”

“Twelve.” Ilya’s voice was hollow. “I found her.” A sharp, visceral pain lanced through Shane’s chest. He could see it, the ghost of a twelve-year-old boy, too serious, too brave, carrying a horror no child should ever know.

Ilya swallowed hard, his gaze dropping to his own hands. “I don’t want you to think she was weak,” he whispered, the vulnerability in his voice so raw it was almost physical.

“I don’t,” Shane said instantly, firmly. He leaned in, capturing Ilya’s face in both hands, forcing their eyes to meet. “I don’t,” he repeated, softer. A few tears escaped then, tracing silent paths down Ilya’s cheeks. Shane didn’t wipe them away; he just held him, his thumbs stroking his skin, an anchor in the rising tide of memory.

“She wasn’t.” Ilya continued, his voice cracking. “She was so funny. And beautiful. She was so sad. And my dad was so hard on her, and...” He trailed off, the rest of the sentence lost to a shaky inhale.

Shane couldn’t stand the distance. He moved, shifting until he was settled in Ilya’s lap, straddling him, their bodies close. He framed Ilya’s face again, leaning in to press a soft, lingering kiss to his lips, a promise, a transfer of strength.

“Do you want me to get you something?” Shane murmured against his mouth, his own eyes stinging. “Do you want some water?”

“No,” Ilya choked out, his arms coming up to wrap tightly around Shane’s back.

He buried his face in the hollow of Shane’s neck, his breath hot and unsteady against his skin. Shane held him, one hand cradling the back of his head, the other rubbing slow, firm circles on his back, holding him together as the walls finally, quietly, came down. In the silence of the room, with the future waiting just outside the door, they held the past between them, gentle and shared.

Minutes passed, marked only by the slowing of Ilya’s breaths and the steady beat of Shane’s heart beneath his ear. Eventually, Ilya stilled, his weight settling more fully against Shane, no longer trembling, just held.

Slowly, Shane leaned back just enough to see Ilya’s face. His lashes were damp, his eyes red-rimmed but clear. His eyes were incredibly blue.

Shane cupped his cheeks with both hands, his thumbs brushing away the last traces of tears. A soft, hopeful smile touched Shane’s lips.

“Hey,” he whispered, his voice gentle. “Do you want to know if it’s a boy or a girl?”

Ilya’s eyes widened slightly. For a moment, he just stared at Shane’s mouth, as if the words had taken shape there first. Then his gaze lifted, meeting Shane’s, and a spark of pure, unguarded wonder lit his face.

His heartbeat, which had only just settled, picked up again, a quick, eager rhythm Shane could feel through the press of their bodies.

“Do you know?” Ilya asked, his voice still rough but threaded with excitement.

Shane shook his head. “The doctor gave me an envelope, but I didn’t open it. I brought it with me. It’s in my bag, still in the car.”

The revelation hung between them, a small, sealed mystery they now owned together. Ilya’s breath caught. His hands, which had been resting loosely on Shane’s hips, tightened their grip.

“Do you want us to open together?” Ilya didn’t answer with words. He surged forward, capturing Shane’s mouth in a kiss that tasted of salt and sudden, fierce joy. It was a yes, a thank you, a promise all at once. When he pulled back, his eyes were shining.

“Da,” he breathed. “Yes. I want to know with you.”

They stood together, a little unsteady, and Shane grabbed the car keys from the side table. Hand in hand, they walked through the quiet house and in the entrance and Ilya grabbed the keys, not letting Shane out into the cool night air.

Shane watched Ilya pulling his backpack from inside and get back inside the house. Once inside, Ilya held it so Shane could unzip it, his fingers brushing past folded clothes until they closed around the small, crisp envelope. He held it out to Ilya.

The white rectangle looked impossibly significant under the dim glow of the trunk light. Shane handed it to Ilya, who took it carefully, holding it as if it were made of glass. He looked from the envelope to Shane, his expression so full of awe it made Shane’s throat tighten.

“Come here” Ilya said, holding Shane’s hand and guiding them back to his bedroom.

Shane nodded, moving to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with him.

Once in the bedroom, both seated at the end of the bed, Ilya slid his finger under the sealed flap, his movements deliberate. The paper gave way with a soft tear. He pulled out a single, small slip of paper. Holding it so they could both see, he angled it toward the light.

One line. Two words. They read it at the same time, their breaths mingling in the cool air. For a moment, there was only silence, the world narrowing to those two words on a slip of paper. Then Ilya let out a soft, shaky laugh, pure happiness breaking across his face. He turned, pulling Shane into a tight embrace right there in the quiet suburban driveway.

“A boy,” Shane whispered against his shoulder, the reality of it blooming warm and bright in his chest.

“Our son” Ilya murmured into his hair.

They stood holding each other in the dark, the future no longer a distant, fearful mystery, but a small, certain, beautiful truth held between them. They were having a baby boy.

Ilya finally pulled back after some shared, quiet tears of pure joy, his eyes still shimmering in the soft lamplight. He looked into Shane's eyes, his thumb brushing a lingering wetness from Shane's cheekbone. A slow, familiar grin tugged at the corner of his mouth, breaking the sacred stillness with something lighter, something theirs.

"So," he said, the word full of playful implication. "A boy. Which means he will probably look like me." Shane rolled his eyes but couldn't suppress the smile that bloomed in response, softening the mock-annoyance.

"Oh, really? And what makes you so sure?"

"Because it would be unfair to the world for there to be two Shane Hollanders," Ilya declared, as if explaining a fundamental law of physics. "One is already too perfect. The universe needs balance." He leaned in closer, his voice dropping to a conspiratorial murmur. "But I want him to have your freckles."

Shane laughed, the sound bright and unguarded, and gave Ilya a gentle shove that didn't budge him an inch. "I can't believe you like my freckles that much."

"They are beautiful!" Ilya insisted, his hand coming up to trace a fleeting path over Shane's cheekbone. "They take my breath away." Shane felt his cheeks warm under the touch and the praise.

"They do?"

"Yes. Your eyes, too."

"They're normal eyes."

"Oh, no, no." Ilya said, his gaze turning impossibly tender. "They are perfect, too. I love the way you look at me with them."

"And how do I look at you?" Shane asked with pure tenderness.

"With pervert eyes," Ilya stated matter-of-factly.

"I'm not a pervert!" Shane protested, though his laughter betrayed him.

"Oh, Hollander," Ilya sighed with exaggerated pity. "You are. Very much"

"Fuck you!"

Instantly, Ilya's hands flew to Shane's belly, cupping the gentle curve as if shielding tiny, innocent ears. His expression was one of comic horror.

"Do not curse! Baby boy might hear you!" Shane laughed again, louder this time, the sound rich and full, shaking through his body and into Ilya's palms. He gave up on protest and just

wrapped his arms around Ilya's neck, pulling him close, shaking his head in helpless, happy surrender.

They stayed like that, wrapped up in each other, Ilya's hands still resting protectively on Shane's stomach, their mingled laughter settling into a contented, breathless quiet. In the safe cocoon of the room, with their son's future whispering between them, they were simply two people hopelessly in love.

The Ottawa air was cooler, sharper than Boston's, carrying the familiar scent of pine and distant lake water.

It was a clean, bracing slap of home that did nothing to calm the nerves simmering in Shane's stomach. His baseball cap was pulled low, his sunglasses shielding his eyes from both the afternoon glare and any wandering, curious glances. He looked like any other traveler, maybe a little tense, maybe hiding a hangover.

He was hiding a pregnancy.

And the other father of his baby was currently lingering just inside the terminal, giving him a two-minute head start. It had been Shane's idea, delivered with that pragmatic, slightly paranoid logic that came from a lifetime of managing public perception. We do not walk out together. *Not yet.*

Shane would go to the car rental. Ilya would follow. Less chance of a photo, less chance of questions neither of us wants to answer right now. Ilya had agreed.

It felt silly, cloak-and-dagger, but the alternative – strolling through the airport side-by-side with Ilya Rozanov, his most famous rival, while three months pregnant with his child – was a headline so explosive he couldn't even fully picture it. *Yet.*

So, he played his part. He'd texted his parents from the plane:

Shane: Landed. Gonna rent the car and drive home. See you soon.

His mother's reply had been a simple:

Mom: Drive safe, honey. We'll be here.

No questions about why he'd need a car for a twenty-minute drive when they would have happily picked him up. That quiet acceptance, that lack of probing, told him everything. They knew something big was coming. They were braced.

He walked briskly to the rental counters, the motion automatic. He filled out the forms with a hand that only trembled slightly, his mind replaying the feel of Ilya's head against his chest the night before, the shaky warmth of his breath, the weight of a grief shared and held. That vulnerability felt a world away from this bright, public space, but it was the fuel that kept his feet moving forward.

Key fob in hand, he found the nondescript sedan in the lot, threw his bag in the back, and slid into the driver's seat. He didn't start the engine. He checked the time on his phone and watched the pedestrian flow from the terminal in the rearview mirror. Tourists, families, businesspeople. Then, a taller, broader silhouette emerged, moving with a relaxed, unhurried confidence that was pure Ilya. He, too, wore sunglasses, but the cap was backwards.

Fuck. He is too sexy.

He looked like he was trying to be incognito, which, for a man with his profile, meant he looked like a famous hockey player trying to be incognito. Ilya's gaze swept the lot, located the car, and he ambled over, hands in his pockets.

He opened the passenger door and slid in, filling the space with his presence and the faint, clean scent of airport soap and his own skin. The door clicked shut, sealing them in a bubble of silence.

Okay?" Ilya asked, Shane nodded, finally turning the key. The engine purged to life.

"Okay." He pulled out of the parking spot, merging into the traffic heading toward his parents' house, as a united front, toward the conversation that would change everything.

"Oh my God, I'm freaking out! Sorry." Shane said, holding Ilya's hand tighter than usual.

They had already parked in front of Shane's parents' house. The parking space was not visible from inside the house, so Shane was using it for his advantage.

"I will be there with you no matter what they say." Ilya brought their joined hands up and pressed a firm kiss to Shane's knuckles. "You are not alone in this. Okay?"

The words, spoken so plainly, so close, cut through the static in Shane's mind. The fear was still there, a cold knot in his stomach, but it was no longer drowning him. It was met, squarely, by the warmth of Ilya's hand in his, the certainty in his voice, the promise in his eyes.

Shane took one more deep, shuddering breath, then let it out slowly, his shoulders dropping slightly. He looked from Ilya's face to the house, then back again. The path forward was still terrifying, but it was clear. And he wouldn't be walking it alone.

"Okay," Shane said, his voice steadier. He nodded, mostly to himself. "Okay. Let's go."

Ilya gave his neck one last reassuring squeeze before releasing him. "Let's go." he said softly.

Together, they opened the car doors and stepped out into the crisp Ottawa afternoon. No more hiding behind sunglasses or staggered exits. Shane in front of Ilya, they walked up the familiar path to the front door, ready to face what came next.

Together.

Chapter End Notes

As I was writing, the chapter kept getting bigger and bigger and I decided to cut it in half. I'm sorry. Don't kill me, please.

I promise I'll update soon, as I've been doing.

Thank you again for your support and all the comments! I thought no one would leave a comment and I would be writing to ghosts, and though I would still happily write for ghosts, reading all the comments made the writing easier.

Love y'all!!

Chapter 8: the truth

Chapter Notes

I'm back with a new chapter, y'all 😎

I'll ask you to read the note at the end of the chapter, please! I have a question about next steps and it would be very important if you could give your opinion!!

Enjoy this chapter! 💕💕

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

Shane pushed the front door open, the warm, cinnamon-scented air of his childhood house washing over him. For a moment, he was just a son coming home. Then Ilya stepped in behind him, a solid, silent presence at his shoulder, and the past dissolved into the present tense.

“Hey, it’s me, Shane.” he called out, his voice echoing slightly in the hallway.

He found his parents standing together in the living room, as if they’d been waiting since his text.

“Hi” he greeted one more time, as to confirm that he was indeed there.

His mother had her hands tangled in front of her body in a kind of held-breath anticipation. His father stood beside her, hands in his pockets, his expression carefully neutral. They looked braced. Prepared for a difficult talk, for tears, for a hard truth.

Then their eyes slid past Shane and landed on Ilya.

All that careful preparation shattered. His mother’s hands fell to her sides. His father’s eyebrows shot up toward his hairline. Pure, unvarnished shock froze their features. It wasn’t anger. It was the cognitive dissonance of seeing their son’s most notorious rival, the man from a hundred heated highlight reels, standing calmly in their foyer.

Shane’s mouth went dry. He cleared his throat, forcing himself to speak to his parents while staring at a point just over his mother’s shoulder. “Mom, Dad, this is Ilya... Rozanov. But you already know that.”

Ilya gave a small, polite nod. “Hi.”

The silence that followed was thick enough to choke on. Shane scrambled for the right words.

“He is... we’re...” he stammered, the sentence dying in the air.

The script he'd rehearsed vanished. *He is the father* felt too blunt, a hand grenade. *We're together* felt too small, a lie by omission.

Ilya's hand came to rest on his shoulder, warm and steadying. He didn't hesitate. "Lovers," he said, the word simple, clear, and devastatingly direct in the quiet room.

Shane flinched, a hot flush creeping up his neck. "No. Ilya, that's *gross*." It was a reflexive, almost teenage objection, born of sheer nerves and the surreal pressure of the moment.

His mother found her voice first, but it was thin with confusion. "But... you *hate* him."

Shane finally met her eyes, saw the bewilderment there, and his own fear softened into a pang of guilt. He shook his head. "No. I-I mean, I get that, but no." He took a shallow breath, and the next words came out quieter, truer. "I actually... I love him."

The admission hung in the air, shifting the shock on his parents' faces into something more complex, more profound.

"Can we just sit down, please?" Shane asked, his voice barely above a whisper.

Without a word, his parents turned and led the way to the dining room. They took their usual seats on one side of the polished wooden table. Shane and Ilya sat opposite them, side by side. The table had never felt so wide, nor so much like a negotiation table.

His mother, moving on autopilot, had already put the kettle on. She returned with a tray bearing four steaming mugs of tea, the familiar domestic ritual a stark contrast to the seismic shift taking place in her dining room.

She placed a mug in front of each of them, her hands trembling only slightly, before sitting back down and folding her hands in her lap, waiting. The stage was set. The tea was poured. There was nothing left to do but tell the rest of the truth.

Shane had to step up.

He took a shallow breath, his fingers tightening around the warm ceramic of his mug. He didn't look at the tea. He looked at his parents, at his mother's worried, kind eyes, at his father's steady, waiting expression. The words felt too big for the quiet room.

"Ilya is my baby's father." The silence this time was different. The shock from before had been about Ilya's presence. This was about consequence.

His mother's hand fluttered to her mouth. Even though it might have been expected from the moment they saw Rozanov, it was still a big announcement.

His father's gaze flicked between Shane and Ilya, processing, connecting timelines. Shane rushed on, the apology tumbling out.

"I-I'm sorry I didn't tell you sooner. Things were... complicated."

“Complicated,” his father repeated, not as an accusation, but as a soft echo, inviting explanation. “I can picture that”.

Shane’s mother found her voice, her tone gentle but thick with emotion, directed at Rozanov. “So when you came to the hospital...” She was piecing it together, the unexpected visit taking on a devastating new meaning.

“I came because I was scared for him, after Marleau hit him” Ilya said, and the raw honesty in it was unmistakable. “But I did not know Shane was pregnant. He found out after I left...”

“I didn’t tell him sooner because I was trying to find the right way...” Shane said, lowering his voice next. “And because I was afraid.”

“Afraid of what, honey?” his mother asked, turning her pained, understanding eyes back to Shane. Shane swallowed.

“Afraid of... everything?” Shane confessed, his voice fraying at the edges. “Of what it would mean for my career. For his. Of what people would say.” He swallowed, his gaze dropping to the untouched tea. “What it would mean to me and Ilya’s... relationship.” He glanced at Ilya, drawing strength from the solid, unwavering presence beside him. “And... I was afraid of disappointing you. All of you.”

“Oh, Shane,” his mother breathed, her eyes glistening with unshed tears that held more understanding than judgment. “You could never disappoint us by loving someone.”

His father leaned forward, his elbows settling on the polished wood of the table. His focus shifted, landing squarely on Ilya. His voice was measured, not harsh, but genuinely, deeply curious. “How long has this been going on?”

Shane and Ilya exchanged a look. A faint, almost imperceptible smile touched Ilya’s lips at the memory. Shane, on the other hand, felt a wave of pure, hot mortification at having to translate their hidden history into words for his parents. “Since, hm... Since our... rookie season,” he managed, the timeline feeling both vast and insufficient.

“Since your *rookie season*?” His mother’s eyes got bigger, another layer of shock settling over her features. The years of public rivalry recalibrated in an instant.

Ilya shook his head gently, Looking at Shane in confusion. “No, it’s not true. The summer before.”

Shane looked at Ilya’s hands, not having the courage to look at his eyes. He would melt with stress. “Not helpful.”

“The summer *before*?” his mother echoed, her mind clearly doing the math, rewriting years of her son’s life. “So, you two have been in love since...”

“No!” The denial burst from both of them simultaneously, intense and immediate. Shane’s cheeks flamed. Ilya laughed.

“Just...” Ilya started, then faltered. How could he explain the tangled, physical, emotionally guarded thing they had been? You didn’t say *we used to just fuck* to your boyfriend’s mother over tea.

“Just what?” his mother pressed, her curiosity now tinged with maternal bluntness.

“Just... Just...” Ilya floundered, uncharacteristically lost for words.

“Ilya...” Shane warned, a plea in his name.

His mother’s eyes widened slightly as understanding dawned. “Oh! Okay.”

“Just what?” his father asked, genuinely lost.

“...Lovers,” his mother supplied, the word landing with soft, devastating accuracy.

Shane closed his eyes and braced himself, his voice clear. “Okay, no one is allowed to use that word again!”

A heavy, almost comical silence followed. Shane’s father broke it, his gaze fixed on Ilya. “Rozanov, I...” he began, his voice still that careful, assessing baritone.

“Ilya,” Ilya corrected gently. It wasn’t a challenge, but an offering, an invitation to cross from formality into the intimate, messy reality of the family he was asking to join.

His father accepted it with a slow nod. “Ilya... I’ve gotta say I’m surprised. You have quite a reputation as a lady’s man.”

Ilya didn’t flinch or look away. “Hm. It isn’t untrue,” he said, the honesty stark and disarming.

Shane sat up straighter, a flicker of protective pride in his eyes. “Ilya likes both,” he stated plainly, a simple fact that carried the weight of a defense.

“It’s true,” Ilya continued, his gaze steady on Shane’s father. “I’ve been with many women.” He paused, and the air in the room seemed to still. He looked at Shane. “But... I’ve been in love with only one person.” And then looked at Shane’s parentes, a way to assure them he was being truthful.

Shane’s breath caught, sharp and sweet in his chest. He found Ilya’s foot under the table, their ankles pressing together, a hidden point of contact, a silent *I love you*.

“Same here,” Shane said, his voice thick. “Only one.”

Ilya continued, his expression open and solemn. “My intention is to be with him. To be a father to our child. To support him, in every way I can.” He let the words settle; a vow made in the quiet of their dining room. “I know this may not be what you imagined for him. But I love your son. And I will spend the rest of my life making sure he knows it, and that our child is safe, and loved.”

The rest of my life.

The phrase echoed in the quiet room, vast and certain. Shane felt it land in the center of him, a promise that unspooled into a future he could suddenly see. Clear, shared, and breathtakingly real. A flutter of pure, dizzying joy, bright as butterfly wings, took flight in his stomach, a secret celebration beneath the weight of the moment. The fear was still there, but it was now cradled by something infinitely stronger: a love that was no longer a secret to the ones Shane loved the most – the ones that truly mattered – spoken aloud in the one place that mattered most.

The room was silent again, but the tension had shifted. The shock was melting, replaced by a dawning, weary acceptance, and beneath that, the first faint glimmer of reluctant grace.

Shane's mother looked them with more attention; at the determined set of Ilya's jaw, and finally at her son's tear-bright, hopeful eyes. She let out a long, slow sigh; a release of the old story, and the first breath of a new one.

"Well," she said softly, reaching for her tea. "I suppose we have a lot more to talk about." She took a sip, her gaze settling on Ilya with a new, searching softness. "Starting with what food do you like, Ilya. Do you eat spaghetti?"

The question was so ordinary, so domestic, that it hung in the air for a second, absurd and perfect. The tension in Shane's shoulders, which had been wound tight enough to snap, loosened a fraction. It wasn't completely an approval, not yet, but it was an offering. An invitation into the small, daily rhythms of family.

Ilya, who had been braced for more interrogation, for skepticism or coolness, blinked. A slow, genuine smile spread across his face, softening the intense lines of his expression. "Yes," he said, his voice warm. "I eat spaghetti. I like it very much."

"Good," she said, nodding as if this were a crucial piece of information. "Because Shane's father makes a very good meat sauce. It's his specialty." She glanced at her husband, who gave a small, almost imperceptible nod of confirmation, a quiet signal of truce, if not yet full alliance.

Shane's father cleared his throat, his own posture relaxing minutely. "I have to start working, then," he said, his tone playful. "Spaghetti for five it is." He gestured toward Shane, the reality of the pregnancy settling into the space between them, no longer a shock but a fact to be accommodated.

Shane felt something unlock in his chest, a fragile, blooming warmth. This wasn't the end of the conversation; there would be logistics, worries about the press, questions about the future. But his mother was asking about spaghetti. His father was planning to cook. They were making room at the table, literally and figuratively, for Ilya. For their baby. For the new life growing quietly in the room.

He reached under the table and found Ilya's hand again, squeezing it tightly. *We're okay*, the grip said. *We're going to be okay.*

His mother saw the movement, her eyes lingering on their concealed hands. She didn't comment. Instead, she took another sip of her tea, the mug hiding a smile. Seeing her son that happy were a reminder of every right decision she had made during life since his birth. Their family would be okay.

The dinner table was set with a large, steaming bowl of spaghetti and the rich, savory scent of simmered tomatoes and herbs. The earlier tension had dissolved into a low hum of cautious warmth, the kind that follows a storm when the air is clean and everyone is just glad to be inside.

Ilya was eating like it was the best thing he'd ever tasted. He twirled the pasta with a focus usually reserved for game tape, loading each forkful with extra sauce from the communal bowl. After his third bite, he reached for the grated parmesan, sprinkling a generous layer over the already-rich mound.

Shane's father watched from the head of the table, a faint, almost imperceptible smile touching his lips. Without a word, he picked up the sauce boat and nudged it closer to Ilya's place setting, a small, silent gesture of approval. Ilya looked up, caught his eye, and gave a quick, grateful nod before helping himself to another ladleful.

Across the table, Shane's mother was in logistics mode. She'd traded her worried expression for one of practical determination, slicing through the emotional weight with plans and possibilities. "So," she said, twirling a modest portion onto her own fork, "the team doctors can arrange a medical leave. We'll say it's for the collarbone and the post-concussion recovery. Nobody will question it. That gives you time." She looked at Shane, her gaze steady. "You'll have the baby, you'll heal, and then you can decide what comes next on the ice. No rush." She then turned her attention to Ilya, her tone shifting to one of strategic support. "And for your move, Ilya, once the season ends and you're a free agent, we can help. I know a realtor who's very discreet. We can look for a place with a yard, maybe not too far from here. Something quiet, private. Good for a family." She said the last word without flinching, as if it were already a fact.

Shane listened, a knot of gratitude tightening his throat. She wasn't just accepting it, she was building a runway for them. Making space in her world for Ilya, for the baby, for this new, sprawling version of a family.

"Ottawa makes sense," she added, glancing at Shane. "It's quieter than Montreal. More manageable. And it'll be good for the baby to have family close by."

She didn't say I want to be near my grandchild, but she didn't have to. It hung in the air, sweet and undeniable.

Ilya wiped his mouth with a napkin, his plate nearly clean. "Thank you," he said, his voice sincere. "For the food. And for... the help. It means very much."

The sentence landed between them like a stone dropped into still water. Shane froze, the glass of apple juice halfway to his lips. Across from him, Ilya's fork, empty except for a stray

strand of spaghetti, hovered in the air. He chewed slowly, his eyes locked on Shane's. A silent, wide-eyed conversation passed between them in the span of a heartbeat, a sudden, shared realization.

They don't know.

A slow grin spread across Shane's face, so wide it made his cheeks ache. He lowered his glass with deliberate slowness, the soft clink against the tablecloth sounding unnaturally loud. His mother caught the look.

"What?" she asked, her eyes narrowing playfully. "Don't tell me you're already picking out tiny skates. We haven't even bought a crib yet."

Ilya swallowed his bite, setting his fork down with a careful, almost ceremonial neatness. He dabbed his mouth with his napkin, a flicker of amusement in his eyes as he looked from Shane's gleeful expression to his mother's curious one.

"Actually," Shane began, his voice bubbling with contained laughter. He looked at Ilya, who gave a tiny, encouraging nod. "We, uh... we might have skipped ahead a little on one detail."

His father leaned back in his chair, arms crossed, a bemused smirk on his face. "Oh? Did you already started picking names?"

"That's not it," Shane said, shaking his head. He took a deep breath, the joy of the secret finally too big to hold. "We know. We know if it's a boy or a girl."

His mother's hands stilled, her bread forgotten. "You do? Since when?"

"Since last night," Ilya supplied, his voice warm. "In Boston. The doctor gave Shane an envelope."

The room seemed to lean in. His mother's eyes were shining, all traces of practicality replaced by pure, grandmotherly anticipation. "And?" she whispered.

Shane looked at Ilya, whose proud, soft smile said everything. He reached under the table and found Ilya's hand again, squeezing it once before turning back to his parents.

"It's a boy," he said, the words simple and miraculous. For a second, there was only silence.

Then his mother let out a small, choked sound that was half-laugh, half-sob, her hands flying to her mouth. "A boy!" she repeated, as if testing the shape of it.

His father's stern expression melted into a look of stunned, genuine delight. He looked from Shane to Ilya, his gaze lingering on the man who would be the father of his grandson. "A boy," he echoed, a slow smile spreading across his face.

Shane's mom reached across the table, grasping Shane's free hand. "A little boy. Oh, honey."

"So," Shane's dad said after a while. "This means I'll have to teach *my grandson* my spaghetti sauce recipe. It is now family tradition."

Shane's father let out a real laugh, deep and rumbling. "Guess you will," she said, shaking his head in wonder.

He looked at the nearly empty sauce boat, then back at Ilya. "And you two, you're going to have to learn to make it. Can't have my grandson eating only ordered food."

Ilya's eyes widened in mock offense. "I can cook! I made very good avocado toast yesterday morning for Shane."

Shane snorted. "He googled 'healthy food for pregnant people'."

"See?" Ilya said, lifting his chin defiantly. "I am trainable."

The table erupted into laughter, real, easy, family laughter that filled the dining room and seeped into the walls, making the house feel, for the first time that evening, not just like a place of confrontation, but like a home ready to expand.

They were having a boy. And as they sat there, surrounded by empty plates and full hearts, the future felt less like a challenge and more like a promise, waiting for them just beyond the kitchen door. They were just a family at dinner, talking about the future. A future that was complicated, uncertain, but theirs to build.

Shane sat very still, letting the warmth of the moment wrap around him. He watched his mother dab her eyes with her napkin, her smile watery and bright. He saw his father's usually stern face softened into something open and wondering as he joked with Ilya about cooking lessons. He felt the solid, familiar weight of Ilya's hand in his under the table, a private anchor in the whirlwind of shared joy. A lump rose in his throat, so sudden and fierce it stole his breath. This, the clatter of forks, the overlapping voices planning a future, the unguarded happiness on every face. This was everything he hadn't dared to hope for. The fear that had coiled inside him for weeks dissolved, replaced by a soaring, almost painful gratitude. This is my family, he thought, and the truth of it was so overwhelming his vision blurred. He squeezed Ilya's hand harder, a silent message sent through skin and bone: *Hold me tight. I love you.* And Ilya, without even looking, squeezed back, his thumb brushing over Shane's knuckles in a steady, answering rhythm, a promise that he already was, and always would.

For Shane, spaghetti never tasted so delicious.

Chapter End Notes

Guys, originally this would be the last chapter and the next one would be the epilogue. However, I was thinking about doing some extra chapters to show moments of Hollanov's life after that: pregnancy moments, baby's birth, hollanov parenting, ottawa hockey, and so on (and I am accepting ideas). Would you like that? Please, let me know in the comments! I feel like I'm gonna write it anyway, but it would be great to hear from you hahaha

Thank you so much for your support! Love yooooou and see you SOON

Chapter 9: PART TWO: our home

Chapter Notes

First of all, I want to say that you are amazing 😭 I didn't think the last chapter was going to receive so many lovely comments and suggestions. I read them all - definitely took some precious notes - and I thought all I could do was thank you for the love and support.

But then I realized I could do much more, and if you notice now, all the previous chapters belong to "Hold me tight" PART ONE.

Now we are officially entering PART TWO, with which I will smack you all in the face with domestic hollanov (and a little bit of angst once in a while so we can suffer a little bit too).

That being said, I hope you enjoy this chapter <3

Two weeks had passed in a blur of logistics, low-key intimacy, and the quiet, growing reality of the life they were building. Shane was now fourteen weeks along. The subtle curve of his abdomen had become a permanent, comforting presence under his hand, a secret he no longer had to keep, at least from the people who mattered most.

The days had been filled with purposeful motion. In the immediate aftermath of the spaghetti-dinner confession, Shane's mother had shifted seamlessly from shock to strategy. She'd made calls, spoken to her realtor, who valued discretion, and compiled a shortlist of properties: homes with space for a family, no neighbors, privacy from the street, and room to grow. Today, they would visit three of them.

Professionally, the ground had shifted, too. Ilya had made the decisive move to change representation, aligning himself with Shane's manager, Farah Jalali. She was sharp, empathetic, and famously protective of her clients. The meeting in her Montreal office the week prior had been a study in controlled surprise. She'd already known about Shane's pregnancy, having worked closely with him and his mother to structure a plausible medical leave. But Ilya Rozanov sitting beside him, holding his hand, and stating calmly that he was the father of Shane's baby had made her pause, her professional composure flickering for just a second before she'd nodded, a slow smile spreading.

"Well," she'd said, "that certainly streamlines the narrative."

From that moment, Farah became the architect of their, still private, transition. While Shane rested in Ottawa, still in his parents' house, Ilya had returned to Boston for five fraught days. It was a whirlwind of difficult goodbyes and logistical untangling. With Farah and still in

Ottawa, he'd had his first, tentative conversations with Ottawa's management; exploratory, hopeful, and charged with the unspoken promise of a new beginning. The harder conversation had been after with Boston. Sitting across from the general manager and coaching staff, Ilya had been deliberately, frustratingly vague about his decision to leave. He'd thanked them, praised the organization, and called his time there an honor. It wasn't a lie, but it felt like a betrayal by omission.

Afterward, he'd found Marleau, his longtime defense partner, and pulled him into a back-slapping hug that lasted a beat too long. "You are a fucking good partner," Ilya had muttered, his voice rough.

Marleau, who knew him better than most, just nodded, his eyes secretly sad. "Go win a cup somewhere else, you bastard."

Now, the dismantling of his old life was underway. Farah was handling the sale of his Boston house and paring down his infamous car collection. Ilya had been adamant about keeping the Porsche 911 GT3 and the yellow Lotus Emira.

"For fun," he'd justified to Shane over the phone. The other four would be sold to fund something more practical, more family. "I will buy a boring car," he'd declared, as if it were a solemn vow. "Like yours."

"It's a normal car!" Shane insisted about his Land Rover. "Good in the snow".

For Shane, the past two weeks had been less about leaving and more about pausing. His path was quieter, a strategic retreat rather than a dramatic exit.

While Ilya untangled himself from Boston, Shane's own steps were measured. He and Farah had formalized the plan they'd first sketched out with his mother: a full-season medical leave. The official reason would be the lingering effects of the concussion and the collarbone fracture and a structured period of medical rehabilitation and rest. It was a clean, uncontroversial pause that the league and the Montreal Metros would accept without probing too deeply. And the last part, although carried and omission of the pregnancy, was not a lie. Farah had made sure it wasn't going to cause harm to any future negotiation regarding Shane's leave.

It bought him time. Time to have the baby, to heal, to see what his body felt like after becoming a father. This also meant he wasn't leaving the team, not yet. Not officially. He wouldn't sell his condo in Montreal. Not this year. It was a safety net, a tangible link to the identity of Shane Hollander, Captain of the Metros, a life that felt both recent and strangely distant.

He and Ilya had agreed: Shane would take the season off, Ilya would join Ottawa, and at the end of that year, when Shane was ready and his contract allowed, they would make the final leap together. He would request a trade to Ottawa, and they would truly merge their lives into one city, one home. So while Ilya was selling his house and cars, Shane's most significant logistical task was simply... waiting. And looking forward.

The house they would choose to live together wouldn't be his legal residence, not immediately. But it would be their home, the place Ilya would live, the nursery they would set up, the kitchen where they'd eat together. It was a promise made real in blueprints and square footage, a future they were walking into one careful, deliberate step at a time.

This morning, standing in the kitchen of Shane's parents' house, that future felt both dizzyingly close and peacefully ordinary. Shane scrolled through the listings on his phone while his mother packed a bag with bottled water and snacks. Ilya was due to land at the Ottawa airport within one hour, coming straight from finalizing his exit in Boston. They would pick him up, and the three of them – Shane, Ilya, and his mother – would spend the afternoon walking through empty houses, imagining their lives echoing in the bare rooms, choosing the place where their son would take his first steps. It was a simple plan. A profoundly normal one. After years of secrets, tears, and seismic revelations, the most extraordinary thing had become the simple act of looking for a home, together.

The first house they visited was a modern split-level at the end of a private cul-de-sac, all sharp angles and grey siding. Shane's mother had the key from the lockbox and let them in herself.

"Well, it's certainly private," she said as they stepped into the vaulted entryway. Her tone was carefully neutral, but Shane knew the code. Private was good.

She moved through the open-concept living area like a seasoned inspector. "The kitchen is nice," she conceded, running a hand over the quartz countertop. "Good sightlines. You could keep an eye on the baby while you're cooking." Then she pointed to the far wall of windows. "All this glass faces north. In an Ottawa winter, this room will feel like an ice rink. You'll spend a fortune on heating." She said as if Ilya and Shane weren't millionaires.

As his mother moved toward the hallway, already muttering about the impracticality of the sleek, handleless cabinets, Shane felt a gentle tug on his sleeve.

Ilya nodded toward a door off the main room. "This room looks important" he murmured with a dirty tone.

They slipped away, leaving Yuna tapping a wall and sighing about drywall quality. Ilya pushed open the door to a small room with a window overlooking the dense treeline. "Office?" he suggested. "Or a playroom, when he is bigger."

Shane smiled, imagining a tiny desk next to Ilya's, or later, toy trucks scattered on the floor. "Playroom," he decided.

Then, they found the master bedroom upstairs. It was spacious, with a wall of windows facing the silent woods. Ilya walked straight to the glass, looking out at the untouched snow still clinging in the shadows. "No neighbors," he noted, a quiet satisfaction in his voice. "Good." Then he turned, his gaze sweeping the room before landing on Shane. He walked back to him, stopping close. "You can be loud in bed with no worry people might hear" he said, his voice dropping.

"Shut up!" Shane looked back, checking if his mother was close. "My mom is here!"

Ilya laughed and pulled Shane closed through his hips. “Is she?”

They could hear Yuna’s voice from the ensuite bathroom down the hall. “The water pressure in this showerhead is abysmal. You’d never get the conditioner out of your hair, Honey.”

Ilya smiled and leaned closer, his breath warm against Shane’s ear. “I like your mother. She sees everything.”

“She does,” Shane whispered back. “It’s terrifying.”

They rejoined her in the living room, where she was standing by the fireplace with her arms crossed. “It’s gas, not woodburning,” she declared. “Think of the smell! A baby’s lungs don’t need that artificial scent. Plus, if the power goes out in a storm, you’re stuck with no heat and no way to cook.”

Ilya gave a solemn nod, though his eyes still danced with amusement. “A very important point.”

Shane nudged him, then gestured down the hall. “Let’s check the rest before we make the final verdict.”

They explored the remaining rooms with a more critical eye. The laundry room was a narrow closet of a space, barely fitting a stacked washer-dryer.

“Where would you even put the laundry baskets?” Shane muttered, already picturing tripping over it while holding a baby.

“Plural?” Ilya asked confused.

“Of course. Towels and bedding, whites, darks and synthetic.”

Ilya looked at Shane with horror and left.

The room that could be the nursery was at the back of the house, with only one small window shaded by a thick pine. It felt cave-like, too dark for a child who would need light and cheer. Ilya stood in the doorway, his expression unreadable, but Shane could feel his hesitation.

“Not this one,” Ilya said quietly, and Shane nodded in agreement. The guest room was boxy and cramped.

“Is this enough space for a bed and a closet?” Shane sighed, it definitely wasn’t.

“Well... What do you think?” Shane’s mom asked when they were all back in the main room, though her tone suggested she already had her answer.

Shane looked at Ilya, who gave a slight shake of his head. “No,” Ilya said firmly, his playful tone gone.

“It’s interesting, mom, but it’s not the one.” Shane said, feeling a strange mix of disappointment and relief. The house had privacy, but it felt cold, impractical, and full of

hidden risks.

“How much are they asking? Three million dollars? It doesn’t look like a three million dollars house” Ilya added.

“I know, right? The photos were a lie” his mother said going towards the exit. They didn’t even want to check the exterior.

“Two more to see. And I have a feeling the next one has a much better laundry room.” Yuna said after locking the door behind them.

The second house was farther from the city, *maybe a little too* far, Shane thought. I was tucked at the end of a winding gravel drive that felt more like a country road. It was a sturdy, two-story brick home with a wide porch and mature trees guarding it on all sides. No neighbors in sight, just quiet woods and the soft rustle of early spring.

“Now this has character,” Shane’s mother said approvingly as she unlocked the heavy oak front door.

Inside, the space felt immediately warmer than the first house. The rooms were generous, with high ceilings and original hardwood floors that gleamed under the afternoon light filtering through large windows. They moved through a formal living room, a den with built-in bookshelves, and a dining room that could easily fit a holiday table for ten.

Upstairs, the bedrooms were bright and well-proportioned. The one that would be the nursery had a charming window seat overlooking the back garden, and Shane could already picture a rocking chair in the corner.

“This feels good,” Ilya said beside him, running a hand along the smooth wood of the doorframe.

But as they explored further, small signs began to appear. In the corner of the master bedroom ceiling, a faint, shadowy watermark spread like a faded bruise. Shane’s mother pressed her palm to the wall beside the window in the guest room.

“Damp,” she said quietly, her earlier approval fading. “Infiltration,” she muttered. “From the roof, maybe.”

They found another patch in the basement, a darker stain, this time with a faint, musty scent lingering around it. Shane’s mother shook her head.

“Moisture means mold. Mold spores are terrible for little lungs. Allergies, asthma. This isn’t just a fix-it project; it’s a health risk.”

Ilya’s jaw was set. He didn’t say anything, but his hand found the small of Shane’s back, a silent signal.

They moved to the garage next, a detached two-car structure with charming, if weathered, doors. Ilya pushed one open and stepped inside, looking up at the low ceiling, then pacing the length.

“My Porsche and the Lotus would fit,” he said, “but there is no room for the ‘boring cars’.” He turned to Shane, a stubborn glint in his eye.

Defeated, they walked out into the backyard, perhaps hoping the outdoor space would redeem the house. And for a moment, it did. The garden was breathtaking. A curated burst of early blooms, flowering shrubs, and neatly tended flowerbeds that wrapped around a stone patio. It felt peaceful, alive, like a private park.

“Oh, this is lovely,” Shane’s mother said, her voice softening. “Imagine the baby playing here.” Shane smiled, stepping onto the grass.

Then a breeze stirred, carrying a cloud of pollen from a cluster of blooming lilacs. His nose twitched. Once, twice. Then, he sneezed, hard and unexpectedly. He rubbed his nose, eyes watering.

“Nope, not this one” Ilya said, taking Shane’s hand to go back to the car before he sneezed again.

Inside the car, the mood was a mix of fatigue and quiet frustration. The silence stretched until Shane finally let out a long sigh, leaning his head against the window.

“Maybe we should just hire an architect,” he murmured, staring at the passing trees. “Build exactly what we want from scratch.”

Ilya glanced over from the driver’s seat. “How long would that take?”

“A year and a half, at least. Maybe more,” Shane’s mother answered from the back, her tone practical. “And if they can do it faster, I still would not consider moving into a construction site with a huge pregnancy belly. I did that once, do not recommend.”

Shane nodded, his hand drifting unconsciously to his stomach. She was right. The fantasy of a perfect, custom-built house was just that, a fantasy. They needed something real, and soon.

“One more to see,” Ilya said, his voice determined. “It is close to your parents. We will know if it is right.”

The third property was indeed just a short, pleasant drive from his parents’ neighborhood. As soon as Ilya turned onto the private road, a sense of calm settled over Shane. The lane was lined with mature trees, their branches forming a canopy that dappled the sunlight on the pavement; it reminded him instantly of the peaceful, winding road to his cottage.

Then, the house came into view, and Shane’s breath caught. Nestled into a gentle slope, the single-story home was a masterpiece of modern, understated elegance. Its clean, horizontal lines and expansive use of glass made it look like a serene part of the landscape itself. A broad, covered carport, an extension of a graceful wooden pergola, offered ample space, more than enough for Ilya’s prized cars.

The home was built on a level below the road, creating a grand, welcoming entrance that promised privacy and breathtaking views.

“Oh,” was all Shane managed to say as they got out of the car.

As they stepped inside, the beautiful layout unfolded. The entire social area was one breathtaking, interconnected space. Vaulted ceilings of different heights created a dynamic play of light and volume, guiding the eye toward the wall of glass at the back. And there was the view: a stunning, uninterrupted panorama of the north-facing property, leading to a peaceful orchard in the distance.

The kitchen, dining, and living areas flowed seamlessly into one another, promising a space where they could cook, live, and watch their son play, all while connected.

“Wow” That was all Ilya could say, and Shane was too immersed into the house’s atmosphere that he said nothing.

The house was designed in distinct blocks, ensuring every room enjoyed light and a view while maintaining intimate zones. Yuna pointed toward a cozy nook off the main area.

Ilya went to see the next room. “A TV room. With a door to close. For when one of us is watching boring sports documentaries.” Shane laughed, the sound light with relief and joy.

They moved through to the private wing. The main suite was spacious and serene, with a luxurious bathroom. Down the hall, there were three additional guest suites. “One for the baby,” Shane’s mother said softly, already planning, “one for guests, and I’m sure the other one you can figure out later” she said, and left to see the other rooms.

Ilya approached Shane and whispered: “This could be our Dungeon”.

“Our what” Shane asks confused.

"Our dungeon," Ilya repeated, his lips brushing the shell of Shane's ear. "You know. For all the toys you will beg for us to buy. We'll need a proper room for them. Can't have your hockey gear mixed up with the good rope."

Shane's eyes went wide. He glanced frantically at the open doorway where his mother had just vanished. A hot flush crept up his neck.

"Ilya!" he hissed, swatting at his arm. "You cannot just say stuff like that. My mom could come back! And how the fuck do you know those things?"

"You would love that" Ilya said, his voice a low, teasing rumble. He stepped closer, backing Shane gently against the pristine wall. “But we can start with a drawer” he said, lips brushing on Shane’s.

"The closets in here are wonderfully deep! Great for storage!" Yuna said, voice muffled from next room. Shane buried his own face in Ilya's shoulder to stifle a sound that was half-laugh, half-moan of utter despair.

"See?" Ilya whispered, his body shaking with silent laughter. "She is already thinking about our storage needs. Very supportive."

"Fuck off! That's gross!" Shane shoved Ilya, trying to stay serious, but couldn't hold a laugh. He was already heading towards the next room. "And we are not having anything like that".

Finally, they walked out onto the large terrace. An outdoor living area and a built-in barbecue were elegantly connected to a serene pool. It was an intimate yet elegant space for gatherings, future birthday parties, quiet evenings, a life lived both inside and out. And the most important, they both could see their baby boy playing outside, running in the grass, playing in the pool with both while using arm floaties, playing in the snow in the winter. They could set up a playground.

Shane turned to Ilya, his eyes shining. He didn't need to say anything. The look on Ilya's face, a mix of awe, possessiveness, and deep contentment, said it all.

"This is it" Ilya stated, his voice leaving no room for doubt. He slipped his arm around Shane's waist, his hand resting gently on the curve of his stomach. "This will be home." Shane's smile grew bigger.

The whirlwind of moving day had passed, guided to efficient order by Shane's parents. Furniture was placed, the heavy boxes from the movers were stacked in their designated rooms, and now, with his parents finally gone and the first deep quiet of their new house settling around them, Shane and Ilya were alone.

They began with the most personal tasks, unpacking the boxes labeled in their own handwriting. In the serenity of their walk-in closet, they built a new mosaic of their life together. Shane's impeccably folded sweaters found space next to Ilya's hoodies and rows of jerseys. It was a silent, deliberate ritual. The merging of two separate worlds into one shared orbit.

As he unpacked a box of kitchen utensils, Shane had a sudden, quiet realization. They'd never actually had a formal conversation about moving in together. There had been no grand discussion, no pro-and-con list. It had simply unfolded, as natural and inevitable as the changing seasons. It wasn't just the baby, though the baby was the urgent, beautiful catalyst. It was the deeper, undeniable truth: after everything – the secrets, the fear, the confession – they could no longer tolerate the old rhythm of their lives. The idea of living in separate cities, of going months without touch only to steal a frantic afternoon before parting again, was suddenly unthinkable. It was agony. And on a purely practical level, if they were both going to be in Ottawa, maintaining two houses would have been absurd; one home would always be achingly empty, a monument to a separation they had outgrown. They were building one life now, and it required a single, shared foundation.

Shane smiled at the thought.

Later, they stood in the room that would serve their trophy room. Before them were boxes containing the physical proof of their careers. With careful hands, they began unpacking their trophies.

The silver gleamed in the afternoon light as they placed the awards on custom shelves – Calder, Hart, Ross, Jennings, and the pinnacle, their Stanley Cups rings side-by-side in glass cases. One being Ilya's and the other two, Shane's. Their hockey history now sat peacefully intermingled, a monument to what they had each achieved, before becoming a family.

Shane ran a finger over the engraving on his Rookie of The Year Trophy, his expression growing distant. The quiet of the house seemed to amplify the doubt creeping in. "It feels like I'm putting myself in a museum," he said, his voice soft. "Like this is the complete set."

Ilya looked at him, but didn't move. Shane continued, still looking at his accomplishments.

"What if I never add to it again? What if they don't let me play again or... What if my body... can't?"

Ilya didn't answer immediately. He finished placing his own award, then stepped close, hugging the love of his life from behind. His hands were warm and steady on Shane's hips.

"Shane," Ilya said, his voice a low, unwavering anchor. "Look at this." He gestured to the collected brilliance in front of them. "This is not an ending. This is proof. Proof that you are the best fucking hockey player to ever do it. Your body knows how to fight. It will remember." The intensity in Ilya's gaze absorbed through the glass reflection in front of them held a different kind of promise, one meant to pull Shane out of his own head. He leaned in, his intent clear, his touch shifting from grounding to claiming. As he slowly lowered his hands firm in the direction of Shane's crotch, Shane's breath hitched.

"Look at them," Ilya murmured, his voice a husky vibration against Shane's neck. "Look at everything you have already won." Shane's head fell back against Ilya's shoulder, his eyes drifting shut before forcing themselves open.

His gaze landed on the shelves, on the cold, hard metal that represented years of sacrifice and glory.

"Look at who the fuck you are. The fucking best. Always remember that".

The sight of his achievements, his name etched in history, blurred as a wave of sheer, overwhelming sensation crashed over him, orchestrated by the man who was now his future. The man who had already lower Shane's pants and was now holding his cock e directing the other hand towards his hole. Shane was already out of breath.

"And if suddenly you can't remember..." Ilya held him tighter. "I'll make sure you do".

In that moment, the past and its trophies weren't a cage; they were the foundation. And the present, this dizzying, intimate reclamation, was Ilya's fierce, physical argument against every one of Shane's fears. The only thing stronger than his doubt was the man determined to silence it.

Chapter 10: our friendship

Chapter Notes

Here I am AGAIN, now finally bringing Hayden Pike, the 15th best player of Montreal and father of 8274 children!! Hope you enjoy this chapter and see you soon <3

The new NHL season was less than two months away, a train that would soon leave the station without Shane. In the profound quiet of their Ottawa home, he felt its absence like a phantom limb. His body, meanwhile, was loudly present. At sixteen weeks, the subtle curve of his stomach had become a definite, firm swell beneath his shirt, a secret that was becoming physically impossible to keep.

That morning, he was happily paying attention to a tiny brushstroke coming from the inside of his belly. He'd frozen, waiting for it to happen again, yearning to share it again with Ilya once he got out of the shower. In the meanwhile, his phone's screen lit up with a notification from the Metros' group chat: the team was getting ready to go to the training camp in three weeks.

His absence was now official, formalized in a press release from the Montreal Metros citing a "medical leave for recovery" from the injuries sustained in the Montreal vs Boston match. His phone had buzzed for a solid day with a cascade of supportive messages from teammates, staff, and fans.

Get well soon, Cap! We'll hold the fort.

Rest up, Shane. Your health comes first.

We're gonna get that Cup for you this season... though it'll be a hell of a lot harder without our captain on the ice.

Each text was a kindness, a small torch of concern in the dark. Yet, reading them in the quiet of his Ottawa home, Shane felt their hollowness. They were cheering for a version of him that felt like a ghost – the Captain recovering from a hit, not the omega pregnant with his rival's child, building a new life in a different city. They didn't even suspect he would trade teams. They maybe would feel betrayed. Probably would. Shane didn't want to imagine the scenario though. He was surrounded by love, yet profoundly alone inside the truth. His body, meanwhile, was loudly, undeniably present. Sixteen weeks. Four months pregnant. Five more to go.

Thinking about Hayden was worse. He was Shane's best friend, had been by Shane's side since rookie day. The godfather to a life Shane hadn't yet told him existed. The agony wasn't

just in the secret; it was in the specific shape of the lie. With his parents, with his manager, the secrecy had been strategic, a necessary fortress. With Hayden, it felt like a wall.

Hayden, who had four kids with his wife, Jackie. Hayden, who had talked Shane through the terror of his first NHL playoff game. Hayden knew the language of fatherhood; the sleepless nights, the pure, terrifying love, the way a tiny hand could fist around your heart and never let go. Shane ached for that conversation. He needed it.

“He sent me the first picture we took together on training camp after the draft” Shane said, his voice cutting through the quiet of their bedroom when Ilya showed up naked, holding his underwear and with his hair dump.

Ilya looked at him confused, heading to the drawer to put his underwear on. “Hmm? Who?”

“Hayden. He just texted me.” Shane put the phone down, screen-first. “I think... I have to tell him.”

Ilya sat in bed now with nothing but his underwear. His face settled into its more neutral, attentive expression. “Why now?”

“Because... he’s my best friend. And because he has four kids, Ilya. He knows. He could... I don’t know, give me advice.” Shane sighed in frustration, and then shook his head. “No, it’s not exactly about him giving me advices, it’s just... I feel like this would be something I should be sharing with my best friend”.

Ilya was silent for a long moment, his gaze piercing. “Do you trust him?”

“I do.” Shane answered without hesitation.

“I don’t trust Hayden,” Ilya stated, matter-of-fact. “But he is not my best friend. He is yours.” A faint, familiar smirk touched his lips. “And he is also bad at hockey.”

The unexpected jab broke through Shane’s tension. “He is not bad at hockey! He’s a solid two-way forward.”

They were veering off track, falling into the comfortable, weathered groove of their lovely rivalry. But Shane steered them back.

“I’m serious, Ilya. This is eating me up. I want to tell him. I need to. I don’t know if it’s the hormones or something, but it’s stressing me out”.

Ilya studied him, the humor fading from his eyes, replaced by something more complex. He saw the genuine torment there, the longing for a connection that mirrored the one they were building. His protectiveness warred with his respect for Shane’s judgment. Finally, he let out a slow breath.

“I trust you,” he said, the words deliberate and heavy. “So if you feel you must tell him, then you should.” The permission, wrapped in unwavering trust, was more powerful than any blessing. The air seemed to settle. The decision was silently made.

“Okay?” Ilya said to reinsure Shane of his decision.

“Okay,” Shane said back, nodding slowly.

Then, the reality of it crashed over them, wave after wave.

“So I’ll tell him... I’m pregnant.”

Ilya gave a single nod. “*Da*.”

“And that you’re the father.”

Another nod. “Also true.”

“And that we’re... together. For real.”

“This is the most important part after the baby thing” Ilya murmured.

“And that now we live here. Together. In Ottawa.”

They looked at each other across the sun-drenched room, the sheer, cascading magnitude of their shared truth hanging between them.

“And that I’ll leave Montreal next year”. It wasn’t one secret. It was the entire foundation of their new life, a story they had to hand over in one fragile piece. “Oh my God” Shane breathed and covered his face with his hands. “It’s a lot.”

“It is everything,” Ilya corrected softly.

But there was no fear in his voice. There was a quiet, steely acceptance. This was their reality. Hiding it from the world was one thing. Hiding it from the people who mattered was becoming impossible.

“God, I wished we could stop time for a little bit and go to the cottage” Shane said, running his hands over his face.

“We can go before hockey camp, if you want to. I am curious to see your fortress of solitude” Ilya said, remembering the exact same words used in a documentary Shane had recorded a while ago. She had watched it all.

“Wait, you saw that?”

“Yes, it was very good. I needed help sleeping, so...”

“You’re an asshole”. Ilya kissed him in the lips, a soft yet full of love peck.

Shane picked his phone up again. The screen had gone dark. He unlocked it, his thumb hovering over his messages with Hayden. Their last exchange was two days ago, a stupid meme about a cat wearing a tiny helmet. Hayden found it hilarious, Shane found it cute.

His thumbs began to move.

Shane: Hey. Can we meet before the camp?

He read it over. It was a grenade, disguised in the plain text of their friendship. There was no going back after this. In the bedroom, Ilya was putting his pants on, the domestic sound a stark contrast to the seismic shift he was initiating. He wasn't alone. He had his partner. He had his truth.

Shane took a deep breath, his hand settling once more on the firm curve of his stomach, a silent apology and a promise to the future. Then, he tapped *Send*.

Setting the meeting was, in the end, tragically easy.

Hayden's reply came in less than a minute, a rapid-fire volley of concern that made Shane's stomach twist with guilt.

Hayden: Of course, man. Everything okay?

Hayden: Don't you dare try to come to Montreal. I'll drive up there, Jackie said it's fine. You're supposed to be resting.

Hayden: Name the time and place. I'll be there.

Shane's thumb hovered over the screen. He felt like he was using Hayden's loyalty to lure him into a conversation that would fundamentally alter that friendship. He typed back his new address, his and Ilya's new home, and hit send.

"He's coming here," Shane said, putting the phone down on the kitchen island. "Told me not to travel. That I should be resting." Ilya, who was laying down next to Shane and who started to let little kisses in Shane's arm and neck, didn't look up.

"He is a good friend."

It was a simple statement, devoid of his usual teasing. He understood the weight of it.

"He is," Shane agreed, his voice tight. "Which is why I feel like I'm about to repay him by dropping a grenade in his lap."

Ilya finally looked up, setting a hardcover biography aside. His gaze was steady. "You are not dropping a grenade. You are being his friend by telling the truth. And if he is the friend you say, he will want to stay your friend." That was surprisingly tender and carried no sign of a joke at all.

He was offering Hayden the truth, not an attack. It was a shift in perspective, fragile but necessary.

"Yeah," Shane breathed out, not entirely convinced, but clinging to the idea.

They decided Shane would meet Hayden alone first. It was the only way that made sense. Dropping the triple truth – pregnancy, paternity, hockey – was a seismic event. Doing it with Ilya, the living embodiment of the most shocking part of that truth, physically present, felt like an ambush. It had to come from Shane. And then, if the ground was still stable beneath their feet, if Hayden hadn't stormed out or looked at him with utter betrayal, they could arrange a proper meeting. An introduction. A beginning.

The two days until the meeting passed in a strange, suspended animation. Ilya pointedly did not ask constant questions, giving Shane space to mentally prepare, but his presence was a constant, steady anchor. A hand on the back of Shane's neck while he made tea, a kiss pressed to his temple as he stared blankly at the nursery wall.

Finally, the morning arrived.

Shane dressed with deliberate normality in sweatpants and a soft, loose sweater that did little to hide the new shape of him, but Hayden would probably not notice the belly at first.

He caught Ilya watching him from the doorway of the bedroom, his expression unreadable. "I'll be at your parents' house eating ice cream" Ilya said.

Shane shook his head. "They don't know the monster they're feeding". He walked over, leaning in to press a firm, lingering kiss to Ilya's lips. It tasted like a promise and a plea. "I'll call you after, okay?"

Ilya nodded, his hand coming up to cradle Shane's jaw for a moment. "Everything will be okay" he said, and it sounded like both a hope and an order. Shane didn't allow himself to open the sentence to debate.

The doorbell echoed through the quiet house, a clean, sharp sound that seemed to bounce off the high ceilings and settle directly in Shane's chest.

He was standing in the entryway, having drifted there five minutes ago under the pretense of checking the mail. His hands were cold. His heart was not. He breathed in and out, walked to the front door and pulled the door open.

Hayden stood on the stoop, backlit by the July sun, a six-pack of something in one hand and his familiar, lopsided grin already spreading across his face. He was wearing a well-worn Metros hoodie, the same one he'd had since rookie year, fraying slightly at the cuffs. Home, in human form.

"There he is," Hayden said warmly. "The man of mystery."

They hugged quickly, a firm, back-slapping embrace that had always been their language. Shane was acutely aware of the firm curve of his belly pressing against the soft sweater. He angled his hips back slightly, a subtle, practiced retreat. Hayden didn't seem to notice.

"Okay, what the hell?" Hayden said, pulling back and immediately craning his neck to look past Shane into the house. "This place is stunning. Like, actually ridiculous. Why do you need this much space? You live alone and most part of the year in Montreal, you weirdo."

He stepped inside, his sneakers loud on the polished concrete floors, already spinning in a slow circle to take in the beautiful ceiling, the wall of glass, the distant view of the orchard.

"Like, genuinely. This is a family house, Shane. You know that, right? This is 'four kids and a golden retriever' territory, maybe two golden retrievers." He shot Shane a teasing grin over his shoulder. "What, are you hiding a wife and kids in here somewhere?"

Shane's throat closed. He forced a smile.

"Just wanted my own space. In my hometown. You know." Hayden didn't push. He just nodded, still admiring the architecture.

"Fair enough. If I could afford a place like this, I'd probably also buy one just to walk around in my underwear and feel fancy."

"Gross". Shane said laughing.

He followed Shane into the kitchen, a sprawling, sun-drenched room that still felt too new, too pristine. Shane moved on autopilot toward the refrigerator. "Can I get you something to drink?"

"Dude, I brought beer," Hayden laughed, hefting the six-pack onto the island. "I'm not driving, took an Uber. Grab a couple. Let's actually drink like normal people for once."

Shane's hand paused on the fridge handle.

I can't. I'm pregnant. I'm carrying your godchild if you want to be my baby's godchild in case you don't hate me forever.

"I don't feel like drinking, actually".

Hayden stared at him for a beat, then shook his head in exaggerated dismay.

"Unbelievable. You're actually impossible. You know that, right?" He popped the tab on one of his own beers and took a long, satisfied sip. "Take you ginger ale or something, then, but I'll be drinking. Jackie doesn't let me drink much since we have the kids at home".

"She is right, you must set an example. And actually it's not so good for your body to drink during the season".

"Dude, my house is a war zone. The kids leave juice boxes everywhere, Jackie's always trying to hide my snack stash, and I'm pretty sure there's a half-eaten granola bar under the couch that's been there since April." He sighed, but it was a happy, fond sound. "You'd go crazy, man. Your pristine, healthy little world would collapse." Shane smiled, small and genuine.

"Your world sounds better."

"It's loud and chaotic and I wouldn't trade it for anything," Hayden said simply. He settled onto a stool at the island, cradling his beer. "Okay, maybe I could make a few observations on how Ruby could be a little less chaotic" They both laughed.

"I still don't know how you differentiate the twins".

"Believe me, I don't even have to try. Ruby really stands out".

Shane took a sip of his orange juice. He was drinking less ginger ale because of the pregnancy. He thought it was better to go with more natural drinks.

"How are you, really?" Hayden asked. "The team's a mess without you, but everyone's pretending they're fine. How's the shoulder? You doing physio every day?" The question landed like a weight.

Shane looked at Hayden, his open, trusting face, his complete and total ignorance of the seismic shift waiting to happen. Guilt coiled in his stomach, sharp and urgent.

Now, he thought. You have to do it now.

He pulled out the stool across from Hayden and sat down slowly. His hand drifted, almost unconsciously, to rest on his stomach beneath the counter.

"Actually, I'm not doing physio anymore. My body has healed completely in the last months."

"But you got a medical leave" Hayden said confused.

"Yeah..." he said. "There's... There's something I need to tell you."

Hayden's easy grin faltered, replaced by a flicker of genuine concern. He set down his beer.

"Okay. You're kind of scaring me, man. What's going on?"

Shane took a breath. The plan, fragile and improvised, formed in his mind: one piece at a time. Let him absorb. Let him catch up.

"I'm not just on medical leave," Shane said. His voice was steadier than he expected. "I mean, not for what you think".

Hayden's brow furrowed. "Then why...?"

Shane's hand pressed more firmly against the soft swell of his belly.

"Because I'm pregnant." The words hung in the air, bare and irrevocable.

Hayden blinked. Once. Twice.

His mouth opened, then closed.

He looked at Shane's face, then down at his hand, hidden beneath the counter, then back up at his face. "You're..." He couldn't seem to finish the sentence.

"I'm sixteen weeks," Shane said. "Four months." The silence stretched, thick and fragile. "I discovered the pregnancy while in the hospital, after the match against Boston".

Hayden's beer sat forgotten, condensation beading on the bottle.

"But it's been three months..."

"Yeah... I..." he couldn't find the words, Hayden's reaction was a pure mix of shock, and some other bad feelings Shane didn't want to think about much.

"Shane," he finally said, his voice barely above a whisper. "What the fuck?"

Shane let out a shaky breath that was almost a laugh, but not quite. "Yeah. That's... that's one way to react."

Hayden shook his head slowly, as if trying to physically process the information. "I-okay. Okay. You're pregnant. That's... wow. Okay. I didn't see it coming". He ran a hand through his hair, a nervous habit Shane recognized from a hundred post-game debriefs. "But wait. Does that mean you... you've been with someone? With... With a guy? Like, seriously? For a while?" Shane's heart was a drum against his ribs. He was standing at the edge of the cliff. Before he could answer something, Hayden continued. "Or was it something casual? I mean, I'm sorry, that's not the best way to put it. Oh my God. I promise I'm not that kind of person! Jesus! I will love your baby anyway, you-".

"Hayden!" Shane said before Hayden passed out with no air. "Yes, I have been with someone. A guy".

Hayden waited. His expression was shifting now, confusion slowly giving way to something more complex. Not judgment. Just... waiting. Shane closed his eyes for a brief second, then opened them.

"It's been a while since I'm with him".

"Okay. But... Is this person aware of the pregnancy?" Hayden asked carefully.

"Yes. He is pretty much aware... and happy. And I'm happy too, although not playing kind of sucks". He smiled.

"Man..." Hayden started laughing. "That's a lot to absorb, but I'm so relieved you're happy. I was freaking out here".

Shane was partially relieved too. At least the first truth was shared and accepted gladly.

"I wish you told me sooner, but... I'm happy if you're happy".

Those words settled into Shane's chest like a stone dropping into still water, the ripples spreading outward in slow, concentric waves. *I wish you told me sooner.* It was the gentlest

possible expression of the hurt Shane had inflicted, a small cut that stung precisely because it was so carefully, kindly placed. But then: *I'm happy if you're happy*. Not forgiveness granted, but it was an opening, a door held ajar.

"Since your baby's father is happy, may you tell me who he is? Do I know him?"

And Shane was back at having cold hands and a raced heart.

"So, it's... his name is..." There was no easy way of telling Hayden this specific truth, so he should just do it. "Ilya?"

The name landed like a physical blow. Hayden's entire body went still.

"I'm sorry, what?"

"Ilya?" Shane repeated.

"Are you asking me the name of your baby's father for some reason, or are you telling me his name?"

"I'm telling you... Ilya is the father."

Hayden stared at him. His face cycled through shock, disbelief, and then, unexpectedly, a flash of something that looked almost like real recognition, as if before he was trying to find in his head someone else with the same name as Ilya's. Pieces clicking into place, years of subtext suddenly illuminated.

"Ilya Rozanov," Hayden said slowly, as if tasting the words.

"Yes?"

"Man, stop responding with this questioning tone, for the love of God!"

"Sorry?"

"Okay, you are saying that your archrival, the guy who we collectively hated for years, got you pregnant?"

"We have never been really rivals"

"Nev... Never? Yes, you have! Shane, when? Where? How long has this been going on? Why?"

Shane took a breath. The cliff was crumbling beneath his feet. There was no going back now.

"We been... a thing... since our rookie year," he said quietly. "On and off. Mostly off. But then, before the hospital... and mostly after... We decided to be together, for real"

He trailed off, his hand pressing more firmly against his belly. Hayden was quiet for a long, long moment. He picked up his beer again, took a slow sip, and set it back down.

When he spoke, his voice was carefully controlled. "So let me get this straight." He held up a finger. "You and Ilya Rozanov have been secretly hooking up for eight years." Another finger. "You're pregnant with his baby." A third finger. "And you waited until now, four months in, to tell me."

Shane's throat was so tight he could barely breathe. "Hayden, I wanted to tell you. I wanted to tell you so badly. But it wasn't just my secret to keep. It was his, too. And I was scared. I was so fucking scared of what would happen if anyone found out. And then the accident happened, and I found out about the baby." He was rambling now, the dam finally breaking. "You're my best friend. You've been my best friend since day one. And I know I should have told you. I know I should have trusted you. I just... I was figuring myself out through all those years, and so was Ilya."

Hayden's face was unreadable. He stared at Shane for a long, excruciating moment. Then he said, very quietly, "You really thought I'd stop being your friend because you fell in love with someone?"

Shane's breath caught. The word love hung in the air, vast and vulnerable. "I didn't know," he whispered. "I didn't know what you'd think. Specially because I fell in love with Rozanov".

Hayden shook his head slowly. There was no anger in his eyes. Just a deep, weary sadness. "Shane," he said. "You're an idiot."

A sob escaped Shane's throat; relief, grief, fear, all tangled together. "I know."

"You're a fucking idiot," Hayden repeated, but his voice cracked on the last word. He scrubbed a hand over his face. "Rozanov. Of all people. Jesus Christ."

"I know."

"There were no nice man in Montreal?"

Shane laughed. "Probably there were".

"And you're having a baby."

"Yeah".

"And you bought a six-hundred-square-meter house in Ottawa because... you're moving here with him?"

Shane hesitated. Then: "Yes."

Hayden looked at him. Really looked, this time. His gaze dropped to Shane's hand, still pressed against his stomach beneath the counter. Understanding flickered across his face.

"Can I see?" he asked softly. Shane hesitated, then slowly, carefully, pulled his hand away. He stood up, letting the soft fabric of his sweater fall against the unmistakable curve of his belly and walked to the other side of the table. Hayden looked at it. Just looked. Then he let out a long, slow breath.

"Holy shit," he murmured. "There's really a little person in there."

"Yeah," Shane said, his voice barely audible. "There is."

Hayden was quiet for another moment. Then, very gently, he reached out and placed his hand on Shane's shoulder. Just a grounding touch, solid and familiar.

"So... You... In Montreal...?"

And just like that, Hayden seemed to put together one plus one. Not with an angry or upset face, but with understanding and grief.

"At the end of this season I'll be joining Ottawa, probably"

"Probably?"

"If I ever get to play hockey again".

"Dude..."

"It's okay".

"You play hockey again, Shane. No one is crazy to let you give up NHL. You have my godchild and you'll be back on ice for next season". Shane let out a single tear and smiled before Hayden hugged him.

"Okay," he said, tapping Shane's back. "Okay. You're still an idiot. But I'm you're not leaving hockey and I'm not going anywhere."

Shane's vision blurred. The tears he'd been holding back for weeks, for months, finally spilled over. "Thanks," he choked out.

Hayden squeezed his shoulder.

"Don't thank me yet. I still have to meet Rozanov. And I have approximately eight years of pent-up shit to say to him."

A wet, shaky laugh escaped Shane. "He's at my parents' house. Eating ice cream and hiding. I didn't want to scare you when you arrived."

"Good, I would have probably punched him in the face". Hayden said grimly. "Let him sweat." But he was smiling now, just a little. "No, but seriously. Rozanov? Is he threatening you or something? You can do so much better, man!"

"Shut up" Shane laughed.

And there, standing in his beautiful, empty kitchen with his best friend's hand on his shoulder and the truth finally, finally spoken, Shane felt something he hadn't dared to feel in months. Hope for an even better future. For him, for Ilya and for their baby boy.

Chapter 11: our cottage

Chapter Notes

Good morning, afternoon and night everyone!

I came after three days with a huge chapter this time.

Before you start reading, I just need to correct something from the last chapter. When I put together the timeline for this story, I was absolutely convinced the Boston vs. Montreal match had happened in May, which means when Shane finally tells Hayden the truth, it's already September. However, the match actually happened in March, two months before.

(Sorry, I should have fact-checked).

So here's the thing: in Chapter Ten, when I mention it's September, it's actually July.

Which means Shane and Ilya have about six or seven weeks before the new season starts, not the few days I'd accidentally compressed them into.

So pack your bags, because you're coming to the cottage 😎

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

The cottage was, indeed, Shane's fortress of solitude and stillness. Packing for it, however, was proving to be anything but still. For two days, Ilya had moved through their Ottawa house with focused determination, gathering armfuls of clothing and supplies. He packed the swimwear Shane loved, some food he bought after Shane told him what he wanted to eat while in the cottage – burgers and hotdogs, he said –, and three different types of tea Shane insisted were good – Ilya didn't like it. He folded sweaters with his own type of precision – Shane tried not to look much – and made a detailed list of hygiene items they would be needing – lube, Shane remembered him.

Shane, meanwhile, kept trying to help. "I can carry that," Shane said for the fourth time that morning, reaching for the duffel bag Ilya was hoisting over his shoulder. Ilya sidestepped him effortlessly.

"No."

"It's just clothes, Ilya. It's not heavy."

"No," Ilya repeated, his tone brooking no argument. He set the bag by the door and turned to assess the remaining pile. "You are not carrying anything. You are going to sit in the car, look at the trees, and maybe nap. This is the plan."

Shane crossed his arms, exasperation warring with a warmth he couldn't quite suppress.

"We're going to the cottage to relax. It doesn't make a difference if I help pack".

"If it doesn't make a difference, you don't pack".

"If I get tired, I'll just stop and rest. That's literally what relaxing is."

Ilya paused mid-reach for a stack of books Shane wanted to read during their little vacation. He turned slowly, a familiar, dangerous glint in his eyes.

"Oh," he said, his voice dropping to a low, teasing murmur. "Is that what we are going to do? Relax?"

The word curled around them, suddenly heavy with implication.

"I hope so," he said softly, and the teasing energy shifted, settled into something quieter, truer. "I would like to relax with you."

Ilya held his gaze for a long, suspended moment. The books were forgotten. He crossed the space between them in two slow steps, his hands coming up to frame Shane's face with a tenderness that made Shane's breath catch.

"I love you," Ilya said. Not playful. Not deflecting. Just the truth, bare and shining between them.

Shane leaned into his touch, his eyes fluttering closed for a heartbeat.

"I love you too," he whispered. Ilya kissed him then, soft and unhurried, a promise of the days ahead.

When he pulled back, his thumb brushed across Shane's cheekbone.

"Now," he said, his voice still gentle but with a hint of his earlier determination. "You will sit. I will pack." Shane laughed, the sound bright and easy in the quiet room.

"You're ridiculous."

"Yes," Ilya agreed, already turning back to the books. "But you love me."

Shane sighed, but he was smiling as he lowered himself onto the couch, one hand resting on the curve of his belly. He watched Ilya move through their home with purpose and care, packing pieces of their life into bags for two weeks of nothing but each other. Outside, the sky was clear. Inside, Shane felt nothing but warmth.

Ilya parked the car with exaggerated care, easing it into the familiar spot beside the cottage as if he were navigating a sheet of fresh ice. The gravel barely crunched beneath the tires. Beside him, Shane slept on, his head tilted against the headrest, lips slightly parted, one hand resting loosely on the curve of his belly. His breathing was slow, deep, utterly peaceful. Ilya cut the engine and simply watched him for a moment.

The late afternoon light filtered through the trees, casting shifting patterns of gold and shadow across Shane's face. He looked younger like this, unguarded. The weight of secrets

and contracts and worried parents had smoothed away, leaving just the man Ilya had fallen in love with, truly, eight years ago.

He should sleep more often, Ilya thought. Then, quietly, so as not to disturb him, he slipped out of the car and closed the door with a soft, careful click. The air hit him first, crisp, clean, carrying the scent of pine needles and distant water. It was cooler here than in Ottawa, the kind of cold that settled into your lungs and reminded you that fall was waiting, patient, just around the corner. But the cottage, waiting at the end of the gravel path, held the promise of warmth.

The house seemed to emerge from the landscape itself, nestled into the natural contours of the Canadian forest with a quiet confidence that required no announcement. The cottage was not a single, imposing structure but a careful composition of volumes, each oriented to capture a different view of the forest and the hidden lake beyond. Expanses of floor-to-ceiling glass punctuated the dark facade, reflecting the sky and the swaying treetops. The windows were not mere openings, but an invitation to look outward, to let the landscape pour in.

Ilya thought of all the houses he had owned before moving to Ottawa, sleek condos, minimalist penthouses, spaces designed to impress and intimidate. None of them had ever felt like this. Just trees, water, sky, and the man he loved, carrying their son, asleep in the car behind him. He thought about the two weeks ahead. The sound of Shane's laugh echoing off the water. The weight of his body against Ilya's in the big, unfamiliar bed. A second home, he thought.

A soft sound from the car, Shane shifting in his sleep, a quiet murmur. Ilya turned and walked back, opening the driver's door with care. He reached across and brushed a strand of hair from Shane's forehead.

"We are here, *moy lyubov*" he said softly.

Shane stirred, blinked slowly, and smiled. "Good," he murmured, still half-asleep. "I missed it."

Ilya helped him out of the car, one hand steady on his arm. Together, they walked toward the weathered gray door, toward the waiting warmth and the cold lake and the quiet woods. The gravel crunched beneath their feet, and the forest held its breath, and somewhere inside the house, the fireplace was waiting to be lit.

The door had barely clicked shut behind them when Ilya's hands were on Shane.

Shane laughed against his mouth, the sound swallowed by the insistent press of Ilya's lips. "The bags..."

"Later."

"...haven't even brought in the..."

"Later." Ilya's voice was a low vibration against Shane's skin, his fingers curling into the fabric of Shane's sweater, pulling him closer. "Everything can wait. Didn't you said before you wanted time to stop a little?"

They stumbled through the entryway, a clumsy choreography of desperate hands and quickening breath. Shane's back met the cool granite of the kitchen island, and the contrast, cold stone against the heat pooling beneath his skin, drew a sharp gasp from his throat.

The door had barely clicked shut behind them when Ilya was already in motion. "Sit. Rest."

Shane opened his mouth to protest, but Ilya was already gone, a blur of purposeful movement between the car and the kitchen. He moved with the same focused efficiency he brought to power plays and penalty kills, except now the opponent was groceries, and the trophy was a properly stocked pantry.

Shane, wisely, stayed out of his way. He settled onto the counter's chair, tucking his feet beneath him, watching Ilya navigate the unfamiliar kitchen with an instinct that bordered on uncanny. The charcuterie supplies went in the designated deli drawer. The sparkling water lined up on the second shelf like soldiers awaiting inspection. Fresh produce found their bins, coffee beans their grinder, and the three different kinds of tea Ilya had insisted on bringing were arranged on the counter by some mysterious ranking system only he understood.

"You don't even drink tea," Shane pointed.

"Yeah, but you do" Ilya replied, not looking up from his organization. "I will become a tea expert. It will be my new identity."

"Ilya Rozanov: NHL superstar, father, tea sommelier."

"Exactly." Ilya set down the paprika and reached for the oregano. "Very intimidating. Opponents will be afraid." Shane laughed, the sound easy and warm in the quiet cottage.

Outside, the lake glittered through the wall of windows. Inside, Ilya unpacked their life into Shane's kitchen, shelf by shelf, as if he had been doing it for years. When the last bag was empty and the last jar aligned, Ilya stood in the center of the kitchen and surveyed his work. His hands found his hips. His expression was one of deep, almost comical satisfaction.

"Good," he pronounced. "Now it is ready, you don't need to worry about anything".

Shane got down from the chair, suddenly nervous in his own home. He ran a hand through his hair, then shoved both hands in his pockets. Ilya was watching him, a small, curious tilt to his head.

"Well... This is my cottage". He said, feeling awkward since they have been inside the house for at least ten minutes now.

Ilya looked around, expressing how impressed the place looked with his beautiful and teasing face. "Your real estate fetish really paid off, huh?"

"I didn't actually buy it," Shane said. The words came out faster than he intended. "I had it built."

Ilya's expression didn't change, but something in his eyes softened. "Oh, I know." Shane's heart stuttered.

Of course Ilya knew. Ilya had seen it on TV, he said it himself.

But knowing and seeing were different things. Knowing and being here, touching the countertops Shane had chosen, breathing the air Shane considered sacred, that was something else entirely.

"Well," Shane said, and his voice came out too bright, too eager. He could hear himself babbling and couldn't stop. "You already know the kitchen, but I can give you a tour if you like. Or... or I can make us some lunch. The water here is really good. I have my own well..." He gestured vaguely toward the wall of windows. "You can see it. From here." He pointed outside before putting his hands back into his pockets. "In case you're... thirsty."

Thirsty. He had just said thirsty to Ilya Rozanov after gesturing at a well house like it was a selling point on a real estate listing. Shane wanted to die.

Ilya was very, very still. His eyes had gone dark. Then he crossed the room in three long strides. He didn't say anything. He didn't need to. His hands found Shane's hips, pulled him close, and his mouth found Shane's. Not urgent, not desperate, but deliberate. Claiming. Finally.

Shane made a sound against his lips, something between a laugh and a sigh of relief. His fingers curled into the fabric of Ilya's sweater, anchoring himself.

"The well," Ilya murmured against his mouth. "You showed me the well."

"Shut up."

"It was very romantic. I am very thirsty."

"Fuck off." Ilya smiled, wide and wicked, and kissed him again.

Outside, the well house stood quiet among the pines. Inside, the kitchen was finally, completely, perfectly ready.

The kitchen smelled incredible. Shane had insisted on homemade pasta sauce. *I'm craving it*, he claimed, though Ilya suspected this was just an excuse to convince Ilya, although we would never deny a single thing to Shane.

Ilya had been tasked with the garlic bread, a role he took with characteristic intensity, buttering each slice with surgical precision.

"This is too much garlic," Shane said, peering over Ilya's shoulder.

"This is not enough garlic," Ilya countered, adding another clove.

"You're going to scare away the wildlife."

"The wildlife can learn to appreciate good bread." Shane laughed, reaching around him to grab the salt.

Ilya caught his wrist, turning him, pinning him gently against the counter. The butter knife clattered into the sink.

"The bread," Shane breathed.

"The bread can wait. You have to enjoy my kiss before I eat all this garlic".

Ilya's mouth found his jaw, then his throat, then the soft skin below his ear. Shane's head fell back against the cabinet, a sound escaping him that was half sigh, half surrender and half hard already.

"The sauce," he managed.

"You said it needs to simmer for forty minutes." Ilya's hands were under his sweater now, warm and certain.

"We have time."

"Your hands are covered in garlic, Ilya". Shane said, holding Ilya's hand still. Ilya smiled, kissed Shane on the lips and went to the sink.

Shane adjusted his shirt and got back to whatever he was doing. *Sauce, pan, okay.* Then, he stirred it a bit, tapped the spoon at the edge of the pan, and felt his butt colliding against Ilya's crotch. Air escaped his lungs once again.

"Hands clean" Ilya whispered in his ear.

They didn't make it to the bedroom. They barely made it to the couch.

Shane pulled Ilya down on top of him, the leather cool beneath his bare back, Ilya's weight a welcome pressure that didn't cause any type of discomfort to Shane's belly. Their mouths met again, desperate and laughing, the absurdity of the moment catching up with them. They were supposed to be adults, supposed to be parents, and here they were, necking on the couch like teenagers while dinner simmered on the stove. Ilya's hips rolled against his, and Shane's laugh turned into a gasp. "Fuck" Shane whispered.

"Hard already, Hollander? You're so needy for me." He teased.

Shane's hand slipped between them, finding Ilya's sweatpants, then the shirt's waistband. Ilya's breath stuttered, his forehead dropping to Shane's shoulder. Shane's other hand guided Ilya's down, wrapping Ilya's fingers around both of them together. Ilya understood immediately, his grip firm and sure, his rhythm steady. Shane buried his face in Ilya's neck and let himself be taken apart.

“Want you on top” Ilya said, and with one nod from Shane, he was sitting in the couch at the same time and he was pulling Shane on top of him, legs spread both of Ilya’s sides.

This time, Shane wrapped them both together and continued to stroke, getting back to an even desperate rhythm. It was quick, desperate, a release of what seemed like weeks, but was barely one day.

When Shane came, it was with Ilya's name on his lips, a prayer and a promise. When Ilya followed, also with Shane’s name escaping his throat, it was with Shane's skin between his teeth, marking and claiming and holding on. They stayed tangled together, looking at each other’s lips and eyes and everything they could catch with their eyes half open, breathing hard.

None of them wanted to say it out loud, naming it might break the spell, might remind them of all the years this wasn't possible. But the truth sat between them anyway, warm and quiet as the fading light through the windows. This was how it was supposed to go after the tuna melts months ago.

"Ya tebya lyublyu" Ilya answered, the words muffled against Shane's forehead.

“I love you”.

They hadn't known how to say it then. They hadn't known if they were allowed to want it, if they were worthy of it, or if they'd misread every signal, every stolen night, every lingering glance across the ice. But now, with their son kicking softly against Ilya's palm and the scent of charcoal clinging to the air, the question felt laughably irrelevant. Shane felt it in his chest, a lightness he hadn't known he was capable of carrying. Not the frantic, desperate relief of a secret finally told, but something deeper. Something that had settled into his bones and made its home there. Ilya shifted beside him, his thumb tracing idle circles on Shane's belly. Foreheads still touching. The words floated between them anyway, lighter than smoke, brighter than the fading sun on the lake. This is how it was always supposed to be. But...

Charcoal...

Smoke...

Something smelled...

“Fuck!” Shane said at the same time as Ilya cursed:

"Blyad!" Ilya was off the couch as soon as Shane stood up and halfway to the kitchen before his brain fully caught up.

Shane scrambled after him, pulling his shirt back down, his legs unsteady. Smoke was curling from the stove. Ilya held the pan handle, swore loudly and dropped it into the sink, causing the already burnt sauce to splatter all over the kitchen. A thin tendril of smoke rose from what had once been a perfectly good pasta sauce and was now a carbonized brick. Even with his hands burned and a desperate Shane holding them under the running water of the tap, Ilya started to laugh.

"It's not funny," Shane said, but his voice cracked.

"It is a little. Your hands still have cum". Shane rapidly washed it away in the water, still holding Ilya's hands.

Ilya looked at the smoldering remains of Shane's sauce and Shane looked too. It was a culinary disaster. Then he started laughing too.

"Fuck, I burned it all".

"You didn't, the stove did".

"I wouldn't have burn it". Shane looked at Ilya, trying to hold his laughter.

"This is my fault?"

"Yes! Completely! One hundred percent your fault!"

Ilya pulled him close, still laughing, pressing kisses to Shane's temple, his cheek, the corner of his mouth, without caring about his wet and burned hand. Shane melted into him, the last of his giggles fading into something softer. He asked:

"What do we do now?"

"We can just have bread. We make hotdogs with them".

They ended up eating hotdogs on the couch, (new and less elaborated) sauce dripping onto their plates, the windows open to let out the lingering smoke. Outside, the lake glittered in the fading light. Inside, they sat close, shoulders touching, feet tangled on the coffee table. The sauce was a loss. But everything else, somehow, was exactly right.

The lake was glass, flat and still, reflecting the sky in shades of deepening blue. Shane stood near the water's edge but still in the grass, cause the stones would sometimes hurt his feet. He was barefoot turning a flat stone over in his fingers.

"Have you ever skipped stones?" he asked, glancing back at Ilya, who was sitting next to him watching Shane with the focused intensity.

"I am from Moscow." Ilya said, as if that explained everything. "Lake was normally frozen. When it wasn't, it was boring because I couldn't practice."

Shane grinned and gestured him closer. "Come here. Lesson one."

Ilya approached, skepticism written across his features. Shane positioned him at the water's edge, adjusting his stance with hands on his hips, nudging his feet wider apart.

"You need a good base. Like hockey."

"That sport looks very technical, skipping stones." Ilya said flatly.

"And the stone..." Shane gave Ilya the stone he was holding moments before. "... needs to be the right shape. Flat. Not too heavy." He placed it in Ilya's palm, closing his fingers around it. "You hold it like this. Index finger along the edge. Wrist loose."

Ilya looked at the stone. Looked at Shane. Looked back at the stone.

"This seems like a lot of instructions for throwing a rock."

"Just throw it, Rozanov."

Ilya threw it.

The stone hit the water with an unceremonious plunk and sank instantly. A single, sad ripple marked its grave.

Shane doubled over, laughing. "That was... you didn't even... the wrist, Ilya."

"I did the wrist! The rock was broken." He said, as if made any sense.

"You did nothing with the wrist! You threw it like a grenade!"

Ilya's jaw set in a way Shane recognized. The same expression he wore when down by two goals with five minutes left. Competitive fire banked and ready.

"Show me then."

Shane wiped his eyes and selected another stone. He positioned himself, wound up, and sent it skimming across the surface; one, two, three, four skips before it surrendered to the depths.

"Show off." Ilya muttered. "Your rock wasn't broken."

Ilya picked another stone. Practiced the grip. Flicked his wrist experimentally.

Ilya picked another stone. Practiced the grip. Flicked his wrist experimentally.

The stone flew sideways, missing the water entirely, and disappeared into the tall grass to their left.

"*Blyad*." Ilya cursed.

Shane bit his lip, trying to be supportive. "That's okay. The grip was better, you just..."

"I know what I did wrong." Ilya was already marching toward the grass, searching for the lost stone. He found it, stalked back to the water's edge, and reset his stance.

Second attempt: the stone hit the water at a perfect angle—and sank like a brick. Zero skips.

“Fuck!”

Shane pressed both hands over his mouth, shoulders shaking.

"This is not funny, Hollander." Ilya growled, already selecting another stone.

"It's a little funny."

"It is not. I'm in pain."

Third attempt: the stone flew beautifully, spinning just right, and managed exactly one skip before disappearing. A single, pathetic skip.

Ilya's face went through approximately seventeen emotions in three seconds. Disbelief. Outrage. A flicker of wounded pride. And then, settling over all of it, a look of such pure, childish frustration that Shane lost the battle entirely.

"This rock is defective too. Bad rock. Poor quality. Someone should test these before they are sold."

"Rocks aren't..." Shane gasped for air. "They're just rocks, Ilya."

"I will get this," Ilya said, jaw set. "I will master the stone-skipping. Watch me."

He grabbed another stone. Squared his shoulders. Took a deep breath.

And this time, the stone flew true. One skip. Two. Three. Four skips, clean and beautiful, before it finally surrendered to the depths.

Then he turned to Shane with the most insufferable, triumphant smile Shane had ever seen. Shane's jaw dropped.

"I am amazing."

"Yeah, okay... It only took you four tries, but that's fine."

"I learned. I adapted. I conquered." Ilya sauntered back to Shane, chest puffed out. "This is what victory looks like."

"Fuck you."

Ilya pulled him close, pressing a kiss to his temple.

The lake glittered.

"Now we do a rematch." Ilya said.

"What are we, twelve?"

"Yes. Rematch." He started to look for good stones on the floor.

What followed was not, strictly speaking, a mature activity for two grown men, one of whom was carrying their future child. But Shane couldn't remember the last time he'd felt this light. This free. They stood at the water's edge for what felt like hours, trading stones and insults, keeping a running tally in the dirt with a stick.

Ilya won. Barely. By one skip. Five skips against four skips.

"The universe has spoken," Ilya announced, brushing his hands together. "I am the superior stone-skipper. You can't do more than four."

"You got lucky."

"I am talented."

"You're insufferable."

Ilya grinned, wide and unguarded, and dropped onto the grass. After a moment, Shane lowered himself beside him, careful of his belly, leaning back on his palms before lying down. Ilya followed. The grass was cool and slightly damp, the last of the day's warmth bleeding out of the sky.

"So," Shane said quietly. "This is our life now. Part of it."

Ilya turned his head to look at him. "Da. It appears so."

"We could spend every summer here."

"If you want." Ilya wanted it too. But most importantly, he wanted to be with Shane.

"I want." Shane's voice was soft but certain. "I want to come here every year. With you. With our son." He rested a hand on his belly, the bump a little more pronounced now. "I want to teach him how to skip stones."

Ilya snorted. "He will have my genes, so he will be amazing skipping stones."

"I'm glad he'll have my genes too, so he'll be reasonable."

They stayed there for a moment in silence, the image of a small boy on this same shore, shrieking with laughter, chasing the waves. Their son.

"I want to learn to cook," Ilya said suddenly. "Properly. Not just enough to make boring food." Shane smiled large. "I will learn..." He counted on his fingers. "Pasta, chicken, something with vegetables, those strange things you call food sometimes and your grandmother's sauce."

"You'll be an amazing chef"

"I want close when you're nine months pregnant." Ilya said, his voice dropping. "I want to see how big you get."

"Rude."

"Beautiful," he corrected. "I want to see you beautiful and round and carrying our son. I want to feed you whatever you crave at three in the morning. I want to hold you when you cannot sleep."

Shane's throat tightened. "That's... a lot of wanting."

"Da." Ilya's gaze was steady, warm, utterly without shame. "I want everything. With you." Shane's jaw dropped.

The words settled between them, heavy and light all at once. Shane felt them in his chest, in his belly, in the tiny flutter of movement that might have been their son responding to his father's voice.

"Do you want more?" Ilya looked at him. "Children, I mean." He flushed, suddenly aware how early this conversation was. They hadn't even had this one yet, and here he was, asking about the next. "I know it's probably too soon to..."

Ilya's hand found his, warm and solid. When Shane looked up, Ilya was smiling. Not his usual smirk, not the competitive grin from their stone-skipping battle. Something softer. Something that made Shane's heart stutter.

"I want whatever you want," Ilya said. His voice was low, certain, like he was reciting a vow. "If you want two, we will have two. If you want more children than Hayden..." Shane snorted. "... we will have more children than Hayden. If you want a whole hockey team, we will have a hockey team. I will build a bigger house. I will buy a bigger car. I will learn to cook for an army."

"That's insane," Shane breathed. "Hayden has four kids."

"Then we will have five if you want to."

"You can't just... that's not how it..."

"I do not care how it works." Ilya lifted their joined hands and pressed a kiss to Shane's knuckles. "I care about you. I care about what you want. Whatever that is, I want it too."

Shane stared at him. The fading light caught Ilya's eyes, turned them to something ancient and endless. This man, this impossible and secretly soft man, was offering him everything. Not just a future. A blank check on forever.

He was so full of love he thought he might burst.

Shane sat up, shifting closer until he could reach Ilya's face. He cupped his cheek, the sharp cheekbone, the slight stubble, the warmth of skin that had become as familiar as his own, and kissed him, softly and slowly. Pouring everything he couldn't say into the press of his lips.

When he pulled back, Ilya's eyes were still closed.

"I think I want two kids, but maybe after we retire... and if we still want to have a second child."

"Thank God. I was scared for a moment. I'm glad you want to have a decent amount of kids."

"You're an asshole."

"You love me."

"I do. I love you a lot." Shane whispered. "Every part of you. Even the competitive part that has to win at everything."

Ilya opened one eye. "You are much more competitive, Hollander".

Shane couldn't deny. "Rematch then."

"Best of three." Ilya was already standing, reaching down to haul Shane gently to his feet. "We can call it the Loon Cup. Let's make it annual. It will be a very important championship and the first and biggest winner is me."

"You don't get to call it a championship just because you won once."

"And first."

"You got lucky!"

Ilya was already at the water's edge, selecting stones. Shane shook his head, laughing despite himself, and waded back into the competition.

He won the rematch. By two skips.

Ilya demanded a tiebreaker.

The sun set over the lake, painting the sky in shades of rose and gold. Two figures stood at the water's edge, arguing about form and wrist action and whether a skip that touched a lily pad should count double. Ilya thought it should be counted as bonus. Shane said it was cheating, cause the pad helped the stone to skip.

But they had forever to decide who won and to make up some stupid rules.

For now, being here, together, was a victory enough.

They were lying in bed, Shane was on his back, Ilya curled beside him, one hand draped possessively over the curve of his belly. The baby had been active all evening, little flutters

and kicks that made Shane gasp and Ilya press closer, trying to feel every movement through his palm.

"We should probably discuss names." Shane said looking at Ilya's hand.

Ilya was quiet for a moment. Then: "I have a list."

Shane turned his head. "You have a list?"

"It's on my head, but it exists."

"What are your ideas?"

"Ilya Jr. Rozanov-Hollander is a strong option." Ilya said playfully and Shane burst out laughing.

"We are not naming our son Ilya Jr."

"Ivan then."

"It looks like a variation of Ilya."

"It's completely different. You're being xenophobic, Shane." Ilya said jokingly and dramatic.

"Fuck off, I hate you." Shane pushed his shoulders laughing.

But underneath the laughter, something flickered. A thought he didn't want to examine too closely.

Ilya lived a significantly amount of years in North America, but he hadn't been born here. He'd come over as a teenager, raw and talented, leaving behind everything familiar. Culture and language.

Shane thought about what it must have been like. To be seventeen and land in a new country where you barely spoke the language, expected to perform at an elite level while everyone around you spoke in tongues. To have your name mispronounced, your accent mocked, your heritage reduced to stereotypes about vodka and bears and cold.

Ilya never complained about it though. Shane didn't know if it was a good sign.

Shane pulled Ilya's head to be closed to his, and so he did, and kissed Ilya's forehead.

Ilya was quiet for a moment. Then his arm tightened around Shane.

"Do you want our son to have a Russian name?" Shane asked.

"Not really." Ilya sighed. "Probably not."

Shane traced the line of Ilya's jaw with his fingertips, then leaned in and pressed soft kisses to each cheek—first the left, then the right, slow and deliberate, like he was memorizing the

shape of him. When he was done, he guided Ilya's head down to rest against his chest, threading his fingers through the damp hair at the nape of his neck.

"Actually, I have only one name." Ilya said, his voice a low rumble above Ilya's ear, "Theo."

Ilya tilted his head, listening to Shane's heartbeat while he considered it.

"Theo is a beautiful name."

"It is. Short, strong." Shane's hand continued its slow, soothing motion through Ilya's hair.

"I have only one too." Shane said after a moment, his voice softer now.

Ilya waited, patient, present.

"James." Shane whispered.

The name hung between them, simple and profound. Ilya lifted his head just enough to press a kiss to the side of Shane's neck, right where his pulse beat steady and true.

"Theo James Rozanov-Hollander," Ilya murmured against his skin, tasting each syllable.

Shane's breath caught. "It's... it's perfect."

"Diplomatic," Ilya agreed, a smile in his voice. "Canadian first name, English middle name, Russian surname, Canadian surname. It's a Canadian sandwich." Shane laughed hard.

"His jerseys will have to be huge." Shane's hand drifted down to rest over Ilya's on his belly. "Rozanov-Hollander is a mouthful."

"Perfect for a future captain, though." Ilya's thumb traced a slow circle over the swell of him. "Long names look important on the back of a jersey. Very official."

Shane laughed, the sound wet at the edges. "He doesn't have to play hockey, you know."

"Of course not." Ilya's voice was mock-offended. "If he wants to be a boring engineer, I will support him. If he wants to be a poet, I will support him. He can be a literature captain."

"I don't think that position exists."

"Of course it does. A literature teacher is a literature captain."

Shane was amazed. Ilya watched him, drinking it in, storing this moment somewhere safe.

But then the laughter faded, and Shane looked down at him, really looked, and Ilya felt seen in a way he'd never quite learned to name.

Ilya looked down at him, at the bump between them, at the life they'd created. His voice was soft, reverent, full of everything he'd never learned how to say until now.

"Theo James Rozanov-Hollander," he whispered.

The baby kicked. Right where Ilya's hand rested, a firm, decisive thump, as if answering to his name for the very first time.

They both felt it. They both smiled. And the three of them drifted into sleep like that, safe and loved.

Chapter End Notes

Hope you enjoyed this chapter.

I'll try to update soon! Meanwhile, if you're interested, you can read the Hollanov oneshot I published yesterday for Valentine's Day! It's called 'Sixteen roses' and you can check it in my profile.

Thank you for reading. Love y'all 

Chapter 12: our worries

Chapter Notes

Hello, everyone!

The chapters are getting bigger and bigger and I don't know how to reduce, so here is an almost 6k words chapter for you. Hope you enjoy <3

Shane stood in front of the full-length mirror in their bedroom, one hand braced on the dresser, the other pressed to the undeniable dome of his belly. Almost six months. Twenty-three weeks. Somewhere in there, Theo was doing somersaults, or at least it felt like it, given the way his insides had been rearranging themselves all morning.

"You are staring at yourself again," Ilya's voice came from the doorway, warm and amused. "Is it still there?"

"Shut up." But Shane was smiling. "I'm trying to see if I've grown since last week."

Ilya crossed the room and stood behind him, his reflection appearing over Shane's shoulder. His hands found Shane's hips, then slid forward to rest on either side of the bump.

"You have," he said solemnly. "Definitely. At least two centimeters."

"You can't tell that."

"I am trained to notice small changes. It is my job."

"Your job is hockey."

"Hockey is noticing small changes, you told me that before." Shane remembered. One of the times they talked after sex during one of their secret encounters.

"Yes, I guess I did."

"So you know. The way a defenseman shifts his weight. The angle of a stick. The..." He pressed a kiss to Shane's temple. "... the daily expansion of my Shane's beautiful stomach." Shane leaned back against him, letting Ilya take some of the weight.

His back ached a bit. Everything ached a little, actually. His hips, his lower back, the strange pulling sensation in his abdomen that he'd learned was just ligaments stretching to accommodate the tiny human growing inside him. But standing here, wrapped in Ilya's arms, looking at the two of them in the mirror, it was almost impossible to feel anything but wonder.

"I'm huge already," Shane said.

"You are perfect."

"I almost can't see my feet anymore."

"Yes, you can." Ilya's reflection grinned at him. "Just look yourself in the mirror. I can see your feet from here."

Shane snorted, the serious moment breaking. "You're an asshole." He was smiling now, despite himself.

"I think I'm going to schedule a doctor's appointment for you." Ilya's voice was thoughtful, faux-serious. "An eye doctor."

"An ophthalmologist?"

"Yes, that one. Your eyes are broken if you can't see you're always stunning." Shane turned his head slightly, raising an eyebrow.

"Stunning?"

"Yes." Ilya's brow furrowed slightly. "Did I use this wrong? You know, beautiful. Take my breath away. Every time."

"Wow." Shane laughed, the sound bright and genuine, his heart so full it felt like it might crack his ribs. The motion made his belly bounce slightly against Ilya's hands, a gentle reminder of the life between them.

"I don't think I'll look stunning in three months. I'm going to be the size of a house."

"A very beautiful house." Ilya pressed a kiss to his temple. "With excellent and spacious garage."

"Shut up!" Shane twisted in his arms, turning to face him properly.

The laughter faded from his face as his hands came up to frame Ilya's jaw. He traced Ilya's left cheek with his thumb, over and over, a soothing rhythm, but he couldn't quite meet his eyes.

"So," Shane said quietly. "We have one more week together."

Ilya's expression flickered just for a moment, a shadow passing over his features before he smoothed it away. The reflex of a man who had learned young not to show weakness, but knew now that he could be vulnerable around Shane.

"One week." Ilya echoed.

"I don't know how I'm going to sleep without you."

"You will have more space." Ilya's voice was light, an offering of levity in the face of something heavier. But Shane felt the sadness underneath, the same sadness coiling in his own chest.

Shane shook his head, pressing closer, his forehead finding the curve of Ilya's shoulder. "I don't want space. I want you."

Ilya's arms tightened, pulling him flush against his chest. He buried his face in the warm curve of Shane's neck too, both now breathing each other like trying to memorize their scents.

"I can skip hockey camp." Ilya murmured against his skin, the words vibrating through Shane's pulse point. He pressed a kiss there, soft and lingering. Shane's eyes fluttered closed before he raised his head.

"No, you can't. And they need you there. You can't skip your first ever hockey camp with Ottawa."

He felt Ilya's sigh more than heard it, a warm exhale against his throat. Ilya knew Shane was right. Of course he knew. This was the life they had chosen, the life they were building, and it required sacrifices from both of them.

But knowing didn't make it easier. Knowing didn't make it right.

"It is not fair," Ilya said quietly, the words muffled against Shane's skin.

"What isn't?"

"You." Ilya pulled back just enough to look at him, his eyes dark and serious. "You have to stay. You have to watch from home while I play. You have to carry our son alone for months while I am on the road." His jaw tightened. "It is not fair."

Shane's throat constricted. He hadn't expected this, hadn't expected Ilya to carry this guilt alongside his own complicated feelings.

"Hey." Shane cupped his face with both hands, forcing Ilya to meet his eyes. "Sorry, I shouldn't say stupid things a week before you go. But I promise I'm okay. Okay?" Ilya didn't answer, just continued to look at Shane's eyes. Shane continued softly: "And you're going to prove to Ottawa that signing you was the best decision they ever made. You're going to have an amazing season, and every night you're going to call me, and you're going to tell me all about it, and Theo is going to kick when he hears your voice."

A single tear escaped, tracing a path down Ilya's cheek. Shane kissed it.

"And then..." Shane whispered, "you're going to come home. To us. And we're going to be here, waiting. Always."

Ilya kissed him. Not desperate, not urgent, but deep and slow and full of everything he couldn't say. Shane melted into it, into him, into the impossible rightness of this moment even

as the clock ticked toward their separation. When they finally broke apart, Ilya rested his forehead against Shane's.

"One more week," Ilya said. "We will make them count." Shane nodded, his eyes now wet too.

"Yeah. We will." Outside, the lake glittered in the afternoon sun.

They stood like that for a long moment, foreheads pressed together, breathing the same air, before Ilya finally pulled back and took Shane's hand.

"Come," he said. "Breakfast."

It had become their thing. Ilya had taken to searching for recipes online, reading through forums about pregnancy nutrition, finding meals that were both delicious and "safe" for Shane. Not boring.

Shane settled onto the chair at the kitchen island, the one with the extra cushion Ilya had bought without telling him. He watched Ilya move through the space, confident now, familiar.

"I have a list." Ilya said finally, cracking eggs into a bowl with one hand while reaching for his phone with the other.

"A list of what?"

"Things you need while I am gone." He scrolled through his phone with the intensity of a general reviewing battle plans.

Shane raised an eyebrow, a smile tugging at his lips. "Let me see this list."

Ilya cleared his throat dramatically, holding the phone like a podium.

"One: food."

"That's succinct." Shane laughed, the sound bright in the quiet kitchen.

Ilya's expression softened, just for a moment, before he continued. "I will buy a lot a food the day before I go, but I called your mother. She said she is going to come visit every day. But she will try to convince you to go to your parents' house. I said you probably would want stay here, since your parents' live near, but it's your choice."

Shane nodded, his hand drifting to rest on his belly. "I'm good here. I don't really feel like leaving the house for too long." He paused, a warmth spreading through his chest. "Although I would really appreciate my mom coming to see me."

"She will. She promised." Ilya returned to his phone. "Two: I will call you every day and text you all day. If I do not text you, it is because hockey." He looked up, serious. "You call and text whenever you want. Day. Night. I do not care. I will answer as soon as I can, okay?"

Shane felt something loosen in his chest. "Okay. I want to FaceTime."

"We will FaceTime a lot." Ilya's mouth curved into a familiar, wicked smile. "I will actually try to not have a roommate. So we can have phone sex."

"That's not what I meant." Shane was laughing now, helpless against the absurdity and the love of it all.

"Oh, but we will be doing it." Ilya crossed to him, bracing his hands on the counter on either side of Shane's hips. "You will wear your glasses..."

"My glasses?"

"... and I will be very, very hot for you. It will be excellent."

"You really should bond with the team while you're there." Shane managed, still laughing a little.

Ilya leaned in, kissing the corner of his mouth. "I will bond with the team." Another kiss, his nose brushing Shane's cheek. "And I will have phone sex with you." A final kiss, soft and lingering. "One thing does not annul the other."

Shane looped his arms around Ilya's neck, pulling him closer and kissing him softly before Ilya returned to the stove.

"So..." Shane said, watching Ilya's back as he tended to the eggs. "What's the rest of the list?"

Ilya didn't turn around, but Shane could hear the smile in his voice. "Three: Shane and Theo must relax their feet."

"What?"

"I bought one of those things that massages your feet." Ilya glanced over his shoulder, looking absurdly proud of himself.

"You bought me na electric foot massager?"

"And creams. For relaxation." Ilya returned his attention to the stove. "And lube. I forgot to mention on item number two."

Shane's face heated. "Oh my..."

"In case you run out." Ilya added, as if this were the most practical, reasonable thing in the world. "While I am gone. It is important to be prepared."

"Okay." Shane was laughing now, shaking his head. "I guess we still have some, but okay. What else?"

Ilya plated the eggs in a plate in front of Shane before retrieving his own. "Four: belly things."

Shane raised an eyebrow. "What are 'belly things'?"

Ilya's eyes were soft now, the teasing edge fading into something warmer. "I made some research. I found out that soon you might have trouble finding a comfortable sleeping position." He reached across the table, his hand covering Shane's. "So I bought you a pregnancy pillow. I am your pillow, but when I am not here, you can hug the alternative me. You can call it Pilya."

Shane's heart did something complicated in his chest while he laughed loudly at the pillow's name. He rested his elbows on the counter, just looking at Ilya, at this impossible, thoughtful, ridiculous man who had somehow become his entire world.

"It won't replace you." Shane said softly. "But it's really sweet that you thought about that."

"Of course I did." Ilya's thumb traced circles on Shane's knuckles. "I do not want you to feel lonely."

The words landed somewhere deep, settling into the space between Shane's ribs. He blinked, suddenly aware of the heat behind his eyes.

"I'm going to miss you so much." Shane whispered. "I think... I think more now. Not just because of the pregnancy." He swallowed. "The amount of time we've spent together these past months... it's more than we ever did since we met. Since the beginning. And I'm going to miss it. Miss *you*."

Ilya stood, circling the table to pull Shane into his arms. Shane went willingly, pressing his face into Ilya's chest, breathing him in.

"I will be back soon." Ilya murmured against his hair. "And then I will take the belly oil I bought..." He pulled back just enough to rest his hands on the curve of Shane's stomach. "... and massage your beautiful garage."

Shane choked on a laugh. "Shut up! That sounds so filthy."

"It is a very nice garage." Ilya said solemnly.

"*Ilya*."

Ilya grinned, then lowered himself to his knees, carefully, slowly, the way he did everything now when it came to Shane. He lifted the hem of Shane's shirt, exposing the round, taut skin of his belly, and pressed a kiss to the warmest part.

"Good morning, Theo," he murmured against Shane's skin. "Papa is making breakfast."

Ilya looked up at him, eyes shining, and kissed his belly one more time before rising. He pulled his chair close to Shane's, beside him, their shoulders touching, their thighs pressed together, and slid their plates closer.

"Eat." he said. "You are eating for two."

Shane picked up his fork, still smiling, still full to bursting with love for this man who made lists and bought pillows and kissed his belly and called it a garage.

They ate together, shoulders touching, the list forgotten.

"Oh," Shane said suddenly, mouth half-full. "I found this thing online. About baby sizes." Ilya looked up, fork paused mid-air.

"What thing?"

"It tells you how big the baby is each week. Like, compared to fruit and vegetables." Shane unlocked his phone and showed Ilya the screen. "So at sixteen weeks, he was the size of an avocado. Eighteen weeks, a bell pepper. Twenty weeks, a banana."

Ilya frowned at the phone and smiled. "This is very specific."

"It's a whole system. Very scientific."

"And now? What size is he now?" Shane scrolled, then grinned.

"Twenty-four weeks. He's the size of a corn on the cob." Ilya's fork clattered to his plate.

"Corn on the what?"

"Corn on the cob." Shane held up his phone, showing a picture of an ear of corn. "See? Like this."

Ilya stared at the image. Then at Shane's belly. Then back at the image. "That is..." He gestured vaguely, lost for words. "That is very specific size. Why corn? Why not..." He waved his hands. "... normal fruit? Apple? Grape? Small melon?"

"I don't make the rules, Ilya. The internet has spoken."

"So he's a corn baby? That's what we're calling him now?" Shane laughed.

"He is not a corn."

"Oh, but the internet had spoken. So now he is a corn baby, Shane. Our son is a corn."

Shane put the phone aside. "How do you say corn in russian?"

"*Kukuruza*" Ilya said, finishing his meal.

"*Kukuruza*" Shane repeated butchering the pronunciation. "*Kukuruza* baby then" Ilya smiled softly. He loved Shane so much he felt like he couldn't store all that love in his heart.

"I love you," he said simply. "Both of you. Even if baby is corn." Shane laughed, bright and free.

"We love you too. Even if you're weird about vegetables."

They stayed like that, hands tangled together over their corn-sized son, until the sun climbed higher and the day demanded they move. But for now, in this moment, they were exactly where they needed to be.

The toothbrush was halfway to his mouth when the first cramp hit.

Shane paused, bristles pressing against his lower lip, waiting. The sensation was dull, low in his belly. Not sharp, not urgent, but there. He counted through it, the way he'd read about in all those pregnancy forums he pretended not to scroll through at 2 a.m.

Eight seconds. Then it faded.

He kept brushing.

The second cramp came twenty seconds later. Stronger. Lower. He gripped the edge of the sink, toothbrush still in his mouth, and breathed through it.

It's fine. Probably Braxton Hicks. Everything is fine, he thought.

He spit. Rinsed. Stared at himself in the mirror.

Then, because he was Shane Hollander and he'd learned the hard way that ignoring things never worked, he reached for the toilet paper and checked.

Nothing. No blood. Just the normal evidence of a body doing normal body things.

He was still standing there, processing, when the third cramp rolled through, sharper this time, enough to make his hand go to his belly on instinct. He breathed through it, counted to ten, waited for it to pass.

It did. But his heart was beating faster now.

"Okay." he whispered to himself. "Okay."

He walked to the bathroom door, opened it, and leaned out into the hallway.

"Ilya?"

His voice was steady. Calm. But something in it must have carried, because he heard the kitchen faucet shut off abruptly, then the sound of footsteps – fast, too fast, the kind of speed that meant Ilya was already reading the situation before he'd even seen Shane's face.

Ilya appeared at the end of the hallway, a glass of water forgotten in his hand. His eyes found Shane's immediately, scanning, searching.

"What?"

"I'm having cramps." Shane kept his voice even. "I checked, no bleeding. But they've happened three times now."

Ilya's face went through approximately five emotions in two seconds: fear, confusion, a desperate attempt at calm, more fear, and then a strange, focused determination that Shane

recognized from the ice. Crisis mode engaged.

The glass of water ended up on the hallway console table, abandoned. Ilya was at Shane's side in seconds, his hand finding Shane's elbow, guiding him back into the bathroom and toward the closed toilet lid.

"Sit. Do not move." His voice was steady, but his hands were shaking. Shane felt it, the fine tremor in Ilya's fingers as he lowered him onto the seat.

"I'm okay." Shane started.

"You are sitting. I am calling the doctor." Ilya already had his phone out, scrolling.

Then another cramp hit.

Shane's breath caught, his hand flying to his belly. Ilya froze, phone forgotten, dropping to his knees in front of Shane.

"What? What is it?"

"Cramp." Shane's voice was tight. "Another one. That's four."

Ilya's face went pale. His hand covered Shane's on his belly, gripping tight.

"Count with me." Ilya said, focusing on his breathing. "In... and out. In... and out."

They breathed together, foreheads almost touching, until the cramp passed. Twenty seconds. Twenty long, horrible seconds.

Shane let out a shaky exhale. "Okay. Okay."

Ilya's eyes were wild. "We need to call-"

"In a second. I need to check something first." Shane reached for the toilet paper again, Ilya's hand still gripping his. He checked quickly, efficiently, the way the doctor had shown him at their last appointment.

Nothing. Still nothing.

"No blood." Shane said, and even he could hear the relief in his own voice. "Still no blood."

Ilya's head dropped forward, resting against Shane's knee. He took a ragged breath.

"Okay." he said, his voice muffled. "Okay. Good. That's good."

"Now you can call."

Ilya lifted his head, already pulling up his phone. "What is her name? The doctor's."

"Dr. Patel. Put it on speaker, please."

Ilya fumbled with the phone, his usually precise fingers slipping twice before hitting the right contact. Shane watched him, the way his jaw was set, the way his thumb shook as he pressed the screen. He reached out and rested a hand on Ilya's shoulder, a silent *I'm here, we're okay*.

The phone rang once. Twice.

"Good morning, this is Dr. Patel."

"Yes, hello." Ilya's accent was thicker than usual, a tell Shane had learned to read. Stress.

"This is Ilya Rozanov. I am calling for Shane Hollander. He is having cramps. He is twenty-four weeks pregnant."

"Okay, Mr. Rozanov. Is Shane there with you? Can he speak?"

"I'm here," Shane said, leaning toward the phone. "Hi. Sorry to bother you."

"Not a bother at all, Shane. This is exactly what we're here for." Dr. Patel's voice came on the line, calm, professional, the kind of steady that immediately made Shane feel less like he was falling apart. "Tell me what's happening."

Shane closed his eyes, focusing. "I've had four cramps in the last... maybe ten minutes? They're low, kind of dull, not sharp. They come and go. I checked for bleeding twice, there's nothing."

"Any other symptoms? Fever, dizziness, fluid leakage?"

"No. Nothing like that."

Dr. Patel hummed thoughtfully. "Cramping can be very normal at this stage, Shane. Round ligament pain, Braxton Hicks contractions, your body just... stretching to accommodate your growing guest. But we always want to be careful."

"What should we do?" Ilya cut in, leaning toward the phone. "Should we come to hospital? Should we-"

"Ilya." Shane squeezed his shoulder. Ilya took a breath, visibly trying to calm himself.

"Let's start with some basics," Dr. Patel said calmly. "Shane, are you hydrated?"

Shane blinked. "I... I mean, I haven't had water since... I don't know."

"Dehydration can cause cramping," Dr. Patel explained. "I want you to drink a full glass of water. Then lie down on your left side. That's important, left side. And rest for an hour. Time any cramps that come. If they get stronger, if they become regular like clockwork, if you have any bleeding or fluid leakage, call me back immediately or come to the hospital."

Ilya was already nodding, mentally cataloging the instructions. "Water. Left side. Timing. Yes."

"And Shane," Dr. Patel added, her voice softening. "Try not to worry too much. Your body is doing something enormous. A few twinges along the way are expected. But you're doing all the right things, paying attention, checking, calling. That's exactly what I want you to do."

"Thank you, doctor." Shane whispered.

"Call me if anything changes. Day or night. That's what I'm here for."

The call ended. The bathroom was suddenly very quiet.

Ilya was still on his knees in front of Shane, still holding his hand, still staring at him like he might disappear.

"Water." Shane said softly. "She said water."

Ilya nodded. Stood. Helped Shane up. Guided him to the bedroom with a hand on his lower back, the way he always did now, like Shane was something precious and fragile.

After sitting Shane on the bed, he disappeared and returned seconds later with a full glass of water.

"Drink." he ordered, pressing it into Shane's hands.

Shane drank. Ilya sat on the edge of the bed, one hand resting on Shane's hip, his thumb tracing anxious circles through the fabric of his sweatpants. Then, he tucked Shane onto his left side, checked the positioning twice, then lay down to cuddle him.

They waited. Five minutes. Ten. The cramps didn't come back. The whole time Ilya had his hands on Shane's bump.

Shane's body slowly unclenched, the tension flowing out of him. Theo kicked, a sharp, indignant thump right where Ilya's hand rested.

Ilya jumped. "He..."

"He's fine." Shane laughed softly. "He's letting us know he's okay."

Ilya stared at the spot where he'd felt the kick, his expression caught somewhere between wonder and residual terror. "He has terrible timing."

"He gets that from you."

"From me? I have excellent timing. I am famous for my timing."

Shane snorted. "Sure."

Ilya's hand was still on Shane's belly, still tracing those anxious circles, but his shoulders had dropped from where they'd been hovering somewhere around his ears. He looked tired. Wired. A little bit wrecked.

"You okay?" Shane asked softly.

Ilya let out a long breath. "No. Yes. I do not know." He shook his head. "I was in the kitchen. Getting water. Normal. Boring. And then you called my name in this different way, and..." He stopped, swallowing. "For a second, I could not move. My legs would not work."

"But you moved. You came very fast, actually."

"Yes, but..." Ilya's voice was quiet. "I kept thinking... what if something happens? What if I am not here? What if I am at camp and you call and I am too far away to-"

"Hey." Shane reached for his hand, pulling it up to his chest, holding it over his heart. "I'm here. We're here. Nothing happened."

"Nothing happened this time."

"And if something happens next time, you'll be a phone call away. And my mom will be here. And Dr. Patel. And I know how to take care of myself."

"But you should not have to." Ilya's voice cracked, just slightly. "You should not have to do it alone."

"I won't be alone. I'll have Theo." Shane pressed Ilya's hand against his belly. "And I'll have you. Even if you're not here, you'll be here." He tapped his own chest. "In here. Always. And, as you said before, my parents live near by."

Ilya was quiet for a long moment. Then he leaned down, pressing his forehead to Shane's.

"I love you." he whispered.

"I love you too."

"And I love him." His hands brushed Shane's belly through the fabric of his shirt. "Both of you. Too much. It is..." He struggled for the word. "... terrifying."

"Yeah." Shane's free hand came up to cup the back of Ilya's head. "It is."

They lay like that, breathing together, Theo occasionally kicking his agreement. The water glass sat empty on the nightstand. The afternoon sun moved across the floor. The cramps didn't return.

"I was thinking," Ilya said eventually, his voice muffled against Shane's chest. "How will he call us?"

"What do you mean?"

"I used to call my father 'Papa'. He was never... never a good father, really. I want to be a good 'Papa'. A Papa who stays. Who listens. Who says how proud he is. Who makes breakfast and buys pillows and kisses bellies."

"I think that's exactly the kind of Papa you'll be." Shane smiled. "And I'll be Dad."

"Yes. Dad is good. Dad is you."

"What does that mean?"

"It means you are steady. Reliable. The one he will go to for advice, for comfort." Ilya shrugged. "You are his anchor. Like you are mine."

"That's a lot of pressure."

"You can handle it, you're the boring Dad. I will have more pressure, because I'll be the fun Papa."

Shane laughed softly. "I guess we'll find out."

"We will." Ilya settled kissed near Shane's ear. "But I am not worried."

"No?"

"No." Ilya's voice was drowsy now, the adrenaline finally fading. "You are Shane Hollander. You can do anything."

"Including growing a human?"

"Especially that." Ilya pressed another kiss to Shane's hair. "You are very good at it. Very impressive. Very beautiful."

Shane smiled, his hand still moving holding Ilya's hand. The room went silent, a good and warm silence, and they stood there for a very long time, enjoying each other's touches and presence. Shane lay there, watching the light shift across the ceiling, feeling Theo's occasional kicks and Ilya's steady heartbeat through his cheek.

They were okay. All three of them.

He closed his eyes and let himself believe it.

Ilya was a boy again, thirteen years old, standing in the kitchen of the apartment in Moscow. His father was there, towering, dissatisfied, the way he always was at the end of a bad day. The way he always was, period.

"Look at you," his father sneered in Russian. "Crying like a little girl. You think hockey will save you? You're too soft. Weak. Just like your mother."

Ilya tried to speak, tried to defend himself, but no words came out.

"This way you'll end up alone," his father said, leaning close, his breath sour and cruel. "No family. No hockey. Nobody." He came closer, his eyes getting darker and darker every

second. "Nobody stays. Nobody ever stays. Your mother didn't stay."

The kitchen dissolved.

Now he was walking through an empty house, room after room, door after door. He called their names. Shane. Theo. His voice echoed back at him, hollow and wrong. No answer. Just silence, vast and cold, swallowing him whole.

He ran faster. Opened more doors. Empty. Everything empty.

"Nobody stays," his father's voice echoed from somewhere. "Nobody ever stays."

Ilya's breath caught. He pressed the heels of his hands into his eyes, trying to push the images away.

Ilya's eyes snapped open.

It was just a dream. A bad dream, he repeated a few times in his head.

For a moment, he didn't know where he was, the dream still clinging to him, dragging him under. His chest was heaving. His skin was slick with sweat. His heart hammered against his ribs like it was trying to escape. The bedroom was dark, the only light a thin sliver of moon creeping through the gap in the curtains. The lake had gone quiet, its gentle lapping replaced by the deep stillness of night. Shane slept on his left side facing Ilya curved around the pregnancy pillow Ilya insisted he tested before he left to hockey camp. His breathing was slow, even, peaceful. Ilya wanted to make sure Shane would feel comfortable, otherwise he would buy other types of pillows until he was.

He looked at Shane for a while, waiting to see his chest go up and down in this peaceful rhythm, and then sat up slowly, carefully, so as not to wake him. His feet found the floor, the cool wood grounding him. He rested his elbows on his knees and dropped his head into his hands, trying to breathe.

But the dream kept playing behind his eyes, refusing to fade.

"You okay?"

The voice was soft, sleep-thick, and Ilya's heart lurched. He turned to find Shane watching him from the bed, his eyes barely open but already sharp with concern.

"Did I wake you?" Ilya asked, his voice rough.

"No." Shane shifted, struggling to sit up against the pregnancy pillow. "Just... felt you move." He reached out, his hand finding Ilya's back. "What's wrong?"

Ilya shook his head, not trusting his voice.

Shane didn't push. He just let his hand rest there, warm and steady, waiting.

"Bad dream," Ilya finally managed.

"Want to talk about it?"

Ilya was quiet for a long moment. Then, slowly, the words started to come.

"My father was there. In the dream." His voice was flat, distant. "Saying things. The things he used to say." He swallowed. "That I am weak. That I am like him. That nobody stays."

Shane's hand pressed more firmly against his back.

"Then I was looking for you." Ilya's voice cracked. "For both of you. And I could not find you. Anywhere. Just empty rooms. Empty house. And his voice, telling me..."

He couldn't finish.

Shane moved then, ignoring the awkward angle of the pregnancy pillow, ignoring everything except the need to reach him. He pulled Ilya toward the bed, toward him, until Ilya was half-lying against his chest, his face pressed into the warm curve of Shane's neck and his hand resting on Shane's bump in a protective way.

"I'm here," Shane murmured against his hair. "We're both here." Shane pulled back just enough to look at him, his hands framing Ilya's face. The moonlight caught his eyes, steady and sure. "And we will stay here for a very, very, very long time." Shane said. "Which, if I have anything to say about it, is forever."

Ilya let out a shaky breath. "You can't be sure..."

"No. I can't." Shane's thumbs brushed his cheekbones, wiping away tears Ilya hadn't realized were falling. "But I know I'm not going anywhere. And I know Theo isn't either. And I know..." He held Ilya's gaze. "... that you are nothing like your father."

Ilya flinched. "You do not know that. You did not know him."

"I know you." Shane's voice was firm, unwavering. "I know the man who makes me breakfast every morning. Who researched pregnancy pillows because he didn't want me to be uncomfortable. Who kisses my belly and talks to our son in Russian. Who made a list, Ilya. A list of ways to take care of me while he's gone."

Ilya's breath hitched.

"That's not a man who's weak." Shane continued. "That's not a man who's cruel. That's not a man who ends up alone and angry." He leaned closer, their foreheads touching. "That's a man who is already a great father before our son is even born."

"But I am leaving." The words tore out of Ilya, jagged and raw. "I am leaving you here. Alone. How is that being a great father?"

Shane's hands slid to cup the back of his neck, holding him close.

"You're leaving to build a future for us." Shane said softly. "And for you too, because that's also important. Remember soon we'll be going together, and we'll be winning Stanley Cups

together and bringing our son to the ice to hold the cup too.” Ilya let out a wet laugh. “And it’s not like you’ll be gone for months. There are gaps between the games that you’ll be here with us.”

“I’ll be here in all of them”. Ilya reinsured him.

"Exactly." Shane pressed a kiss to his forehead. "That's not leaving, Ilya. That's loving. That's being a partner. That's being a father."

They stood there in the darkness, breathing together, the nightmare slowly loosening its grip. Theo kicked, a soft, sleepy movement against Ilya's side.

Ilya pressed his palm to the spot. "We woke him up."

"Thank God, he slept a lot today, I was kind frightened." Shane's hand covered his.

Ilya was quiet for a long moment. Then, so softly Ilya almost missed it:

"I love him so much. Already. It scares me."

"Me too." Ilya squeezed his hand.

"But that's the thing about love. It's supposed to scare you a little. Means it's real."

Ilya lifted his head, meeting Shane's eyes. "When did you get so wise?"

"Always been wise."

“Okay, sure...”

“I was the one to talk about feeling first, that was me being wise.”

“Hm. Okay.” “But I was the one to took the initiative first, in the showers.”

Shane laughed, the sound bright in the quiet room. “Oh my God, that was not wise at all!”

“Of course it was. And here we are, seven years later, living together, growing a human being.”

“It was irresponsible.”

“So, I would be irresponsible all over again.”

Ilya didn't move. He stayed where he was, curled against Shane's chest, listening to his heartbeat. Steady and strong.

"I would too." Shane whispered.

Ilya was quiet for a moment. Then, against Shane's chest, he smiled.

"*Ya tebya lyublyu.*" he murmured.

"*Ya tozhe.*" *Me too*, Shane said, surprising Ilya, who raised his head to meet Shane's eyes better. "What? I've been studying."

"That was very hot, Shane Hollander. I think I'll skip hockey camp this year." Ilya said as a joke, but kept his face serious, making Shane laugh hard.

"Shut up and get some sleep. We've got six more days together

"I'll teach you some useful words in Russian now, like 'harder, please' or 'yes, sir'."

"Sleep, Ilya." Shane laughed softly, the sound vibrating against Ilya's skin.

Ilya settled more heavily against Shane, his body finally relaxing, the adrenaline leaching out of his muscles. And he finally let himself believe that maybe his father had been wrong. Some people did stay.

He had proof, right here in his arms.

Chapter 13: our longing

Chapter Notes

Guys..... I started to write this fic thinking I would always keep the chapters between 3k to 6k maximum.

But today I present you a 8k chapter, because I couldn't write less I'M SO SORRY! It wouldn't make sense to split this chapter into two and it would make less sense if I reduced it.

So, I hope you enjoy it, cause for me it was a rollercoaster of emotions to write it.

26 weeks

The first two weeks without Ilya were a study in contrasts.

On paper, Shane's life was exactly what he and his mother had mapped out with Farah, the careful architecture of his medical leave, the excuse of recovery, the slow retreat from the public eye. No early morning skates. No press obligations. No long-distance travel. Just Shane and Ilya's new home, the quiet, and the slow stretch of days unfolding one after another exactly as planned. The problem was, in practice, no one had planned for how loud the silence would feel.

He woke the first morning to an empty side of the bed and stared at Ilya's pillow, or Pilya, for a full ten minutes before forcing himself up. The house now felt too big. Too quiet. The absence of Ilya's footsteps in the kitchen, his voice humming Russian songs off-key, the clatter of him eventually burning something after attempting a new recipe, it all echoed in the spaces where it should have been.

"You're fine" Shane told himself, pressing a hand to his belly, where his baby was already kicking. "Papa will come back soon, Theo."

He threw himself into keeping busy.

The garden became his refuge. The weather had turned warm, the late summer sun gentle on his skin, and Shane spent hours outside enjoying the weather. He found a prenatal yoga course online. The instructor was a cheerful woman named Brynn who spoke in soothing tones and reminded viewers every three minutes to 'listen to your body'. Shane, who had spent his entire career pushing his body past its limits, found this concept baffling but tried his best. He rolled out two mats on the grass, one for him and another to position his laptop, and attempted things like 'cat-cow stretches' and 'gentle hip openers' while Theo kicked in what Shane could only assume was commentary.

It felt good, helped with the growing back pain. He added it to his daily routine.

At night, he tried to fill the hours before sleep.

Ilya had would send him recommendations of movies to watch, classics Shane had never watched, although he used to watch a lot of movies on the plane. Shane tried. He really did. But he would stop paying attention mid-way, the movie playing unwatched to an empty room. At least it avoided the quiet.

"I'm just not a movie person, mainly outside of planes." He admitted during one of their calls. "I'm sorry. I tried."

Ilya's face on the screen was fond, exasperated. "You watched five minutes of *Clueless* and fell asleep."

"It was very... pink."

"It is a masterpiece of 90s cinema."

"It's a movie about teenagers shopping, Ilya. I don't understand why you love it so much."

Ilya looked genuinely wounded. "The fashion. The dialogue. The social commentary. It is brilliant."

"You're brilliant. That movie is... fine."

"We will try something else. Maybe action movies. Explosions. Things your tiny attention span can follow."

"My attention span is fine. Your movies are just not my thing."

"My movies are *culture*."

"My culture is hockey. Which I can't even watch properly anymore."

This was a fresh frustration. The NHL preseason had started, and Shane wanted to watch, needed to watch, it was in his bones. But games started at seven, eight, sometimes nine o'clock at night, and lately, without warning, his body would simply... shut down. He'd be sitting on the couch, second period starting, and the next thing he knew, it was 3 a.m. and the TV was playing infomercials.

"It's humiliating," he told Ilya. "I'm falling asleep before the first intermission. Old people stay up later than me."

"You are growing a human," Ilya reminded him. "Growing is tiring. Your body knows what it needs."

"My body needs to watch hockey."

"Your body needs to sleep. Hockey will still be there."

It was infuriating how reasonable Ilya sounded.

He tried reading instead. Stack of books from their still on progress library, thrillers and biographies and one very confusing sci-fi novel that made his head hurt. But his eyes would glaze over after a few pages, his mind wandering back to Ilya, to the baby, to the thousand small worries that circled like sharks beneath the surface of his calm.

Cooking was its own special challenge. He'd always been competent in the kitchen, nothing fancy, but he could feed himself. Now, with his belly getting in the way, everything was harder. Reaching for pots in lower cabinets required a complex series of maneuvers. Standing at the stove made his back ache. And every meal, no matter what he made, tasted... boring.

It wasn't the food. It was the absence of Ilya's presence beside him, tasting from the pot, stealing bites, making ridiculous comments about his technique, cause now Ilya was a professional graduated from weeks of internet cooking.

Cooking alone was just fuel. Cooking with Ilya had been a love language.

He ate his boring meals anyway, because Theo needed them. But he didn't enjoy them.

Through it all, Ilya was a constant presence.

They talked every day, sometimes multiple times a day. Ilya sent pictures from camp: his teammates making stupid faces in the locker room, the view from his hotel room, a truly unflattering shot of his own face immediately after practice that made Shane feel embarrassingly aroused

Ilya: This is what exhaustion looks like.

Shane: You look sexy.

Ilya: I am sexy 😈

He told Shane about his new teammates. A goalie named Wyatt Hayes that was very friendly, a veteran named Zane Boodram who told terrible dad jokes, a rookie called Luca Haas who was so nervous he dropped his water bottle three times during his first practice. They were nice, Ilya said. Welcoming. It helped, knowing he wasn't completely miserable.

And every night, without fail, Ilya asked: "How are you? Really?"

Shane always said fine. Because he was fine. He was managing. He was keeping it together.

But on the tenth night, something shifted.

They were on a video call, Shane in bed with his laptop propped on the pregnancy pillow, Ilya in his hotel room looking rumpled and tired and unfairly attractive in just his undershirt. They'd been talking for a few minutes about Ilya's day, about Theo's latest kicks, about the raccoon that had tried to break into their house's garbage.

Then the conversation drifted into silence, and they just looked at each other.

"I miss you," Shane said quietly. "I know I say it every day, but I really miss you."

Ilya's eyes softened. "I miss you too. Every minute."

"I keep reaching for you in bed. In the middle of the night. And you're not there."

"I know. I do the same."

Shane bit his lip. Then, before he could overthink it: "I miss your hands too."

Ilya's eyebrows rose. "Yes?"

"Touching me." Shane's cheeks were warm, but he didn't look away. "I miss you making my body feel good."

Something flickered in Ilya's eyes. Surprise, then heat, then a softness that made Shane's heart clench.

"Do you touch yourself?" Ilya asked, his voice lower now.

Shane's breath caught. The question hung between them, weighted and electric. "Sometimes," he admitted, his voice barely above a whisper. "At night. When I can't sleep."

Ilya's gaze was intense even through the screen. "What do you think about?"

"You." Shane's hand drifted to his belly, then lower, a subconscious movement. "The way you look at me. The way you..." He swallowed. "The way you sound when you're close."

Ilya made a sound low in his throat. "Show me."

"What?"

"Show me what you do." Ilya's voice was rough, careful. "When you think of me. I want to see."

Shane's heart was hammering. He remembered how good it was when Ilya was in Russia, how good he felt.

"Okay." he whispered. He adjusted the phone, angling it so Ilya could see him better and, as a gift, he reached for his glasses in the nightstand and put them on.

"You really are dirty, Hollander." Ilya said smiling. "Take off your clothes" He said, getting rid of his own.

Shane did what he said and slowly moved his hand lower. Ilya watched, his breathing audible even through the speakers, as Shane massaged his own cock.

"Tell me what you think at night when you're touching yourself." Ilya murmured.

"You... I think about you." Shane's eyes fluttered closed. "About your mouth. The way you..." He gasped softly. "The way you taste me."

"*Blyad*." Ilya breathed and adjusted the camera before lowering his own hand, keeping his eyes on the screen. "Keep going."

"And then I..." Shane hesitated.

"Then you what?" Shane bit his lip.

"Then I put my hand in my boxers. And I think about your hands instead. Because they're better."

A long, shaky exhale crackled through the phone.

"Fuck, Shane. I want to do so many things to you now." Ilya said.

"Tell me. If you were here, what would you do?"

"If I were there right now, I would not be so gentle." Shane's breath hitched.

"No?"

"No, because I know you like that." Ilya smirked. "I would put you on the bed. On your back. I would take my time with your mouth." His voice dropped lower, almost a growl. "I would make you beg for it."

"I don't beg." Shane knew it was a lie.

"You would beg for me." Ilya's smirk was visible even through the screen. "You always do. You get so desperate" He made a sound, low in his throat. "So beautiful when you need it."

Shane's hand moved faster. His eyes were fixed on Ilya's face, on the way his jaw tightened, the way his lips parted.

"And then," Ilya continued, "I would kiss down your neck. Your chest. That spot behind your ear that makes you melt." He paused, letting Shane imagine it. "I would kiss your belly for a long time. And then I would keep going lower."

"Fuck..."

Ilya's smile was wicked, even as his breathing grew ragged.

"I would put my mouth on you. Right there. While you take three of my fingers. I would take you so deep you would forget your own name. And I would not stop until you came apart for me."

Shane moaned, loud enough that he was glad their home had no neighbors.

"I would taste you." Ilya continued, his voice straining. "Every drop. And then, when you were shaking and finished, I would climb up and kiss you so you could taste yourself on my tongue."

Shane took his other hand to his entrance, imagining Ilya ripping him apart the way he loved it.

"And then I would ask if you wanted more." Ilya's hand was a blur now. "Because I am not done with you. Not even close. I would have you again and again until you could not move. Until the only thing you could say was my name."

"Fuck, I'm close," Shane gasped. "So close..."

"Look at me." Ilya's voice was urgent, commanding. "Look at me when you come."

Shane's eyes locked onto the screen, onto Ilya's face, onto the raw hunger there. The sight of him, this man, his man, falling apart for him across hundreds of miles, pushed him over the edge.

He came with a broken cry, Ilya's name on his lips. Through the speakers, he heard Ilya follow, heard the Russian curses, the gasping breaths, the sound of him collapsing against his pillows. For a long moment, there was only silence and the sound of their breathing. Then Ilya laughed, soft and wrecked.

"I wish I could hold you right now." Ilya's voice was tender now, the heat fading into something softer. "I would wrap myself around you and not let go."

"I know." Shane pressed his palm to the screen. "Soon."

"Soon." Ilya pressed back.

"That was so hot."

"It was. And it is going to be hotter when I'm there in a week."

"God, I hope it goes by very quickly."

"You're unsatiable, Hollander"

"Only because of you."

"Clean yourself and get some sleep. You need rest."

"You need to rest too."

Shane got up to clean himself and put his some new boxers. After, they stayed on the call until Shane's eyes grew heavy, until his breathing evened out into sleep. Ilya watched him for a long time afterward, memorizing the shape of his face in the dim light, before finally hanging up and facing the empty hotel room alone. But somehow, tonight, it didn't feel quite so empty.

30 weeks

The drive from their house to Shane's parents' house took exactly twelve minutes. Twelve minutes of winding roads, bare trees just beginning to show their autumn colors, and his mother's careful driving, one eye on the road and the other constantly flicking toward him in the passenger seat.

"You're staring." Shane said without looking away from the window.

"I'm admiring." His mother's voice was warm. "You look beautiful, sweetheart. Pregnancy suits you."

Shane glanced down at himself, the massive swell of his belly, the swollen ankles, the way his face had rounded in ways he wasn't entirely comfortable with. "I look like a beached whale."

"You look like someone who's growing my grandson. There's a difference. And that makes you beautiful in my eyes. End of discussion."

Shane smiled despite himself. Seven months and a half. Thirty weeks. Theo was the size of an eggplant now, or maybe a cauliflower, Shane had lost track of the fruit-and-vegetable comparisons. All he knew was that his back hurt constantly, he had to pee every forty-five minutes, and the baby's kicks had evolved from gentle flutters to what felt like full-blown gymnastics routines.

But he was healthy. Theo was healthy.

And Ilya was in California.

"Have you talked to him today?" his mother asked, as if reading his mind.

"This morning. Before his morning skate." Shane's phone was already warm in his hand from checking it approximately six times since breakfast. "He said the ice cream in California is weird. Too soft."

"Too soft?"

"That's what he said. I don't know what it means either."

His mother laughed, pulling into the familiar driveway. The house looked exactly as it always had, warm brick, cheerful flower boxes now filled with autumn mums, the porch light on despite it being midday. Home, in every sense of the word.

Lunch was a leisurely affair. They ate salmon salads and drank grape juice, because Ilya was craving it badly. Afterward, they moved to the dining room table for cards.

Shane's mother was ruthlessly competitive at Crazy Eights. His father, although very good at cheating, got caught every time. Shane, who had learned to play poker in NHL locker rooms, later absolutely destroyed them both without breaking a sweat.

"You're too good at this." his mother complained, shuffling the deck for a fourth round.

"I spent eight years playing cards with hockey players. You learn to win fast or lose your money faster."

His father snorted. "Remind me never to play poker with you for actual money."

By three o'clock, Shane could feel his energy flagging. His eyes kept drifting closed mid-hand, his responses slowing to a crawl.

"Nap time," his mother announced, not asking. "Your room is ready. Go."

"But the game..."

"Starts at ten. You have hours. Go sleep."

Shane didn't have the energy to argue. He hauled himself up the stairs, slower than he used to, one hand on the railing, the other pressed to his lower back, and collapsed onto his old bed. Theo kicked once, twice, then settled.

Just a nap, Shane thought. Then I'll be awake for Ilya.

He was asleep in minutes.

Dinner was pot roast. Shane's mother had been simmering it all afternoon, and the smell alone was enough to make Shane's mouth water. He ate more than he had in weeks, the food settling warm and comforting in his stomach.

"So..." his mother said, reaching for the potatoes. "how are you really feeling? Not the polite answer. The real one."

Shane considered lying. It was instinct, at this point, the reflexive need to project strength, to be fine, to handle everything on his own. He'd spent his whole career learning to hide weakness. Old habits.

But this was his mother. And he was too tired for walls.

"Tired." he admitted. "All the time. Not like... not like after a double-overtime game tired. Deeper than that. Like my bones are made of concrete."

His mother nodded, her expression soft and encouraging.

"My back hurts constantly. There's this spot right here..." He twisted, trying to reach the place between his shoulder blades, gave up. "... that just aches. All day. Every day. Ilya bought me this expensive massage thing that eases the pain for a while."

"I remember that." his father said quietly. "The back pain. Your mother used to make me knead her lower back for an hour every night."

"Because it helped!"

"Did I say it didn't help? I'm just saying I remember."

Shane smiled despite himself. "I miss Ilya." The words came out softer than he intended, more vulnerable. "I know he's only been gone a few days this time, but I miss him. And I'm..." He paused, searching for the right word. "... nervous, I guess. About labor. About being a parent. About doing it alone when Ilya leaves for a game. About..." He gestured vaguely at his belly. "...all of it. Every part of it. I don't know what I'm doing."

His mother reached across the table and took his hand. "That's all completely normal, sweetheart. Every single thing you just said. The tiredness. The back pain. Missing Ilya. Being terrified." She squeezed. "All of it is normal."

"When your mother was pregnant with you..." his father added. "she was a wreck."

"David!"

"It's true! She cried at commercials. Made me go out for ice cream at 2 a.m. Twice. And not the same ice cream, either. First time it was chocolate chip. Second time, mint chocolate chip. I had to go to two different stores because the first one was closed."

"I did not cry at commercials."

"You cried at a tire commercial. The one with the baby ducklings following their mother across the road."

His mother's cheeks flushed a deep pink. "Those ducklings were very cute, honey." She said looking at Shane. "They were so small and they were trying so hard to keep up. It was emotional."

Shane was laughing now, really laughing, the kind that made his belly bounce and Theo kick in confused protest. It felt good, this easy, warm teasing. This reminder that his parents had done this too, had been just as scared and unprepared and human as he was now.

"I cried at a yogurt commercial last week." Shane admitted, still giggling. "I don't even like yogurt that much. It was just... there was this little girl sharing her yogurt with her dad, and I lost it. Completely lost it. Sobbed for ten minutes."

His mother reached across the table and squeezed his hand again, her eyes warm and bright. "Welcome to parenthood, sweetheart. It only gets weirder."

"Wait until the baby's actually here," his father added. "Then you'll really cry at commercials. I once cried at a car commercial because I started wondering about the day you would move out."

Shane wiped at his eyes, still laughing. "I can't believe this is what I have to look forward to."

"Oh, it's so much worse." his mother assured him. "Wait until Theo says his first word. Wait until he takes his first step. Wait until he smiles at you for the first time and you realize your

heart is just..." She pressed a hand to her chest. "... gone. Completely gone. Belongs to him now."

"Scary." Shane whispered.

"Best scary there is." His mother squeezed his hand one more time before releasing it. "And you won't be alone, sweetheart. You have Ilya. You have us. You have Hayden and Jackie. You'll never be alone."

Shane looked down at his belly, at the hand resting there, at the life growing inside him. The fear was still there, would probably always be there, in some form. But underneath it, something else was growing too. Something that felt almost like courage.

"Thanks, Mom. Thanks, Dad." he said quietly.

"For what?"

"For all of it."

They smiled, that particular smile they saved just for their son.

"That's what mothers do, sweetheart. We're here. Always."

His father cleared his throat, immerse in emotion. "So... anyone want more pot roast? There's plenty."

Shane laughed and held out his plate. "Yeah, actually. I'm eating for two, remember?"

"That's my son." His father loaded his plate with another generous portion. "Eat up. Gotta keep my grandson strong."

They ate and talked and laughed, the evening stretching warm and easy around them. Later, they'd watch the game, and Shane would text Ilya, and everything would feel exactly as it should.

After dinner, they settled in the living room. The pre-game show was already running, analysts breaking down matchups and making predictions. Shane arranged himself on the couch, pillows behind his back and a blanket over his lap. His mother sat beside him, his father in his usual armchair.

"Rozanov's been playing well." his father observed as the camera panned across the Ottawa bench. "Seven goals in the last five games."

"He's always been good." Shane said, and there was no rivalry in his voice anymore, just pride. "People don't give him enough credit for how smart he is on the ice."

"Not as good as you, though."

Shane laughed. "Mon."

"I'm just saying. He's really good. You're great. It's not an insult."

The game started. Shane watched every shift, every pass, every check. Ilya looked sharp, really sharp. His skating was fluid, his reads quick, and somewhere in the second period, he took a shot from the point that beat the goalie clean.

"Beautiful shot." his mother said approvingly. "Rozanov always had a good release. Annoying to defend against."

Shane was already smiling, his hand pressed to his belly where Theo was kicking in response to his elevated heartbeat. On the screen, Ilya was being congratulated by his teammates, his face breaking into that rare, genuine smile that Shane had learned was reserved for moments like this. And for moments with him.

The third period was tense. Ottawa fought hard, but Los Angeles tied it late, then scored again in overtime. Final score: 4-3, Los Angeles. Shane watched Ilya skate off the ice, his expression carefully neutral, the way he always looked after a loss.

Shane reached for his phone after the game, typing quickly.

Shane: I watched the whole game. You played amazing. That goal was beautiful.

Shane: Proud of you. Always.

He hit send and settled back against the pillows.

Shane's phone buzzed after a while. Ilya as probably getting ready in the locker room.

Ilya: We lost.

Shane: I know. Still proud of you.

Shane: The team is playing well.

Ilya: All the goals I made were for you and Theo.

Shane: He kicked, said he loved Papa's goals.

Ilya: I love you.

Shane: I love you too.

Shane: Very much!

Ilya: 🥹❤️😁😄

Shane smiled at his phone, warm and full and content despite the loss.

"Good game?" his mother asked.

"Good game." Shane confirmed. "They'll get the next one."

His father reached for the remote, turning down the volume. "You staying over?"

"Yeah. I'm too tired to drive back."

"I rearranged the bed, put your pregnant pillow there already." His mother patted his knee. Ilya could only think he wasn't going to tell her the pillow's name was Pilya. "And I'll make pancakes in the morning. The ones with the chocolate chips you like. Healthy ones."

Shane leaned his head back against the couch, Theo kicking softly against his palm, the warmth of his parents' house wrapped around him like a blanket. Ilya was in California, but he'd be back in two days. The season was long, but it wouldn't last forever.

35 weeks

The house wasn't spotless. Shane physically couldn't make it spotless anymore, not at thirty-five weeks. But it was tidy enough. Ilya would always clean it before he left, and Shane had managed to keep up with the basics: dishes rinsed, surfaces wiped, laundry. The pregnancy pillows were arranged in a permanent way on the bed now, a nest Shane had constructed and barely left for the past three days. He would not make the bed in the morning anymore, it was too much already.

But this morning, he'd attempted something ambitious.

The recipe for Ilya's favorite Russian dish, the one with beef and beets, was still open on his phone, but the evidence of his failure sat in a pot on the stove. The beef was tough. The beets were undercooked. The sauce had separated into something that looked dangerous. And somewhere around the forty-five minute mark of standing at the stove, Shane's back had simply given up.

Now he was on the couch, arranged in the most comfortable way he could get, staring at the ruined pot back in the kitchen. He'd tried to clean it. He really had. But bending over the sink had sent such a sharp stab of pain through his lower back that he'd actually gasped, then wept, then given up entirely.

Thirty-five weeks. Theo was the size of a coconut, apparently. A coconut that had taken up permanent residence on his bladder and used his ribs as a jungle gym.

The front door wouldn't open for another twenty minutes. Plenty of time to pull himself together.

Except every time he thought about Ilya walking through that door, about his arms, his voice, his stupid perfect face, Shane's eyes welled up again.

Stop it, he told himself. *Stop crying*.

His eyes kept leaking anyway.

He'd tried the cold compress trick. Twice. His face was currently pressed against one, but he could already feel the puffiness settling in, the telltale redness that would give him away the second Ilya looked at him.

Which would be approximately three seconds after Ilya walked through the door.

The thought made him cry harder.

He heard the key in the lock. The familiar sound of the front door opening. The soft thud of a bag being set down. Then Ilya's voice, warm and tired and home.

"*Moy lyubov*? I am here."

Shane tried to arrange his face into something normal. Tried to look like he hadn't just spent the last hour weeping into a dish towel.

Ilya appeared in the living room doorway.

And stopped.

His eyes took in the scene. Shane on the couch, buried in pillows, his face blotchy and red, his lower lip caught between his teeth in a futile attempt to stop its trembling. The ruined pot on the stove, visible through the kitchen doorway. The general air of defeat that hung over the entire room.

"Shane." Ilya crossed the space as fast as he could, dropping to his knees in front of the couch. His hands found Shane's face, gentle, careful. "What happened? Are you okay? Is Theo..."

"We're fine." Shane's voice cracked. "We're fine. I just... I tried to make you dinner. That Russian thing. With the beets." He gestured vaguely toward the kitchen. "It didn't go well."

Ilya's eyes flicked toward the stove, then back to Shane. His expression softened into something so tender it made Shane's heart clench.

"You cooked for me?"

"I tried to cook for you. Past tense. It's a disaster. The kitchen smells like regret." He burst in tears.

Ilya didn't even glance at the kitchen. His thumbs were still stroking Shane's cheeks, wiping the tears away.

"You stood," Ilya said quietly. "For how long?"

"I don't know. Forty minutes I guess."

"Shane." Ilya's voice was pained. "You are thirty-five weeks pregnant. You cannot stand for that long."

"I know." Shane's lip wobbled dangerously. "I just... I wanted to do something nice for you. You're always the one taking care of me, and I wanted to show you that I can still..."

Ilya kissed him. Soft and slow and full of everything Shane couldn't say.

When he pulled back, Shane was crying again. Happy crying. Stupid, overwhelmed, a 'so glad you're here' kind of crying.

"I missed you," Shane whispered. "I missed you so much."

"I missed you too." Ilya pressed their foreheads together. "Every minute. Every second."

"Theo missed you. He's been kicking non-stop."

"Theo has excellent priorities." Ilya's hand slid down to rest on Shane's belly, and as if on cue, Theo delivered a solid thump right against his palm. Ilya's face broke into that rare, genuine smile that Shane lived for. "Hello, little one. Papa is home."

Shane watched him, watched the way his whole body softened when he talked to Theo, the way his hand moved in slow, reverent circles, and felt the last of his tension dissolve.

"I'm sorry about dinner." he mumbled.

Ilya looked at the pot, then back at Shane, his expression shifting into something mischievous. "It looks like the beets died in a war."

Shane blinked. Then snorted. Then started laughing, real laughing, the kind that made his belly bounce and Theo kick in confused protest.

"You're such an asshole" he gasped. "They absolutely died. It was a massacre."

"A genocide of vegetables." Ilya nodded solemnly. "We must have a funeral."

"Stop..." Shane was wheezing now. "Stop making me laugh, it hurts."

"Never." Ilya pressed a kiss to his cheek, then his nose, then the corner of his mouth.

"Laughing is good for you. Good for Theo."

Shane looked at Ilya still laughing, but suddenly his lips formed a pout and he started crying all over again. "Theo thinks I'm insane."

Ilya finally settled beside him on the couch, carefully arranging himself around Shane's pillows, pulling Shane against his chest.

"That's okay, everything is okay." Ilya said. "A lot of changes are happening in your body, it's okay to cry, to laugh. I'm here for you."

"Now. What do you want to eat? I will make it."

Shane closed his eyes, breathing in Ilya's familiar scent. "Anything. I don't care. I love whatever you make."

"Anything is not an answer. Give me specifics."

"Anything that doesn't have potatoes or cheese." Shane grimaced slightly. "I had some yesterday and it made me feel... weird. Nauseous."

Ilya's hand stilled on his belly. "You were nauseous? You did not tell me."

"It wasn't a big deal. Just a little queasy. Passed after an hour."

"You did not tell me." Ilya repeated, and there was worry in his worry that made Shane open his eyes.

"I didn't want to worry you." Shane said quietly. "You were in the middle of a road trip."

"I always need to know." Ilya's hand found his, squeezing. "Good or bad. Big or small. I need to know."

Shane squeezed back. "I know. I'm sorry."

"Did you call your mother?"

"Yeah. She came over. Brought soup. Sat with me until it passed." Shane smiled at the memory. "She told me stories about when she was pregnant with me. Made me feel better."

Ilya relaxed slightly, some of the tension leaving his shoulders. "Good. That is good." He pressed a kiss to Shane's hair.

Shane's eyes burned again. "I love you." he whispered.

"I love you too." Ilya kissed his forehead. "Now. No potatoes, no cheese. What about chicken and rice? Simple, easy on stomach."

"That sounds perfect."

"Good." Ilya started to move, but Shane's hand on his arm stopped him.

"In a minute." Shane said. "Just... Just hold me for another minute. Please."

Ilya settled back, pulling Shane closer. "As long as you want. I am not going anywhere."

Shane was in the bathroom, attempting the simple act of brushing his teeth before Ilya arrived. A task so mundane, so ordinary, that he'd done it thousands of times without thinking.

Until the toothpaste tube slipped from his fingers.

It wasn't a dramatic fall. It just... dropped. Bounced once on the counter. Disappeared behind the sink.

Shane stared at the empty space where it had been. Then at his belly, which made bending down to retrieve it a complex operation involving holding the counter, lowering himself carefully, and probably making sounds like a dying whale.

He couldn't.

He literally could not bend down to pick up the toothpaste.

The absurdity of it hit him all at once. The forever lost toothpaste, the ruined dinner, the back pain, the loneliness, the fact that he was thirty-five weeks pregnant and crying over a fucking tube. The tears started before he could stop them, hot and humiliating, spilling down his cheeks.

"Ilya." he called, his voice cracking.

He heard movement from the bed. In no time, Ilya was at the bathroom door, his eyes immediately finding Shane's face, scanning for emergency. "What? What is wrong?"

Shane pointed at the floor behind the sink. Wordless. Pathetic.

Ilya leaned forward, looked, and saw it. The toothpaste tube, resting peacefully against the baseboard like it hadn't just destroyed Shane's last shred of dignity.

A small sound escaped Ilya. A huff. A barely-suppressed laugh.

Shane's face crumpled. "You're laughing at me."

"I am not..." Ilya's voice wavered. "I am not laughing at you."

"You are. You're laughing because I can't even pick up toothpaste anymore. Because I'm huge and useless and I can't do anything..."

Ilya crossed the space in two strides, wrapped one arm around Shane's waist to steady him, and bent down to retrieve the toothpaste in one fluid motion. He straightened, set the tube on the counter, and cupped Shane's face with both hands.

"I am not laughing at you." he said softly, though his eyes were still bright with amusement. "I am laughing because..." He shook his head, smiling. "... you are standing in the bathroom, crying, pointing at the floor like it has personally offended you, and I love you so much it makes me laugh. And I'm relieved that it was just a tube. Last time you called me like that you had those cramps and I almost had a heart attack."

Shane's lip trembled. "I'm ridiculous."

"I think you are perfect." Ilya squeezed his cheeks gently, making his lips pucker. "Perfect and all mine."

Shane tried to glare at him, but it came out watery.

Ilya picked up the toothpaste and reached for Shane's toothbrush. He squeezed a perfect ribbon of paste onto the bristles and held it out like an offering.

"Open." he said.

Shane opened his mouth. Ilya guided the toothbrush in, gentle, careful, his other hand still resting on Shane's hip.

"There." Ilya murmured. "See? Problem solved."

Shane brushed his teeth standing there, held by Ilya, tears still drying on his cheeks. When he finished, Ilya took the toothbrush, rinsed it, set it in its holder. Then he pulled Shane into a hug, slow and careful, mindful of the belly between them.

"You are not useless." Ilya said against his hair. "You are growing a human. If you need toothpaste picked up, I will pick it up. If you need food cooked, I will cook it. If you need to cry over the floor, I will hold you while you cry." He pulled back just enough to meet Shane's eyes. "This is what I am here for. All of it."

Shane buried his face in Ilya's chest and let himself be held.

After they moved to the bed, Pilya being replaced by Ilya, the weight of everything pressed in again.

"He's beautiful." Ilya murmured, more to himself than to Shane. His hand was spread across Shane's belly, tracking Theo's movements with quiet wonder.

"What?"

"Theo. Moving like that." Ilya's thumb traced a slow circle. "It is like watching a miracle."

Shane was quiet for a moment. Then, so softly Ilya almost missed it: "I feel like a miracle that's gone wrong."

Ilya's hand stilled. "What?"

Shane didn't want to look at Ilya, he felt ashamed. "Ilya... I can't see my feet. I can't tie my own shoes. I get winded walking to the kitchen. My back hurts all the time. My face is round. I don't even recognize myself in the mirror anymore."

Ilya didn't interrupt. He just listened, his hand warm and steady on Shane's belly.

"I know I'm supposed to be grateful," Shane continued, his voice cracking slightly. "I am grateful. I want this baby more than anything. But sometimes I look in the mirror and I just see..." He swallowed. "... this huge, swollen, ugly version of myself. And I wonder how you could possibly still want to look at me, or touch me."

Ilya shifted behind him, holding himself on his left elbow to see Shane's face better, and held it, carefully turning it until they were face to face.

"You are not ugly." Ilya said quietly. "You have never been ugly and you'll never will be, Shane."

Shane's lip trembled.

"I have never seen anything more beautiful than you right now. Never."

"You're just saying that."

"I am not." Ilya's voice was fierce. "I do not say things I do not mean. You know this about me."

Shane did know.

Ilya pressed a kiss to Shane's forehead. "And I still want to look at you. I still want to touch you. I still want you. Every version of you. Always."

A tear escaped, tracing a warm path down Shane's cheek. Ilya caught it with his thumb.

"I feel huge and clumsy." Shane whispered.

"You are graceful. I have watched you navigate this house like a dancer."

"I feel like I'm falling apart."

Ilya pulled him closer, wrapping him in his arms. "You are not falling apart. And if you feel like that, just tell me and I will hold you until you're feeling good again."

"Can you come lie down in front of me, please?"

"Sure." Ilya moved until he was facing Shane, who buried his face in Ilya's chest and let himself be held.

"I love you." Shane mumbled into his shirt.

"I love you more." Ilya's hand resumed its slow circles on Shane's belly. "Now. Tell me one thing you like about yourself today."

"What?"

"One thing. Anything."

Shane thought about it. "I... my hands don't look different. They still look like mine."

"I agree. They feel pretty much the same when they are on my dick. Still very good hands."

Shane laughed and hit Ilya in his chest. "Oh my God, shut up! We haven't done anything in a while now." Ilya kissed his forehead.

“Tell me another thing.”

"My hair. It's been behaving this week."

"I like your hair longer like that. Good length to pull.”

“You’re so dirty.” Shane smiled against his chest. “I kind of like my stretch marks too. I already had them in my thighs, now I have them in my belly. They’re like tiger stripes.”

“Oh my God, Hollander, you have no idea how sexy your tiger stripes are. I’m calling them like that from now on. Sexy tiger stripes.”

Ilya's arms tightened around him.

"I might need a lot of reminding."

"I'll be remembering you for the rest of my life, be sure of that." Ilya's voice was warm, certain.

Shane was never so sure.

40 weeks

Forty weeks and two days.

Shane had stopped crying somewhere around the thirty-nine week mark, as if his body had finally exhausted its supply of hormones and decided to let him exist in a state of peaceful resignation. He was huge – there was no other word for it – but somehow, in these final days, he'd made peace with his size. He was temporary universe for the tiny person who would soon be sleeping in the nursery Ilya had helped him assemble.

The strangest part was that he was starting to miss Theo. Which made no sense. Theo was right there, kicking his ribs, pressing against his bladder, making his nightly presence known with relentless enthusiasm. But Shane understood, in some deep parental way he couldn't explain, that this was different. Soon Theo would be outside. Separate. A person Shane would have to share with the world instead of keeping safe and warm inside his own body.

He would miss this. The secret language of kicks and rolls. The way he could talk to Theo and feel him respond. The knowledge that, for these nine months, Theo had been completely, utterly his.

But he was also ready. So ready.

“I don’t think he wants to get out.” Shane said, his hands caressing his own bump.

“It must be very nice inside his mansion. He must be in the middle of a very important hockey game.”

"I don't think so, he's been very quiet for the last couple of days."

Ilya had been home for five days now, thanks to a cracked rib sustained in Ottawa's last game. The team was furious. They were on a winning streak, and losing their captain mid-season was a blow. But Ilya had shrugged it off with typical stoicism, more concerned about missing games than about the sharp pain in his side whenever he laughed. This is what he let his teammates know. In fact, he was relieved to be home for Shane.

"You are supposed to be resting." Shane pointed out as Ilya's strong hands worked the arch of his foot.

"I am resting." Ilya's thumbs pressed into a particularly tight spot, making Shane groan. "My hands are working. The rest of me is resting."

"That's not how resting works."

"This is how my resting works." Ilya's smile was soft, focused on his task. "Your feet are swollen."

"My everything is swollen."

"Your feet are especially swollen." Ilya lifted one foot, examining it with mock seriousness. "They look like small bread loaves."

"Ilya!"

"I am not insulting. Bread is delicious. Your feet are delicious-looking." He said before pretending to bite it.

Shane laughed, the sound surprising him, it had been a while since he'd felt light enough to really laugh. "You're ridiculous."

"Yes. But you love me, so..."

"Yeah, I do."

They sat in comfortable silence, the fire crackling now that it was almost mid-December and the house should be kept warm. Ilya's hands never stopped moving, kneading, soothing, loving Shane through touch the way he always did when words weren't enough.

"Can you help me shift?" Shane asked eventually. "My back is starting to ache in this position."

Ilya nodded, carefully setting Shane's feet down and standing. "What do you need?"

"Just... a little to the left. And maybe another pillow behind my... back". Shane said, managing the words as it was hard to breathe now.

Ilya circled to Shane's side, hands gentle on his shoulders, helping him adjust his weight against the mountain of pillows.

"Better?" Ilya asked.

"Yeah, I think... Less uncomfortable at least."

Ilya got back to work on Shane's feet right after.

Shane shifted, and felt it.

A strange sensation. Wetness. Warmth spreading beneath him on the couch.

He froze. For a moment, his brain refused to process what his body was telling him.

"Ilya?" His voice was small. "Did you drop your juice?"

Ilya looked down at his hands, empty. Then at the coffee table, where his glass sat untouched, exactly where he'd left it. And empty.

"No." he said slowly. "Why?"

Shane's hand moved instinctively to his lap. His sweatpants were dark. Wet. Spreading.

"I'm-" His voice caught. "There's water. On my pants."

Ilya's eyes followed his hand. Tracked the dark stain spreading across the gray fabric. Widened.

For one eternal second, neither of them moved.

Then Ilya dropped to his knees in front of the couch, his hands hovering over Shane's belly, his face a perfect mask of shock and awe.

"I think... I think my water broke." Shane's heart was suddenly hammering.

They stared at each other. The fire crackled.

"Okay." Ilya's voice was steady, but his hands were shaking. "Okay. This is... this is happening. We are having a baby."

"We're having a baby," Shane echoed, and suddenly he was laughing... hysterical, breathless, terrified laughter. "Oh my God. We're actually having a baby."

Ilya grabbed his face and kissed him, hard and fast. Then he was on his feet, grabbing his phone, the hospital bag they'd packed weeks ago, Shane's coat. While Shane was still lying on the couch.

"Can you stand?" he asked, already in motion. "Can you walk?"

Shane looked down at himself. At his soaking sweatpants. At the life about to begin.

"Yeah," he said, and his voice was steadier than he felt. "I just need help standing, I guess. I'm starting to feel kind of heavy."

Ilya helped him and Shane glanced at the sofa once he was on his feet.

"Fuck, I ruined the sofa."

"I'll clean that up for you later, *moy lyubov*. Or if you want to we will buy a new couch. We will buy a hundred couches. Right now, we are going to the hospital to meet our son."

Shane took a step. Then another. The reality of it was starting to crash over him in waves. Then another wave hit, but this one wasn't in his head. This one was in his body.

Shane stopped mid-stride, one hand flying to his belly, the other gripping Ilya's arm like a lifeline. His breath caught, held, then released in a slow hiss.

"Ilya."

Ilya was instantly alert, his free hand bracing Shane's back. "What? What is it?"

"I think..." Shane's eyes were wide. "I think that was a contraction."

"You think?"

"I've never done this before, Ilya. I don't know what they're supposed to feel like." But even as he said it, he knew. That was no ordinary kick. No ordinary pressure. That was something else entirely.

Ilya's face went through approximately seventeen emotions in three seconds – fear, awe, panic, wonder, more fear – before settling on something that looked like determined calm.

"Okay," he said, his voice only slightly strained. "Okay. That is good. Contractions mean it is happening, yes?"

"I know..." Another wave was building; Shane could feel it, the tension coiling low in his belly. "I just... I didn't think it would feel like this."

"Like what?"

Shane's breath caught again as the second cramp rolled through, stronger than the first. He leaned into Ilya, letting him take some of the weight.

"Like my insides are being wrung out like a wet towel."

Ilya made a sound that might have been a laugh or a sob. "That is a very descriptive image."

"Shut up and hold me."

"I am holding you." Ilya's arms tightened around him, careful of his ribs, careful of Shane's belly, but holding him like he was the most precious thing in the universe. "I will always hold you."

The contraction passed. Shane sagged against him, breathing hard.

"Fuck, I'm scared." he whispered. "I thought I wasn't, that I had everything under control. But I'm so fucking scared now."

Ilya pulled back just enough to meet his eyes. His own were bright, wet, full of everything he couldn't say.

"It's okay to be scared." he whispered. "I'm sorry I can't do nothing but to be on your side now." He pressed his forehead to Shane's.

Shane took a breath. Let it out. Felt another contraction building in the distance, like a wave far out at sea.

"Believe me, you're doing a lot already. God, I wouldn't be able to do this alone."

"You will never be alone, *moy lyubov*. Now, are you ready to go?"

Shane breathed in through his nose and exhaled through his mouth. "Ready," he said.

They walked out the door together, leaving the wet couch, the cold juice, their quiet home behind. Ilya put everything the needed inside the trunk after helping Shane sit comfortably in the backseat.

Ahead of them was the hospital, the labor, the terrifying miracle of meeting their son.

Ahead of them was everything.

Chapter 14: our baby

Chapter Notes

Everyone welcoming baby Theo James Rozanov-Hollander to the world!
Hope you enjoy 💕💕

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

The hospital room was white and sterile and smelled like antiseptic and something vaguely floral that Shane immediately decided he hated. He stood in the center of it, one hand braced on the bed, the other gripping Ilya's arm, breathing through another contraction while a kindly nurse named Patricia explained the intake forms.

"You can change into this." Patricia said, holding up a thin cotton gown printed with tiny blue squares. "It opens in the back. If you need help, just press the call button." She smiled at Ilya. "Or your partner can assist."

Shane nodded, not trusting his voice as the contraction peaked, then slowly released him.

Patricia left with promises to return soon. The door clicked shut. Silence.

Ilya was already moving, dropping their bag on the visitor's chair, shrugging off his jacket. He held up the gown, examining it like it was a complex piece of equipment.

"You should have a pajama like that, opened in the back to display your beautiful back cheeks."

"Gross." Shane tried to laugh, but another contraction was building. They were coming faster now, the calm between them shrinking.

He gripped the bed rail and breathed, the way he'd practiced in the last months, the way the yoga instructor had demonstrated with infuriating calm on the screen.

Ilya was beside him instantly, one hand on his lower back, the other finding his free hand. "Okay, breathe."

They breathed together. The contraction passed.

"Okay..." Shane said shakily. "Okay. Let's just... Let's get this thing on before the next one."

Getting the gown on was an exercise in humiliation. Shane's belly made everything awkward. His arms didn't seem to reach where they were supposed to. The ties in the back were a cruel joke. By the time they'd wrestled him into it, Shane was fighting back tears of frustration.

"I hate this." he said, tugging at the thin fabric. "I feel like a beached whale wearing a napkin."

Ilya cupped his face, forcing him to meet his eyes. "You look beautifully sexy."

"Shut up!" Shane laughed and looked away. "You don't have to lie."

"I'm not lying." Ilya kissed his forehead, gentle and lingering. "I say it because it is true. I even suggested you use a sexy pajama like that."

Shane's eyes burned while he smiled softly, but before he could respond, another contraction hit. This one was stronger. He doubled over with a groan, and Ilya was there, holding him up, breathing with him.

When it passed, Shane was sweating. "Fuck, they're getting worse."

Ilya helped him to the bed, arranging pillows behind his back. "I am going to call your parents. And Hayden. I should have done it already."

"You were driving."

"And helping you check in. And wrestling with the napkin gown." Ilya pulled out his phone, already dialing. "They will understand."

Shane watched as Ilya made the calls; first to his mother, whose voice was so loud Shane could hear her exclaiming from across the room, then to Hayden, whose reaction was much bigger as if Jackie was in labor. Ilya spoke calmly, efficiently, giving updates, answering questions, promising to text soon.

When he hung up, he came back close to bed and took Shane's hand.

"Your parents are on their way, and I will keep Hayden updated."

Shane nodded, grateful for the logistics being handled, grateful for Ilya's steady presence. Another contraction was building. He could feel it, the pressure coiling low in his belly.

"Ilya."

"I am here."

They breathed through it together. Then another. Then another.

The hours blurred. Patricia returned to check his progress: four centimeters, then five, then six. The contractions rolled in like waves, each one higher than the last, each one leaving Shane more exhausted, more certain he couldn't do this.

His parents arrived somewhere around seven centimeters. His mother cried. His father gripped Ilya's shoulder and told him he was doing good. They stayed for a while, then retreated to the waiting room at Shane's exhausted nod.

Through it all, Ilya never left his side.

He held Shane's hand through every contraction. He wiped sweat from his forehead. He fed him ice chips when he was allowed, and when Shane snapped at him for no reason, he just smiled and said: "You are allowed to be angry. I have broad shoulders and I know you are kind of kinky."

"Not the time, Ilya!" Shane said out loud, but he sure thought it was funny. Ilya's jokes helped in a certain way to ease everything.

At eight centimeters, Shane broke.

Another contraction peaked, and when it finally released him, he was sobbing. Not quiet tears; full, heaving sobs that shook his whole body.

"I can't." he gasped. "Ilya, I- I can't do... do this. It's too hard. It's too much. I'm not... I'm not strong enough."

Ilya was on the bed in an instant, pulling Shane against his chest, holding him through the storm.

"You are the strongest person I know." he said, his voice rough. "You have carried our son for nine months. You have endured pain I cannot imagine. You have done everything to bring him here safely, Shane."

Shane shook his head against Ilya's chest. "You don't understand. It hurts so much."

"I know. I wish I could understand" Ilya pressed a kiss to his hair. "I wish I could do all the hard parts for you, I'm sorry."

"No, you don't have to apologize. Fuck!" Shane said, crying harder.

"Want me to call the nurse? If you want to do a c-section it's okay. It's your body, you will choose what you want to do."

They had talked about it a few weeks ago. Shane has decided he wanted to do that the regular way, normal birth. It was better for him to recover later, because there wouldn't involve an abdominal incision. And it would be better for the baby too. But now he was considering, given all the fog that was forming in his mind due to the pain.

Another contraction hit. Shane cried through it, Ilya's arms around him, Ilya's voice in his ear, breathing with him, telling him he was amazing, telling him he was loved, telling him he could do this and he could choose how he wanted it to be, always reinsuring him it was Shane's choice.

As the contraction released him, Shane lay back against the pillows, trembling and gasping, Ilya's hand still gripped tightly in his. In the brief oasis of calm, his mind drifted; a survival mechanism, maybe, or just the strange way brains worked when pushed to their limits. He thought about everything he'd conquered in his career, his eyes strongly shut. The rookie season when everyone said he was too young. The playoff losses that had gutted him. The

Hart Trophy, the Ross, the back-to-back Cups as Montreal's captain. All those moments when he'd proven the doubters wrong, when he'd pushed through pain and exhaustion and the simple, crushing weight of expectation.

And then he thought about Ilya. About eight years of stolen moments and impossible longing. About the hospital room where everything changed. About the cottage, the kitchen, the burned sauce and the stone-skipping and the nights spent wrapped in each other's arms. They'd faced so much, secrets and fear and the very real possibility of losing each other, and they'd come through it together. They'd built something unbreakable. And as the next contraction began to build in the distance, Shane felt something settle in his chest. He was Shane Hollander. He had won Stanley Cups. He had won Ilya Rozanov's heart. He was, in fact, really strong. And he could do this.

When it passed, Shane was trembling, but something had shifted. The panic was still there, but underneath it, buried deep, was something else. Resolve. Determination. The knowledge that there was only one way out of this, and that was through.

"Please call the nurse, I want to know if the dilatation is good enough." he whispered.

Ilya pulled back just enough to meet his eyes. "You are not alone, okay?" Shane nodded, pulling Ilya to kiss him in the lips. "You will never be alone. I am right here. Every second. Every push. Every breath." He pressed their foreheads together. "We are doing this together. You and me. And Theo. He is old enough to help already."

Shane laughed and nodded, tears still streaming, but something steadier in his gaze.

"Okay." he whispered. "Okay."

The next contraction came while Ilya called Patricia back.

He was doing it. They were doing it.

The door opened, and Patricia poked her head in with a warm smile. "How are we doing in here?"

Shane opened his mouth to answer, but another contraction was already building. He gripped Ilya's hand as soon as he got back to Shane's side and breathed through it, waiting for the wave to pass.

When it did, Patricia was already beside him. "Let's see where we are, shall we?"

The exam was quick, efficient, and utterly without ceremony. Patricia's face broke into a broad smile.

"Well, Shane..." she said, "... you're at ten centimeters. It's time."

The words landed like a thunderclap. Shane looked at Ilya before settling on something that looked like determined wonder.

"Now?" Shane asked stupidly. "Like... now now?"

"Now now." Patricia was already moving, unhooking monitors, preparing the bed for transport. "We're going to move you to the delivery room. Your baby is ready to meet you both."

The transfer was a blur. Hallways, lights, a new room with more equipment and a bed that looked vaguely like something from a science fiction movie. Through it all, Ilya never let go of his hand.

In the delivery room, a nurse handed Ilya a set of blue scrubs. "For you." she said. "Put these on over your clothes."

Shane watched as Ilya fumbled with the scrubs, his usually precise fingers clumsy with nerves. He got them on backwards first, then finally, with the nurse's gentle guidance, correctly. By the time he was dressed, his face was flushed and his hair was sticking up in ways that would have been funny in any other context.

"You look ridiculous like me now." Shane managed, between contractions.

Ilya came to his side, taking his hand. "Sadly mine doesn't show my beautiful butt, but we are both very sexy." Ilya kissed his knuckles. "I'll by hospital clothes for us to use at home."

Shane didn't have time to respond. The next contraction hit, and then another, and then Dr. Patel was there, and Patricia was there, and suddenly it was time.

"Okay, Shane." the doctor said, her voice calm and steady. "On the next contraction, I want you to push."

Shane pushed.

And pushed.

And pushed.

Time dissolved into a rhythm of contractions and pushing and Ilya's voice in his ear, telling him he was amazing, telling him he was almost there, telling him he could do this. Shane screamed. Shane cried. Shane said things he would later regret and things he would never forget.

And then, somewhere in the haze of pain and exhaustion, everything changed.

"The head." the doctor said. "I can see the head. One more push, Shane. One more."

Shane found something deep inside himself, some reserve he didn't know he had, and pushed and screamed with everything he had left.

And then there was a cry.

A tiny, furious, beautiful cry.

Shane fell back against the pillows, sobbing, laughing, utterly wrecked. Ilya was crying too; great, silent tears streaming down his face, his hand still gripping Shane's so hard it would probably bruise.

The doctor lifted a small, squirming, perfect creature and placed him on Shane's chest.

"Oh." Shane breathed. "Oh my God... Theo."

Theo was red and wrinkled and covered in things Shane couldn't identify. And his was beautiful. His eyes were squeezed shut, his tiny fists clenched, his mouth open in a wail that was somehow the most beautiful sound Shane had ever heard.

Shane wrapped his arms around him, so small, so fragile, so impossibly his, and felt something fundamental shift in the universe.

"Hi, baby." he whispered, his voice cracking. "Hi, little one. I'm your dad. I'm so happy to meet you."

Theo's crying began to quiet, his tiny body relaxing against Shane's chest as if he recognized the heartbeat he'd been listening to for nine months.

And then Ilya was there, his face hovering over them both, his hand reaching out to touch, hesitating, trembling.

Shane caught his wrist and pulled him closer. "He's yours too."

Ilya's fingers brushed Theo's head, so gently, so reverently, like he was handling something sacred.

"*Moy syn*" he whispered. My son. "He is... he is perfect."

"He is." Shane agreed, his voice thick with tears. "He's so perfect. Theo James Rozanov-Hollander."

They stayed like that, the three of them, wrapped in each other, while the medical team moved quietly around them. Shane was barely aware of them; of the placenta being delivered, of the gentle cleaning, of the warm blankets being draped over Theo's tiny body. All he could see was Theo's face. All he could feel was Ilya's hand in his, Ilya's body pressed close.

After a few minutes – Shane had lost all sense of time – the doctor approached with a gentle smile.

"He looks perfect." She said. "and his Apgar scores are excellent. But we need to do the standard newborn checks, weight, measurements, a quick exam. It'll only take a few minutes."

Shane looked down at Theo, curled peacefully against his chest. The thought of letting him go, even for a few minutes, felt like physical pain. Worse than the contractions.

But Theo needed the checks. And Shane needed...

He looked at Ilya.

"Go with him." Shane said. "Be with him while they do the checks, okay"

"Okay." Ilya caressed Shane's hair and kissed his forehead.

Ilya looked at Theo. Looked at Shane. Looked back at Theo.

"We'll be back soon."

Shane laughed, the sound wet and exhausted and full of love. "Okay. I love you."

"I love you too." Ilya leaned down and kissed him again, soft, lingering, full of promises.

"I'm so proud of you." Then he straightened, took a breath, and reached for his son.

Ilya held Theo close, cradling him against his chest with the same careful reverence he brought to everything that mattered. Shane felt his heart melt with the view. Theo protested a little.

"Shh, little one." he murmured, his voice rough. "Papa has you. Papa will keep you safe." Theo's cries softened.

Shane nodded and Ilya followed the nurse to the warming station, Theo cradled against his chest like the most precious thing in the universe. As Shane watched them go – his son and his partner, the two people he loved most in the world – he felt something settle deep in his bones.

Ilya and Theo, they were his family, his everything.

The room was quieter now, the chaos of delivery replaced by a soft, exhausted peace. Shane was propped up in bed, already in his private hospital room, Theo nestled against his chest in a tight white blanket with a tiny blue striped hat covering his head. Ilya sat in the chair beside the bed, pulled as close as possible, one hand resting on Theo's little hand, the other intertwined with Shane's.

Theo had passed every checkup with flying colors. Eight pounds, two ounces; nineteen inches long; perfect in every measurable way. He'd slept through most of it, rousing occasionally to protest being moved before settling back into the deep, peaceful slumber of the newly born.

He had breastfed Theo with the help of the nurse earlier. Shane hadn't produced much milk, as it was already expected, but enough to feed Theo for a few weeks before resorting to baby formula. Theo had latch on with surprising determination for someone so new to the world, and Shane felt a strange, powerful rush of emotion. This was his body, still giving, still nourishing, still sustaining the life they'd created. It hurt a little, in a way the books hadn't

quite prepared him for, but it also felt impossibly right. Ilya watched with wide, wondering eyes, his hand resting on Shane's shoulder, letting them bond with each other.

Now, in the dim light of the hospital room, they just stared at him, who slept peacefully in the mobile bassinet.

"He has your nose" Ilya said softly, his finger tracing the air above Theo's tiny face without touching. "Look. The little bump right there."

Shane leaned closer, squinting. "That is a nose. All babies have noses."

"Yes, but that nose is your nose. See the shape?" Ilya traced the air again. "Yours is like that. Mine has... I don't know. Character."

"Hey!"

"Not in a better way." Ilya's lips twitched. "I prefer your nose."

"I like yours." Shane caressed Ilya's cheek and then his nose.

"Yes, well, it's a good nose. A strong nose. A nose that says 'I am Ilya Rozanov and I will score on your power play.'"

Ilya laughed softly, careful not to wake the baby. "You wish."

Ilya smiled down at Theo, then his eyes widened slightly. "Oh. Oh, Shane, look."

"Look at what?"

"The freckles." Ilya tilted Theo's face slightly toward the light. "Right there. On his cheeks. Can you see them?"

Shane leaned closer. There they were, the faintest dusting of tiny golden freckles across Theo's cheekbones, barely visible but unmistakably there.

"He has freckles." Ilya breathed. "Just like you."

"Just like me." Shane's voice was thick with wonder. "I didn't think they'd show up this early. Mine didn't come in until I was a toddler."

"Maybe they are impatient like his Dad too." Ilya's finger hovered over Theo's cheek, not quite touching. "We made him beautiful. Both of us."

Shane nodded, unable to speak for a moment. They watched Theo sleep, his tiny chest rising and falling, his little bow mouth pursed in that particular way newborns had.

"He's practically hairless." Ilya observed after a moment. "Look at that head. Just a little fuzz."

"He has hair. There is hair right there." Shane pointed at the few wispy strands visible beneath Theo's hat.

"That's not hair. That's... suggestions of hair. Hints at future hair."

Shane laughed again, the sound bright in the quiet room. "Suggestions of hair. You are a poet." Shane adjusted the blanket slightly, tucking it more securely around Theo. "When I was born, my mom says I had a full head of hair. Dark, thick, the whole thing. She has pictures."

"Oh, I saw some pictures at your parents' house. You were a very pretty baby."

Shane looked at Theo's almost-bald head, then at Ilya's thick, golden and curled hair. "I think he's going to have your hair. It hasn't come in yet, but when it does..." He reached up, touching Ilya's hair lightly. "... it's going to be like this."

Ilya preened slightly. "My hair is very stylish."

"Your hair does whatever it wants. You just exist alongside it."

"That is called confidence."

Theo stirred slightly at their quiet bickering, his little face scrunching, and they both froze instantly.

"Sorry." Ilya whispered to the baby. "Sorry, little one. We'll be quiet."

Theo's face relaxed, and he settled back into sleep.

Ilya let out a breath. "He is already training us."

"What do you mean?"

"To be quiet. To be careful. To put him first." Ilya's voice was soft, full of wonder. "He does not even know he is doing it."

Shane looked down at their son, at the faint freckles, the hint of future hair, the tiny perfect fingers curled against his chest. "He knows." he said quietly. "I think they know everything, at first. And then they forget, and we have to teach them all over again."

Ilya was quiet for a moment. Then: "I need to buy an Ottawa shirt with his name on it."

"Ah, the important things." Shane said laughing.

"And I'll buy those little crochet shoes that look like skates."

"Yeah, that's also very important, Ilya."

"Do you think it is safe to give him a plush hockey stick already?"

"Okay, we'll think about it later, babe."

Ilya leaned over and pressed a kiss to Shane's temple, then another to the top of Theo's tiny hat. They sat in the quiet, watching their little life sleep as if it was the most scenario they had even seen in their entire life. For them, it was.

Chapter End Notes

Get ready for some angst, you guys 
But I promise I do light angst (if that makes sense).
See you SOON <3

Chapter 15: our first three months

Chapter Notes

Hi everyone! Before you read, just one quick note:

*Attention to the new tag added to the story:

*.

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

1st day

The car pulled into the driveway slowly, carefully, as if Ilya was transporting the world's most precious cargo – which, in a way, he was. Shane sat in the back seat, twisted slightly to watch the baby car seat where Theo slept peacefully, utterly unaware that his entire world was about to change venues.

"I can't believe we're finally here." Shane murmured.

"Theo has not seen his home yet." Ilya agreed, killing the engine. "He will be impressed, I think."

"He'll be asleep. He won't notice anything."

"Then we will show him later. When he wakes."

Shane smiled, exhausted but happy. "Can you grab him first? I need a minute to..." He gestured vaguely at his still-recovering body. "... get myself organized."

Ilya was already out of the car, moving to the back door with the focused determination of a man on a mission. He unbuckled the car seat with careful precision, lifting it with Theo still safely strapped inside. The baby didn't even stir.

By the time Shane had maneuvered himself out of the car, slower than usual, still sore, but mobile, Ilya was there, one arm around his hips, pulling him close.

"Welcome home, *moy lyubov*" Ilya murmured against his hair, giving it a kiss.

Shane leaned into him, breathing in the familiar scent of his skin. "It's good to be here."

They walked toward the front door together, Ilya's arm still around Shane's waist, the car seat dangling from his other hand like an extension of his body. Behind them, another car pulled into the driveway; his parents, right on time.

Shane's mother was out of the car with a wave, her face bright with barely contained joy. His father followed more slowly, carrying a large casserole dish that smelled suspiciously like his mother's famous lasagna.

"We brought food!" his mother called, already climbing the porch steps. "So you don't have to worry about cooking at least for today".

"Thank you, mom." Shane said, finally getting the door open. "Both of you. Come in."

They entered the house, and for a moment, everyone just stood in the entryway, taking it in. The house felt different now; still theirs, but somehow more real with a baby in it.

Ilya guided Shane to the couch, settling him on the clean side, the side farthest from where Shane's water had broken what felt like a lifetime ago, but had been only one day. Shane looked at the other cushion, at the faint stain he could still see.

"The couch." Shane said weakly.

"I will handle it." Ilya carefully set the car seat down on the clean side, within easy reach of Shane. Theo slept on, oblivious. "Do not move. I will be right back." He kissed Shane's head before leaving.

He disappeared toward the laundry room, and Shane heard him rummaging for supplies.

Shane's parents settled into chairs across from him, their eyes fixed on the sleeping baby.

"Oh, Shane," his mother breathed. "He's so perfect."

"He really is." his father agreed, his voice gruff with emotion. "Looks just like you with those freckles."

"Yeah." Shane said, smiling.

His mother leaned closer, peering at Theo's tiny face. "I see them! The tiniest little freckles. Oh, my heart."

"He has Ilya's nose though, and I think he'll have his hair too."

"Honey, we never know for sure what to expect when it comes to hair."

They sat in comfortable silence for a moment, just watching Theo sleep. Then his mother reached over and squeezed Shane's hand.

"I'm so proud of you." she said softly. "You were incredible. All of it... the pregnancy, the labor, everything, you managed it all perfectly. You're going to be such a wonderful father."

"And Rozanov..." He glanced toward the laundry room, where Ilya could be heard returning with cleaning supplies. "He's been a rock. The way he handled everything at the hospital, the way he takes care of you..." He shook his head. "I wasn't sure about him at first. But I'm sure now. He's great."

Shane's eyes burned. "He really is."

Ilya appeared then, armed with cleaning spray and paper towels. He approached the stained cushion like it was an opponent on the ice, spraying and scrubbing with focused intensity.

"This couch..." He announced. "... has witnessed a great event. The entrance of our son. It should be honored."

"It should be cleaned." Shane said, laughing.

"Cleaned, yes. But also honored." Ilya scrubbed for another moment, then straightened, surveying his work. "There. Now it is acceptable. But we will probably need a new couch soon anyway."

"A new couch?"

"For Theo to ruin." Ilya shrugged, grinning. "It is what babies do. Ruin things. We will buy many new couches in the next eighteen years."

"Our son is not a golden retriever, Ilya."

"But he can have golden retriever aura, Shane."

Shane's mother laughed out loud. "He's not wrong, honey. You did destroy a few things when you were a toddler yourself."

Ilya smiled widely, still focusing on cleaning, then covered the damp spot with a thick blanket before turning to Shane.

"Are you hungry? What do you want to eat? I will make it."

Shane thought for a moment. "Actually... that smoothie you make. The one with the banana and the yogurt and the..."

"Theo's favorite smoothie," Ilya finished, nodding. "Yes. I will make it." He turned to Shane's parents. "You would like something also? I have ingredients for many things. Or I can serve the lasagna for you."

Shane's mother waved a hand. "Oh, no thank you, dear. The lasagna is for you two for later, you can put it in the fridge."

"Are you sure? It is no trouble."

"Positive." She smiled warmly at him. "You focus on taking care of your boys."

Ilya's expression softened at that and he nodded, crossing to the kitchen to begin his work.

Shane watched him go, then looked down at Theo, still sleeping peacefully in his car seat. His parents were here. Ilya was making him a smoothie. Lasagna waited. Their son was home.

Shane's parents had left an hour ago, after much cooing over Theo and promises to return tomorrow with more food and less fussing. Their home felt quieter now, but in a peaceful way. It was now just the three of them, settling into the rhythm of their new life.

Ilya carried Theo toward the bedroom, the baby cradled against his chest. Shane walked beside them, one hand on Ilya's shoulder for balance, still moving slower than usual, still recovering from the monumental work of bringing their son into the world.

The room was bright, but no more rays of sunlight were coming in through the window. Shane sat on the edge of the bed with a tired sigh and held out his arms.

"Can I have him? It's time to feed."

Ilya transferred Theo carefully, supporting his head, placing him in Shane's waiting arms. Theo stirred at the movement, his little face scrunching, and Shane guided him to where he needed to be.

Theo latched on with the same determined focus he'd shown in the hospital, and the room fell into a peaceful silence.

Then Theo's eyes opened.

In the hospital, the light had been too bright, too clinical. Shane had seen glimpses of his son's eyes – unfocused, still adjusting to the world – but never like this. Here, in their home, in their bedroom, in the soft light of the afternoon, Theo looked up at him with eyes that were unmistakably, breathtakingly blue.

Clear and bright and the exact shade of Ilya's.

Shane's breath caught. "Ilya."

Ilya was already there, perched on the bed beside them, his hand resting on Shane's back. "What? Is something wrong?"

"Look at his eyes." Shane's voice was barely a whisper. "They're yours. They're completely yours."

Ilya leaned closer, and when he saw, really saw, his own eyes widened. A sound escaped him, something between a laugh and a sob.

He smiled widely, the kind of smile we would give to Shane.

"He has my freckles and maybe my nose..." Shane said, his voice thick. "... but I think that's all he got from me. The rest is all you."

Ilya shook his head, his hand coming up to cup the back of Shane's neck. "He has your kindness, I can tell that."

“How do you measure a kindness from a new born. He is less than one day old.”

“And is the most well behaved one day old I have ever seen.”

“I don’t think you’ve seen many one day old babies.”

“I have seen enough to give a verdict, yes?”

Theo continued nursing, his blue eyes fixed on Shane's face with an intensity that seemed impossible for someone so small. Shane stared back, mesmerized, feeling something shift and expand in his chest.

He had never felt anything like this.

Not winning the Cup. Not scoring the overtime goal. Not even the moment he'd first admitted he loved Ilya. This was different. This was deeper. This was a love so vast and terrifying and beautiful that it felt like it might crack him open.

A tear slipped down his cheek, warm and unbidden.

"Are you okay?" Ilya's voice was soft, concerned.

Shane nodded, unable to speak for a moment. He blinked, and more tears followed, but he was smiling.

"I'm more than okay." he finally whispered. "I just... I didn't know it could feel like this. Loving someone this much."

Ilya's arm tightened around him, and Shane felt the press of lips against his hair.

"I know." Ilya murmured. "I feel it too. Every time I look at him. Every time I look at you."

They stayed like that, the three of them, while Theo finished nursing. When he was done, Shane shifted him carefully, remembering the lessons his mother had given him in the hospital.

"Okay, little one." he murmured. "Time to get that air out."

He patted Theo's back gently, rhythmically, waiting for the telltale burp. Theo fussed slightly, then delivered a surprisingly robust sound that made both fathers laugh.

"Good job." Shane told him seriously. "Very impressive."

Theo's response was to fall promptly asleep, his tiny face relaxing into an expression of utter contentment.

Shane looked at Ilya. "Your turn."

Ilya stood and crossed to the cradle they'd assembled weeks ago, a wooden one lined with soft blankets. Shane followed, placing Theo carefully inside, making sure he was secure,

warm and safe.

They stood together, looking down at their sleeping son, Ilya hugging Shane from behind.

"He's so small." Ilya whispered.

"He won't be for long."

"No." Ilya's arm came around Shane's waist. "But we will remember this. Always. The first night at home. And tomorrow we will show him around."

Shane nodded, then let Ilya guide him to the bed. They settled under the covers, Shane on his side, Ilya pressed against his back, one arm wrapped around him, hand resting on his still-soft belly.

For a moment, they just breathed together in the dark.

Then Shane spoke, his voice quiet, vulnerable.

"I feel empty."

Ilya's arm tightened. "What? Where? Are you in pain?"

"No, not like that." Shane's hand covered Ilya's. "I mean... he was in there for so long. I could feel him all the time. His kicks, his rolls, his little hiccups. And now he's not." He swallowed. "It's stupid. He's right there. In the cradle. I can see him. But my body doesn't know that yet. It still feels like he should be here with me."

Ilya was quiet for a moment, processing. Then he pressed a kiss to the back of Shane's neck.

"That is not stupid," he said softly. "Your body just needs time to remember that he is safe outside. That he does not need to be inside anymore."

Shane nodded, not trusting his voice.

"I am here." Ilya whispered. "He is here. We are both here. And we will keep reminding your body, every day that you did great."

Shane turned in Ilya's arms, facing him in the dark, their foreheads touching.

"I love you," he whispered. "God, it's been a long time since we last slept face to face like that, so close."

"The bump made us cuddle for weeks, but I am not complaining. I love cuddling with you." Ilya kissed him, soft and slow and full of everything.

"I love cuddling with you too, but I love being face to face like that." Shane caressed Ilya's jaw. "We still need a shower, though" he murmured against his chest, eyes already heavy. "We should have taken a shower while my parents were here."

"Soon." Ilya promised, his hand tracing slow circles on Shane's back. "In a few minutes. Rest a little first."

"Now the bed's all dirty too..."

"I will change them. Do not worry." Ilya pressed a kiss to his hair. "Rest now. I have you."

Shane wanted to argue, but his body had other plans. The weight of the past twenty-four hours, the labor, the birth, the overwhelming love, pressed down on him, and he was asleep in seconds.

When he woke, the room was slightly darker, the angle of the sun shifted. Ilya was still there, still holding him, still awake. His eyes were fixed on the cradle across the room, a soft smile on his face.

"How long?" Shane whispered.

"Thirty minutes. Maybe forty." Ilya's gaze dropped to him. "You needed it."

Shane stretched slightly, wincing at the residual soreness. "We really should take that shower now."

"Okay, Mr. Cleaning."

"It's just hygiene."

"Okay, Mr. Hygiene." Ilya helped him stand up, steadying him with a hand on his back. "Wait here. I will get things ready." He helped Shane sit on the armchair they had settled next to the cradle.

Shane watched as Ilya moved efficiently around the room, stripping the bed with quick, practiced movements, replacing the sheets with fresh ones from the closet. When the bed was made, he crossed to the cradle and checked on Theo, his finger hovering near the baby's cheek, not quite touching.

"He is still sleeping," Ilya reported. "Peaceful."

"He will be sleeping a lot. The doctor said that's normal."

"Good. Normal is good."

Shane stood carefully, testing his balance. "I'm ready. But..." He looked toward the bathroom, then back at Theo. "I don't want to leave him alone."

Ilya was already moving. "One moment."

He disappeared into the nursery, the room they'd prepared down the hall, and returned carrying a small device with a screen. He set one part on the dresser facing Theo's cradle, then carried the other into the bathroom.

"This is the baby camera," he explained, positioning the second screen on the bathroom counter where they could see it. "We watch him while we shower. And we leave the door open. He will be safe."

Shane felt something loosen in his chest. "Okay. Only because I really need help showering."

Ilya returned to him, offering his arm for support. "Come. Let us get clean."

The bathroom filled with steam as the water heated. Ilya helped Shane undress, slowly, carefully, with none of the urgency of their previous encounters. This was different. This was care, pure and simple.

Under the warm spray, Shane sighed, the water working into his tired muscles. He didn't even care his belly looked weird now.

Ilya stood behind him, close but not crowding, his hands gentle as they worked shampoo into Shane's hair.

"I can do that." Shane said, but he made no move to stop him.

"I know." Ilya's fingers massaged his scalp. "But let me. Rest your hands to pet me later."

Shane let his eyes close, let himself be held up by the warmth of the water and the warmth of Ilya's body behind him. Every few seconds, he glanced at the baby monitor screen, checking for movement in Theo's cradle. Still asleep. Still peaceful.

Ilya rinsed his hair, then quickly washed his own one-handed, the other arm wrapped around Shane's waist to steady him. Then he reached for the soap, and his hands began to move over Shane's body; not sexual, not demanding, just caring. Washing. Touching every part of him with the same reverence he brought to everything involving their son.

Shane leaned back against him, letting himself be held, letting himself be cared for.

"I love you." he whispered.

"I know." Ilya pressed a kiss to his shoulder. "I love you too."

"It's kinda crazy to think about us back in like... 2008, then about us now."

"Yes, but... Good crazy, yes?"

"The best crazy." Shane turned to face Ilya, giving his lips a kiss before resting his head on Ilya's shoulder.

They stood like that for a long moment, the water falling on Shane's back, the heat soaking into his sore muscles. For the first time since before the labor started, Shane felt something like peace.

After a few minutes, Ilya turned it off and guided Shane out of the shower. He wrapped him in a towel, dried Shane's body before his own, then knelt – carefully, mindful of his own still-

healing ribs – and began to dry Shane's feet.

Shane laughed softly when Ilya's fingers found the spaces between his toes.

"That tickles."

"Good." Ilya smiled up at him. "I can use it against you later." He said, as if he didn't know this small detail about Shane already.

Ilya finished drying him, then helped him into his softest pajamas. He guided him back to the freshly made bed and tucked him in like he was something precious.

"Now you sleep." Ilya said. "I will check on Theo, get us some water and join you soon."

Shane was already sinking into the pillows, into the clean sheets, into the overwhelming comfort of being home. "You'll sleep too?"

"I will sleep." Ilya kissed his forehead. "And after we will have some lasagna."

"I love my mom's lasagna. Don't know if I should eat though." He said the last part so quietly Ilya didn't hear. His eyes already closed.

Through the haze of exhaustion, he heard Ilya's soft footsteps going to the kitchen and coming back to their bedroom, the gentle creak of the cradle as he checked on Theo, the quiet murmur of Russian words he couldn't understand but felt in his bones.

Then warmth beside him. Arms around him. A kiss on his hair.

"Sleep, *moy lyubov*" Ilya whispered. "I have you."

And Shane slept.

1st month

The first month passed in a blur of sleepless nights and endless wonder.

Theo, it turned out, was an exceptionally easy baby. He ate well, and Shane's body would always wake himself up, as if knowing Theo was hungry before he cried. He slept in generous stretches, and only cried when he actually needed something, a discovery that left Shane and Ilya exchanging disbelieving glances every time Hayden recounted horror stories of colic and endless screaming.

"He's too good." Shane whispered one night, watching Theo sleep in his cradle. "Something must be wrong with him."

"There is nothing wrong with him." Ilya came up behind him, wrapping his arms around Shane's waist. "He is perfect. Like his fathers."

"We are not perfect. And babies aren't supposed to be this easy. I mean... It's not easy, we haven't been sleeping more than three hours straight, but... Hayden said the first month is survival mode."

"I would cry too if I was Hayden's baby."

"Stop it! He's a great father."

Shane laughed, but part of him still waited for the other shoe to drop. For Theo to suddenly decide that sleep was optional, that screaming was a hobby, that his parents didn't deserve such an uncomplicated introduction to parenthood.

The other shoe never dropped.

Theo continued to be a dream. He nursed eagerly and burped easily. He slept in his cradle without fussing. He tolerated diaper changes with the patience of a tiny Buddha. When he was awake, he stared at his fathers with those impossibly blue eyes, studying their faces like he was memorizing them for later.

But easy didn't mean effortless.

There were nights when Theo woke at 2 a.m. and refused to settle, no matter what they tried. Shane would nurse him, Ilya would burp him, they'd rock him together, sing to him in two languages, and still he'd lie there with his eyes wide open, apparently just... done sleeping.

"He is practicing..." Ilya said during one such night, at 3 a.m., walking slow circles around their bedroom with Theo against his chest. Shane was watching them from the bed. "... for when he is teenager and stays awake all night playing hockey in his videogame. And of course he will be playing as me."

"He's a month old. He doesn't know what a teenager is. Or hockey. Or videogames. Or playing."

"He knows. He is very smart. He gets it from me."

Theo finally slept around 4 a.m., and his fathers collapsed into bed together, too tired even to talk.

There were also the moments of pure, unfiltered panic. Like the first time Theo spit up and Shane was convinced he was choking. Or the first time he sneezed and Ilya nearly called 9-1-1 thinking he had some type of deadly allergy. Or the first time he slept for five hours straight and Shane woke in a cold sweat, certain something was wrong, only to try waking Theo up for two minutes straight in pure despair before the baby started crying for being disturbed.

"He is fine," Ilya said, for the seventeenth time that week, although he had freaked out a few times himself. "You must breathe."

"You breathe. I'll panic."

"That is not how partnership works."

Ilya kissed his forehead and handed him a cup of tea. They sat together, watching Theo sleep, and for a moment, everything was calm.

The hardest part, surprisingly, wasn't the baby. It was the adjustment. The loss of spontaneity. The realization that a simple trip to Shane's parents' house now required forty-five minutes of planning, packing, and mental preparation.

The first time they attempted to leave the house together, it took them an hour to get out the door. Theo needed to be fed. Then changed. Then he would sometimes burp on his outfit, so he needed to be changed again. Then Shane realized he hadn't eaten anything, so Ilya made him a sandwich while he fed Theo. Then Ilya realized he'd forgotten the diaper bag in the bedroom. Then Theo started crying because he was overstimulated by all the activity.

They made it to the car eventually. They even made it to Shane's parents. They would make a ten-minute conversation before Theo needed to eat again or get changed or be put to sleep.

Shane watched Ilya with Theo more than he probably realized. There was something about the way Ilya held their son, with such natural confidence, such unstudied tenderness, that made Shane's heart clench every time. Those large, strong hands that had won countless games on the ice cradled Theo's tiny body like he was made of spun glass. Ilya talked to him constantly, in Russian and English, narrating his day, pointing out objects in the room, and presenting places Theo had never seen, such as the top of their fridge in the kitchen or behind the trees in their backyard. Sometimes Shane would come around a corner and find them like that, Ilya sprawled on the couch with Theo on his chest, both of them asleep, Theo's tiny hand fisted in Ilya's shirt or his finger. In those moments, Shane felt so full of love he thought he might burst.

Ilya, for his part, felt the same way watching Shane. There was a softness that came over his partner when he held Theo, a gentleness that Ilya had only ever glimpsed before, in quiet moments after games or during their stolen time together. Now it was constant, radiant, impossible to miss. Shane nursed Theo with a patience Ilya hadn't known he possessed, whispering to him, stroking his cheek, gazing at him like he was the most precious thing in the universe. When Theo slept on Shane's chest, Shane would rest his cheek against the baby's head and close his eyes, breathing him in, memorizing the feeling. Ilya often found himself just... watching. Marveling. This was the man who had carried their son for nine months, who had pushed through unimaginable pain to bring him into the world, who now gave his body and heart and every waking moment to keep him safe. And Ilya felt he would give his own body and heart to always keep them both safe.

By the end of the first month, they had found their rhythm.

Shane learned to nurse while half-asleep. Ilya became an expert at the 3 a.m. diaper change. They developed a system: Theo woke, Shane fed him, Ilya burped and changed him, they took turns rocking him back to sleep. Although Ilya took Shane's turn sometimes.

"You carried him for nine months, go back to sleep", he would say.

It was exhausting. But it was beautiful too.

One night, when Theo was exactly four weeks old, they put him to bed together and stood over his cradle, watching him sleep.

"We made him," Shane whispered. "We actually made a person."

"A very good person," Ilya agreed. "Easy. Calm. Beautiful."

"Yeah..."

Shane leaned into him, watching their son sleep. The room was quiet, peaceful, full of the soft sounds of a baby dreaming.

The first month was hard. But it was also, impossibly, the best month of their lives.

And then, something shifted.

Ilya had to leave for a few days every week to play hockey, he would come back still every week for at least three days to be with Shane and their son. It was tiring for Ilya but also rewarding.

And it didn't happen all at once.

There was no single moment when Shane could point and say *here, this is where it started*. It crept in like fog rolling off the lake, slowly, imperceptibly, until one day he looked around and couldn't see the shore anymore.

The first few weeks after Ilya got back to playing had been exhausting but good. His parents would come often to their house. The sleepless nights were hard, but expected, and his mom would sometimes sleep over to help with Theo. The adjustment to parenthood was challenging, but manageable. Shane had felt the full weight of love for his son, had cried happy tears watching Ilya and his parents hold him. He had believed, truly, that everything was going to be okay.

But the fog began to roll in.

It started with small things. Shane found himself staring at the wall while Theo nursed, not thinking anything, just... empty. He forgot to eat lunch three days in a row, not because he was busy, but because food simply didn't occur to him. He stopped checking his phone that often, letting messages from Hayden and his mother pile up unanswered. Sometimes, messages from Ilya, who would call after a few minutes with no response from Shane to check if everything was okay.

Shane lied.

At first, Shane told himself it was just exhaustion. Normal. Every new parent went through this.

But the fog didn't lift.

And the worst part was the guilt.

What's wrong with me? he'd think, staring at Theo's perfect face. *I love him. I know I love him. So why am I feeling sad?*

He started crying at random times. Not the emotional, cathartic crying of the early postpartum days, but a hollow, helpless sobbing that came over him without warning. In the shower. While folding laundry. In the middle of the night, when Theo was sleeping peacefully and there was no reason at all to cry.

He hid it from Ilya. Or tried to.

Ilya noticed everything. He noticed that Shane had stopped laughing at his jokes. He noticed that Shane picked at his food instead of eating. He noticed that Shane's eyes had gone flat, like someone had turned down the light behind them.

One day, in the kitchen, Ilya pulled him close, wrapping him in his arms, after Shane started crying in the sink with his hands still wet. Shane went rigid for a moment, then collapsed against him, his body shaking with silent sobs.

"I'm sorry." Shane whispered. "I don't know what's wrong with me. I don't know why I..."

"Shh." Ilya held him tighter. "You do not have to apologize. You do not have to explain."

Shane cried against his chest, great heaving sobs that seemed to come from somewhere deep and broken. Ilya held him through all of it, one hand cradling his head, the other rubbing slow circles on his back.

When the tears finally slowed, Ilya spoke again.

"I am calling your doctor." he said gently. "Tomorrow. We are going to talk to someone about this. About how you are feeling."

Shane tensed. "I don't need..."

"You need help." Ilya pulled back to meet his eyes. "That is okay. You have been so strong for so long. But you do not have to be strong alone."

Shane looked at him, tear-streaked and exhausted and so terribly lost.

"What if they think I'm a bad father?" he whispered.

Ilya cupped his face, thumbs wiping away the tears. "They will think you are a father who loves his son so much that he wants to be well for him. That is not bad. That is brave."

Shane's lip trembled. "I love him. I do. I just... it's like there's this fog between me and everything I love."

"I know." Ilya pressed their foreheads together. "And we will find a way through it. Together."

Shane nodded, a tiny movement, but enough.

"Okay." he whispered. "Okay."

That night, Ilya made the call. And the next week, Shane sat in a therapist's office for the first time in his life, and began the long, hard work of finding his way back from the fog.

It wasn't easy. There were good days and bad days. There were moments when Shane felt like himself again, and moments when the fog rolled back in and swallowed him whole.

But through all of it, Ilya was there. Holding him. Feeding him. Taking Theo when Shane couldn't. Reminding him, over and over, that he was loved, that he was enough, that he would get through this.

He had asked for a special leave. It wasn't ideal to leave the team now, but he knew they wouldn't get to the playoffs, and his season would be over in March. It didn't matter if they got a berth, actually. Ilya would've asked for a leave even if Ottawa had potential to win the cup. His family needed him the most now.

And slowly, imperceptibly, Shane noticed, the fog began to lift.

3rd month

Theo at three months was a different creature entirely from the sleepy newborn they'd brought home from the hospital. He smiled now, real smiles, not just gas bubbles, and his eyes tracked movement across the room with increasing focus. He'd discovered his hands, staring at them like they were the most fascinating things he'd ever seen, and he attempted on holding his baby bottle while drinking his formula now that Shane's milk had run out. He was also beginning to make cooing sounds that Ilya insisted were early attempts at Russian.

"Papa" Ilya would say to him, over and over, pointing at his own chest. "Say Papa."

"He's three months old," Shane reminded him. "He can't talk."

"He is a genius. He will talk early."

"He'll talk when he's ready. Which will not be at three months."

Ilya ignored him completely, continuing his campaign to make "Papa" Theo's first word. Shane secretly loved it; loved watching Ilya with their son, loved the way Theo's face lit up when Ilya walked into the room, loved the deep, rumbling sound of Ilya's voice as he narrated their days in a mix of English and Russian.

Theo had also discovered the joy of being held and to hold his parents' hair.

"Ilya, my hair!" Shane would say once in a while to ask for Ilya's help when Theo would grab his hair and not let go.

Ilya would laugh and soon be attack by his own son the same way.

“This is karma for laughing at me before.” Shane would say before talking with Theo using his baby voice that Ilya loved so much. Loved so much he would make Theo grab his hair just to hear Shane using it. “Now open your little fingers you little man. Set you Papa free.”

Theo wanted to be in someone's arms constantly, fussing when placed in his cradle or bouncer, calming instantly when picked up. They'd learned to do almost everything one-handed: cook, eat, even shower in shifts. It was exhausting but wonderful.

Little by little, the fog began to clear. Shane was getting better. Really, truly better. Therapy gave him words for feelings he'd never known how to name, and those words became tools he could use to pull himself back from the edge when the darkness threatened. He started working on himself with the same determination he'd once brought to the ice: showing up, putting in the work, trusting the process.

The home gym saw him again. He even rolled out his yoga mat, now in their warm living room, Theo being now a comforting presence as he moved through poses that reminded him he was still here, still strong, still himself.

The best moments, though, were when Theo joined him. He'd lay their son on a soft blanket beside his mat and do "baby yoga" – gentle stretches, tiny bicycle kicks, little arm movements that made Theo's face scrunch in concentration. And without fail, somewhere in the middle of it, Theo would let out the most undignified, un-baby-like fart, loud and proud and utterly shameless.

Shane would dissolve into laughter, the kind that came from somewhere deep and real, and Theo – startled at first, then delighted by his dad's reaction – would start laughing too, a gummy, toothless sound that was the most beautiful thing Shane had ever heard. Ilya would come running from wherever he was, drawn by the noise, and find them both helpless with giggles on the yoga mat.

"What happened?" he'd ask, and Shane would try to explain, but the laughter made it impossible.

Eventually Ilya would give up and join them, scooping Theo onto his own chest and attempting his own version of baby yoga, which inevitably led to more baby farts and more laughter until all three of them were a tangled, joyous heap on the floor. In those moments, surrounded by his family, Shane felt something he'd almost forgotten: pure, uncomplicated happiness.

Shane started training to prepare for next season. Not the way he used to, not with team facilities and trainers and the focused intensity of a man preparing for battle. But in their well equipped home gym, pushing his body back toward something resembling his old form.

It was slow. Frustrating. Humiliating.

His body didn't move the way it used to. His core, once a fortress of muscle, felt weak and unstable. His endurance was a shadow of what it had been. Every time he looked in the mirror, he saw the changes, softer belly, slightly wider hips, large stretch marks that maybe would never fade.

He knew, logically, that his body had done something incredible. He knew it would take time. He knew all the right things.

But at night, when Ilya was asleep beside him and the house was quiet, the doubts crept in and those feeling we was trying to push away for weeks would come back too.

You'll never get back to where you were.

You're too old, too soft, too broken.

They'll find someone else to fill your spot.

You're not a hockey player anymore. You're just... this.

The tears would come then, silent and hot, soaking his pillow while he tried not to make a sound. He'd press his face into the mattress and cry until the exhaustion took over, then wake in the morning and pretend everything was fine.

He was good at pretending. He'd had years of practice.

But Ilya was better at seeing through it. He also had years of practice, especially with Shane.

Ilya noticed everything.

He noticed the way Shane turned sideways in the mirror now, never facing it directly. He noticed how Shane's hands would drift to his stomach when he thought no one was watching, pressing against the softness there like he was trying to push it away. He noticed that Shane had stopped walking around the house in just his boxers, something he used to do without thinking while he was pregnant, since it was too hard dressing sometimes, and now wore loose jackets and baggy sweatpants even when the house was warm.

Ilya noticed. And Ilya said nothing.

Instead, he acted.

It started small. A hand on Shane's lower back as they passed in the kitchen, lingering just a moment longer than necessary. Ilya's fingers tracing absent patterns on Shane's hip while they sat together on the couch, Theo sleeping between them. A kiss pressed to Shane's shoulder every time Ilya walked past him. Not sexual, just present.

When Shane came out of the shower one morning, wrapped in a towel that didn't quite hide the parts of himself he was learning to hate, Ilya was waiting. Not to stare, not to make a comment, just to hold out Shane's softest sweatshirt, the one that always made him feel comfortable, and to press a kiss to his damp hair before walking away. No words. Just warmth.

And Ilya notice Shane tried to hide himself once Ilya was in front of him. His heart would just shatter every time.

Ilya started touching Shane more. Not in ways that demanded anything, but in ways that said "I am yours and you are mine". His hand on Shane's thigh during movie nights. His arm around Shane's waist and his hand resting open in Shane's stomach, caressing it while they cooked dinner together, pulling him close even when it made the cooking slightly more difficult. His foot hooked around Shane's ankle under the table, a constant, grounding connection. Shane's laugh or smile was the answer Ilya needed to keep acting like that.

"You are beautiful." Ilya whispered against his skin, a day when they were watching hockey together.

Well, Shane was watching hockey and Ilya was watching Shane. Theo was asleep in the nursery.

Shane looked surprised and tried to look away, but Ilya caught his chin, held his gaze.

"I mean it." he said.

"You should focus on watching the game." He said, trying also to sound like he was teasing. Trying to hide again.

Weeks passed. The baggy sweatpants remained, but sometimes, in the privacy of their bedroom, Shane let Ilya see him.

And slowly, imperceptibly, something began to shift.

One night, after Theo had been fed and burped and rocked to sleep, Shane came to bed in just his boxers and an old t-shirt. Nothing special. But Ilya noticed; noticed that the shirt wasn't that baggy, that Shane wasn't trying to hide himself entirely, that he walked across the room without angling his body away.

But it was difficult to grow confidence if Shane's body was being tested by paternity every day. He would simply collapse internally sometimes.

In the same night, Ilya woke to find the bed beside him empty. He found Shane in the bathroom, sitting on the closed toilet lid, face buried in his hands, shoulders shaking with silent sobs.

Ilya didn't ask. He didn't need to. He just crossed the small space, lowered himself to his knees in front of Shane, and pulled him gently into his arms.

For a long moment, neither of them spoke. Shane cried against his chest, and Ilya held him, one hand cradling the back of his head, the other rubbing slow circles on his back.

"I see you..." Ilya finally whispered. "... in the gym. Every day. Pushing yourself."

Shane shook his head against his chest. "It's not enough. I hate my body, Ilya." Shane whispered like saying this out loud killed him.

Ilya's arms tightened around him, his whole body going still for just a moment before he pulled Shane impossibly closer.

"Do not say that." he whispered, his voice rough with an emotion Shane couldn't quite name. "Please. Do not say that."

Shane tried to pull away, embarrassed now, the words hanging in the air between them like something shameful. But Ilya held fast, refusing to let him retreat.

"I hate seeing you hate yourself." Ilya continued, his accent thickening the way it always did when he was feeling too much. "It is like... like watching someone hurt the person I love most. Right in front of me. And I cannot stop it."

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have..."

"No." Ilya's hand cupped the back of his neck, firm but gentle, forcing Shane to meet his eyes. "You should always say what you feel. Always. Keeping it inside is worse. But don not hurt yourself like that."

Shane's lip trembled. "It's just... I look in the mirror and... Everything is different. Softer. Stretched. Ruined."

"Ruined?" Ilya's voice cracked on the word. "Shane. Look at me."

Shane looked.

"This body..." Ilya said, his free hand tracing down Shane's chest to rest on his still-soft belly, "grew a little human for nine months, it kept him safe and warm and alive." His hand moved, spanning across Shane's stomach, his hip, his thigh. "You have no idea how much I worship it. You think I do not see you? I see every drop of sweat, every grimace, every moment you want to quit and don't. And I am so proud of you I cannot breathe sometimes."

Shane's eyes were streaming again, but different now. Softer.

"I hate that you are hating yourself," Ilya whispered. "Because I love every inch of you more every day. You understand?"

Shane nodded, not trusting his voice.

"I will tell you every day." Ilya promised. "Every single day. Until you believe it. Until you look in the mirror and see what I see."

After a moment in silence, Shane asked: "What do you see?"

Ilya smiled, small and tender. "I see the father of my son. The love of my life. The strongest person I have ever known." He kissed Shane's forehead, slow and lingering. "I see home. A very sexy home."

"I..." Shane started, not know exactly how to say the next words. "I'm insecure about... You not finding me attractive anymore... Like you used to."

The words hung in the bathroom air, heavy and raw. Shane waited for Ilya to say something, to reassure him, to dismiss his fears, to tell him he was being ridiculous.

Instead, Ilya was quiet for a long moment. His hand, still resting on Shane's hip, moved in slow, thoughtful circles.

"That is what you think?" Ilya asked finally, his voice careful. "That I do not want you anymore?"

Shane couldn't meet his eyes. "It's been months, Ilya. Since before Theo was born we haven't done... nothing. And I know... I know we've been busy, and tired, and focused on him now. I know that's normal. And that my body had to heal, and I was totally okay with that, but... But I've been having these... I've been wanting you badly lately... And sometimes I wonder if..." He swallowed hard. "If maybe you're just not... attracted to me anymore."

Ilya's hand stilled. "Shane. Look at me."

Shane shook his head; eyes fixed on the bathroom tile.

"Please." Ilya's voice was soft, almost pleading. "Look at me."

Slowly, Shane lifted his gaze.

Ilya's eyes were bright, shining with something that looked almost like tears. But his expression was steady, open, utterly sincere.

"I have never stopped wanting you." Ilya said. "Not for one single day." He took Shane's face in both hands. "I want you. Always. Every version of you."

"Then why..." Shane's voice broke. "Why don't you touch me anymore?"

Ilya let out a slow breath. "Because I was waiting."

"Waiting for what?"

"For you." Ilya's thumbs brushed Shane's cheekbones. "You have been through so much. Your body has been through so much. I did not want to push. I did not want you to feel pressured, or like you owed me something, or like our relationship was about that when you were struggling just to exist." He shook his head slightly. "I was waiting for you to be ready. To want me again."

Shane stared at him, something cracking open in his chest. "I always want you."

"I did not know that." Ilya's voice was rough. "You have been so quiet. So distant, sometimes. I thought maybe..." He paused, regrouping. "... you needed space. From everything. Including me."

"No." Shane's hand came up to cover one of Ilya's. "No. I need you. I need this. Us. I've just been..." He laughed wetly. "I've been waiting too, I guess. Waiting to feel like myself again. Waiting to feel desirable. Waiting for you to make the first move because I was too scared to. Too insecure."

Ilya pulled him close, wrapping him in his arms.

"I'm an idiot." Shane said.

"The most talented and beautiful idiot in the world."

"Fuck you!" Shane laughed against his chest, the sound watery but real, and he admitted: "What if it's different now? What if my body doesn't... what if I can't..."

Ilya pulled back just enough to meet his eyes. "Then we will figure it out. Together. Slowly. There is no rush. There is no pressure." He kissed Shane's forehead. "I just want to be close to you, yes?"

Shane nodded, tears spilling over again but different now; relief, mostly. And love. So much love.

"I miss your blowjobs." Ilya said near Shane's ear. "You are very talented at that."

"Fuck off!" Shane laughed, but then: "I want to try." he whispered. "Tonight. Not... not everything. But something. I want to feel you."

Ilya's eyes darkened slightly, but his touch remained gentle, questioning. "Are you sure?"

Shane pulled him closer. He wasn't so sure, but he had to do this for himself, he knew it.

Ilya kissed him then. Soft at first, tentative, asking permission with every brush of his lips. Shane answered by deepening it, by pressing closer, by letting his hands roam over familiar planes of muscle and skin. Shane pulled Ilya out of the bathroom and to the living room, not before grabbing the baby camera.

It wasn't like before. It was slower, more careful, more conscious of their bodies and everything it had been through. It was also sweeter, somehow. Deeper. Rooted in something that went far beyond physical attraction.

They didn't go all the way through, and Shane wanted to keep his shirt on, so Ilya would kiss his stomach over the fabric. They rubbed each other until they surrendered to pleasure. And when they finally broke apart, breathless and trembling, Shane's shirt ruined, Ilya rested his forehead against Shane's.

"I love you." he whispered.

"I love you too." He pressed closer. "Ilya..."

"Hm?"

"Can we do that one more time before coming back to bed?" Ilya gave Shane back a dirty but surprised look.

"I have woken up my sex demon?" Shane didn't say a thing, he just laughed grabbed Ilya's dick again, who moaned against his neck. "Fuck, Shane."

"Please, show me again how you love my body... please."

And Ilya did. Slowly, carefully, thoroughly. And he would do until the end of his life.

When they were both in bed, Ilya's warm weight pressed against Shane's back, understood something he'd spent his whole career learning and somehow still managed to forget. Hate was powerful. It could fuel rivalries, build walls, keep people apart for years. He knew that better than most.

But love was something else entirely.

Love was patient. Love was stubborn. Love was showing up every day, even when it was hard, even when the fog rolled in, even when your body changed and your mind struggled and nothing felt like it used to. Love was Ilya driving home from road trips at 2 a.m. just to be there for breakfast. Love was Theo's gummy smile and the way he reached for his fathers like they were the safest place in the world. Love was Ilya's little touches that Shane began to notice and that were sometimes better than words. Love was this; messy and imperfect, full of acts of service and absolutely everything.

And as Shane watched Ilya get up to feed Theo, their son making those beautiful little noises, he felt the truth of it settle deep in his bones. Everything would be okay, because hate was a powerful thing, sometimes a powerful weapon, but love, Shane had learned, was the most powerful force of all.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you all for reading and see you soon <3

Chapter 16: our getaway

Chapter Notes

I'M BACK!

I want to thank you all one more time for commenting in every chapter, it really keeps me going and worsens my heated rivalry addiction, which I think it's a bless 🙏🙌

As a token of gratitude, I present you with a hollanov smut 🍌

Hope you enjoy your reading 💕

6 months old

Shane was the kind of dad who kept a diary. Inside it, in the most organized way possible, was a record of everything, both in writing and picture. He wrote it all down: dates, times (military time, of course), details, what Theo was wearing. It was his way of holding onto moments that felt too precious to trust to memory alone.

Theo's first smile

21/01/2018, 14:10 - 6 weeks old.

- *Theo was wearing a cotton kimono-style bodysuit with blue and white stripes.*
- *The smile was directed at Ilya, although I was the one who carried him for 9 months.*

The first laugh

12/02/2018, 12:21 - 9 weeks old.

- *Theo was wearing a long-sleeve onesie with hockey sticks print (Ilya bought it for his 2 month anniversary – Theo's, not Ilya's, although sometimes looks like Ilya is younger than Theo).*
- *It was a real laugh, not just a gas bubble, at Ilya making ridiculous faces.*

First time Theo rolled over

08/04/2018, 02:24 – 4 months.

- *Theo was wearing a white sleep sack with a fluorescent bear print (I wanted to see him clearly in the crib during the nights - Theo's pediatrician said it wouldn't be harmful for his sleep).*
- *It happened in the middle of the night, no one saw it, but the baby camera recorded it.*

Ilya, meanwhile, approached fatherhood like research. His phone was full of bookmarked articles and saved parenting forums. He knew, at any given moment, what developmental milestones Theo should be hitting, what foods to introduce and when, how many hours of sleep was normal for his age. He'd come to Shane with findings: "Did you know they can recognize their name at 6 months?" or "We should start reading to him every night, it helps with language development. I will find a children's Russian book for him", and Shane would smile and kiss him and add the information to his mental file.

They were different, him and Ilya. Shane held onto the past, recording every precious moment. Ilya looked toward the future, always preparing for what came next. Together, they made sure Theo was documented and ready for whatever the world threw at him.

Theo was six months old. He could hold his head – although not for too long or he would be tired – and it helped him track everything his fathers did with intense curiosity and with his intense blue eyes. He'd discovered his voice, too, filling their home with shrieks of delight, experimental babbles, and the occasional frustrated wail when something didn't go his way. His hair was coming in, it was something in between Shane's and Ilya's hair, almost a dark brown, but with curls. Ilya's curls.

The gym had become their sanctuary, in a way. Not from Theo, but as a space where they could be together, all three of them, while still focusing on themselves. Shane had been training consistently for months now, four or five days a week, and his body was finally responding. The softness was giving way to muscle. The strength was returning. He could see his old shape emerging from the fog of pregnancy and postpartum, and for the first time in a long time, he didn't flinch when he caught his reflection.

Therapy had helped. So had Ilya's unwavering patience, his constant touch, his refusal to let Shane retreat into his own insecurity. Slowly, painfully, beautifully, Shane was learning to love himself again.

But there was one thing they hadn't done yet.

Not once, since before Theo was born, had they gone all the way. Exchanged handjobs in the shower, yes. Blowjobs when Theo was safely napping in the nursery, absolutely. Quick, quiet, efficient; those were easy. Those left no evidence, required no intense cleanup, could be interrupted at a moment's notice.

But fucking? Real, messy, all the way sex? That hadn't happened in nearly eight months.

Shane wanted it. God, he wanted it. He craved Ilya's weight on top of him, the feeling of being completely taken, the intimacy of letting go completely. His body was ready. His mind was ready. But every time he thought about suggesting it, he looked at Theo, at the baby monitor, at the nursery door, at the tiny person who depended on them for everything, and the moment passed.

It felt wrong, wanting that with their son in the house. Like he was choosing his own pleasure over his responsibility. Like he was a bad father for even thinking about it.

He knew, logically, that was ridiculous. Parents had sex. Parents had always had sex. But the guilt lingered anyway, a quiet voice whispering he was selfish every time he looked at Ilya with something other than exhaustion in his eyes.

The gym, at least, was a place where they could be close without the weight of expectation. Today's workout was going well, Shane on the bench press, Ilya spotting him, Theo dozing in his mobile crib a few feet away. The soft sounds of the baby's breathing mixed with the clank of weights and their own steady breaths.

After Shane's set, he sat on the floor beside the mirror and reached for his water bottle. Ilya sat in front of him, his feet touching, and laughed quietly.

"What?" Shane asked after a few sips of water and handed the bottle to Ilya.

"I remembered something. When we met at the hotel gym after the draft." Shane smiled and his cheeks turned red.

He remembered that very well, including the part in which he was holding back the desire to pin Ilya down to the floor and kiss him.

"And now we have a baby together." Ilya said before drinking from the bottle and winking at Shane. "You are quiet today." Ilya observed after a while. "More than usual."

Shane glanced at Theo, still sleeping, still peaceful, then back at Ilya.

"I've been thinking..." he said quietly. "About us. About... sex."

Ilya's eyebrow rose, but he didn't interrupt.

"The kind we used to have. Before." Shane's voice was barely above a whisper. "I want that. I want you. All of you. But every time I think about it, I look at him and I feel..." He gestured vaguely. "... guilty. Like wanting that makes me a bad father. Like I'm choosing my own pleasure over taking care of him."

"You know how babies are made, yes?"

"I'm serious, Ilya."

Ilya was quiet for a moment, processing. Then he sat beside Shane and his hand found his, their fingers lacing together.

"You are not a bad father," he said softly. "You are a father who also happens to be my partner." He licked Shane's ear and whispered. "My lover. The person I want to be close to in every way." He squeezed Shane's hand and Shane took a deep breath. "I want that too. I have wanted it for a long time."

"Then why haven't you said anything?"

"I want it when you want it." Ilya's thumb traced circles on Shane's skin. "I did not want to push." He smiled, small and tender. "I can wait. I will always wait for you."

Shane's eyes burned. "I don't want you to wait anymore. I want..." He laughed softly, helplessly. "I want you to fuck me until I can't walk straight."

Ilya's eyes darkened, just slightly. "I think you will kill someday, Hollander."

"Shut up."

"I am not complaining. I am appreciating the clarity." Shane shoved him gently, but he was smiling.

"So... what do we do? How do we make this happen without feeling like we're abandoning him?"

Ilya thought for a moment. Then his face brightened.

"Your parents," he said. "They have been asking to keep Theo overnight. Your mother mentions it every time we see her."

Shane blinked. "You mean..."

"We ask them to take him. Just for one night. We prepare bottles, diapers, everything he needs. And then we have the house to ourselves." Ilya's voice dropped lower, more intimate. "We order food. I drink whiskey, you drink ginger ale. We take our time. All night. No interruptions. No guilt."

Shane stared at him, the idea taking root. It was so simple. So obvious. Why hadn't he thought of it?

"You think they'd say yes?"

"I think your mother would drive here herself to pick him up." Ilya smiled.

Shane felt something loosen in his chest. "Okay. Yeah. Let's... let's do that. Let's ask them..." He trailed off, a new worry creasing his brow. "But..."

"But what?"

Shane ran a hand through his already messy hair, a flush creeping up his neck.

"What do we tell them?"

Ilya's eyebrow arched slightly, a silent question. "What do you mean?" He asked, though the glint in his eye suggested he knew exactly what Shane meant.

"I'm not gonna ask my parents to take care of Theo so you and me can fuck, Rozanov."

Shane blurted out, the words tumbling over each other in a hushed, embarrassed rush. The thought of standing in his mother's kitchen and making that particular request made his stomach flip.

A rare, slow smile touched Ilya's lips.

"Your parents know how babies are made, Shane?"

The question was again so blunt, so perfectly Ilya, that despite his embarrassment, Shane let out a short, surprised laugh.

"Fuck you! They do, but that's not the point."

Ilya reached out, tucking a stray piece of hair behind Shane's ear, his calloused fingers gentle.

"We just tell them we want some time for ourselves. To rest or whatever. Okay?" The simple touch, the calm in Ilya's voice, worked its usual magic on Shane's frayed nerves. The panic subsided, replaced by a flutter of anticipation.

He nodded, his eyes dropping to Ilya's lips for a brief second before meeting his gaze again. He unconsciously licked his lips, which were suddenly dry.

"Okay."

Ilya leaned in and kissed him, soft and promising. When they broke apart, both of them were smiling.

Then a sound made them turn.

Theo was sitting up in his crib.

Not propped by pillows, not supported by anything, just sitting, all by himself, his big blue eyes blinking at them with sleepy confusion. He'd never done that before.

Never.

"*Bozhe moi*" Ilya breathed.

Shane was already on his feet, moving toward the crib. "Theo! Baby, did you... did you just sit up by yourself?"

Theo looked at him, clearly unsure how he'd gotten into this position. Then, in slow motion, his little body wobbled, tipped, and flopped backward onto the mattress.

The silence lasted exactly one second.

Then Theo's face crumpled, and the wailing began.

Shane scooped him up instantly, cradling him against his chest, bouncing gently. "Oh, baby, it's okay. You did it! You sat up all by yourself! That's amazing! Don't need to cry."

Theo continued crying, unimpressed by his own accomplishment.

Ilya joined them, his hand coming up to stroke Theo's hair. "He sat up alone." he said, wonder in his voice. "Our son sat up."

"He did." Shane was laughing now, Theo's cries already subsiding against his chest."

"You are a self-made man, yes?" Ilya said in a deep, funny voice while tickling Theo's belly.

His fingers danced across the soft fabric of his onesie, and Theo, as if on cue, stopped crying immediately and erupted into giggles, those beautiful, gummy, toothless laughs that made everything in the world feel right. Shane watched them, holding Theo tightly, trying to look stern even as his heart melted.

"He laughs at you more than he laughs at me. It's not fair."

Ilya glanced up, grinning. "I am funnier."

"Maybe."

Theo, in response to the conversation happening above him, let out a wet raspberry and grabbed a fistful of Shane's hair with surprising strength. Shane yelped, his head tilting at an awkward angle as he tried to gently extricate himself.

"Baby, nooooo..." he pleaded. "That's Daddy's hair. Daddy needs that."

Ilya was laughing now, watching the struggle.

"He grabs your hair more than he grabs mine."

"And that's better how exactly?"

"He loves your hair more than mine." Ilya reached over, carefully helping to free Shane's strands from Theo's surprisingly strong grip. "But I get him. I love your hair more too." He ran his fingers through it, soft and appreciative. "It is really nice to pull." Shane's eyes widened.

"Don't say that in front of him!" Ilya shrugged, utterly unrepentant.

"Ah, it is fine. Babies only start to comprehend words after nine months. We have time."

Shane stared at him, Theo now contentedly gumming his own fist in Shane's lap.

"You're a walking encyclopedia at this point."

Ilya laughed, pulling them both into a hug. "We will call your mother later." he murmured against Shane's ear. "But first, our son has achieved greatness. This requires celebration. I will make great lunch for us and great milk for Theo."

The drive to Shane's parents' house, although short, took enough time for Shane to check Theo's bag at least four more times, thinking about whether they'd packed enough bottles and diapers or not.

"I'm going to call them when we get back." Shane announced for the third time. "Just to check in." Ilya kept his eyes on the road, but a small smile tugged at his lips.

"They will be fine."

"What if he doesn't take the bottle? He's been a little fussy with bottles lately."

"Then they will try again. Or they will wait. He will eat when he is hungry."

"What if he cries and can't stop?"

"Then they will comfort him. They are experts at this. You know your parents raised you, yes?"

Shane opened his mouth to argue, then closed it. Fair point.

"Stop saying obvious things to me, please."

Theo, blissfully unaware of his father's anxiety, slept peacefully in his car seat, his tiny lips pursed in that way that made him look like he was dreaming of something important.

Shane's parents were waiting on the porch when they pulled up, his mother's face bright with anticipation, his father already reaching for the car door before the engine fully stopped.

"There he is!" Yuna exclaimed as Ilya carefully lifted the car seat. "There's my little man!"

Inside, the house was warm and welcoming, smelling of something delicious simmering on the stove. Shane's mother had clearly prepared in advance: there were a stack of clean blankets and pillows already in the living. Shane set down the diaper bag and immediately began unpacking.

"Okay, so there are six bottles in here, already measured. He usually eats every three to four hours, but sometimes he wants more frequently in the evening, so I put extra formula in the side pocket just in case. But don't worry, we will pick him up by 5 p.m. tomorrow." He pulled out a small container. "This is the probiotic drop. He needs two drops in his first morning bottle, not the evening one, because it can make him a little gassy at night. The white noise machine is in the outer compartment, he likes the ocean setting best. Not the rain, the ocean. And definitely not the heartbeat one, that one actually makes him fussier for some reason. And his sleep sack is the one with the little bears, he won't sleep in the other one you guys gave, we've tried..."

"Shane." His mother's voice was gentle but firm.

"... and if he wakes up and won't settle, sometimes walking with him helps, but not too fast, and if you sing, he likes..."

"Shane." He stopped, blinking at her. "The probiotic drops..." his mother said slowly. "...two drops in the morning bottle. The ocean setting on the white noise. The sleep sack with bears. Got it."

"Also his pacifier, there are three in the side pocket, but he only likes the round ones, not the orthodontic ones, those make him mad..." Ilya gently placed a hand on Shane's shoulder.

"She knows, *moy lyubov*. She is a mother. She raised you."

Shane nodded but kept going.

"And if he gets hiccups, you have to hold him upright for at least fifteen minutes, or he'll spit up, and it's a lot of spit up, like, more than you'd expect..."

Yuna crossed the room and took his hands, stilling them. "Sweetheart. I know how to take care of a baby."

"I know, but..."

"I took care of you. For eighteen years. You survived." She smiled, warm and teasing. "You turned out mostly okay."

Shane's mouth opened, then closed. Ilya, behind him, was definitely hiding a laugh.

"Your mother changed your diapers," his father added helpfully from the couch, where he was already making faces at Theo. "Wiped your nose. Stayed up with you all night when you were teething. Remember the time you had the stomach flu and threw up on her favorite sweater? She didn't even get mad."

"That sweater was ugly anyway," Yuna said. "The point is," she continued, squeezing Shane's hands, "we've done this before. Many times. We know what we're doing. Theo is going to be just fine."

Shane looked at his mother, really looked at her. At the gray streaking her hair, the laugh lines around her eyes, the steady, confident way she held herself. She had raised him. Through everything; hockey practices and school projects and teenage angst and the terrifying prospect of her flying across the country to play in the NHL. She had been there. Constant. Capable. Loving.

He took a breath. Let it out.

"Okay," he said quietly. "Okay. I trust you."

"Good." She kissed his cheek and then said in a lower tone. "Now go home. Be with your boyfriend. Do whatever it is young people do when they have the house to themselves." She winked and Shane's cheeks turned red.

"Mom..."

"And don't call us. We'll call you if we need anything."

Ilya stepped forward, placing a hand on Shane's lower back.

"She is right. We should go." Shane looked at Theo, now awake and blinking up at his grandfather with curious eyes. He looked happy. Content. Unbothered by his fathers' departure.

"Okay," Shane said again. "We're going. We're really going." Shane said, but stood in the same place looking at his son, who seemed to not be bothered at all by his parents' leaving him there.

"Go." his father said, waving them off. "Enjoy your night. We've got this."

Before they left, Shane and Ilya said their goodbyes to Theo, kissing him softly in his puffy cheeks and caressing his curly hair. Then, Ilya guided Shane toward the door, and somehow, miraculously, Shane let himself be guided. They were almost to the car when he stopped.

"The white noise..."

"Your parents can handle that kind of technology" Ilya opened the passenger door. "Get in."

"But if he..." "Shane." Ilya's voice was soft but firm.

"Your mother raised you. She kept you alive for twenty-six years. She can handle one night with Theo." Shane looked back at the house, at the warm glow of the windows, at the shadow of his mother moving inside with their son.

"Yeah." he said finally, climbing into the car. "Yeah, she can."

They drove away, and for the first time in six months, the back seat was empty. It felt strange. Wrong. But also, somewhere beneath the anxiety, exciting. Tonight was just for them.

The drive home was quiet, charged, both of them pretending they weren't thinking about what came next. Shane's leg bounced slightly the whole way. Ilya's grip on the steering wheel was a little tighter than necessary, then he put his hand on Shane's leg and Shane held it little tighter than necessary too.

They pulled into the driveway. Killed the engine.

Ilya's got out of the car. Shane followed, his heart already hammering. The key turned in the lock. The door swung open. They stepped inside, and the door clicked shut behind them, sealing them in the quiet, empty house.

No Theo. No parents. No monitors or schedules or responsibilities.

Just them.

Shane leaned back against the door, letting it hold his weight. His eyes found Ilya's across the small entryway. Ilya stood perfectly still, watching him with an intensity that made Shane's skin prickle with anticipation. A grin starting to form in his lips.

Fuck, Shane was starting to get hard already. He wouldn't last much.

He wet his lips.

Ilya moved.

He crossed the space in three strides, his hands finding Shane's hips, gripping them like he needed something to hold onto. His mouth found Shane's neck, not gently, not tentatively, but with purpose. With hunger.

Shane's head fell back against the door with a soft thunk, a sound escaping him that was half gasp, half moan.

"Finally." Ilya breathed against his skin, the word vibrating through Shane's entire body.

Shane's hands came up, fisting in Ilya's shirt, pulling him closer, than in Ilya's hair. "Fuck, I'm not gonna last."

They kissed then, messy, desperate, nothing like the careful, controlled kisses of the past months. This was teeth and tongue and months of wanting condensed into a single moment. Ilya's hands roamed, relearning the shape of Shane's body, the places that made him gasp, the spots that made him press closer.

Shane's fingers fumbled with Ilya's buttons, impatient, clumsy. Ilya made an amused sound against his mouth.

"Eager?"

"Shut up." Shane finally got the shirt open, pushing it off Ilya's shoulders. "It's been months. I'm allowed to be eager."

Ilya's response was to lift him, Shane's legs wrapping around his waist automatically, his back still pressed against the door. They kissed like that, suspended, Ilya's strength holding them both up, Shane's hands buried in his hair.

Somehow, Shane never quite registered the transition, they ended up on the living room floor. A tangle of limbs and discarded clothes, the rug rough against Shane's back, Ilya's weight exactly where it belonged.

"Wait." Shane gasped, and Ilya froze immediately.

"What? Too much? Do you want to stop?"

"No." Shane pulled him closer. "Just... Fuck, I'm really not gonna last, Ilya."

"Yes, but we have all afternoon..." he kissed Shane's forehead. "All night..." then his right cheek. "All morning..." his nose. "All afternoon again." And then Shane's lips.

His eyes were dark, pupils blown wide, but focused entirely on Shane.

"I love you." Shane whispered.

Ilya's expression softened, the hunger giving way to something deeper. "I love you too. Always." he murmured

Shane kissed him again, softer this time, a promise.

Then the softness gave way to need.

The living room disappeared. The couch, the windows, all of it faded until there was nothing but sensation. Ilya's mouth on his skin. Ilya's hands gripping his hips. Ilya's voice, rough and broken, whispering Shane's name like a prayer.

His mouth traveled lower, leaving a trail of heat across Shane's skin. He kissed every inch: the hollow of Shane's throat, the curve of his shoulder, the soft skin of his stomach where their son had grown. He lingered there, pressing his lips to the faded stretch marks, murmuring something in Russian that Shane couldn't understand but felt in his bones.

God, Ilya speaking Russian would always be the biggest incentive for his dick.

Ilya's teeth grazed Shane's hip bone, then his inner thigh, nipping just hard enough to make Shane gasp. He marked the sensitive skin there, deliberate, possessive, a promise that hours from now, when Shane moved, he'd feel the ghost of this moment.

"Ilya..." Shane breathed, the name a warning and a plea.

Ilya's answer was to take Shane into his mouth.

Shane's head fell back against the rug, a guttural sound tearing from his throat. Ilya's hand cradled him, thumb stroking in rhythm with the movement of his lips, finding a pace that was devastatingly perfect. His other hand cupped Shane's balls, rolling them gently, and Shane saw stars.

"Fuck!" Shane gasped. "Ilya, I'm-I'm going to... if you don't stop..."

Ilya didn't stop. If anything, he doubled down, taking Shane deeper, his hand working in perfect sync.

Shane came with a broken cry, his body arching off the floor, everything going white. Ilya stayed with him through every wave, swallowing, gentling him through it with soft touches and slower movements.

When Shane finally collapsed back to earth, trembling and boneless, Ilya lifted his head and laughed, a low, satisfied, utterly smug sound.

"Blyad." he murmured, crawling back up Shane's body. "I missed that. You screaming like that."

Shane cursed at him weakly, but the effect was ruined by the smile spreading across his face and the way his hands immediately found Ilya's hair. "You're... that was... Fuck, I hate you."

"No, you do not." Ilya kissed him, and Shane tasted himself on Ilya's tongue. "You love me."

"I do. I love you so much."

They kissed, slow and lazy, Shane's body still humming with aftershocks. Ilya's hips pressed against his thigh, and Shane could feel how hard he still was, could feel the evidence of his own pleasure written across Ilya's skin.

But more than that, he could feel himself stirring again. Responding. Already wanting more.

Ilya pulled back, one eyebrow raised, a wicked grin spreading across his face.

"Again?" he asked, his voice full of teasing delight. "Already?"

Shane's cheeks flushed. "Shut up."

"It has been what? Five minutes?"

"Fuck you."

"I have created a monster. A very sexy, very eager monster." Ilya murmured, lowering himself again.

"No, I want you too."

Shane pushed gently at Ilya's chest, a silent request. Ilya understood immediately, rolling onto his back and pulling Shane with him. They rearranged on the living room rug. Shane was positioned above him, looking down at the man he loved with something that felt almost like worship.

"I want..." Shane started, then stopped, suddenly shy.

Ilya's hand came up to cup his face. "What do you want? Tell me."

"You. In my mouth." Shane's voice was quiet but sure.

Ilya's breath caught. His eyes darkened, but his touch remained gentle. "Yes?"

"Yes." Shane kissed him once, soft, then began to move lower.

He took his time, the way he'd been craving. He pressed kisses down Ilya's chest, across his stomach, tracing the lines of muscle with his tongue. Ilya's hands fisted in the rug, then moved to Shane's hair. His eyes fixed on Shane.

When he finally took him in his mouth, Ilya made a sound, low and broken, something between a groan and a sigh. His hips twitched, then stilled, giving Shane control.

Shane took it. Slowly, deliberately, he found a rhythm. His hand wrapped around what he couldn't reach, working in tandem with his mouth. He looked up at Ilya through his lashes,

watching the way his partner's head fell back but soon got back on watching Shane, the way his jaw went slack, the way his chest heaved with every breath.

"Fuck." Ilya breathed.

Shane hummed in response, the vibration making Ilya's whole body shudder. He loved this. Loved the power of it, the intimacy, the way Ilya completely surrendered to him. Months of waiting, of wanting, of feeling disconnected from this part of themselves, it all poured into this moment.

Ilya's hand tightened in his hair, a gentle warning. "I'm close. You don't have to..."

Shane doubled his efforts.

Ilya's warning became a gasp, then a moan, then a string of Russian that Shane couldn't follow but felt in his bones. And then he was there, his whole body tensing, his hand gripping Shane's hair like a lifeline. And Shane swallowed it all.

When it was over, he crawled up to lie beside him, both of them breathing hard. Ilya turned his head, looking at Shane with an expression of complete, utter awe.

"You were practicing, Hollander?" Ilya started.

"What?"

"You practiced in your dildo?" Ilya laughed, pulling him closer.

"You're such an asshole."

"You almost killed me." Ilya said, kissing Shane's jaw.

Shane grinned, warm and satisfied. "You're welcome, I guess."

Ilya kissed him, tasting himself on Shane's lips, and neither of them minded.

Before Shane could catch his breath, Ilya was already moving. Strong hands gripped his bare ass, lifting him effortlessly, and suddenly Shane was being carried. Not toward the bedroom, but passed the living room, toward the kitchen.

Shane laughed, wrapping his legs around Ilya's waist. "You know that's the kitchen, right? Our bedroom is in the opposite direction."

"Yes." Ilya said simply, not slowing down.

"The kitchen, Ilya. The room with the refrigerator. Where we eat breakfast."

"I know where the kitchen is."

Shane's butt met the cool granite of the kitchen island, the contrast making him gasp. Ilya stood between his legs, looking down at him with an expression that was equal parts hunger

and adoration.

"You're going to fuck me in the kitchen?" Shane asked, breathless.

"Yes." Ilya's hands slid up Shane's thighs, parting them further. "But I am going to do something else first."

He didn't wait for a response, he kissed Shane's lips, neck, chest and stomach, pressing his body until it was lying down on the counter. Then, Ilya raised Shane's legs, pressing them against Shane's chest.

Shane's head fell back, a broken sound escaping him. His hands tight on his own thighs, gripping, holding on as the world narrowed to the new feeling of the wet heat of Ilya's mouth pressing his entrance and the impossible, overwhelming sensation of being wanted like this.

"Oh god." Shane gasped. "Oh god, Ilya..."

Ilya hummed in response, the vibration traveling through Shane's entire body. One hand gripped Shane's hip, holding him steady; the other wrapped around his own cock, working in perfect rhythm.

Shane looked down, watched Ilya's head moving between his buttocks. The sight alone was almost enough to undo him.

"Fuck, that is too much. I need you!"

Ilya pulled off just long enough to say, "I'm here." before diving back in.

"No, Ilya, please. I actually need you."

"If you need me that much..." Ilya took one step back, adjusting his hair back. "Keep that position until I get back, okay?"

"Ilya..."

"Or I will not be able to reward you, Shane. And that would be very sad, yes?"

"Fuck!" Shane intensified the grip on his legs. "Okay, okay. But come back fast, please."

Ilya disappeared toward the bedroom, his footsteps not so quick but purposeful, leaving Shane sprawled across the kitchen island in a state of blissful, anticipatory haze. The granite was cool against his heated skin, and he made no move to adjust his position, trusting that Ilya would be back.

A minute later, what looked like forever for Shane, Ilya reappeared in the kitchen doorway, and his breath caught at the sight of Shane's obedience. In one hand, he carried the bottle of lube from their nightstand; in the other, two condoms, pinched between his fingers like they were the most important things in the world. He crossed back to the island, set both items down within easy reach, and looked at Shane, still exactly where he'd left him, still waiting, still wanting, with an expression that was equal parts hunger and reverence.

"Good boy," Ilya murmured, and the words sent a shiver down Shane's spine that had nothing to do with the cold counter beneath him.

"What do you need from me again? I need you to tell me." He said while spreading the lube on his finger, and then he put one finger inside Shane.

"Fuck!" he hissed. "I need your dick. Please, please, please, Ilya."

"You are such an impatient slut." He added another finger.

Shane whimpered, thinking about all those months he had not touched himself there.

"Your... Your slut."

"So be a good slut and spread your legs more, Hollander." And he did.

Ilya kept working on Shane's hole, enjoying the sound of him moaning and the view of legs muscles twitching.

"Fuck, Ilya, get your dick inside now!"

"You were asking so nicely befo-."

"Please! Now do it! Please!"

Ilya laughed, took out his fingers and open the two condoms at the same time. He put one first on Shane, who was already so sensitive he had to hold himself on the counter. Deep down he was glad, though, that it wouldn't make a mess on the kitchen, cause if it did, he would worry later, but later he expected his legs to be wobbly and sore.

After putting the condom, Ilya adjust Shane's legs over his own shoulders and himself in his entrance. One hand gripping Shane's hand over the counter and the other positioned in his now toned abdomen. When he finally pushed inside, both of them gasped, a sound that echoed off the kitchen walls and hung in the air between them.

"Oh my God..." Shane let out in a whisper when Ilya was all the way in, already feeling breathless.

"Okay?" Ilya asked, his voice strained.

"More than okay." Shane's legs tightened. "Move. Please."

Ilya moved.

Slow at first, deep and deliberate, each thrust a reminder of how long they'd waited, how much they'd missed this, how good it felt to be connected again. Shane's head fell back, a moan escaping him that he couldn't have held back if he'd tried. His hands gripped the edge of the counter, knuckles white, holding on as Ilya found a rhythm.

"You feel... Fuck!" Ilya started, then stopped, lost for words.

Faster now. Ilya's hips snapped forward with increasing urgency, the granite cool against Shane's back, the heat between them building to something unbearable. Shane's moans became cries, became screams, pleasure tearing out of him with every thrust, every perfect angle, every moment of Ilya's body pressed against his.

"Yes, right there. Don't stop."

Ilya didn't stop. Couldn't stop. His hand slid up Shane's chest, wrapped around his throat, not choking, just holding, claiming, grounding them both as the world narrowed to the place where they joined.

"I'm gonna..." Shane said, a crying warning.

"Oh my God, Hollander!"

"Ilya, I'm cumming".

And then he came first, screaming Ilya's name, his body arching off the counter, every muscle tensing and releasing in waves. The sound of it, raw and desperate, pushed Ilya over the edge, and he followed with a groan that was almost a sob, buried deep inside the man he loved. His instincts made him bite Shane's shin, absorbing the feeling of having him like this after months of longing.

For a long moment, there was only breathing.

Ragged, broken, beautiful breathing.

Ilya pulled back just enough to look at Shane. Sweaty, flushed, utterly wrecked, and smiling like he'd just won the lottery.

"Hi..." Shane whispered. Ilya laughed, the sound watery and warm. "We're insane."

"We're in love." Ilya kissed his legs again, putting them down carefully to hold Shane's thighs while lowering his torso to kiss his lips, soft and lingering. "I love you."

"I love you too." Shane pulled him closer, not ready to let go. "But for the record, the bedroom is still in the other direction."

Ilya grinned. "We will get there." Ilya kissed him again. "Eventually."

Shane laughed, the sound dissolving into a moan as Ilya's tongue found a particularly sensitive spot. His hips bucked involuntarily, making both moan loudly. Ilya was still inside.

Shane smiled, warm and satisfied and more connected to Ilya than he'd felt in months.

Eventually, as Ilya had promised, they got to their bedroom, after Ilya fucked Shane against the corridor wall, Shane's hands pressed flat against the wallpaper, Ilya's chest hot against his back, both of them laughing and moaning in equal measure as they somehow navigated the ten-foot journey from kitchen to bedroom.

Now they were laying tangled in their sheets, limbs intertwined, the bedside clock glowing 1:08 a.m. Shane could hear the distant sound of leaves rustling outside.

"I can't feel my legs." Shane mumbled against Ilya's chest.

"Good."

"I'm serious. I think you broke me."

Ilya's laugh rumbled through his ribcage. "I think I am going to have to carry you around the house, then".

Shane snorted, but he was smiling. He traced lazy patterns on Ilya's stomach, avoiding the still-tender spot where his ribs had healed months ago. "We should do this more often."

"The nearly dying part or the sex part?"

"Both." Shane tilted his head up to look at him. "But especially the sex part. The nearly dying part I could probably skip."

"Agreed, we have a son to raise." Ilya kissed his forehead. "We will schedule regular orgasms. Very important for our health."

"Our what now?"

"I read an article. Orgasms reduce stress, boost immune system, improve sleep." Ilya's hand slid down Shane's back, slow and possessive. "Very scientific."

"You're making that up."

"I never make things up. I am a very serious person."

Shane laughed, the sound soft in the quiet room. He pressed closer, nuzzling into the warm space beneath Ilya's arm. "Hey."

"Hey."

"I missed this. Being able to touch you without rushing. Without listening for the baby monitor. Just... us."

Ilya's arm tightened around him. "I missed it too. More than I knew."

"I'm not saying I don't miss Theo, I do..."

"I know. I miss him too. But he is in good hands."

"I know."

They lay in comfortable silence for a moment, the weight of the past months settling around them like a blanket.

"Do you think he's okay?" Shane asked quietly.

Ilya's hand stilled on his back. "He is fine. Your mother probably has him in a better routine than we do."

"She's going to spoil him."

"He is six months, Shane. How do you spoil a 6 months old baby?"

"I don't know." The familiar anxiety easing slightly. "I still want to call in the morning. First thing."

"We will call. And then I will eat you for breakfast". He turned Shane on the bed, pinning him down to the mattress.

Shane laughed loudly. "You'll keep me starving in the morning then"

Ilya's eyebrows rose. "Oh, no, no. Of course not. You can do that thing you did earlier." He kissed Shane throat. "Swallow."

"You are dirty." Shane said, his cheeks already colored in that familiar red tone. Ilya pulled him closer, settling into the pillows.

"You are dirtier than me, Hollander. Don't you listen to yourself when we are having sex?"

"Shut up, I need to sleep." He turned, back against Ilya's chest.

"Oh, now you do..." Ilya was grinning, but said no more. He was tired too.

He just hugged the love of his life tightly and they drifted, not quite sleeping, not quite awake, wrapped in each other and the quiet of the house. Eventually, they sleep, and wake up, and love each other one or two more times.

But for now, they would just enjoy the warm of their skins against one another.

Chapter 17: our reveal

Chapter Notes

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

They woke to the sound of Shane's stomach.

It was not a subtle sound. It was a full-throated, dramatic growl that seemed to echo off the bedroom walls and startle them both awake. Shane blinked at the ceiling, disoriented for a moment, before the events of the previous night came flooding back, the kitchen, the hallway, the wall, the bed.

"I think..." he said slowly. "... my body is trying to tell me something."

Ilya propped himself up on one elbow, looking down at him with sleepy affection. "Is telling you we forgot to eat dinner."

"Oh." Shane thought about it. "Oh, right. We were a little... busy, I guess"

"A little." Ilya's lips twitched.

Shane's stomach growled again, louder this time. He groaned, pressing a hand to his abdomen. "Okay, that's actually painful. I need food."

Ilya was already moving, swinging his legs out of bed. He grabbed a new underwear from his drawer, pulled them on, then turned to Shane, with a questioning look.

Shane was making a confused face while moving a little, still lying on the bed. He shifted, testing his legs. His muscles protested, shaky and weak in a way that was deeply satisfying but not particularly functional.

"My legs feel funny. Like jelly." He laughed, embarrassed.

"Do they?"

Ilya didn't hesitate. He took another underwear, helped him step into them with ridiculous care, then scooped him up, one arm under his knees, one behind his back, as if he weighed nothing.

"Ilya!" Shane's arms wrapped around his neck automatically. "You don't have to..."

"I want to." Ilya carried him out of the bedroom, down the hall, toward the kitchen. "You are not walking on jelly legs. This is husband duty."

"We're not married."

"We will be. Eventually. The duty remains."

Shane laughed, the sound bright in the quiet morning. "You're so ridiculous."

"Yes. But your jelly legs are being carried, so who is really winning?"

"Me?"

"Me."

In the kitchen, Ilya deposited him gently on the counter; the same counter, Shane realized, heat rushing to his cheeks. But as soon as he was seated, his body seemed to remember exactly what that position had entailed hours earlier. His butt protested. His thighs trembled. He immediately flopped backward, lying flat on the cool granite with a groan.

"My butt feels funny too." he announced to the ceiling.

Ilya peered over him, grinning. "Good funny or bad funny?"

"The best kind of funny. But also I can't sit on it."

"Then you lie there." Ilya pressed a kiss to his belly, right above the waistband of his underwear. "I will cook."

Shane watched, upside down from his perspective, as Ilya moved around the kitchen. Naked except for his underwear, completely unselfconscious, utterly beautiful. He pulled eggs from the refrigerator, bread from the pantry, and set to work with the focused efficiency he brought to everything.

It was maybe the most domestic, most intimate moment of Shane's life. Lying on the kitchen counter in his underwear, watching the love of his life make them breakfast, both of them marked and satisfied and utterly content.

When the food was ready – scrambled eggs, toast, a hurried smoothie for extra nutrition – Ilya surveyed his work with satisfaction. Then he turned to Shane, scooped him off the counter in one fluid motion, and slung him over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes.

"Ilya!" Shane shrieked, laughing so hard he could barely breathe. "What are you doing?!"

"Transporting you to bed." Ilya patted his butt as he walked. "You need to eat comfortably. Jelly legs cannot sit at table."

"You could have just asked me to walk!"

"Too slow. Too much effort." Ilya carried him back down the hall, one arm wrapped securely around Shane's thighs. "This is faster."

"So I should've stayed in our bedroom."

"I want you close." And kissed Shane's butt.

They reached the bedroom, and Ilya deposited him on the bed with surprising gentleness, given the journey. Shane bounced slightly on the mattress, still giggling.

"We're going to get food all over the sheets." he protested.

Ilya didn't answer. He just grabbed a towel from the bathroom, spread it carefully over the bed between them, and settled their plates on top of it. Then he climbed in beside Shane, arranging pillows behind them both.

"There." he said. "No mess."

Shane stared at him, something warm and overwhelming blooming in his chest. Ilya hadn't said it – he was mostly a man of action, not words – but Shane understood. The towel, the bed, the carrying, the careful cooking, it was all love. All proof.

"You're good at this." Shane said quietly.

"At what?"

"Taking care of me."

"Yes, I am a good daddy."

"Shut up! Oh my God, you just killed the mood. What the fuck? Don't ever say that again!"

Ilya was laughing and then kissing Shane's shoulder.

"You are easy to take care of when you let me." he murmured. "Now eat. Before your stomach dies."

They ate in comfortable silence, shoulders and knees touching. The eggs were perfect. The toast was golden. The smoothie was cold and sweet. And lying in their bed, in their house, with their son safe and loved with his grandparents, Shane felt utterly loved.

When the plates were empty, Ilya set them aside and pulled Shane close.

"We should shower." Shane murmured against his chest.

Ilya's hand slid down his back, slow and suggestive. "Oh?"

"No, not like that." Shane laughed. "I mean, we actually need to shower. We're sweaty. And sticky."

"We have time." Ilya's lips found his neck.

"In the shower..." Shane clarified. "We can... you know. In the shower. But then we actually wash."

Ilya pulled back, a wicked glint in his eye. "You are proposing shower sex."

"I'm proposing efficiency. We multitask."

"Multitask." Ilya considered this. "I like the way your dirty mind thinks."

He stood, pulling Shane up with him. They walked to the bathroom together – Shane's legs still a little unsteady, but functional enough – and stepped into the warm spray.

And true to their word, they were efficient.

Very, very efficient.

The afternoon sun was warm on their skin, the kind of perfect spring day that made you long for the summer. Shane and Ilya had drifted outside after their shower, still in that contented, lazy haze that followed a night of rediscovering each other.

Ilya had grab a small soccer ball he had for some reason already bought for Theo and jogged onto the grass, already dribbling with surprising skill for someone who'd spent his life on ice. Shane chased after him, laughing, and for a glorious thirty seconds they actually played; passing, dodging, Shane attempting a goal no nowhere since there weren't nets.

Then Shane's legs, still recovering from the night's activities, gave out beneath him. He collapsed onto the grass, laughing so hard he couldn't breathe.

Ilya was on him instantly, not to help him up but to join, rolling onto the grass beside him, both of them staring up at the sky.

"This is pathetic." Shane gasped, staring up at the sky, his chest heaving with laughter and exertion. "We're professional athletes."

"Yes, I bet we play very nice football if we are on our skates." Ilya's hand found his hand, squeezing, their fingers lacing together on the grass between them.

Shane turned his head to look at him, a competitive glint in his eye even now, sprawled and useless on their lawn. "I bet I would score before you."

Ilya scoffed, pulling him closer, their shoulders pressing together. "I would rip the ball with my skates before you scored."

"Cannot accept defeat, Rozanov?"

"I always win, Hollander. What are you saying?"

Shane propped himself up on one elbow, genuinely offended. "I beat your ass more than you beat mine! What are *you* saying?"

Ilya's grin was infuriatingly smug. "No, no, no. Even when my team lost, I still got to beat your ass, sweetheart." Ilya pulled Shane and held both his buttcheeks.

Shane's mouth opened. Closed. Opened again. No words came out, because unfortunately, infuriatingly, Ilya had a point. Their rivalry had always been about more than the scoreboard,

Ilya would still, in fact, beat his ass in private.

After a while, Shane's back started to complain about the ground. He nudged Ilya. "Let's go to the deck chairs."

They relocated to the pair of chairs they'd bought last month, but instead of sitting separately, Shane settled in front of Ilya, his back against Ilya's chest, Ilya's arms wrapped around his waist. Perfect.

"I wish we could pick fruit from our trees." Shane said, eyeing the bare branches.

Ilya pressed a kiss to his shoulder. "Next year, maybe. We will bring Theo out here, let him try to reach. He will be walking by then."

"Running, more likely. I think he's going to be fast."

"Like his fathers."

They watched the clouds drift, then Shane's mind, as it always did, started spinning forward.

"We should order a playset soon." he said. "For when he's bigger. A swing, a slide, one of those little climbing things, like we discussed before."

Ilya nodded against his hair. "And a sandbox. Every child needs a sandbox."

"It'll get everywhere."

"Theo will love sand because his fathers will hate it. That is the law of children."

Shane laughed. "You're probably right."

They continued planning. A vegetable garden next spring – very Slavic –, definitely a protection over the pool. The future spread out before them, endless and bright and full of possibility.

Then Shane's phone buzzed on the patio table. A group chat notification. The Montreal Metros.

His smile faded.

"I haven't told them yet." he said quietly. "My team. They still think I'm on medical leave. Recovering from the concussion. Getting ready to come back."

Ilya's arms tightened around him. "You talk to them regularly."

"I do. I message back. Say I'm feeling better, making progress, hope to be back soon." Shane's voice was hollow. "It's not totally a lie. I am better. The postpartum stuff, the mental health stuff, that was real recovery. But they don't know any of it. They don't know about Theo. About you. About us. About... me leaving Montreal."

The weight of it pressed down on him. Montreal hadn't made the playoffs this year, the first time since 2009, his rookie season. He couldn't help but wonder: if he'd been there, would things have been different? If he hadn't been hiding, recovering, becoming a father in secret... would've Montreal made to the playoffs?

"Is it my fault?" he whispered. "That they didn't make it?"

Ilya turned him gently, forcing Shane to meet his eyes. "No. Absolutely not. Hockey is a team sport. One person does not make or break a season."

"I was the captain."

"And you were also growing a human and recovering from the hardest thing a body can do." Ilya's voice was firm. "You cannot blame yourself."

"Yeah, but... They don't that part." The guilt lingered. "I know I have to tell them," he said. "And I have to do it soon."

Ilya was quiet for a moment. Then: "I want to tell Ottawa too."

Shane blinked. "You do?"

"My teammates... they are good people. Nicer than I expected, actually." Ilya smiled slightly. "Very open-minded. They talk about feelings and therapy like it is normal. It is... strange. But good."

"That's... really great, Ilya."

"It is. And they deserve to know. About you. About Theo. About why I am always rushing home and skipping barbecues." He pressed his forehead to Shane's. "We do this together. Yes?"

Shane nodded, something loosening in his chest. "Okay."

They sat there, wrapped in each other, the weight of the truth they'd been carrying finally feeling shared rather than hidden. But the future still held difficult conversations, awkward revelations, moments of vulnerability that would test them.

Theo was radiant.

He sat on Ilya's lap at the kitchen table, bathed in afternoon sunlight, absolutely transfixed by whatever faces his father was making. Ilya's expressions ranged from exaggerated surprise to mock shock to something that looked vaguely like a constipated fish, and Theo responded to each one with shrieks of delighted laughter that filled the warm kitchen.

"He's going to make himself sick." Shane's mother said, but she was smiling, reaching out to stroke Theo's downy hair. "All that laughing."

"Good for his lungs." Ilya said, not breaking eye contact with Theo, who was now gumming his own fist in anticipation of the next face. "Strong lungs for strong hockey player."

"He doesn't have to play hockey." Shane said automatically, the words coming out by reflex now.

Ilya and Yuna exchanged a look that clearly said *we'll see about that*.

Shane ignored them, resting his elbows above the table with a cup of coffee in hands. His parents' kitchen felt like home, always had, but today it also felt like a launchpad.

"So..." Yuna said, turning to Shane with the directness only a mother could manage. "You're really going to do this? Tell both teams?"

Shane nodded, his stomach flipping. "We talked about it. I think... I think I'm ready. I've been hiding for too long. From everyone."

"And you're doing it before summer?"

"Summer officially starts in a few days." Shane glanced at Ilya, who was now making Theo "fly" through the air, much to the baby's delight. "I want to go into the off-season with it all out there. No more secrets."

Yuna absorbed this, her expression soft but concerned. "How are you going to do it? Both of you, I mean."

"I'll go to Montreal first. Talk to my team." Shane's voice was steady, but his heart was racing just thinking about it. "Ilya and Theo will come with me, we'll travel together. But obviously they won't be in the room when I talk to them. That would be..."

"Too much." Ilya finished, settling Theo back on his lap. "He needs to do this part alone." He pressed a kiss to Theo's head. "We will be there after. For support. For whatever he needs."

"Good you still have your apartment in Montreal." Yuna said.

"Yeah." Shane smiled ruefully, already thinking about selling it soon.

Yuna nodded slowly, then looked at Theo, now beginning to droop against Ilya's chest. "You know..." she said carefully, "if you wanted, you could leave him with us. For the Montreal trip. Give yourselves one less thing to worry about."

Shane's heart clenched. Not with offense, but with gratitude. His mother, always offering, always supporting.

"Mom..." he said softly. "I promise you will have so much time with him. So much. But this trip... I need him there. Both of them." He looked at Ilya, at Theo, at his whole world sitting at his parents' kitchen table.

Yuna squeezed his hand, her eyes bright. "I know, sweetheart. I know."

Ilya spoke up then, his voice warm. "And soon, next season, when Shane and I play together for Ottawa, you will have Theo all the time. We will need you. Constantly. You will be sick of us asking."

Yuna laughed, the sound bright. "I could never be sick of you. Any of you."

Theo chose that moment to let out a massive yawn, his tiny face scrunching before relaxing into sleep against Ilya's chest. The room softened around them, the weight of future conversation momentarily lifted.

2 days later

Shane parked the car in the nearly empty lot, deliberately choosing a spot far from the entrance. Not because he needed the exercise, but because he needed the time. The walk from here to the doors would take a full minute. Maybe two. He'd take every second.

The engine died. Silence filled the car.

He sat there, hands still gripping the steering wheel, staring at the familiar glass doors of the arena where he'd spent almost a decade of his life. Nine years. Nearly a third of his existence, poured into this building, this team, this family.

Beside him, Ilya said nothing. He just reached over and gripped Shane's hand, his thumb tracing slow, steady circles on Shane's skin. Then he lifted Shane's hand to his lips and kissed it, soft, reverent.

"I don't know if this will be fast or slow." Shane whispered. "I don't know how they'll take it."

Ilya's eyes were steady, warm. "It does not matter. However long it takes, however they react, Theo and I will be here. Waiting for you. Always."

Shane nodded, swallowed, nodded again. Then he opened the car door and stepped out into the cool Montreal air.

The walk to the entrance felt like a death march. His feet were heavy. His heart was heavier. But he kept moving, because stopping wasn't an option. Not anymore.

Inside, the arena was quiet in that particular way buildings get when the season ends; echoey, half-empty, the ghosts of crowds still lingering in the rafters. Shane's footsteps echoed down the long corridor leading to the locker room, each step a countdown to the moment he'd been dreading for months.

A few staff members passed him. Their faces lit up when they recognized him.

"Shane! Hey, man! Good to see you!"

"Captain! You look great, how's the recovery?"

Shane smiled, shook hands, exchanged pleasantries. They meant well. They didn't know that every "good to see you" was a knife twisting in his gut.

The locker room door loomed ahead. He could hear voices inside; laughter, conversation, the familiar sounds of teammates decompressing after practice. His hand hesitated on the handle.

Then he pushed through.

The room went quiet for exactly one second. Then:

"HOLLANDER!"

The cheer that erupted was deafening. Guys were on their feet, clapping, hollering, a few rushing over to pull him into back-slapping hugs. Shane was passed from teammate to teammate like a trophy, each embrace warm and genuine and absolutely devastating.

He let himself feel it. The love. The camaraderie. The weight of almost nine years with these men. The Olympics, the Stanley Cups, the awards, the injuries, the hotel rooms and bus rides and late-night diner conversations. They'd bled together. They'd won together. They'd lost together.

They were his family too. Which made this the hardest thing he'd ever done.

When the initial chaos settled, Shane made his way around the room properly. Handshakes, shoulder clasps, real smiles that he didn't have to fake because. God, he did miss them. JJ pulled him into a headlock that was more affection than aggression. Markov slapped his back hard enough to bruise.

"Seriously, man, how are you feeling?" Drapeau asked, concern in his voice. "The recovery's been rough?"

Shane hedged. "It's been... a process. But I'm doing better."

"When are you coming back?" That was JJ, always direct. "We need our captain. This season was garbage without you."

A few grumbles of agreement. Heads nodding.

Shane looked around the room, at their expectant faces, their trust, their love, and knew he couldn't delay anymore.

"I actually need to talk to you all about that." he said, his voice steadier than he felt. "About... a lot of things."

The room quieted. Guys settled onto benches, giving him their attention. Hayden, who already knew, caught Shane's eye and gave a small, almost imperceptible nod of encouragement.

Shane took a breath.

"I've been your captain for a long time. And through all of it, I've tried to be honest with you. To lead the way I'd want to be led." He paused, searching for words. "But there's something I haven't been honest about. Something I've been hiding, and I can't do it anymore. You deserve better than that."

Silence. A few confused glances.

"I... I took a medical leave after the Boston game. That part was true, I was injured. But that's not why I've been gone this whole season." Another breath. Deeper this time. "I was pregnant."

The word landed like a grenade. Eyes widened. Jaws went slack.

"I found in the hospital, after the game against Boston." Shane continued, pushing through before he could lose his nerve.

Absolute silence.

JJ was the first to speak, his voice careful, almost hesitant. "So you took a leave to... have the child? Or did you..." He trailed off, but Shane understood. The unspoken question hung in the air.

"No. I mean yes." Shane shook his head firmly. "I had the baby. I'm a father now. His name is Theo, and he's six months old, and he's the best thing that's ever happened to me... Really."

The silence stretched. Shane could feel it pressing against him, waiting to see which way it would break.

Then Comeau laughed.

Not cruelly, just surprised, delighted, overwhelmed. And suddenly the room erupted. Grins broke out. Guys were shaking their heads, clapping, letting out amazed sounds.

"Holy shit, Hollander!"

"You're a dad?"

"Where's the pictures, man? Where's the kid?" Boiziau yelled from the back.

Shane felt tears prick his eyes. Hayden was beside him instantly, one hand gripping his shoulder, grounding him.

"That's... I mean, that's not nothing," Drapeau said slowly. "An omega in the NHL, choosing to have a kid. That's not how it usually goes."

"But maybe it should be." Comeau countered. "The old way... hiding, pretending... that's fucked up. Good for you, man. Seriously."

Shane blinked, and a tear escaped. He wiped it quickly, but not before Hayden pulled him into a rough hug.

When he pulled back, some of them were already asking for baby pictures. Shane laughed, reaching for his phone, then stopped.

"There's more, actually." he said. "I have more to tell you."

The room settled again, curiosity replacing celebration.

"I'm with someone now. The baby's father. He's an alpha, and we're together. We live together. We're raising Theo together."

JJ's eyebrows shot up. "Wait... that's why you always bailed when I tried to set you up? I thought you were just picky."

A few chuckles. Shane managed a small smile.

"There was this girl, too." JJ continued, thinking out loud. "Lily? Back in Boston, a few years ago. You actually went on a few dates, no? I remember you leaving every night we played there. I thought maybe..."

Shane froze.

The room seemed to sense the shift. The casual atmosphere tightened.

"That was... complicated." Shane said carefully. "But it wasn't what it looked like."

"Then what was it?" Drapeau pressed.

Shane looked at Hayden. Hayden's expression was pained, but he nodded. Go on.

"The person I'm with... He used to live in Boston." Shane said, and his voice wavered for the first time. "It's Ilya."

Confusion. Frowns.

"Ilya who?" JJ asked.

Shane felt a chill in his stomach, but said before giving up: "Ilya Rozanov."

The silence this time was different. Colder.

"What?" JJ asked in a low tone.

"The Ilya Rozanov? Hockey player?" Comeau clarified.

"Ilya Rozanov who we've been hating for eight years?" another Drapeau added.

Shane nodded, not trusting his voice.

"That's..." JJ ran a hand through his hair, clearly struggling. "That's Rozanov. Our rival. The guy who..." He stopped, shook his head. "He's the father of your kid?"

"Yes."

"And you're... together? Like, together together?"

"... Yes."

The room was a minefield of expressions, shock, disbelief, something that looked uncomfortably like betrayal. Shane felt it pressing in on him, the warmth of moments ago replaced by something far more complicated.

"You've been with Rozanov since last year?" Drapeau's voice was sharp. "While you were our captain? While we were out there fighting him on the ice?"

"It wasn't... It wasn't like that. It was complicated. We've been... a thing... for almost ten years now."

"What the fuck?" JJ spat. "The whole time we know each other?" And asked in disbelief.

Shane's chest tightened. This was what he'd feared. This was the other side of the coin.

"He's the father of my child." Shane said quietly. "And I love him. I know that's hard to hear. I know it changes things. But I couldn't keep lying to you all."

The room was silent. No one met his eyes.

Then Hayden stood up.

"Look." he said, his voice firm, "I know this is a lot. I was there when Shane told me. I had my own feelings about it. But Shane is still Shane."

Comeau shot back: "You already knew?!"

Hayden ignored him and pressed on. "He's still the guy who led us to two Cups. He's still our captain." He looked around the room, meeting eyes. "And if Rozanov makes him happy, if Rozanov is a good father to that kid, then maybe we need to rethink what we think we know."

"So you leave us to have a fucking baby with fucking Rozanov?" Drapeau growled.

"Don't fucking talk like that!" Shane snapped.

"Or what?" Drapeau stood up, fists clenching.

"Guys, come on!" Hayden intervened, stepping between them.

The silence stretched. Shane held his breath.

Finally, JJ spoke. His voice was rough, but not angry.

"I'm not saying I'm okay with this." He looked at Shane. "But I'm also not saying I'm not. That's fucked up, man."

A few guys nodded. Others still looked uncomfortable. And although no one told him he was dead to them, Shane could feel himself dying in that locker room.

But the crack wasn't wide enough.

"I just... I don't get it." That was Boiziau, his face twisted with genuine confusion. "You spent eight years hating this guy. We all did. We built games around hating this guy. And now you're telling us you were..." He trailed off, shaking his head.

"I wasn't hating him." Shane said quietly. "I was trying to, but I just couldn't."

"Same thing, isn't it? From where we were sitting?"

Shane opened his mouth, but another voice cut in.

"This is so messed up." JJ stood near the back now, arms crossed, his expression hard. "You were our captain. We looked up to you. And you were what? Fucking the enemy the whole time?"

"It wasn't like that. Don't reduce the situation to that."

"Then what was it like?" Drapeau stepped forward. "Because from here, it looks like you lied to us. For years. About everything."

"I didn't lie about the important stuff. I never lied on the ice. I never gave less than everything for this team..."

"But you lied about him. About who you were. About what you were doing when you weren't here apparently" Drapeau's voice was rising. "How are we supposed to trust you now? How are we supposed to go back on the ice with you and pretend we don't know that you were sneaking around with the guy we've been told to hate since day one?"

Shane felt his own temper flare. "I've known Ilya as long as I've known any of you guys. Longer than most. And what we have... it-it's not fucked up. It's not wrong. It's the realest thing in my life."

"Then why didn't you tell us?"

The question hung in the air, brutal and unanswerable.

Shane looked around the room, at the faces he'd bled with, celebrated with, trusted with his life on the ice. And for the first time, he didn't recognize them.

"You know why." he said quietly. "Because of this. Right here. This is exactly why."

Comeau shook his head. "That's not fair."

"No? You just called the love of my life 'the enemy.' You just reduced eight years of my history with him to 'fucking the enemy.'" Shane's voice was shaking now, but he didn't stop. "Tell me how that's fair."

“Eight years?” JJ shot.

Silence. A few guys looked away.

JJ ran a hand over his face. "Look, Shane, this is just a lot. You gotta understand that. Rozanov has been... I mean, we hate him as a team. And now you're telling us you were with him the whole time? That's a hard thing to just..."

"I know it's hard." Shane's voice cracked. "I know. But I'm still me. I'm still the same person who bled for this team. The only thing that's changed is that now you know the truth about one part of my life. Just one part. And apparently..." He looked around the room, at the closed faces, the crossed arms, the averted eyes. "Apparently that's enough to undo everything else."

No one contradicted him.

Shane felt something inside him crumble. Not his love for Ilya, that was solid, unshakeable. But his faith in this team, in this family he'd given everything to? That was cracking apart.

He realized, in that moment, that even the earlier acceptance – the congratulations about Theo, the questions about fatherhood – had been conditional. They'd been happy for him when they thought his story was simple. An omega choosing parenthood? Brave. Progressive. Worth celebrating.

But add Ilya to the equation – add eight years of media-fueled rivalry, of highlight-reel fights and trash talk and manufactured hatred – and suddenly Shane wasn't brave anymore. He was a liar. A traitor. Someone who'd broken the unspoken rules.

His happiness, his family, his love, none of it mattered as much as the stupid, manufactured rivalry the media had sold them.

"Okay," Shane said quietly. "I understand. So... You don't care about Theo." Shane whispered. "You don't care that I'm a father. You don't care about my happiness. You just care that it's Ilya. That I loved the wrong person. Because of a stupid rivalry..." Shane continued, his voice breaking. "Something the media invented. That's more important to you than... than everything."

He didn't wait for a response. He just turned and walked toward the door.

"Shane, wait" Hayden called after him, but Shane kept moving. He couldn't stay here. Couldn't breathe in this room full of people who had just shown him exactly where he stood.

The corridor was longer on the way out. Colder. The few staff members he passed smiled and waved; he couldn't even muster a response.

He burst through the doors into the parking lot, gasping like he'd been underwater. The cool air hit his face, and for a moment he just stood there, hands on his knees, trying to remember how to breathe and cursing himself for parking so far away.

Then he looked up.

Across the lot, Ilya stood beside the car, Theo in his arms. Even from this distance, Shane could see the concern on his face. The worry. The love.

Shane started walking toward them. Each step felt like climbing out of a grave.

Ilya met him halfway, shifting Theo to one arm so he could pull Shane close. Shane buried his face in Ilya's neck and just... breathed. Theo's tiny hand patted his cheek, confused but comforting, and when he grabbed his hair, Shane let out a laugh mixed with a crying sob.

"It didn't go well." Ilya murmured. Not a question.

Shane shook his head against his skin.

"I'm sorry." Ilya's arms tightened around him. "I am so sorry."

Shane pulled back just enough to look at him, at this man who had been his secret for so long, who was now the only thing that made sense.

Ilya's jaw tightened, wishing he could go inside and beat everyone up for making his Shane cry, but he didn't speak or move. He cupped his face, instead, thumbs wiping away tears Shane hadn't realized were falling.

Shane looked past him, at the car, at the baby seat, at the life they'd built together. Then back at Ilya, at the man who had waited eight years for him, who had held him through postpartum darkness, who had carried him to bed when his legs gave out, who had kissed his belly and called him beautiful. Who had chosen him over hockey even.

"You don't have to be sorry. It's not your fault, never will be." He caressed Ilya's face.

Ilya kissed his forehead, soft and lingering.

"Wanna go back to the apartment?"

Shane nodded, and together they walked back to the car.

Shane had just reached for the car door handle when he heard it.

"Shane! Shane, wait!"

He turned. Three figures were jogging across the parking lot: JJ, Hayden, Comeau. Ilya was instantly in front of Shane, one hand on his shoulder, the other tightening around Theo, positioning himself between them and whoever was coming.

JJ reached them first, slightly out of breath. His eyes flicked to Ilya, taking him in, the baby, the protective stance, before settling on Shane.

"You just left." JJ said, a little accusatory, a lot confused.

"I said what I needed to say."

"No, you..." JJ ran a hand through his hair, frustrated. "You dropped a bomb and then just walked out. That's not how this works, man."

Hayden caught up, slightly winded. "Shane, come on. Just... give them a minute. They're processing."

"They processed." Shane's voice was flat. "I heard them process."

Comeau stepped forward then, old and slow and steady. He looked at Shane, then at Ilya, then at Theo, who was watching the whole thing with big, curious eyes.

"That's the kid?" Comeau asked.

Shane didn't say anything.

Comeau studied Theo for a long moment. Then he looked at Ilya.

"You're Rozanov."

Ilya's chin lifted slightly. "Oh, am I?"

"Played against you for a decade. Hated your guts."

"Oh, yes? And now you decided to hate on Shane too?"

"Ilya..."

Comeau stood quiet. Then, unexpectedly, he smiled.

"Best goddamn rival I ever had, you know?" He looked back at Shane. "And if he's good enough for you, he's good enough for me, Hollander."

Shane blinked. "What?"

"Look... I've seen a lot of stupid things in this league." Comeau said simply. "Players hiding who they are. Lying about their lives. Pretending to be something they're not because they're scared of what people might think." He shrugged. "It's all bullshit. Always has been. If you love him, you love him. The rest of them will come around or they won't. But I wanted you to know... I'm not one of the ones who won't."

Shane felt tears prick his eyes again.

JJ stepped forward then, looking uncomfortable but determined. "Look, I'm not... I'm not there yet."

"JJ..." Hayden intervened, but JJ continued:

"This is weird for me. For all of us. But I've known you for almost a decade, Shane. You're my captain. You're my friend. And if this is what makes you happy..." He glanced at Ilya. "God, it's weird, but if it is, then I'm gonna try. I can't promise it'll be easy, but I'm gonna try."

Hayden moved to stand beside Shane, his hand landing on his shoulder. "That's three with me" he said quietly.

Shane looked at them. Comeau, gruff and steady; JJ, struggling but trying; Hayden, solid as always. Then he looked at Ilya, at the slight softening in his partner's protective stance.

"I... I'm leaving Montreal" Shane said, deciding to rip the band aid off once and for all in an attempt to block some good feelings he might have had already growing inside his chest. He didn't want to feel happy and then be drag to sadness and anger just like it happened in the locker room.

"What?" JJ said in pure disbelief.

"Ilya moved to Ottawa to be close to me and Theo. He gave up everything for us to be together as a family. I'm doing the same, for him and for our son."

For a long moment, no one spoke.

Then Theo let out a loud, insistent babble, demanding attention. Shane took him from Ilya's arms and kissed his head before resting it against his own chest.

"Wait, wait, wait." JJ held up both hands, like he was trying to stop traffic. "You're just... you're leaving? For good?"

Shane nodded, Theo warm against his chest. "I'll request a trade. Officially. And after everything that just happened in there..." He glanced back at the arena, then at JJ. "I can see it was the best decision I could have made."

"But this is your team. This is..." JJ gestured wildly at everything and nothing. "You're Shane Hollander. You are Montreal."

Shane's voice was quiet but steady. "And now I'm Theo's dad. I'm Ilya's partner. And, JJ, Montreal just showed me exactly where I stand in their priorities."

Comeau nodded slowly, a heavy understanding in his eyes. "Can't say I blame you, dude. If my team had reacted like that..." He shook his head.

"But you're making a big decision based on a bad moment. You sure that's wise?" JJ asked. His face was a mess of emotions; confusion, hurt, a flicker of understanding he was clearly fighting. "So that's it? You're just... done?"

"Look, JJ" Shane took a step forward – Theo making small noises – and his voice cracked slightly. "I love Montreal, I really do. It's my mother's team, it has been a home for me for years and I love what we built together. But I won't be away from my son... And I'm not gonna pull him away from Ilya."

Theo squirmed in his arms, letting out another insistent babble. Shane adjusted him, pressing another kiss to his downy head, and something in the gesture seemed to break through JJ's defenses.

"God, you have a kid." JJ muttered, but his voice had lost its edge. "A real, actual kid. With Rozanov. And I'm standing here arguing about hockey."

"Theo is pretty great, I get surprised he is Rozanov's son sometimes." Hayden said before Shane glared at him reproachfully.

"I surprise myself too, sometimes." Ilya said, then he looked up at Hayden with a small smirk. "But not as much as I surprise myself that someone with fifty children still finds time to be this annoying and play bad hockey."

"It's not-"

"Please, stop." Shane says and both go quiet.

JJ was still quiet. He stared at Hayden and Ilya, at the way Ilya's hand rested on Shane's lower back. At the way Shane leaned into him without thinking. At the baby, their baby, nestled between them like he belonged exactly there.

"I don't get it." JJ said finally. "But I'm starting to think that's my problem, not yours. And... Theo is really cute, man."

A small, wet laugh escaped Shane. Theo, sensing the shift in mood, chose that moment to grab a fistful of Shane's hair and yank.

"Ow, baby, no..."

Ilya gently pried Theo's fingers loose, murmuring something in Russian that made the baby giggle. The moment was so absurd, so perfectly them, that JJ actually cracked a smile.

"You're really doing this." Comeau, who was very quiet so far, said. "The whole... family thing."

"Yeah." Shane took Theo back, settling him against his chest. "We really are."

Then he stepped forward and, to everyone's surprise, offered his hand to Ilya. Ilya looked at it like it might bite him. Then, slowly, he reached out and shook it.

Hayden clapped his hands together. "Alright. This is getting too emotional. Let's go before I start crying." He looked at Shane. "We have to schedule a visit to the aquarium, Jackie wants me to take the kids."

"Yeah, I think we can do that after we go public about this." Shane said with a smile.

"Fuck, you still have to go public!" Comeau exclaimed, hand on his hips, reality crushing.

"We will do it when Shane is ready." Ilya said.

JJ let out a low whistle. "Public. Like... *public* public? Cameras and headlines and all that?"

"That is usually what public means." Ilya said with his ironic and serious face.

"Shut up, I know what public means. I just..." JJ ran a hand through his hair. "That's gonna be a shitshow. You know that, right? The media is going to lose their minds."

Shane nodded, his jaw tight. "Yeah. I know."

"The 'heated rivalry' narrative has been running for almost a decade," Comeau added, his voice heavy with experience. "They're not gonna let that go easy. They'll spin it every way they can. Some of it'll be ugly."

Ilya's hand found Shane's, squeezing. "We know," he said quietly.

JJ looked between them, his expression softening. "But you're doing it anyway."

It wasn't a question, but Shane answered anyway. "Yeah. We are. No more hiding. No more secrets. Theo deserves better than that. We deserve better than that."

Comeau studied them for a long moment, then nodded slowly. "Good for you. It'll be hard, but... good for you."

JJ still crossed his arms. "So, what's the plan? Press conference? Social media? Leak it to a reporter and hope for the best?"

"We haven't decided yet." Shane glanced at Ilya. "We're still figuring out the details."

"Just... be careful, okay?" Comeau's voice was surprisingly earnest. "People are gonna have opinions. A lot of them are gonna be stupid. But you've got people in your corner." He gestured at himself, Hayden, JJ. "Us, for starters."

Hayden grinned. "Look at you, being supportive. That's growth, man."

"Shut up."

Shane spoke his voice calm and steady. "We appreciate it. All of you." Then Theo let out a small crying sound. "Someone's hungry." Ilya took him already beginning to bounce him gently.

Comeau took a step back. "Alright, that's our cue. Family time." He pointed at Shane.

"I'll call you." Hayden promised Shane.

They said their goodbyes. Hayden pulling Shane into one last hug, JJ giving Ilya an awkward nod that was almost friendly, Comeau clapping both of them on the shoulder like a proud grandfather. Then the three of them headed back toward the arena, leaving Shane, Ilya, and Theo alone in the parking lot.

Shane watched them go, something warm and fragile blooming in his chest.

"That went better than I expected." he admitted.

Ilya shifted Theo to one arm, using the other to pull Shane close. "We have good people. Some of them, anyway. Not Pike entirely, maybe like 60% of him, the rest is bad hockey."

"Stop it." Shane leaned into him, breathing in the familiar comfort of his presence. "But, yeah, we do."

Ilya kissed Shane's forehead and then his mouth, keeping their lips together for a while before letting go.

Theo gurgled, demanding attention, and they both looked down at him, at his bright eyes and tiny freckles and the dark hair that was so clearly Ilya's.

"Come on, *malysh*." Ilya murmured, shifting Theo gently in his arms as they approached the car.

Shane glanced over, a small smile playing at his lips. "Little one?"

Ilya stopped walking so abruptly that Shane nearly tripped. His head whipped around, eyes wide with genuine surprise.

"How do you know that?"

Shane shrugged, trying to look casual and failing completely. "I've been studying, I told you that." He paused, amusement flickering across his face. "What? You think I haven't been paying attention all these years?"

Ilya stared at him for a long moment, something shifting in his expression, surprise melting into wonder, then into something darker, hungrier. Theo continued gumming his own fist contentedly.

"Hollander..." Ilya said slowly, his voice dropping to that low register that always made Shane's stomach flip. "I think we need to let Theo with your parents again when we get back."

Shane blinked. "What? Why?"

Ilya stepped closer, close enough that Shane could feel the heat radiating off him. "I need you to speak Russian again. In bed. Or in the kitchen."

Shane's breath caught. His face flushed. A thousand retorts sprang to mind, but all that came out was a strangled squeak.

Ilya grinned, utterly satisfied with himself, and continued walking toward the car like he hadn't just short-circuited Shane's entire brain.

"God..." he muttered, more to himself than anyone, and laughed.

Shane was still blushing when he got in the car. Ilya sat in back with Theo, making faces that kept the baby entertained the whole way, while Shane drove.

And as they pulled out of the parking lot, Shane glanced in the rearview mirror at the arena shrinking behind them. Nine years. Two Cups. A lifetime of memories.

He didn't know if he'd ever walk through those doors again. But for the first time, that thought didn't feel like a loss. It just felt like the next chapter.

3 days later

The Athletic (The New York Times)

BREAKING NEWS: HOLLANDER AND ROZANOV – THE TRUTH BEHIND THE RIVALRY

By Braden Walsh

Posted: 2:47 PM ET

In a development that will send shockwaves through the hockey world, sources have obtained exclusive photographs of Montreal Metros captain Shane Hollander and Ottawa Centaurs captain Ilya Rozanov in what appears to be a private family gathering – complete with a baby.

The images, captured this week in the parking lot of Montreal's arena, show the longtime rivals in an interaction that can only be described as domestic.

<WHAT DO THE PHOTOS REVEAL>

Multiple shots obtained by our team show:

- Hollander and Rozanov standing close together, their body language unmistakably intimate and both men displaying clear parental affection;
- Rozanov holding an infant, estimated to be just a few months old, with visible tenderness;
- The two players embracing, with Rozanov's arm wrapped protectively around Hollander;
- A tender moment where Rozanov kissed Hollander's forehead and mouth!

<THE TIMELINE CONNECTION>

Hollander has been on medical leave from the Montreal Metros for the entire season – an absence officially attributed to recovery from a collision during a game against Boston last March. At the time, Rozanov was still with the Raiders.

The timeline raises obvious questions. If the baby in these photos is just a few months old, conception would have occurred around the time of that infamous Boston-Montreal

matchup – the same game that put Hollander in the hospital.

<WHAT THIS MEANS FOR THE LEAGUE>

If confirmed, this would mark one of the most significant personal revelations in NHL history. Two star players – long positioned as the league's fiercest rivals – secretly building a life together while maintaining a public feud. An omega player choosing to have a child mid-career. A same-sex relationship between an omega and an alpha, kept hidden for what sources suggest could be as long as we know.

The Montreal Metros and Ottawa Centaurs have both declined to comment. Representatives for Hollander and Rozanov have not responded to requests for statement.

For now, the hockey world waits. And the photos speak for themselves.

We will continue to update this story as it develops.

Chapter End Notes

See you soon 😎

Chapter 18: our freedom

Chapter Notes

Hello, guys!

I bring sad news to y'all. My vacations are coming to an end and I will have less free time to update the story, but I'll count on my addiction in writing those two to post at least 1 chapter each 2 days, and not the usual 1-2 chapter per day.

Also, as we are kinda close to the end (I think this story is going to have between 23 and 25 chapters), I want to let you know that after that I'll publish a hollanov non-canon fic.

Soon I'll bring you some details if you're interested.

That being said, thank you for commenting (this has been really important for me) and for reading!

Hope you enjoy today's update 💕💕

Chris Johnston @sportsnet_chris: The NHL has issued a brief statement: "We respect our players' privacy and wish them well in their personal lives." No further comment at this time.

Mike T. @tsn_mike: Sources confirm multiple teams are "monitoring the situation." This is unprecedented territory for the league.

Natasha Petrova @russianhockeynews: In Russia, Rozanov's family has not commented. Sources say his relationship with his family has been "complicated" for years, especially after Rozanov's father passing last year.

Taylor S. @shitposthockey: "Heated rivalry" they said. "They hate each other" they said. THEY WERE RAISING A BABY TOGETHER. 💀💀💀

Amanda Lee @thehockeyguy_69: Shane Hollander is a DAD. With Ilya Rozanov. Ilya Rozanov is a DAD. With Shane Hollander. I don't know how to process this information.

Craig Thompson @hockeytrad: So our captain was lying to us for YEARS? While we cheered for him? While we HATED Rozanov with him? This is betrayal. Plain and simple.

Yves Dubois @habsfan_forever: So he was getting pregnant while we were losing games? While we needed him? Selfish. So selfish! And such a liar.

Frank @puckdad69: Not surprised. Omegas always prioritize family over team. Shouldn't be in the league if you're gonna pull this shit.

Kevin Porter @nhlbetarights: Another omega proving they can't handle the physical demands long-term. One pregnancy and his career's done. Waste of a draft pick. Hollander is useless now.

Jean-Claude Moreau @montreal_4_life: Trade him. Trade them both. Don't want this drama near my team. In fact, NHL should kick them out of the league.

Wes H. @realhockeytalk: Omega player steps away mid-career to have a baby? Say goodbye to his career. You can't just take a year off and come back like nothing happened. Montreal should cut ties.

Marcus Webb @fantasyhockeyguru: So all those times they were sitting next to each other last all stars game... were they just... flirting?? While we thought they were fighting?? I'm done.

The afternoon sun was warm on the backyard, the kind of perfect late spring day that made you forget the world existed beyond your own little patch of grass. Theo was sprawled on his baby blanket, kicking his chubby legs and babbling at the plush hockey stick clutched in his tiny fists. Every few seconds, he'd wave it triumphantly and let out a shriek of pure joy.

"I think he's trying to check me." Ilya observed, tightening a bolt on the play structure's tower. "Look at that aggression. He gets it from you."

"He gets it from *you*. I am a clean player. You once boarded me so hard I saw stars."

"That was different. You deserved it."

Theo shrieked again, punctuating the argument.

Shane wiped sweat from his forehead and glared at the half-assembled playground towering over them. "This is impossible. We should have bought one that came already assembled. Just plop it on the grass, done."

Ilya looked at him with an expression of utter horror. "You mean one of those boring ones? Like you?"

"Excuse me?"

"The basic playgrounds. The ones every house has. Beige. Safe. Predictable." Ilya shook his head sadly.

"Well, it's for kids, it *has* to be safe."

"It does not have to be boring! That is the Hollander special. But I am Rozanov. I chose something worthy."

Shane gestured at the sprawling chaos of wood, slides, and unidentifiable parts. "You chose a nightmare."

"A fortress." Ilya corrected. "With a play tower. A swingset. Two slides, one open and one closed, what's the name?"

"A Toboggan."

"Yes, that." He continued. "A jungle gym. A sandbox. That thing that goes up and down."

"A seesaw."

"Yes, a seesaw." He counted them off proudly on his fingers. "Theo will rule this backyard."

"Theo is six months old. He can't even sit up by himself for more than thirty seconds."

"Which is why we have time." Ilya returned to his bolt-tightening. "Five months until he walks. Plenty of time to finish."

"Five months until he might walk. Some babies walk later."

"My son might walk tomorrow, who knows?." Ilya said it with such absolute certainty that Shane laughed despite himself.

"Your son is currently trying to eat his hockey stick."

They both looked at Theo, who had indeed managed to get the plush stick into his mouth and was gumming it with intense concentration.

"He is taste-testing," Ilya said. "Very important quality in hockey player."

Shane shook his head, grinning, and picked up another piece of the endless instruction manual. For a while, they worked in silence, Ilya handling the heavy lifting, Shane managing the smaller connections, both of them occasionally glancing at Theo to make sure he hadn't somehow rolled into danger.

The sun moved across the sky. The playground slowly took shape. Theo eventually abandoned his hockey stick in favor of napping, his tiny chest rising and falling peacefully on the blanket.

By late afternoon, they stood back to admire their work.

It was magnificent. A sprawling wooden fortress with a tower, two slides spiraling down opposite sides, a swingset with three seats, a jungle gym for climbing, a seesaw painted bright red, and a sandbox waiting to be filled. It dominated the backyard like a declaration of war against boredom.

"We did it." Shane breathed.

"We are geniuses."

"We're exhausted geniuses. I need a shower and approximately twelve hours of sleep."

Theo chose that moment to wake up, blinking at the sky before realizing something had changed. His eyes found the playground, the enormous playground, and went wide.

"Da," Ilya said softly, scooping him up and trying to show him what they had built. "That is yours, *malysh*. All yours. When you are ready."

Theo stared at it, then at his fathers, then back at the playground.

"I think he approves." Shane said.

"Of course he approves. I have excellent taste."

They stood together, the three of them, admiring their creation. The sun was beginning to dip toward the horizon, painting the sky in shades of gold and pink. It was peaceful. Perfect.

Then the doorbell rang.

Shane frowned. "Were we expecting anyone?"

Ilya shrugged, already moving toward the house with Theo. "Your mother said something about dropping off food this week, but not today."

They walked through the kitchen, Ilya grabbing his phone from the counter on instinct, and toward the front door. Shane was still smiling, still warm from the afternoon, still thinking about how lucky they were.

"I'll warm Theo's milk."

“Da.”

Ilya glanced at his phone.

Stopped walking.

Shane felt the shift immediately. "What?"

Ilya's face had gone pale. He held up the phone, screen glowing with dozens of notifications. Missed calls from Shane's parents. From their agent, Farah. From Hayden. From numbers they didn't recognize.

“Check your phone.” Ilya said and Shane did, taking it from the counter.

"What the..." Shane started.

The doorbell rang again. More insistent this time.

Ilya shoved the phone in his pocket and moved to the door, pulling it open.

Shane's parents stood on the porch. Behind them, Farah, their agent, her face tight with worry.

His mother's expression softened at the sight of them, at Theo, at Ilya, at the three of them together. But the worry didn't leave her eyes.

"Sweetheart." she said gently to Ilya. "Have you looked at your phone today?"

Ilya blinked. "We were in the backyard. Assembling the playground. Why?"

Farah stepped forward, her voice calm but urgent. "Let's coming, shall we?"

Once in the living room, Theo in Yuna's lap, Shane appeared with the warm bottle in hands, giving it to his mother.

"Is everything okay?" Shane asked immediately. "What's wrong?"

“Shane, Ilya, well...” Farah started, exchanging glances with Shane's parents. “Someone took photos. In the parking lot in Montreal. You and Ilya. With Theo.” She paused, letting it sink in. "They're everywhere. The story broke this afternoon. It's all over the internet. TV. Social media. Everywhere."

Shane felt the world tilt.

Ilya's hand found his lower back, steadying him.

"What do you mean, everywhere?" Shane asked quietly.

"I mean the whole world knows," Farah said. "About you. About Theo."

The silence that followed was deafening. Theo, oblivious, grabbed a fistful of Yuna's hair and laughed. Shane's dad was now trying to open his little hand.

Ilya's jaw tightened. "How bad is it?"

Farah pulled out her own phone, already scrolling. "Bad. But not catastrophic. The photos are... they're clear, but they're from a distance. You can tell it's you, you can tell there's a baby, but you can't see Theo's face clearly."

"His face?" Shane's voice was sharp. "They took pictures of his face?"

"From far away," Farah emphasized. "He's not identifiable. Right now, the story is about you two. The baby is... the mystery baby. No one knows his name, his age, anything."

Shane's father moved closer, his hand reaching for his arm. "We came as soon as we saw. We wanted you to hear it from us."

"What else?" Ilya asked Farah, his voice controlled. "What else did they get?"

Farah hesitated. Then she turned her phone toward them.

The screen showed a photograph, grainy, clearly zoomed in, but unmistakable. Shane and Ilya stood in the parking lot, Ilya's arms around him, their faces close. It was the moment after Hayden, Comeau and JJ had left, when Ilya had pulled him close and kissed his forehead. The tenderness of it was obvious even through the low resolution.

Shane felt the blood drain from his face.

"There's more." Farah said quietly. She scrolled. Another photo: Ilya holding Theo, looking down at him with that soft expression he couldn't hide. Another: Shane taking Theo from Ilya's arms, their hands overlapping on the baby. Another: the three of them together, a family frozen in frame.

"They published a whole story," Farah continued. "TSN broke it early this afternoon. The Athletic picked it up an hour later. It's everywhere, Sportsnet, CBC, even some US outlets. Social media is..."

She trailed off, but she didn't need to finish. Shane could imagine.

His head was rushing. A waterfall of thoughts – Theo's privacy, their careers, the team, the fans, the world knowing – crashed through his mind in a chaotic flood. He couldn't grab onto any single one. Couldn't think. Couldn't breathe.

And then, somewhere in the chaos, something broke loose.

A sound escaped him. Small at first, almost swallowed by the pounding in his ears.

Then another.

His mother looked at him with concern. "Shane?"

He was laughing.

Not hysterically, not cruelly, just... laughing. Helpless, overwhelmed, completely inappropriate laughter that bubbled up from somewhere deep and refused to stop.

"I..." he gasped. "I'm sorry, I don't-I can't..."

Ilya was staring at him like he'd grown a second head. Then, slowly, impossibly, Ilya's own lips twitched.

"Shane..." he said, his voice caught somewhere between concern and amusement. "Are you..."

"I don't know why I'm laughing!" Shane wheezed. "This is... this is not funny, it's ... It's really not funny..."

But he couldn't stop. The absurdity of it, years of secrecy, months of planning, all that fear and anxiety, and it was a parking lot that undid them. A parking lot, of all places. After everything.

Not a hotel camera, not a message leaked, not a hospital information.

Ilya made a sound. A strangled, disbelieving sound that was dangerously close to a laugh.

"No." he said, but his voice was cracking. "No, do not..."

"I can't help it!" Shane was shaking now, tears forming at the corners of his eyes. "We were so careful! We waited seven years to... to be together! And a... A year later... Someone took pictures of us in a parking lot..."

Ilya's composure shattered.

He laughed, a real laugh, full and surprised and helpless. Theo, confused by the sudden noise, looked between his fathers with big eyes. Then he laughed too, a baby giggle that made everything even more absurd.

Shane's mother stared at them like they'd lost their minds. His father looked equally bewildered. Farah just watched, a small, relieved smile tugging at her lips.

"I'm sorry," Shane gasped, sinking onto the couch because his legs had stopped working. "I'm sorry, I know this is... this is serious..."

Ilya collapsed beside him, still laughing, one arm coming around Shane's shoulders. "We are... we are idiots..."

"A parking lot, Ilya..."

"We were so dumb..."

They dissolved again, leaning on each other, laughter shaking through both of them. Theo, delighted, just shrieked.

Farah cleared her throat gently. "So... you're taking this well?"

Shane looked up at her, tears streaming down his face; from laughter now, not fear. "I have no idea. I think I'm in shock."

"That is also a possibility." Ilya agreed, wiping his own eyes. "But also..." He looked at Shane, at Theo. "... is a little funny."

His mother shook her head, but she was smiling now. "You two are impossible."

They sat there, the six of them – Shane, Ilya, Theo, Yuna, David, and Farah – in the warm glow of the living room, the chaos of the outside world temporarily held at bay. The photos were out there. The story was everywhere. Their lives would never be the same.

"We were going to go public anyway," Shane said later, after the laughter had settled into something quieter, steadier. Theo, now in his arms, had fallen asleep against his chest after drinking his bottle and exhausted by the emotional whiplash of his fathers losing their minds. Shane's free hand rested on the baby's back, feeling the slow rhythm of his breathing. "I mean, we wanted to do it in our way, whenever and however we wanted, but..." He trailed off, looking at Ilya. Something had shifted in the last few minutes. The panic was still there, lurking at the edges, but underneath it was something else. Acceptance, maybe. Or just the simple exhaustion of fighting something he couldn't control. "I don't find it the end of the world anymore."

Ilya's hand found his, lacing their fingers together over Theo's sleeping form. He didn't say anything, just squeezed, and Shane felt the warmth of it spread through his chest.

"So..." Ilya continued, looking at Farah. "We will follow what we planned. Adapt to what we have now." He glanced at Shane, who nodded slowly, steadily. "We were going to tell the truth anyway. Now we just... tell it faster."

Farah straightened, her professional demeanor clicking back into place. "Okay. Good. That's good. We can work with this." She was already typing on her phone. "I'll draft a statement. Something simple, honest, on your terms. We release it tonight, beat the next news cycle."

Shane's mother moved to sit on the arm of the couch beside him. "How do you feel about that, honey? Really?"

Shane considered the question. How did he feel? Terrified, still. Exposed. Worried about Theo, about their careers, about the million cruel comments surely flooding every platform. But also... light. Like something he'd been carrying for years had finally been set down.

"Relieved?" he said, surprising himself. "I think... relieved."

Ilya lifted their joined hands and pressed a kiss to Shane's knuckles. Shane's eyes burned, but he blinked the tears away. He was just feeling luck for having Ilya as his baby's father, as his

partner.

His father, who had been quiet throughout, finally spoke. "So what happens now? With the teams? With the media?"

Shane looked at Ilya. They'd talked about this, planned for it, but the reality was suddenly here.

"We talk to them." Farak spoke first. "Before any statement goes out I'll deal with Montreal and Ottawa about the trade, which was already progressing since you came back from Montreal." She looked at Shane. "I'll set up some calls tonight." She was already scrolling contacts. "I'll make it happen."

Shane looked at her. "What are people saying? Really? How are they reacting?"

Farah took a slow sip of water Yuna had bring earlier, considering her words. "It's mixed. That's the honest answer."

Ilya's arm tightened around Shane's shoulders.

"There are ugly voices." Farah continued, her voice calm and steady. "The usual ones, the people who can't wrap their heads around two professional, and elite, hockey players raising a child, who think an omega should choose career over family or retire before deciding on having one, who feel betrayed by the years of secrecy." She paused. "They're loud. They're always loud."

Shane's jaw tightened, but he didn't look away.

"But there's also..." Farah set down her water, meeting his eyes directly. "There's a lot of support, Shane. More than I expected, honestly. People are happy for you. They're calling it brave. They're calling it history."

Shane blinked. "History?"

"The first active NHL couple with a baby." Farah shrugged, a small smile tugging at her lips. "That's a pretty big deal. A lot of people recognize that—including both of your sponsors. None of them backed down or asked to terminate their contracts. It doesn't mean they're exactly *supporting* you both, not publicly anyway, but at least they're not working against you. For now, that's enough."

Ilya's hand found Shane's, squeezing gently.

"The omega community is already rallying behind you," Farah added. "They're calling you a role model. Someone who chose family without giving up his career. That matters to people."

Shane felt something loosen in his chest. "So it's not... it's not all bad?"

"No." Farah's voice was firm. "It's not all bad. It's messy, because these things always are. But the support is real. People are genuinely happy for you both."

"That's great! It's a good start." Shane's mother said.

Shane took a breath. Let it out. Felt Theo's warmth against his chest and Ilya's hand in his.

"So we just... we live our lives." he said quietly. "And pray for Ottawa to still accept me."

The room was silent for a moment. Then Ilya spoke, his voice soft but certain.

"I do not think they will lose this opportunity, sweetheart." He looked at Shane, seeing the hockey star he never stopped being.

"I hope so."

Shane's father cleared his throat gruffly. "Well. If you need someone to yell at reporters, I'm available."

"David," his mother chided, but she was smiling.

"I'm serious. I've been practicing my angry face. Theo loves it, he laughs all the time."

Ilya considered this. "We may take you up on that."

Shane laughed—a real laugh, not the hysterical one from before. It felt good. It felt like starting.

Farah stood, phone in hand. "I'm going to make those calls. You three..." She pointed at Shane, Ilya, and the sleeping Theo. "...stay here. Rest. Be a family. I'll handle the rest for now."

Shane's mother kissed his forehead. "Everything is going to be fine."

Shane looked down at Theo, at his peaceful face, his tiny fingers curled against Shane's shirt, the faint freckles scattered across his nose. He closed his eyes and let himself believe it.

"Okay," he whispered. "Okay."

They sat there in the quiet, holding each other and their son, waiting for the next chapter to begin.

After almost an hour of them waiting on the living room, Farah returned from the kitchen with a fresh cup of tea, settling into the armchair across from the couch. Shane was still curled against Ilya's side, Theo asleep in the bassinet they'd moved into the living room. The phone calls had been made, the statements drafted, the immediate crisis managed.

"Calls are set for tomorrow morning. Both teams are prepared." Farah paused, choosing her words carefully. "Montreal isn't exactly happy about any of this, but it would look worse for them if they didn't support you publicly. As for Ottawa, they're moving forward with the trade like nothing changed. Rozanov's still their guy." She glanced at her phone, then back at them. "The official statement goes out tonight. After that, you two can decide how public you

want to be. Interviews, social media, whatever feels right. This is your story now. You get to tell it however you want."

Shane leaned back against Ilya, feeling the steady rhythm of his heartbeat.

"So the world didn't end," he said quietly.

"Not even close." Farah stood, gathering her things. "I'll let you two rest. You've earned it. Call me if you need anything. And I mean anything. That's what I'm here for."

She let herself out, followed but Shane's parents, who left after reassuring Ilya and Shane that everything would be alright, leaving them alone with the quiet and the baby and the strange, beautiful reality of their new life.

Theo stirred in his bassinet, let out a tiny coo, and settled back to sleep.

Shane laughed softly. "He has no idea."

"Oh, he will be once he has access to internet. So we will stop paying for Wi-Fi soon."

Dr. Elena Vasquez @omegarightsnow: An omega NHL player chose to have a baby AND kept his career? This is actually HUGE for representation. Shane Hollander just became a hero to so many young athletes.

Rob Wilson @canucksforever: Wait wait wait. So the Boston/Montreal "rivalry" was just... these two being in love?? The media played us all for FOOLS.

Sarah Tremblay @cottagecorecanada: The way Ilya is holding that baby in the second photo... sir, you're supposed to be a villain?? That's a DAD. That's just a dad holding his kid.

Jess O. @shipnamenow: Eight years of rivalry. Eight years of "enemies." And they were together the whole time? That's not a scandal, that's a romance novel. I'm S.E.A.T.E.D.!!!

Nadia @mapleleafssuffer: Ottawa and Montreal are about to have the most awkward games next season. Can you imagine the warmups?

Trevor Lang @ftcanadacaptain: If this doesn't prove that the "heated rivalry" was manufactured media BS, nothing will. Two guys just wanted to live their lives.

Chris Johnston @playoffpoolpro: I need full and detailed timeline. How long? How long has this been happening? Since all-stars?? Man, they were so connected in all stars last year I think that was it.

Jess Kim @hockeytok: That photo of Ilya kissing Shane's forehead in a PARKING LOT while holding a BABY is the most domestic thing I've ever seen from an NHL player. Ever.

The morning light was just beginning to filter through the curtains when Ilya's alarm went off. He silenced it quickly, instinctively turning to check on Shane; still asleep, face soft and peaceful, one arm thrown protectively over the bassinet beside the bed where Theo slept.

For a moment, Ilya just watched them. His family. Still strange to think in those terms, even after all these months, given his own history with his family back in Russia.

He slipped out of bed carefully, going to the bathroom to shower. Once in his clothes, Ilya notice Theo was already full awake, but quiet enough to let Shane sleep some more. So, he took him in his arms, giving him morning kisses, and when to the kitchen to prepare him a bottle. It was only when Theo had burped already that Ilya came back to their bedroom on time to see Shane waking up.

"You're leaving already?" Shane's voice was rough with sleep.

"Practice. It's not 8 a.m. yet, sleep some more. Theo is fed already." Ilya crossed to the closet after putting their baby in the bassinet, pulling out his gear bag. "I will be back by afternoon."

Shane pushed himself up on one elbow, glancing at the Theo and smiling softly. Theo was awake, but would be for long, tiny chest rising and falling slowly already. "How are you feeling about today?"

Ilya paused, a pair of socks in his hand. "About practice?"

"About walking in there." Shane's eyes were clear now, fully awake. "It's the first time you'll see them since the news broke."

Ilya considered lying. Considered shrugging it off, making a joke, pretending it was nothing. But this was Shane. There was no point.

"I do not know," he admitted. "Your teammates... they did not react well. Mine are different, I think. Ottawa never had a rivalry with Montreal, so it is not personal for them. But still." He sat on the edge of the bed, running a hand through his damp hair.

Shane reached out, placing a warm hand on his bare knee. "Your teammates like you a lot. I've heard you talk about them."

"I know. But knowing and feeling are different things."

"Yeah." Shane squeezed. "They are."

Ilya was quiet for a moment, a thought clearly forming behind his eyes. Then, almost too casually: "And I'm pretty sure Luca has a crush on me, so maybe he will get angry he can't have me."

Shane's head snapped up. "What?"

The word came out far too loud, cutting through the quiet morning like a gunshot. Theo's eyes flew open. His tiny face crumpled. And then the crying started; that sharp, indignant wail that meant he had been deeply, personally wronged.

"I'm so sorry, baby!" Shane scooped him from the bassinet, cradling him against his chest, bouncing gently. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, Daddy didn't mean to yell, shh, shh..."

Ilya was no help at all. His shoulders were shaking, trying very hard to muffle his laughter behind his hand.

"It's not funny!" Shane hissed, still bouncing Theo, who was slowly beginning to settle.

"It is a little funny."

Theo's cries faded to hiccups, then to silence, his eyes already drooping again. Shane pressed a kiss to his downy head and continued the gentle rhythm, waiting until he was sure Theo was fully asleep before speaking again.

"Okay." His voice was carefully quiet now. "But seriously. What do you mean Luca has a crush on you?"

Ilya's eyebrows rose, innocence personified. "Are you jealous, Hollander?"

"No." The word came too fast. Shane adjusted his grip on Theo, not meeting Ilya's eyes. "No, I'm just... surprised. That's all."

"Surprised." Ilya's voice was warm with amusement. He leaned closer, close enough that his lips brushed the sensitive skin just below Shane's ear. Shane shivered despite himself.

"I will only and forever have eyes for you, *moy lyubov*." Ilya murmured against his neck.

"Yeah?" Shane's voice came out slightly breathless.

Ilya pulled back just enough to meet his eyes, his expression soft but serious. "Yes."

Shane felt the jealousy, or whatever it was, drain out of him. Replaced by something warmer. Safer.

But Ilya wasn't done.

"But..." he said thoughtfully. "if you ever want to do a threesome with Luca someday..."

"Shut up!" Shane's face went red. "I'm holding your baby! And this relationship is very much strict!"

Ilya laughed openly now, not even trying to hide it. "Strict?"

"Monogamous! Exclusive! Whatever word you want! The point is..." Shane shifted Theo, who was somehow still sleeping through this absurd conversation. "... no. Just no."

"I am only joking." Ilya pressed a kiss to his forehead, then another to Theo's soft hair. "You are all I want. Both of you. Forever."

Shane's heart did that thing it always did when Ilya got sincere: clenched and expanded all at once.

"Good," he said quietly. "Because we're not sharing you either."

Ilya smiled, soft and real, and for a moment they just existed like that, a small, perfect family in the quiet morning light.

Then Ilya glanced at the clock and sighed.

"I have to go."

"I know." Shane reached out to squeeze Ilya's hand. "Call me or text me. No matter what happens, okay?"

Ilya squeezed back. "I will."

"Whatever happens in that locker room, you come home to us. To me and Theo. That's not going to change."

Ilya leaned down and kissed him, slow, deliberate, pouring everything he couldn't say into the press of his lips.

"I know." he whispered against Shane's mouth.

He kissed Theo's forehead, and grabbed his keys.

He stood, grabbed his keys, and paused at the door.

"Shane."

"Yeah?"

"Luca is not my type. Too young. Too earnest."

Shane snorted. "Good to know."

Ilya grinned and disappeared through the door.

Shane looked down at Theo, still sleeping peacefully in his arms.

"Your Papa is ridiculous." he whispered.

Theo, in response, let out a tiny snore.

The drive to the arena felt strange. Not because of the roads or the traffic or the early morning light, all of that was familiar. What felt strange was the knowledge that everything had changed. The last time he'd made this drive, he was just another player heading to practice. Now he was... what? Public enemy to some. Romance novel hero to others. A father, out loud, for the first time.

He parked the car and sat for a moment, gripping the steering wheel.

They won't be horrible, he said to himself. He hoped to was right.

The walk to the locker room was longer than usual. Or maybe that was just his imagination, every step echoing in the empty corridors. He could hear voices ahead; laughter, the familiar chaos of teammates getting ready for morning skate.

He paused outside the door. Took a breath.

Then he pushed through.

The scene was normal. Completely, utterly normal. Troy was already half-dressed, arguing with Wyatt about something stupid. Zane was scrolling through his phone, feet up on the bench. Luca was doing something with his stick that looked suspiciously like sword fighting with an imaginary opponent.

Heads turned as Ilya entered.

"Rozanov!" Troy called out, grinning. "Morning, old man."

"What are you talking, he is like two years older than you." Wyatt said before turning to Ilya. "Ready to get embarrassed on the ice today, captain?"

"You wish."

Zane looked up from his phone, giving a casual wave. "Hey, Ilya."

Luca offered a small, shy smile that Ilya had become familiar with over the months.

Normal. All of it, completely normal.

Too normal.

They have internet, da?, he questioned himself.

Ilya felt a prickle at the back of his neck. The news had broken less than twenty-four hours ago. His face was everywhere; their faces, together, with their son. And yet his teammates were acting like it was just another Thursday morning. No questions. No awkward glances. No shift in the easy camaraderie they'd built over the past year.

It didn't make sense.

Montreal had reacted with shock and betrayal. The internet was a warzone of opinions. But here, in this room, it was as if nothing had happened at all.

Something was off.

He nodded back, muttered a greeting, and turned toward his locker to drop his bag, every nerve on alert, waiting for the other shoe to drop.

Then, an explosion nearly gave him a heart attack.

Blue confetti erupted everywhere: in his hair, down his jersey, floating in a ridiculous cloud around his head. Ilya spun around, a Russian curse flying from his lips, heart hammering in his chest.

"Blyat!"

His teammates were losing it.

"Congratulations, it's a boy!"

"So you're a BOY DAD, Rozanov?" Troy bellowed, already doubled over with laughter.

Wyatt was holding another confetti popper, clearly disappointed it didn't work, so he just threw the confetti around. "Congrats on the kid, man! A boy! That's amazing!"

Zane was grinning, phone held up. "I got that on video. This is going in the group chat."

Luca was just laughing, face red, clearly in on the whole thing.

Ilya stood there, covered in blue confetti, his heart still racing, trying to process what had just happened.

This was the other shoe. Not judgment. Not awkward silence.

"You..." He shook his head, confetti flying. "You almost killed me."

"You should have seen your face!" Troy wheezed. "I thought you were going to fight the air!"

Zane waved his phone. "The face was perfect. Ten out of ten."

Wyatt finally put down the unused popper and clapped Ilya on the shoulder. "Seriously though, man. Congrats. Hollander's a good guy. Always respected him, even if he's wearing the wrong jersey."

"Wrong city, right guy." someone added, still laughing.

Ilya blinked confetti out of his eyes. "You planned this?"

"Since six this morning," Zane confirmed. "Wyatt wanted to do it when you walked in."

"That was the goal." Troy said, utterly unrepentant. "If your heart is that fragile, you are really getting old."

"Fuck you, I am not Scott Hunter."

Ilya looked around the room. At Troy, covered in confetti remnants; at Wyatt, already pulling out his phone to show baby photos of his own kids; at Zane, still holding his phone like he'd just captured a historic moment; at Luca, watching him with genuine warmth.

They weren't just accepting it. They were celebrating it. In the most ridiculous, chaotic, completely unhinged way possible.

Exactly like his teammates.

"So... Where are the baby pics?"

Ilya looked down at the mess covering his jersey, his bag, the floor around him. Blue confetti everywhere.

He started laughing and then grabbed his phone to show his teammates the cutest baby that ever existed before they hit the ice.

Marta K. @hockeyfan_marta: Wait, I'm supposed to be mad about this? Two people found love and started a family? Grow up, y'all. 🏳️‍🌈❤️

Megan C. @meg_writes_stuff: I literally JUST checked AO3 and the "Shane Hollander/Ilya Rozanov" tag already has 20 fanfictions posted in the last THREE HOURS. The fandom works FAST. Some of y'all are absolutely unhinged and I respect it. 📝🔥🔥🔥🔥

Levesque @habsfan4life: I've hated Rozanov for a decade. Turns out he was just in love with our captain the whole time. I don't know how to feel but honestly? Kinda iconic.

Jenna K. @jenna_writes_things: Okay but hear me out: 2009 draft AU where they meet for the first time and there's immediate tension but it's NOT rivalry tension, it's *longing* tension. Rookie year, secret glances across the locker room, stolen moments between games. The angst. The PINING. I'm already outlining this. Hollanov nation rise up. 📝😓

Tasha R. @tasha_reads_spice: Okay I need someone to write a Vegas awards night fic immediately cause that day they were JUICYYY. Someone give me the angry drunk confessions while they're already ripping each other's clothes off. Hollanov smut writers, I'm looking at you. 🍷👔🔥

Chen @hollanderstan: Shane literally took medical leave to have a baby and kept it private to protect his family and y'all are mad? He's a king! End of discussion.

A.M. @pridenhl: The first active NHL couple with a baby and we're supposed to be upset? This is HISTORY.

Chapter 19: our team

Chapter Notes

Hello, everyone!

Hope you enjoy today's chapter! <3

Theo was nine months. He sat up on his own now, sturdy and proud, and had recently discovered the joy of scooting. Not quite crawling, but a determined combination of rolling and dragging himself toward anything remotely interesting. Which was, apparently, everything.

He had two teeth on the bottom, with more threatening to emerge at any moment, a process that had introduced his fathers to the concept of teething nights. Those were the nights when Theo woke every two hours, inconsolable, and Shane and Ilya took turns walking him around the house, singing lullabies in two languages, and reminding each other that this phase would pass.

It was passing.

Slowly.

With a lot of coffee.

He'd also discovered solid foods, which meant mealtimes had become an exercise in controlled chaos. Sweet potato in his hair. Banana smeared across his tray. The triumphant look on his face when he successfully grabbed the spoon and flung its contents across the room. Ilya had started taking videos, claiming they would be "excellent blackmail material for his teenage years."

As for Theo speaking, Shane pretended not to care which word he would say first. And Ilya pretended to believe him.

His favorite sounds were "dapa" and "pada," which he directed at both of them with equal enthusiasm. Neither one was quite what they were expecting, which meant the great bet – the one that had started months ago, with Ilya confidently predicting Theo would say "Papa" first and Shane equally certain it would be "Dada" – remained completely unresolved.

"I'm pretty sure 'Dapa' counts as a win for me." Shane had argued just last week.

"That is nonsense. 'Pada' is clearly closer to 'Papa', which is literally 'Dad' in Russian. Dapa means nothing."

"They're the same word with the syllables swapped!"

"Which means he is trying to say 'Papa' but getting confused by your constant 'Dada' propaganda."

"My *propaganda*?"

Ilya had simply shrugged, unrepentant. "You are very loud when you say it. You confuse him."

Theo, for his part, seemed to enjoy the ongoing debate. He would sit in his high chair, banging his spoon, and offer a cheerful "Dapa!" just to watch his fathers argue.

The bet remained unresolved. Neither of them minded.

Their home had transformed around them. Outlets, corners and the pool covered. The playground in the backyard had become Theo's favorite place to be held while swinging, his face alight with joy as his dads pushed him gently back and forth. The sandbox remained empty, they'd decided to wait until he was old enough not to eat it, since he was putting almost everything into his mouth now.

Three months since the news broke. Three months since their lives had been laid bare for the world to see.

The world, it turned out, had mostly moved on. There were still comments, still articles, still the occasional photographer lurking at the Ottawa's arena or during grocery shopping. But the frenzy had died down. The crazy fans had found new dramas to obsess over and Shane and Ilya had found their rhythm.

Except for one thing.

The trade had gone through. Shane was officially an Ottawa Centaur now, which meant he and Ilya would finally play on the same team, exactly as planned.

It also meant Shane was taking a pay cut. A significant one.

"The numbers make sense." Shane said, scrolling through the contract on his phone for the hundredth time. "Ottawa had to make the cap work. You're expensive, Rozanov."

"I am *worth* expensive." Ilya was on the floor with Theo, helping him stack blocks. Theo's preferred method was to let Ilya stack them and then knock them over, which he found hilarious. "You should not worry about money."

"I'm not *worried*, I just..." Shane sighed. "It's a lot less than I made in Montreal. Feels like a step down, you know?"

Ilya looked up at him, one hand steadying Theo's latest tower. "Do you know who you are talking to?"

"An incredibly expensive Russian?"

"Hollander, you don't have to worry about money." Ilya said it casually, like it was obvious. It really was, they were both millionaires. "Your future husband is very, very rich."

"And who exactly is this future husband of mine? Anyone I know?"

Ilya pretended to consider this, stacking another block while Theo watched with intense focus. "He is a very hot, very sexy player. The second best in the NHL, I would say."

Shane thought about this for a moment. A very long, deliberate moment.

"Scott Hunter?" he asked, trying to sound innocent.

Ilya's face underwent a rapid transformation: confusion, horror, disgust, and finally something that looked like betrayal.

He scooped Theo into his arms, cradling him protectively. "We are leaving. Your other father has said something unforgivable in front of you. You will not remember this, but I will."

He strode toward the back door, Theo giggling at the sudden movement.

Shane burst out laughing, scrambling to follow. "Ilya! I was joking!"

No response. The back door slid shut behind them.

Shane found them in the playground, Ilya settled on one of the swings with Theo on his lap, pushing gently with his feet. His expression was carefully neutral, the kind of blank that meant he was absolutely *not* mad but absolutely *was* going to make Shane work for forgiveness.

Shane sat on the other swing, letting it sway slightly.

"You mad?" he asked.

"No." Ilya didn't look at him.

"You're doing the thing where you say you're not mad but you're definitely mad."

"I am not doing a thing."

Shane smiled. "Okay."

They swung in silence for a moment. Theo babbled happily, pointing at a bird.

"I actually think *you're* the *best* player in the league." Shane said quietly.

Ilya's feet stilled on the ground. He looked at Shane now. "No. You are. There is no doubt about it at all."

Shane opened his mouth to argue. He had facts, statistics, a whole career's worth of evidence, but Ilya had a lot on his curriculum as well. Ilya continued:

"You have the trophies. The stats. The legacy."

"You do have all that too."

"And you are also the father of my child and the person I love most in the world." Ilya's voice was firm. "There is no debate, Hollander. Accept it. You are the best, end of discussion."

Shane felt warmth spread through his chest. "Fine. But for the record, I still think you're wrong."

"Your record means nothing."

They swung in comfortable silence, Theo reaching for the chains of Ilya's swing.

"I don't want to marry Scott Hunter." Shane said eventually.

Ilya rolled his eyes so dramatically that Theo laughed. "*Seryoznyy?*" *Seriously?*, he said ironically.

Shane's voice softened: "I want to marry you. I want that more than anything."

The silence this time was different. Charged. For a long moment, Ilya didn't speak.

Then, so quietly Shane almost missed it: "Do you?"

Shane looked at him, at this man who had been his rival, his secret, his partner, his everything. At the father of his son, sitting on a swing in their backyard, holding their baby like it was the most natural thing in the world.

"*Da*." Shane said softly.

The Russian word hung in the air between them, simple and perfect.

Ilya's face broke into something Shane couldn't name, joy, surprise, love, all of it tangled together. He shifted Theo to one arm and reached out with the other, pulling Shane's swing closer until they were touching.

"I love you." Ilya whispered.

Shane leaned in, close enough to kiss him, close enough to feel Theo's tiny hand patting his cheek.

"*Ya tebya lyublyu*" Shane said. "Forever."

Ilya kissed him again, soft and sweet and full of promise. Theo, caught between them, giggled at the proximity of his fathers' faces.

When they pulled apart, Ilya's eyes were bright.

"I still will propose." he said.

"Wasn't that a proposal?" Shane asked, the Theo grabbed a fistful of Shane's hair and yanked for the hundredth time. "Ow... Theo!"

Ilya laughed, the sound bright and free. "Theo is saying it was not a proposal."

"He has a funny way of showing it."

The car was packed. The bags were loaded. Everything was ready for the two-week training camp that would officially begin their new chapter as teammates.

And Shane couldn't stop holding Theo.

"I know," he murmured into the baby's soft hair. "I know, buddy. Daddy's being ridiculous."

Theo, oblivious to the drama, gummed his fist and grabbed a fistful of Shane's shirt.

"You're going to have so much fun with Grandma and Grandpa. They're going to spoil you rotten. You won't even remember we were gone." Shane's voice cracked slightly. "Which is good. That's good. You should have fun."

Ilya stood next to them, watching with an expression that was trying very hard to be patient and not entirely succeeding. Not because he wasn't feeling the same thing, but because if he let himself feel it, they'd never leave.

"*Moy lyubov*," he said gently. "We have to go."

"I know. I'm going. I'm just..." Shane pressed one more kiss to Theo's forehead. "Okay. Okay. Here."

He handed Theo to his mother, who was waiting with the soft, knowing smile of someone who had done this exact thing herself many times.

"He'll be fine, sweetheart," Yuna said. "Better than fine. He'll be loved and fed and exhausted by the time you get back."

"I know." Shane's voice was thick. "I know."

He turned to Ilya, ready to go... and stopped.

There was a tear. Just one, tracing a slow path down Ilya's cheek before he could wipe it away.

Shane blinked. "Are you crying?"

Ilya's hand froze mid-wipe. "No."

"That's a tear. On your face. That's crying."

"Is allergy."

Shane's eyebrows shot up. "You don't have allergies."

Ilya's jaw tightened. For a moment, he looked genuinely caught. Then his expression shifted into something almost defiant.

"Is lie." he said flatly. "Lier told you that. I have allergies."

And before Shane could respond, Ilya had crossed to Yuna and taken Theo back into his arms, pressing kiss after kiss to the baby's cheeks, left, right, forehead, nose, left again, while Theo giggled and grabbed at his face.

Yuna and David were laughing at the scene. Shane's heart, already fragile, completely dissolved.

"Okay." he managed, laughing wetly. "Okay, I see how it is."

Ilya finally pulled back, cradling Theo against his chest one last time. "You be good for Grandma and Grandpa." he murmured in Russian. "Papa will be back soon. He will miss you every second."

Theo patted his face, understanding none of it and everything all at once.

Shane's father stepped forward, clearing his throat gruffly. "We've got this. Go. Be hockey players. Come back in one piece."

Shane nodded, swallowing hard. "One more thing." He looked at his mother. "His teeth, they've been bothering him at night. If he wakes up fussy, the teething gel is in the side pocket of the diaper bag. And he likes smashed bananas with a little bit of the baby formula mixed into it. Not too much, just a little bit. And you have to really mixed it before giving it to him, so he doesn't choke."

"Got it." Yuna said, smiling.

"Okay." He looked at Ilya. "Okay. Let's go."

They walked to the car. Ilya drove. Shane watched the house shrink in the rearview mirror.

"He'll be fine." Shane said quietly, seeing Ilya was too silent.

"I know. I just didn't think it would be this hard at this point."

Shane reached over and took his hand, squeezing. "Neither did I."

They drove in silence for a while, holding onto each other and the knowledge that this was necessary. Two weeks of camp. A new team. A new beginning.

Theo would be waiting when they got back.

The Ottawa training facility was modern, gleaming, and full of strangers who kept glancing at Shane with undisguised curiosity. He felt their eyes on him as he walked through the halls. The new guy, the *famous* new guy, the one who'd been at the center of the biggest hockey story of the year.

He was used to attention. He was not used to this particular flavor of it.

"I feel like I'm a rookie all over again." he muttered.

Ilya's hand found the small of his back, a brief, grounding pressure. "You are not a rookie, you are a legend."

"They're staring."

"Because you are with me. I am very pretty, that is why people look." Ilya said it with such casual confidence that Shane almost believed him.

The locker room door loomed ahead. Voices filtered through, laughter, conversation, the familiar sounds of teammates bonding.

Ilya paused, turning to face him. "Ready?"

Shane took a breath. "Ready."

Ilya pushed open the door.

The room went quiet for exactly one second. Then...

"Holy shit, Shane Hollander did really sign with the Centaurs!" That was Zane Boodram, grinning from across the room, already on his feet.

"Really nice having you with us and not against us, man." Wyatt was there too, nodding at Shane with genuine warmth.

Troy looked up from his phone. "Yeah, this gonna be good! Since you guys were outed, Rozanov doesn't shut up about you."

"Nice meeting you, guys." Shane said with a contained smile. He already could see what Ilya was talking about when would to tell him how nice those guys were.

Ilya ignored them completely, turning to Shane with the smallest smile. "These are my teammates. They are kinda boring too, but play good hockey."

Wyatt clapped Shane on the shoulder, friendly and firm. "Welcome to the circus, man. We're happy to have you. With all due respect, Montreal must be shitting their pants now that we have both of you." He glanced at Ilya.

Shane laughed, a real laugh, surprised out of him. The tension in his shoulders began to ease.

One by one, the others came over. Handshakes. Introductions. Jokes about Ilya's newly discovered soft side. Questions about Theo, carefully respectful, genuinely curious. Stories about the time Ilya was covered in blue confetti in the locker room – Shane had seen the video though, and even cried. A little bit of sad tears for himself, but mostly happy tears for Ilya.

"It was chaos." Zane said. "We're still finding confetti."

Shane looked around the room, at the faces smiling at him, the easy camaraderie, the way Ilya fit here, the way they were already making space for him too.

This was his team now. Soon would be his home.

He caught Ilya's eye and smiled.

"I didn't think Rozanov would be so mushy." Troy said.

"Oh, I knew that." Wyatt screamed from his locker. "This guy just knows how to hide it beneath his Russian face."

"Well, you don't have to hide that anymore." Harris, who had come to the room minutes ago, punctuated. "Only when you're on the ice. The enemy have to think you're dangerous."

"I am dangerous. You flinch, I score. You look away, I make a baby with Hollander."

The room dissolved into laughter. Shane let himself be pulled into it, let himself belong, although his cheeks were very much red.

"That surely will be dangerous if Theo decides to play hockey in the future." Harris added.

The first week passed in a blur of ice and sweat and the strange, exhilarating joy of finally playing *with* Ilya instead of *against* him.

It was, objectively, ridiculous how well they worked together. They had a taste of it in the all-stars game before Shane found out about his pregnancy. From the very first drill, something clicked. A chemistry that went beyond their years of studying each other's every move. They anticipated each other's passes before they happened. They knew where the other would be without looking. They moved like they shared a single brain, a single heartbeat.

"Okay, that's actually unfair." Troy said after watching them execute a perfect give-and-go during a scrimmage. "Like, genuinely unfair. You two should be illegal."

"We're on the same team, you should be celebrating." Ilya said smugly.

"Seriously, years of *hating* each other." Wyatt said. "That's not supposed to translate to this."

Ilya just grinned and Shane smiled widely, both sweat dripping down their faces, happier than they'd been on the ice in months.

"What can I say? We're just that good." Ilya said. "And actually we never hated on each other, not even back in rookie season." He winked at Wyatt before skating away, leaving a very much confused friend behind.

The team rolled their eyes, but they were smiling. And that was the thing, they were *all* very happy. The adjustment had been easier than Shane dared to hope. On the ice, his skill spoke for itself. He was feeling like he was playing even better than before having Theo. Off the ice, the guys just welcomed him. Zane's loud jokes. Wyatt's dad humor. Troy's endless curiosity about everything. Luca's quiet, earnest attempts to make Shane feel included.

They ate meals together, sprawled across the cafeteria tables. They stayed up too late playing cards during a few nights, Troy accusing everyone of cheating while he was, in fact, the only one cheating. They swapped stories about hockey, about life, about the absurdities of their shared profession.

Shane found himself laughing more than he had in months.

Every evening, without fail, he and Ilya called home. Shane's mother would hold up the phone so they could see Theo, crawling now, truly crawling, a fact she documented with daily videos. He'd grown somehow in just a week, his face changing, his hair getting thicker and curlier. He babbled at the screen, sometimes offering a "dapa" or "pada" that made both his fathers' hearts clench.

"He's so perfect." Shane whispered after one call, staring at the screenshot he took of Theo looking at the screen and smiling.

Ilya pulled him close, kissing his hair. "He is. I can't wait to see him when we get back."

"I know. I just..." Shane shook his head. "I love him so much it's like my heart lives outside my body now."

Ilya was quiet for a moment. Then: "Yes. That is exactly what I feel too."

They had been assigned the same room. Unsurprising, given the circumstances. Most nights, they just slept, exhausted from practices. But every evening, after their call with Theo, they would shower together.

It started practical: saving water, saving time. But somewhere between the shampoo and the rinse, practicality became something else. Hands wandering. Breath catching. The warm spray muffling sounds that were meant only for each other.

They never went all the way, too tired, too aware of thin walls and nearby teammates. But blowjobs in the shower became their ritual, quick and urgent and perfect, followed by washing each other clean, erasing any evidence except the satisfied smiles they wore to bed.

By the tenth day, the coaches declared it time for a break. Two days of rest before the final push. Two days to recover, to bond, to just be a team instead of a collection of players.

The decision was unanimous: a barbecue by the fire pit.

Bood, it turned out, took his burgers very seriously. He stood at the grill with the focus of a surgeon, flipping patties at exactly the right moment, refusing all offers of help.

"Last time I let someone else touch the grill, we had hockey pucks disguised as food." he said darkly. "Never again."

Zane had somehow acquired an entire cooler of beer; local craft stuff, nothing fancy, but plenty of it. He distributed cans with the enthusiasm of a man on a mission.

"I said to coach Wiebe I bought just two cans per person, don't tell him it was seven, guys."

Even Luca, usually so quiet, relaxed into the evening, nursing a beer and actually joining the conversation instead of just hovering at its edges. And Troy and Harris were hugging near the fire.

They sat around the fire pit as the sun went down, the flames casting warm light on their faces. Stories flowed. Jokes landed. Shane felt like he wasn't just fitting in, he was getting to know his new family.

Troy raised his can at one point, gesturing vaguely at Shane and Ilya. "You know, I gotta say... When we found out about you two, I thought it was gonna be weird. Like, *really* weird. The whole rivalry thing, all of it."

Shane tensed slightly.

"But honestly?" Troy continued, clearly drunk already. "Watching you play together? Watching you just... be together? It makes sense. You're adorable and it makes sense."

"Cheers to the Stanley Cup we're gonna get because of that not-yet-but-surely-soon-to-be-I-bet married couple." Wyatt added, raising his own can.

Zane nodded. "Welcome to the family, Hollander. For real. We're glad you're here."

Shane looked around the circle, at these men who had welcomed him without hesitation, who had made space for him and Ilya both. His throat was tight.

"Thanks" he managed. "Really. This means..." He shook his head, unable to find the words.

Ilya squeezed his knee, then raised his own can.

"To the team." he said. "And to fuck Montreal next season!"

"FUCK MONTREAL!" Everyone repeated. And what was supposed to make Shane feel sad, actually made him laugh.

Shane leaned into Ilya's side and let himself be happy.

Two hours later, the fire had burned low and the beer had flowed freely. Empty cans littered the tables around them, and the easy laughter of earlier had evolved into something looser, louder, more unguarded.

Shane was sprawled against Ilya's side, his face flushed from more than just the warmth of the flames. He'd lost count of how many beers he'd had. Three? Four? It didn't matter. What mattered was that everything was *hilarious*.

"... and then..." Shane was saying, gesturing wildly with one hand, "then he just... he just *looked* at me, you know? Like this... In the shower." He demonstrated, doing an impression of Ilya's intense stare that was more exaggerated than accurate. "And internally I was like, *oh no. Oh no*. But at the... the same time I was like... *I really wanna kiss you*."

Troy was doubled over, wheezing. "In the *showers*?"

"I was kinda obsessed a little with him, yeah, but... I thought he was trying to be friendly during the commercial, not..." Shane waved vaguely at Ilya, at the two of them tangled together.

"Trying to get into you pants?" Zane leaned forward, clearly enjoying himself. "So when did you realize it wasn't about hockey?"

Shane opened his mouth. Closed it. Thought very hard.

"I think the Vegas awards night in 2014" he said finally, signing and then blushing. "He didn't..." He turned to look at Ilya, blinking slowly. "You remember that night?"

Ilya's lips twitched. "I remember."

"We didn't even kiss." He said almost in a whisper.

Ilya put his forehead on Shane and responded in a whisper as well: "If I kissed you, I would not have let you go. I could not do that at the time, because I was still afraid I was already in love with you."

"You are so cute I wanna cry." Harris said already crying.

"And for me..." Ilya said, holding Shane closer. "I wasn't about hockey since the Canada vs. Russia game in 2008."

"But we met like less than a week before the game."

"Yes."

For a long moment, Shane and Ilya simply stared at one another, searching for something unspoken.

Troy was crying now. "Oh my God, get a room you two!"

"We have one" Ilya called back. "We're just choosing not to use it!"

“Gross!” Some of the teammates screamed.

"Wait, wait, wait. So you've been doing this since Rookie year?"

"On and off." Shane confirmed. "Mostly off. Lots of off. Months of off, actually." He looked at Ilya with exaggerated sorrow. "He made me very sad for a long time."

"You were the one to date Rose Laundry!"

"You picked up girls at clubs!"

“Not publicly!”

Shane snorted. “Oh, it was pretty much public!”

Ilya opened his mouth to argue, then stopped. Something shifted in his expression., the playful defensiveness fading into something softer, warmer. Fuck, Shane was his entire world, and he was drunk and flushed and bickering about things that didn't matter anymore and still was managing to look stunning, the most beautiful human being in the entire world.

“I love you.”

Shane's attempt of being angry – which looked like an angry kitten, a very cute kitten with red cheeks – just failed completely, and he was making his doe eyes that would shuffle Ilya's brain.

“I love you too.”

Wyatt snorted. "You too are disgustingly in love, oh my God!"

Shane buried his face in his hand, embarrassed. Then, he felt his stomach churning.

"I think I've said enough."

"You definitely have," Ilya agreed.

Shane pouted at him. "My stomach feels weird."

"Then it's time to go to bed." Ilya stood, pulling Shane gently to his feet. He raised his voice, addressing the group. "Let's go, everyone. Party's over."

"You heard the cap, let's go!" Wyatt bellowed, and suddenly everyone was Moving, grabbing empty cans, gathering stray jackets, the chaos of the night winding down into the familiar rhythm of heading to bed.

Ilya kept one arm firmly around Shane's waist, guiding him away from the fire pit and toward their cabin. Shane stumbled once, twice, his feet not quite cooperating with his brain's instructions.

"Whoa." he muttered. "The ground is moving."

"The ground is not moving."

"Are you sure?"

"I am sure." Ilya tightened his grip, laughing. "Just walk. We are almost there."

"The grass is funny."

They made it inside somehow. Shane collapsed onto the bed and immediately regretted it as the room began to spin.

"Oh no. No, no, no, I didn't ask for a moving bed. Ilya, did they change the bed?"

Ilya was already moving, helping Shane remove all his clothes, grabbing a bottle of water from the mini bar and ibuprofen from his bag.

"I asked for a dancing bed." He said, teasing.

"There is no such a thing..." Shane said with suspicious eyes.

"Drink." Ilya handed the pill and the water. "The bed stops dancing only if you drink your pill."

Shane drank. The water helped.

"Better?"

"A little." Shane handed back the glass, then grabbed Ilya's wrist before he could move away. "I wanna hug you like a bear."

Ilya's expression softened. He turned off the lights, toed off his shoes, removed all his clothes except his underwear, and climbed onto the bed beside Shane, pulling him close until Shane's head rested against his chest. His fingers found Shane's hair, stroking gently, the way he knew helped Shane relax. The spinning slowed after a few minutes, just a little.

For a while, they just lay there, breathing together. Ilya thinking Shane would regret in the morning for drinking too much and not taking a shower or brushing his teeth before bed, but he was already regretting:

"I'm sorry." Shane mumbled against his shirt.

"For what?"

"For being embarrassing and saying too much."

Ilya's chest rumbled with a quiet laugh. "It was funny. The team loved it."

"They're going to tease me forever."

"Probably. But that is how it works with this team. They love you already."

Shane considered this. "I guess that's okay then."

"It is more than okay." Ilya pressed a kiss to the top of his head. "And for the record, you were very funny. Troy almost fell out of his chair."

Shane groaned. "I'm never going to live this down."

"No." Ilya agreed cheerfully. "You are not."

Another pause. Shane's eyes were getting heavy, the alcohol and the warmth of Ilya's body combining into a powerful sedative.

"Ilya?"

"Hmm?"

"*Ya tebya... 'blueblue'?*"

Ilya laughed hard.

"Oh my God, I forgot, I'm sorry." Shane said in despair, hiding his face in Ilya's chest.

"I love you too." Ilya's hand never stopped moving through his hair. "And I'm sorry for not kissing you that night in Vegas."

"It's okay... The sex was really good though."

Ilya laughed softly, not letting himself think about Vegas too much or he would have to get to the bathroom to get rid of an unwanted erection. "Go to sleep, *moy lyubov*."

Shane wanted to argue, but his body had other plans. His eyes closed. His breathing evened out. Within minutes, he was asleep.

Ilya lay there for a while longer, watching him, listening to the quiet sounds of the cabin settling around them. Outside, he could hear the distant murmur of the others heading to their own rooms, the occasional burst of laughter, the comfortable chaos of a team bonding.

He pressed one more kiss to Shane's hair and closed his own eyes.

Tomorrow, there would be practice. There would definitely be teasing. There would be the ongoing adventure of playing together, of building a life together. And soon, when they got home, it would be the tree of them together again. There would be Ilya, Shane and Theo.

Chapter 20: our Cup

Chapter Summary

Hope you enjoy the reading <3

Chapter Notes

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

The season started like a door finally opening.

After months of Waiting, of practices and press conferences and the strange adjustment of pulling on the same Jersey, Shane and Ilya finally took the ice together for real. Opening night. Ottawa versus Toronto. A sold-out crowd, national broadcast, the whole thing. Everyone was eager to see Hollander and Rozanov playing together.

Shane's heart hammered in his chest during the anthem, the familiar pre-game adrenaline mixing with something new. Something lighter.

I'm not alone.

Beside him, Ilya rolled his shoulders, shook out his hands, did that little hop he always did before a shift. Shane had watched him do it from across the ice a hundred times. Never from this close.

"You ready?" Ilya murmured, not looking at him.

Shane smiled. "Born ready."

The puck dropped.

And it was like everything they'd ever done had been leading to this.

They moved together like they'd been doing it for years, because in a way, they had. Every shift against each other, every overtime battle, every moment of studying each other's every move had built this. They didn't need to call for passes, they just *knew*. Ilya would curl into open space, and the puck would be there. Shane would cut toward the net, and Ilya's pass would hit his tape perfectly.

By the end of the first period, they had two goals between them. By the middle of the third, they had four. A hat trick for Shane, a goal and three assists for Ilya.

The bench was electric. The crowd was on their feet. Everything was perfect.

Then Dallas Kent happened.

He was the Toronto star center, good player, but mean and known for running his mouth. He'd been taking cheap shots all night, mostly missing, mostly being ignored. But as the final minutes ticked down and Ottawa's lead grew insurmountable, his frustration boiled over.

They were lined up for a face-off in the Toronto zone, Shane on the wing, Ilya at the point. Kent skated past them, slow and deliberate, and let his voice carry just loud enough to be heard.

"You two are actually disgusting." He sneered, looking at Ilya.

"Jealous cause nobody loves you, Kent?" Ilya replied and Kent snorted angrily.

"Nice of you to raise some other alpha's mistake."

Ilya went still.

Shane felt it more than saw it, the sudden tension in his body, the shift from athlete to something more dangerous.

"How many alphas did he have to fuck before he trapped you with that bastard k-" He didn't have the chance to finish the sentence.

Ilya's stick came up. Not high, not dirty, just fast. He drove the butt end into Kent's midsection, then, when Kent doubled over, brought his glove up into the side of his head.

Kent went down like a sack of potatoes.

The whistle blew. Players converged. Referees dove between them, grabbing Ilya, pulling him back. Kent stayed on the ice, groaning, one hand pressed to his face and the other to his stomach.

"Enjoying the defeat?" Ilya called out, voice cold, as they dragged him toward the penalty box.

Kent didn't answer. He was too busy being helped off the ice by trainers, blood trickling from his nose.

The arena was chaos. The Ottawa bench was on its feet, half of them trying to hold back laughter, the other half genuinely concerned about the suspension implications. Shane just stood there, stick loose in his hands, watching Ilya settle into the box like he'd just done something completely reasonable.

Ottawa killed the penalty easily. The game ended 5-2.

In the locker room after, the mood was celebratory but confused. Guys were trading looks, whispering, trying to figure out what had actually happened. Ilya sat on a bench in front of his stall, still in his gear, staring at nothing.

Shane found him there.

He walked over slowly, ignoring the curious glances, and dropped to his knees in front of him. His hands found Ilya's thighs, resting there gently, grounding them both.

"What the fuck was that?" Shane asked quietly.

Ilya's jaw tightened. "Fucking Dallas talked shit... about you and Theo."

Shane's heart clenched. "What did he say?"

"It does not matter."

Ilya met his eyes then, and Shane saw it, the fury still burning there, banked but not extinguished. Shane was quiet for a moment, processing Ilya's anger. Then his hands moved, stroking slowly up and down Ilya's thighs.

"You can't do that, Ilya. Fight during the games." Shane said softly.

Ilya leaned forward, forearms resting on his knees, bringing his face closer to Shane's. "You should not have to hear that garbage. You should not have to prove yourself to anyone or hear shit about our son." He stopped, swallowed.

Shane's eyes burned. He kept stroking Ilya's legs, slow and steady.

"We won." he said quietly. "We were perfect out there. Stupid people like Dallas Kent shouldn't get inside your head."

"I know." Ilya's voice cracked slightly. "But it is not fair. It is not *fair*, Shane. That people think of you as less because you are an omega, because you had a baby, because of any of it. You have been the fucking number one since your rookie season. Everyone knows it. They just will not say it out loud."

Shane looked up at him, at this man who had just risked suspension and fines and God knows what else, all because someone said something ugly about him and their baby.

"It does get to me sometimes." Shane admitted. "The comments. The looks. The way people assume things." He squeezed Ilya's thighs. "But then I remember that my future husband tells me every single day how good I am. Every practice. Every game. Every morning when I wake up next to him."

Ilya's breath hitched at the words *future husband*.

"And I'll keep playing better every time." Shane continued. "Every shift. Every goal. Every win. I'll make it so obvious that everyone who says shit has to shut up. Because they can't argue with results."

Ilya stared at him for a long moment. Then, slowly, the tension in his shoulders began to ease.

"I love you." he murmured against Shane's hair.

"I love you too." Shane pressed closer. "Even when you do stupid things for me."

"Worth it."

"Okay, but don't do that again."

Shane shook his head, but he was smiling. Around them, the locker room slowly returned to normal, guys laughing, shower water running, the quiet victory buzz of a game well played.

They sat there for a while before actually take a shower and get dressed. Shane was already anticipating that tomorrow, there would be a lot of questions. A media cycle to navigate.

He would think about that tomorrow.

The season rolled on after that, a blur of cities and games and hotel rooms that now felt different because they were shared. Ottawa was good, really good. The team clicked in ways no one had expected. The rookies stepped up. The veterans held steady. And Shane and Ilya kept doing whatever it was they did, racking up points and confusing opponents who still couldn't figure out how two former rivals had become the most dangerous duo in the league.

Between games, there were calls home. Theo growing, changing, becoming more himself every day. He had four teeth and opinions about food and a laugh that made everything worth it.

Shane's mother sent videos constantly. Theo eating. Theo playing. Theo babbling at the cat. Theo trying to put blocks in his mouth and looking offended when they didn't fit.

"He's going to be walking by the time we get a break." Shane said one night, staring at his phone.

Ilya looked over his shoulder. "He is determined. Like his fathers."

"Terrifying thought."

"The most terrifying."

Halfway through November, the schedule of games was updated.

Shane got it in his phone. He was scrolling through the remaining months, mentally mapping out travel and home stands.

He stopped.

Scrolled back.

Read it again.

"Ilya."

"Hmm?"

"Look." Shane turned the phone toward him, pointing at the date. December 10th. A three-day break between games. No travel. Nothing scheduled.

Theo's first birthday.

Ilya's eyes went wide. Then soft. Then suspiciously bright.

"We are home." he said quietly. "For his birthday."

"Thank God." Shane's voice was thick. "We get to be there."

Ilya pulled him close, burying his face in Shane's neck. For a moment, neither of them spoke.

"I was so worried we would miss it." Ilya admitted, his voice muffled. "That we would be on the road, or playing."

"Me too." Shane held him tighter. "Me too."

They stayed like that for a long moment, holding each other in the quiet of their hotel room, grateful for this one small mercy in a season full of sacrifices.

Finally, Ilya pulled back, his eyes still bright but his smile fierce.

"We will make it perfect." he said. "His first birthday. Our first birthday together, as a family."

Shane nodded, smiling.

The season stretched ahead of them, games and travel and the relentless grind of professional hockey. But at the end of it, waiting like a beacon, was December 10th.

Home. Theo. Everything they'd fought and would continue to fight for.

Their house had never looked like this.

Streamers in black and red – Ottawa colors, because Ilya had insisted and Shane had rolled his eyes but secretly loved it – draped across every available surface. A banner that read "THEO FIRST BIRTHDAY" hung over the fireplace, slightly crooked despite three attempts to straighten it. Balloons drifted against the ceiling, their strings tangled together in a way that would definitely become someone's problem later.

And in the middle of it all, surrounded by chaos and love and more people than he'd ever seen in one place, sat Theo.

He was wearing a tiny birthday hat that he'd already tried to eat twice. His chubby legs kicked with excitement as he surveyed his kingdom. The wrapped presents stacked on the coffee table and the smash cake waiting on the kitchen counter.

"We threw a party for a one-year-old." Shane murmured, standing in the doorway with Ilya. "I mean, he doesn't know what's happening."

"I think he knows." Ilya said confidently, watching as Theo was laughing as the balloons moved in the ceiling because of the wind, making little noises.

Shane's parents had arrived first, as always. Yuna immediately took over kitchen duties, arranging the food with David's help.

"He's gotten so big." Yuna said, watching Theo play. "Look at him. Almost walking."

"Don't say that." Shane groaned. "I don't think I'm ready to lose his first walk cause I'm away playing."

"Don't worry, honey. I'll keep him sitting while your away, so he'll only walk when you're here." She said playfully and Shane laughed.

"Don't do that, mom. He will walk when he is ready and when he wants to. I just need you to record it so I can cry later."

"I will, honey."

Hayden and Jackie arrived next, their four kids exploding into the house like a small hurricane. The youngest, Amber, immediately gravitated toward Theo, showing him how to stack blocks, but he preferred knocking them over. The twins, Jade and Ruby, discovered the balloons and began an elaborate game that involved trying to catch them from the ceiling to pop some. The middle-son, Arthur, attached himself to Jackie's leg and refused to move.

"Sorry." Hayden said, not sounding sorry at all. "We brought chaos."

"We brought *family*." Jackie corrected, kissing Shane's cheek. "Chaos is just a side effect."

Ilya watched the kids with something like wonder. "Four." he murmured to Shane. "They have four. And they are still functioning despite being Hayden's children."

"Hey!" Hayden called over.

"You two, don't start." Shane warned.

JJ and Comeau arrived together, looking slightly overwhelmed by the domestic scene.

"Never seen Rozanov in a party hat before." JJ observed.

Ilya was, in fact, wearing a tiny birthday that matched Theo's. It sat crooked on his head, absurd and perfect.

"Theo insisted." Ilya said defensively.

"I bet he did." JJ said looking at Theo, who was biting one of his chew toys.

Comeau clapped on Ilya's the shoulder. "You're a good dad, kid. A weird dad. But good."

They brought gifts, a ridiculous amount of gifts, actually. Stuffed animals, board books and a tiny outfit with a hockey gear print.

Svetlana arrived midway through the afternoon, and the moment she stepped through the door, Ilya's whole face transformed.

"*Svetlana*." he breathed, crossing to her in three strides. They embraced like the childhood friends they were, speaking rapid Russian that Shane could only catch fragments of.

When they finally pulled apart, Svetlana turned to Shane with warm eyes. "Shane Hollander!"

"Nice to meet you."

"Nice to meet you too, Jane." She said in a whisper while hugging him, using the old nickname Ilya had recorded on his phone as Shane's number.

Something passed between them, a shared understanding, a acknowledgment of all the years Ilya and Shane had been involved before getting together.

"Thank you for coming." he said, a little smile on his lips.

"It means everything to me to be here." She looked at Theo, now being passed to Yuna, and went immediately to greet him too. "Oh my God, he is beautiful!"

Rose arrived last, and Shane felt the shift in the room immediately.

She was beautiful, as always. She hugged him warmly, then turned to Ilya with a smile that was equal parts friendly and challenging.

"So you're the one who finally caught him."

"Yes." Ilya's jaw tightened almost imperceptibly. "And you're the one who made my days miserable."

"Ilya..." Shane said with closed eyes, feeling totally embarrassed.

"Well, that was certainly Shane's fault. I had to give him a shock of reality when we broke up, so you should thank me, actually." She winked at Ilya, then glanced at Shane, softening. "I'm happy for you. Both of you. Really."

"Thank you for being here. It means a lot." Shane said.

"Wouldn't miss it." She looked at Theo, now gumming a block with intense concentration. "He's perfect, Shane. Absolutely perfect."

Ilya materialized at Shane's side, sliding an arm around his waist with a casual possessiveness that was entirely intentional. "He has my eyes and Shane's freckles."

Rose's lips twitched. "And I hope he'll be as funny as both of you when he's older."

She laughed, already moving toward Theo, leaving Ilya standing there with his brow furrowed.

He turned to Shane, genuinely confused. "Funny? She said *you* are funny?" A pause. "And I was not being funny right now. Why did she think I was funny?"

Shane bit back a smile. "Ilya, are you jealous?"

"No."

"You're jealous."

"I said no." Ilya's jaw tightened. "I am simply... clarifying. You are boring."

"You once said I was funny."

"No, never said that."

Shane stepped closer, dropping his voice. "Let me remind you that we are together. We live together. We have a child together."

Ilya's eyes softened slightly, but he wasn't done. "And we play on the same team together."

"Exactly." Shane reached up, adjusting the ridiculous party hat Ilya still hadn't taken off. "So you don't need to be jealous."

"I am not jealous."

"Rose is great. And she's my best friend, so it's important to me that you treat her nicely."

Ilya's expression shifted; still stubborn, but listening. "I am treating her nicely."

"So be nicer." Shane brought his lips close to Ilya's ear. His voice dropped to a whisper, warm and private. "If you do, I'll have a gift for you tonight. When we get to bed."

Ilya went very still.

Then, slowly, his eyes darkened.

"That..." He said quietly. "... is manipulation."

"Yes."

"Effective manipulation."

"I know."

Ilya looked at him for a long moment. Then he turned, walked directly to where Rose was cooing over Theo, and said loud enough for Shane to hear: "Rose. Your presence here brings me joy. You look beautiful today. Would you like some juice?"

Rose stared at him. Then at Shane. Then back at Ilya.

"...Okay." she said slowly. "Thank you?"

Ilya nodded, satisfied, and winked at Shane. Shane held his laugh.

The party continued around them. The kids were chasing balloons, the adults would engage in pleasant conversations and Theo was pretty much enjoying the house being so full.

The afternoon rolled on. Presents were opened. Theo was most interested in the wrapping paper. Cake was demolished. Theo got more on his face than in his mouth, which was the goal. Laughter filled every corner of the cottage. Including Theo's.

At one point, Shane noticed Ilya standing slightly apart, watching the chaos with an expression he couldn't quite read. He crossed to him, slipping his hand into Ilya's.

"You okay?"

Ilya nodded slowly. "I just..." He gestured at the room. "I never thought I would have it."

Shane squeezed his hand. "You have now. It's all yours."

"Ours."

Later, after the guests had gone and Theo had been bathed and fed and finally, *finally* coaxed to sleep, Shane and Ilya stood at the side of his crib, watching him dream.

His cheeks were still faintly pink from the excitement, but gladly they were able to remove all the cake during his bath. His tiny hand was wrapped around the stuffed bear Svetlana had brought.

"One year." Shane whispered.

"One year." Ilya echoed.

"Can you believe it?"

Ilya shook his head slowly. "Sometimes I still cannot believe he is real. That any of this is real."

Shane leaned into him. "It's real. We're real."

They stood there for a long moment, watching their son sleep, surrounded by the quiet and the dark and the weight of everything they'd built.

Finally, Ilya spoke.

"Happy birthday, *malysh*," he murmured in Russian, kissing Theo's forehead. "Papa and Dad love you. More than anything."

Shane pressed a kiss to Ilya's cheek and led him away, leaving Theo to his dreams.

When they got to their bedroom, Shane didn't have the time to get to bed, Ilya was already kissing his neck and putting his hands under Shane's shirt. In a matter of seconds, they were already both naked in bed and Shane already had his mouth full with Ilya's dick, finally revealing his gift of the night.

After New Year's, the season became a crazier.

Games stacked on games, cities blending together, hotel rooms feeling both familiar and foreign. Shane and Ilya played like men possessed, their chemistry only deepening with each shift. The highlight reels were full of them. Perfect passes, perfectly timed breakouts, goals that left goalies shaking their heads.

And every week, they went home.

Two days here. Three days there. Sometimes just a single night, long enough to hold Theo, to breathe him in, to watch him do something new. Pull up on the furniture, babble a new sound, take a wobbly step before collapsing into giggles. Shane was glad that during one of those nights they got to see Theo walking alone for the first time. They cheered like they had just won the Stanley Cup. To be real, it was far better.

Shane's parents became a permanent presence. Whenever the games were in Canada, especially in cities within driving distance, Yuna and David would make the trip, and watch the game from the private family area reserved for players' loved ones. It was a quiet, insulated space, designed to shield little ears from the roar of the crowd. Theo could play, nap, or babble at the TV without being overwhelmed by the chaos of twenty thousand screaming fans. And every time Shane and Ilya knew they were there, something shifted. The game became lighter. Sharper. Better. They played harder when their son was watching. They played happier.

It wasn't just Theo. It was knowing that behind the glass, away from the noise, their family was safe. That no matter what happened on the ice, there was something waiting for them after.

But as the season pushed toward its end, the days at home grew shorter and the amount of games in distant cities increased. The playoffs were approaching, and Ottawa was *good*. Better than good. They'd lost only two games since October: one to the New York Admirals

in a heartbreaking overtime, another to San Francisco by a single goal that still haunted Shane's dreams.

Every other game? They won.

The league was taking notice. The chatter was getting louder. And so were the voices on the ice.

It happened almost every game now. A defenseman would slash Shane after the whistle. A forward would mutter something as they lined up for a face-off. A goalie would stare too long, say too much, cross a line. A wing would not shake hands with Shane and Ilya after losing the game.

At first, Ilya had reacted. His temper was famous for a reason. But somewhere along the way, something shifted. And he did it for Shane.

The anger didn't disappear, it transformed. Every cheap shot, every ugly word, every insult aimed at his family became fuel. He'd take the hit, absorb the words, and then he'd score. Again and again and again.

"Keep talking." he told one particularly obnoxious defenseman after netting his second goal of the night. "I like the motivation."

The guy laughed.

Ilya scored.

The guy shut up after that.

Shane watched it happen, game after game, and felt something swell in his chest.

They were unstoppable.

The final game of the regular season arrived with everything on the line. Win, and they were in the playoffs. Lose, and they'd have to wait and hope.

Their opponent? Montreal Voyageurs.

Of course it was Montreal.

Shane tried to pretend it didn't matter. Tried to tell himself it was just another game, another team, another chance to win. But the moment he stepped onto the ice at the Bell Centre, the ghosts surrounded him.

The Montreal fans booed when his name was announced. Some of them cheered. Most of them just watched, curious and conflicted, still processing the captain who had left them.

The game was brutal from the first puck drop. Montreal was fighting for their own playoff hopes, and they played like it, fast, physical, desperate. Every shift was a battle. Every inch of ice was contested.

Shane scored first, ten minutes in. The arena went silent. Then the boos started again.

Ilya scored next, a beautiful tip-in that left the Montreal goalie helpless. He didn't celebrate. Just skated past the Montreal bench with a look that said everything and nothing.

By the third period, Ottawa was up 3-2. Montreal was pressing hard, throwing everything at the net. The tension was suffocating.

Then, with three minutes left, a Montreal forward, some rookie Shane barely knew, skated past Ilya after a whistle and muttered something under his breath.

Ilya's head snapped around. His stick tightened.

But before he could move, before he could react, Shane was there.

He stepped between them, facing the rookie directly. His voice was low, cold, cutting.

"Say that again. I dare you."

The rookie's eyes widened. His mouth opened, then closed.

Shane didn't move. Didn't blink. Just stared him down until the kid looked away, skating off to his bench with his tail between his legs.

Ilya stared at Shane, something new in his eyes.

"What?" Shane asked, still breathing hard.

Ilya shook his head.

Shane glanced at the Montreal bench, at the fans in the stands, at the building that had once been his home. "I'm done letting people talk about my family." He looked back at Ilya. "We're in this together."

Ilya's face softened, just for a moment. Then the puck dropped, and they were moving again.

Ottawa held on. The final horn sounded. They'd done it.

Playoff bound.

Montreal was done for the season. Again without Shane.

Shane stood at center ice, watching his former teammates skate off, heads down, dreams crushed. He felt something. Not satisfaction, exactly. Just... closure.

Ilya appeared beside him, silent and solid.

"You okay?"

Shane nodded slowly. "Yeah. I think I am."

They walked off together, leaving the ghosts behind.

The playoffs were waiting.

Game seven of the Stanley Cup Final.

Ottawa versus New York. Three games apiece, each one a war, each one leaving both teams battered and desperate.

Now it came down to this: one game, winner take all, on Ottawa ice.

The arena was deafening before the puck even dropped. Every seat filled. Every throat ready to scream. The energy was a living thing, crackling through the air, raising goosebumps on skin.

Shane stood at the bench during warmups, watching the Admirals skate. They looked focused. Determined. So did his team.

Ilya bumped his shoulder. "Nervous?"

"No." Shane shook out his hands. "Ready."

"Good. Me too. Our son is watching, we have to do good."

They shared a confident look and stepped onto the ice for real.

The first face-off was between Ilya and Scott Hunter. Two captains, two veterans, two men who had been in this spot more times than either could count.

Scott smiled as they bent down. "Hope you're ready to lose, Rozanov."

Ilya's lips twitched. "Hope you're ready to go home empty-handed."

"Big talk for someone who's never beaten me in a game seven."

"There's a first time for everything."

The puck dropped. Ilya won it cleanly.

The game was on.

It was brutal from the start. End to end, shift after shift, neither team willing to give an inch. New York's defense was suffocating. Ottawa's forecheck was relentless. Goals came hard and rare. New York first, then Ottawa, then New York again.

By the third period, it was 3-3.

The clock ticked down. Five minutes. Four. Three.

Every shift felt like life or death. Every hit echoed through the arena. The crowd was on its feet, screaming, pleading, willing their team to find something.

Two minutes.

Shane's lungs burned. Ilya's legs ached. But they kept moving, kept pushing, kept believing.

One minute.

New York iced the puck. Ottawa called timeout.

In the huddle, Coach's voice was calm, steady. "We've got sixty seconds. We've got a face-off in their zone. We've got the best team in the league right now. We've got the best duo." He looked at Shane and Ilya. "Figure it out."

They skated to the circle. Scott lined up across from Shane this time, Ilya hovering at the point.

Scott's eyes were tired but still sharp. "Last chance, Hollander."

Shane breathed. "We don't need chances."

"You're down to seconds."

"Seconds are all we need."

The puck dropped.

Shane won it back to Ilya. Ilya moved, drawing defenders, creating chaos. He slid it back to Shane. Shane held, waited, let the defense commit.

Then he saw it. A sliver of space. A fraction of a second.

He passed to Ilya, cut toward the net, and Ilya fed it back to him in one fluid motion. The defense was a step behind. The goalie was shifting. The angle was impossible.

Shane shot.

The puck left his stick with seven seconds on the clock.

It sailed through traffic. Past a defenseman's stick. Past the goalie's glove.

And into the net.

The horn sounded. The red light flashed. The arena exploded.

For one eternal moment, Shane just stood there, staring at the puck in the net, unable to process what had just happened.

Then Ilya hit him like a freight train, a collision of pure joy. Their bodies crashing together as Ilya's arms wrapped around him and lifted him off the ice. Both of them spinning, laughing, crying, Ilya screaming something in Russian that Shane couldn't understand and didn't need to.

"We did it!" Shane shouted against his ear. "We actually did it!"

Ilya's face was wet, his smile so wide it looked like it might crack his face. "We did it!"

Around them, the ice filled with bodies, teammates hugging, falling to their knees, throwing their gloves and sticks into the air. The noise was deafening, beautiful.

Shane slid back down to the ice, and for a moment, they just held each other, foreheads pressed together, breathing the same air, sharing the same heartbeat.

Then the chaos shifted.

Commissioner's voice boomed through the arena, announcing what everyone already knew. Staff flooded the ice, setting up the platform, the table, the gleaming silver trophy that was about to change hands. Important people in suits appeared at center ice, legends of the game, league officials, the kind of faces that meant this was real, this was happening.

Again for Shane and Ilya, but for the first time for both of them at the same time.

Shane squeezed Ilya's hand. "Go. That's you. They're waiting for the captain, not the captain's boyfriend."

Ilya hesitated one more second, then skated toward center ice, toward the trophy, toward history.

The crowd roared as he approached. The Commissioner shook his hand. A few words were exchanged that no one could hear. And then, with the kind of deliberate reverence that only happened in moments like this, the trophy was placed in Ilya's hands.

He lifted it over his head.

The arena lost its collective mind.

Shane watched as tears streamed down his face, as Ilya skated a slow, triumphant lap, the cup held high. Shane and his teammates mobbed him at every turn, reaching out to touch it, to touch him, to share in the impossible dream made real.

Finally, Ilya found Wyatt. He handed off the cup without a word, trusting him completely, and turned.

He skated straight for Shane and pulled him near the center ice.

The crowd seemed to understand, somehow. The noise didn't dim, but it shifted, became something warmer, more knowing. Cameras followed. Eyes followed. The whole world watched as Ilya Rozanov stopped in front of Shane Hollander, took his face in his hands, and kissed him.

Deeply. Thoroughly. With everything they were and everything they'd become.

When they finally broke apart, the arena was somehow even louder.

"*Ya tebya lyublyu.*" Ilya whispered against his lips. "Forever."

Shane laughed, cried, kissed him again. "Forever."

In broadcast booths across the world, commentators were struggling to find words.

: *Ottawa has done it. In seven games, in the final seconds, they've captured the first Stanley Cup in franchise history.*

: *And at the center of it all, Shane Hollander and Ilya Rozanov. Former rivals. Current teammates and partners in every sense of the word. They wrote the winning goal together.*

: *Definitely a story about what happens when you stop fighting each other and start fighting together.*

On the ice, Ilya pulled Shane into another kiss, the Cup gleaming somewhere in the background, the moment frozen in time.

: *Ladies and gentlemen, that's hockey. That's love.*

Chapter End Notes

And that, ladies and gentleman, is the end of PART 2.

PART 3 LET'S GOOOOOOOOOO

Chapter 21: PART THREE: his proposal

Chapter Summary

5 times Ilya tried to propose and it all went wrong.

1 time it all went better than he expected.

Chapter Notes

Hi, everyone!

We've officially entered part three of Hold Me Tight, and with a 5 + 1 chapter with over 9k words!!

Thank you to everyone who is still here with me and enjoying the fic. Hope you like this chapter!

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

One:

The ring had been burning a hole in Ilya's pocket for almost six hours.

He'd put it there that morning, before the game, tucking the small box into his suit jacket with hands that only shook a little. The plan had been simple. After they won the Stanley Cup – and Ilya was relieved they did–, after the confetti settled and after the Cup was hoisted, he would find Shane on the ice, drop to one knee, right there, in front of the world, and ask the question he'd been carrying in his heart for months.

Like Scott Hunter, he'd thought. A show. A statement. Everyone watching.

But somewhere between the second period and the final seven seconds, the plan had started to feel wrong.

Because Shane and Ilya weren't like Scott Hunter. Their love had never been a show. Hunter's love was not a show either, but him and his boyfriend were two completely different people. Ilya's and Shane's love had been secret glances across the ice, stolen hours in hotel rooms, years of yearning and waiting and hiding. When the world finally found out about them, it hadn't been on their terms, it had been grainy parking lot photos and breaking news alerts and a story they didn't get to tell first.

The memory still stung a little, although sometimes they would laugh of it. The world had been surprisingly kind, eventually, but the loss of control was something that was still something Shane would eventually think about. The feeling of having something so precious ripped from their hands before they were ready to share it was sorrowful.

So the ring stayed in his pocket as they lifted the Cup. As they kissed on camera. As the arena exploded and the confetti fell and history was written. He kept it hidden, waiting for the right moment.

Their moment. Not the world's.

The locker room was chaos.

Champagne sprayed everywhere, soaking hair and jerseys and the massive Cup that sat in the center of the room like a gleaming god. Music Harris had chosen blared from somewhere, the speaker was playing something loud and obnoxious that everyone screamed along to. Teammates hugged, cried, laughed, fell over. Coaches got drenched and didn't care.

Shane was pressed against Ilya's side, both of them dripping with champagne and sweat and pure, unbridled joy. His face hurt from smiling of pure happiness.

"Can you believe it?" Shane shouted over the noise.

Ilya pulled him closer, lips brushing his ear. "We have a cup together now, huh?"

Shane's heart did that thing it always did when Ilya got closer with such a huge smile: clenched and expanded all at once.

For a while, they just existed in the chaos, letting it wash over them. Troy did a keg stand using an actual champagne bottle, while other players helped him standing upside-down. Wyatt cried on camera during an interview and then was crying even more in the locker room. But Luca was crying harder, clearly overwhelmed in the best way possible. And Zane was taking pictures of everything, claiming he was 'documenting history'.

Then, slowly, the chaos began to thin.

Teammates, already showered and in their suits, peeled off to find their families, their wives, their kids waiting in the corridors. Coaches shook hands and headed for the press conferences. The equipment staff started the long process of cleaning up, though they'd given up on the champagne hours ago and had decided to end up the cleaning the next day.

Eventually, it was just Shane and Ilya, both on their suits.

The locker room was quiet now, save for the distant echo of celebration somewhere else in the building. The Cup still sat in the center of the room, gleaming in the soft light, waiting to be carried to the trophy room.

And they were alone.

Ilya's heart hammered against his ribs.

This, he thought. *This is the moment.*

He took Shane's hands, turning him gently until they were face to face. Shane looked at him, curious, still buzzing with happiness.

"Ilya?"

"I need to tell you something," he said. His voice came out rougher than he intended. "Something I have been wanting to tell you for a long time. Months. Years, probably."

Shane's eyes softened. "Okay."

"I love you." Ilya's hands tightened on his. "I love you more than I ever thought it was possible to love anyone. You gave me a family. You gave me a home. You gave me..." He laughed, a little wetly. "You gave me everything I never really thought I deserved. And I never thought I would have any of it. For so long, I thought I would be alone. That I deserved to be alone."

Shane shook his head, but Ilya pressed on.

"I was wrong. You showed me I was wrong. Every day, you show me." He squeezed Shane's hands. "And I want to spend the rest of my life showing you. Every day. Forever."

Shane's eyes were bright, glistening. He didn't speak, just pulled Ilya into a hug, burying his face in Ilya's neck, holding him like he was the most precious thing in the world.

"You're my everything, Ilya. And you deserve everything." Shane said, voice muffled and noticeably shaken.

Ilya held him back, one hand cradling the back of his head, breathing him in. His other hand drifted toward his pocket. Toward the ring, the black band with a gold interior.

Now, he thought. *Ask now.*

He opened his mouth...

And the locker room door slammed open.

"ROZANOV! HOLLANDER!"

Wyatt and Troy burst in, if not drunk, already tipsy, loud and carrying another bottle of champagne between them. They were grinning like idiots, completely oblivious to the moment they'd just destroyed.

"Get your asses over here!" Troy bellowed. "We're not done celebrating!"

"You can't hide in here forever!" Wyatt added, already shaking the bottle. "This is for the *captain*!"

Before either of them could react, the cork flew. Champagne sprayed everywhere—over Ilya's head, over Shane's suit, over the exact spot where Ilya's hand had been reaching for the ring.

"*Blyad!*" Ilya muttered.

"Fuck!" Shane said, wiping champagne from his eyes. "Seriously?"

"Seriously!" Troy was already grabbing them, pulling them toward the door. "Come on! The bar's waiting! Everyone wants to see you!"

Ilya looked at Shane, helpless. Shane just smiled, shrugged, and let himself be pulled.

"Later, then." Shane mouthed over his shoulder.

Ilya nodded, his hand still hovering near his pocket. Later. There would be later.

Wyatt stopped at the door, turning back with a grin. "Also... Please don't ever have sex in the locker room. We have to practice here."

"Oh, why?" Ilya started, a fake sadness in his expression?

"Don't care. Just don't." Wyatt disappeared through the door.

Shane was laughing so hard he could barely walk. Ilya shook his head, but he was smiling too.

The ring stayed in his pocket.

Later did come, eventually.

After the bar, after Shane's parents took Theo with them and after the endless congratulations. After the team finally dispersed to their own celebrations, their own families, their own beds. After Shane and Ilya stumbled home at 3 a.m., exhausted and happy and still vaguely sticky with champagne. After that, 'later came'.

They collapsed into bed. Too tired to even put on their underwear after the shower Shane insisted they took, they just lied down fully naked. The house was quiet. The bed was soft. Shane was warm against Ilya's chest.

It would have been perfect.

Except Ilya was asleep before his head hit the pillow, and Shane followed moments later. The ring stayed in Ilya's pocket, ungiven, waiting.

Tomorrow, Ilya thought, in the last moment before sleep took him. *I'll do it tomorrow. There will be a perfect moment. We will make love. It will be what Shane deserves.*

Two:

They did wake up and make love.

Slowly this time, without the desperate urgency of the nights they spent together in the hotels' showers during the season. Morning light filtered through the curtains, painting everything gold, and they moved together like they had all the time in the world. Because now, finally, they did. At least for today.

Shane didn't drink much during the celebrations and Ilya thought it was better to follow his boyfriend's example. They did enjoy the party though. They chatted nonsense with their teammates and friends. They also kissed, not caring about what people would say. They acted like a couple would. Everything was perfect.

Except Shane was not wearing the ring Ilya had bought yet.

"We have to take another shower now." Shane said, his head still resting on Ilya's chest. "And change the sheets. The bed's all dirty."

"Yes. You have a very dirty mind, so when we fuck everything gets really dirty too." Ilya said, pushing Shane closer.

Shane would not contest anymore.

The shower was slow, unhurried, steam curling around them as Ilya's hands worked shampoo into Shane's hair. Then soap over his shoulders, down his back, along every curve and plane of the body he loved so much. Like an aftercare.

Shane leaned into his touch, eyes closed, a soft smile on his lips.

"This is nice." he murmured.

"Just nice? Not amazing? Life-changing?"

"The best thing ever." Shane opened one eye. "Better?"

Ilya kissed his shoulder. "Yes."

Shane laughed, the sound echoing off the tiles, and Ilya felt something expand in his chest. This was what he wanted. Every morning. Every shower. Every day for the rest of his life.

Ask now, a voice whispered.

But Shane was so relaxed, so peaceful. And they were wet, and naked, and the ring was still in his pocket abandoned on the bedroom floor.

Not the moment. Not yet.

After the shower, they made breakfast together.

Ilya handled the eggs. Shane managed the toast and the fruit, moving around the kitchen with the easy grace of someone completely at home.

They worked in comfortable silence, shoulders brushing, hips bumping, stealing kisses between tasks. It was domestic and perfect.

Ilya set the table while Shane plated the food. Two plates, two glasses of orange juice, a small vase of flowers that had definitely not been there before. It was a decoration forgotten in the living room that Ilya thought would look nice in the table, at least for this special moment.

Ilya stood back, surveying the scene. Sunlight streaming through the window. Food steaming on the plates. Shane humming something soft as he poured coffee.

Candles, Ilya thought. I should have bought candles. Then it would be perfect. Then I could-

"So..." Shane said, sliding into his chair, "I was thinking."

Ilya sat across from him, reaching for the orange juice. "About what?"

"After breakfast, I want to pick up Theo. Spend the day with him. Just the three of us." Shane's smile was soft, wistful. "Before everything gets crazy again."

Ilya's hand paused mid-reach, smiling.

"This week is going to be insane." Shane continued, blissfully unaware of Ilya's internal crisis. "Press stuff. Commercials. Interviews. We won't have a moment to ourselves." He reached across the table, covering Ilya's hand with his own. "So today. Just us and him. Okay?"

Ilya nodded, intertwining his fingers with Shane's.

Just us and him. That was the point, wasn't it? They were a family. A real family. And Ilya wanted to make it official, wanted to put a ring on Shane's finger and promise forever in front of everyone who mattered.

And maybe that was the right scenario for a proposal.

They ate breakfast, talked about nothing, laughed at everything. Then they cleaned up together, did the dishes, changed the sheets. Shane's face went pink when Ilya pointed out exactly which stains needed addressing. Not because Ilya cared about laundry that much, but because he loved seeing Shane's freckles light up when suddenly he felt embarrassed about sex.

And then they drove to Shane's parents' house to pick up their son.

Theo was sitting in the living room before raising himself from the ground and saying “Papa” and “Daddy” like those were his favorite words.

Shane scooped him up, pressing kisses to his cheeks until Theo squirmed and laughed.

Ilya watched them, heart full, ring still in his pocket.

Today, he thought. *Today is the day.*

In the afternoon, they settled in the backyard. The sun was warm but not harsh, perfect for a few hours of family time before the madness of the week ahead. Ilya spread a blanket on the grass near the playground, close enough to watch Theo explore it if he wanted to.

Shane arranged Theo's favorite toys: the plush hockey stick, the stacking cups, the squeaky bear that Theo adored. Theo surveyed his kingdom with the gravity of a tiny emperor, then immediately crawled toward the stacking cups.

They watched Theo play, occasionally laugh, scream and throw cups away. The sky was beginning to shift, that golden hour glow that made everything look soft and warm and magical.

Ilya's hand drifted to his pocket. The ring box was there, solid and waiting.

He'd planned it carefully. Simple. Intimate. Nothing like the public spectacle he'd almost attempted on the ice. Just the three of them, in their backyard, with the golden light and the toys and Theo's happy babbling.

He would put the ring box in Theo's tiny hand. Theo would deliver it to Shane, maybe not understanding, but participating, being part of this moment they would tell him about someday. Then Ilya would take Shane's hand, drop to one knee, and ask the question he'd been carrying for months.

Perfect.

He reached for Theo, who was showing signs of wanting to stand, reaching up with both arms. Ilya lifted him, settling him against his chest for a moment and kissed his soft cheeks.

Okay, he thought. *Now I-*

"Fuck!"

Shane's shout cut through the quiet like a knife, doing a fast movement towards his right hand. Ilya clutched Theo protectively against his chest, getting close to Shane in seconds.

"What? What happened?"

Shane held up his hand, wincing. "Something bit me." He examined the spot, already red and swelling. "Shit, I think it was a bee."

Ilya's heart lurched. He knelt beside Shane, shifting Theo onto Shane's lap. "Let me see."

Shane extended his hand, and Ilya took it gently, examining the spot where the stinger was supposed to be.

"I think it fell."

"Not so bad, but take the first aid kit. It's in the kitchen, top drawer left of the sink."

Ilya disappeared into the house, returning moments later with the small white box. Shane watched as he opened it, pulled the antiseptic and a piece of cotton to clean the wound with the kind of focused attention he usually reserved for game tape.

"Okay." Ilya said finally. "All better."

Shane looked at his hand, then at Ilya. "You're good at this."

"Taking care of you, yes." Ilya said before giving a small peck in Shane's lips.

"I think I'm gonna need ice."

Shane scanned the grass, looking for the culprit. Nearby, Shane spotted it, frowning.

"Wait. That's not a bee."

Ilya looked. "What is it, then?"

Shane leaned closer, examining the yellow and black body. "It's a

. See the shape? Bees are rounder. Wasps have that narrow waist. And they keep the stinger after stinging. " He pointed.

Ilya stared at the tiny corpse, worrying.

"They sting multiple times, actually." Shane held up his hand. "Good thing it's dead, but..."

"Wasps are never alone..." Ilya looked around, suddenly wary. "There could be more."

They both looked at Theo, happily gumming a plastic stacking cup, completely unaware of the potential danger.

"I think..." Shane said, already moving. "We should go inside. Now."

"Okay."

They gathered the toys, the blanket, the remnants of their perfect afternoon with impressive speed. Shane scooped up Theo; Ilya grabbed everything else. The wasp stayed where it was, a small casualty of a moment that almost was.

As they reached the back door, Ilya glanced at the sky, still golden, still beautiful, still perfect for the proposal he'd planned.

Not today, he thought.

Not with wasp stings and chaos. Not when they had a baby home and Ilya should me making a call scheduling for an inspection of a possible wasp infestation or something.

Three:

Ilya spent three weeks planning it.

Not that he had much free time. The weeks after the Cup win were a blur of obligations. Interviews, commercials, appearances, more interviews, the kind of relentless media circus that came with being Stanley Cup champions. Every day brought a new camera, a new microphone, a new round of questions about the season, the winning goal, their "incredible love story."

So he planned. Quietly. Carefully.

A restaurant. Somewhere they could just... be. Together. Without cameras or questions or anyone expecting anything from them.

He found a place downtown, not the most exclusive spot in the city, but comfortable. Warm lighting, good reviews, a menu he checked three times to make sure it had things Shane liked. When he called to book a table, the host asked if it was a special occasion.

"Just a date night." Ilya said. "With my partner."

They had a table reserved in a semi-private area, not completely closed off, but tucked away enough that they could pretend they were alone. Ilya booked it three days in advance. No favors. No strings. Just a normal reservation for a normal couple having a normal date.

It was going to be perfect.

The night arrived.

Shane came out of the bedroom wearing dark jeans and a deep green sweater that Ilya had never seen before. The color made his eyes look like the lake at the cottage. His hair – longer now, softer, curling slightly at the ends – fell across his forehead in a way that made Ilya's brain short-circuit.

For a solid ten seconds, Ilya forgot how to breathe.

"What?" Shane asked, self-consciously tucking a strand behind his ear. "Do I look bad?"

"You are perfect." Ilya's voice came out rough, almost reverent. "You are... The most beautiful thing I have ever seen."

Shane's cheeks went pink. "It's just a new sweater."

"It is not just a sweater. It is you. And your hair..." Ilya stepped closer, reaching out to touch the ends. "When did it get so long?"

"I don't know. Months? We've been busy."

"It is... very sexy."

Shane's blush deepened. "Ilya."

"It is." Ilya's hand slid to the back of his neck, pulling him closer. "When we get back tonight, I am going to do a lot of things to you. Many things."

Shane's breath hitched. "You can't say that before we leave."

"Why not?"

"Because now I'm going to be thinking about it all night." Shane pressed a hand to Ilya's chest, gently pushing him back. "And we have a reservation. And we have to leave Theo at my parents'."

"Fine. We go." He picked Theo up in his arms and kissed his head. "We have nice dinner and pretend to be normal people."

"We are normal people."

Shane laughed, bright and free, and followed him out the door.

The restaurant was perfect.

Warm lighting. Comfortable booths. A low hum of conversation that felt cozy instead of overwhelming. Their table was in a corner, slightly elevated, with a view of the rest of the room but enough privacy to feel like they were in their own little world.

The menu had everything Shane loved. Ilya watched him read, watched his expressions shift from delight to indecision to delight again, and felt his heart swell.

"This place is amazing," Shane said. "How did you find it?"

"Research."

"Research?"

"I looked for places with food you like. This one had good food you like." Ilya shrugged. "It is not complicated."

Shane smiled at him across the table, soft and warm. "You're sweet."

They ordered wine. They ordered food. They talked about nothing and everything, like Theo's newest words, the cottage, the off-season plans, how ridiculous Wyatt had been during their last commercial shoot. Shane laughed so hard at one point that he snorted, which made Ilya laugh, which made Shane laugh harder. And then they remembered the commercial they had shot together after the draft back in 2010.

This was it. This was what Ilya wanted. They surrounded by memories, by good food, Shane smiling all the time, their hands and feet together above the table.

The ring box sat heavy in his pocket, waiting.

Dinner came and went. The food was incredible. The wine was perfect. Shane was just held Ilya's hand, tracing patterns on his skin, and Ilya thought his heart might actually burst.

Now, he thought. *Now is the-*

"Excuse me? I'm so sorry to interrupt."

A couple stood at the edge of their table, young and nervous and clearly thrilled. The woman was practically vibrating. The man kept glancing at his phone like he couldn't believe they'd actually done this.

"We're huge fans." the woman said. "Like, huge. We watched every game of the playoffs. That goal in game seven..." She pressed a hand to her chest. "I cried. My boyfriend cried. We both cried."

"It was very emotional." the man agreed.

Shane, gracious as always, smiled. "Thank you."

"Could we... would it be okay... a picture? Just one? We promise we'll leave you alone after."

Ilya looked at Shane. Shane looked at Ilya. Shane squeezed his hand under the table.

"Of course." Ilya said. "One picture."

They posed. The couple took three pictures. Then the woman wanted one with just her and Shane. Then the man wanted one with just him and Ilya. Then they wanted another of the four of them together, which required flagging down a waiter to take it.

By the time they finally left, Ilya's wine was warm and the moment had slipped away.

"Didn't expect people to recognize us tonight." Shane said, squeezing Ilya's hand.

Ilya squeezed back. "Yes."

Dessert arrived. Something that for Ilya was kind of decadent, but made Shane happy. Ilya watched him, distracted, running through scenarios in his head.

After dessert. Before the paying. Here. Okay.

"Everything okay?" Shane asked, licking a way too dark chocolate off his spoon.

Ilya blinked. "Yes. Fine. Just thinking."

"About what?"

About you. About the ring.

Ilya smiled and cleaned a drop of chocolate from Shane's mouth. "Is dessert good?"

Shane looked at him for a long moment, something knowing in his eyes. But he didn't push. Just went back to his chocolate.

"It's great! Eat it too, it's for both of us."

Ilya reached for his spoon, but then he stopped. He was overthinking too much, making too many excuses because he wanted to be perfect. However, it was already going to be perfect, because it was him and Shane and forever waiting. They had Theo, they had all the love they needed.

That was it.

He directed his hand to his pocket and-

"Mr. Rozanov! Mr. Hollander!"

Another group. Larger this time. Four people, all clearly a few drinks in, all absolutely delighted to have spotted them.

"We're from out of town!" one announced. "Came all the way from Vancouver to celebrate the Cup win! Can we get a selfie? Please?"

Ilya's hand tightened on the ring box. A few quiet seconds passed, the group didn't seem to sense the mood. So, Ilya breathed deep.

"Of course." he said, because what else could he say? He wasn't going to be rude, especially when he was with Shane.

More pictures. More questions. More congratulations on the season, on the Cup, on their 'beautiful family'. One of them asked about their son. Another wanted to know if they were planning more kids. A third offered unsolicited parenting advice. Shane somehow dodged all the invasive questions with grace.

By the time they left, the restaurant had started to empty. The waiter appeared with the check, apologizing for the interruptions and saying the dessert was on the house.

Ilya didn't care, he paid without looking at the total.

In the car, Shane leaned against him, warm and content.

"Tonight was perfect." he murmured.

Ilya kissed his hair. "Yes, okay."

"It was." Shane reinforced.

"If you don't think about people coming over to take pictures or talking like if we didn't know how to be parents."

"But we were together and food was really good." Shane kissed him softly in the mouth.
"And you're going to do things to me when we get home too."

Ilya looked at him, his eyes darkening and traveling to Shane's mouth.

"Okay, Hollander, it was perfect. Now drive." He said quickly, turning the engine for Shane so he could drive already.

Shane laughed and started driving.

The ring stayed in Ilya's pocket.

Another time.

Four:

After the restaurant disaster, Ilya reevaluated his entire approach.

Public places were cursed. That was the only explanation. Every time he tried to create a romantic moment anywhere with other around, the universe found a way to intervene. Champagne. Wasps. Fans. That one very persistent couple from Vancouver who had somehow taken seventeen pictures.

And gardens? Definitely cursed. Bees. Wasps. Aggressive insects that attacked at the worst possible moments. No. Never again.

So. New plan.

Private. Intimate. Home.

Ilya needed somewhere truly special. Somewhere that meant something.

The cottage.

They were going there anyway, a whole week away, just the three of them. Theo was old enough now to enjoy the lake, the grass, the endless sky. Shane had been talking about it for

weeks, planning activities, making lists of things to pack. It was going to be perfect.

And in the middle of that perfection, Ilya would find his moment.

The ring came with them, tucked safely in his bag, wrapped in a sock so Shane wouldn't accidentally find it while unpacking. Ilya checked on it every few hours, making sure it was still there, still waiting, still ready.

The first few days at the cottage were everything they'd hoped for.

Theo discovered the lake stones and was fascinated. He sat in it, pulled at it, tried to eat it – quickly stopped by Shane. He watched the birds with intense concentration. He laughed at the wind, at the lake. He was, in every possible way, perfect.

They took him to the water's edge, letting his tiny feet dip into the lake. He shrieked with delight. The piled up little stones that he immediately destroyed. They lay on a blanket and watched clouds and pointed out shapes to each other. Ilya would hold Theo in his arms while jumping up and down inside the water, Theo loved it.

And Ilya was waiting for the right moment. A sunset. A quiet evening after Theo went to sleep. A chance to finally, *finally* ask the question.

On the fourth night, everything aligned.

Theo had been perfect all day. Played hard. Ate well. Fell asleep at seven with barely a fuss. Ilya and Shane ate dinner on the porch, watching the sun sink over the lake, painting the sky in shades of orange and pink and gold.

The wine was good. The food was simple. The conversation was easy.

Ilya's heart raced.

Now, he thought. *This is it. The perfect moment.*

He reached for Shane's hand across the table. Shane took it, smiling softly.

"I love this place so much." Shane said. "I love that we can come here. That Theo gets to grow up with this."

Ilya nodded. "He will learn to swim here. To skip stones. I can learn how to fish so we can teach him too. That's a thing in Canada, right?"

"I don't know." Shane laughed, and the sound was so beautiful, so *right*, that Ilya almost pulled out the ring right there. "Maybe some families go fishing."

Later, he thought. When we move to the couch. When it's darker. When the moment is absolutely perfect. Shane will love it.

They cleared the dishes together. Shane went to check on Theo, even though the monitor showed him sleeping peacefully. Ilya used the moment to retrieve the ring from his bag, tucking it into his pocket.

Ready. Finally ready.

Shane came back, smiling. "Still out. I think we actually have a full night."

"We do." Ilya pulled him toward the couch. "Come."

They settled together, Shane curled against Ilya's chest, the fire crackling softly. The cottage was quiet. The lake was still. The world felt like it was holding its breath.

Ilya kissed Shane and reached into his pocket.

But Shane shifted. "Did you hear that?"

"What?"

"I thought I heard..." Shane sat up, listening. "Theo?"

Silence.

Ilya sat up too, paying attention.

Then, the baby monitor crackled and the crying sound came.

Not just any cry, the full-throated, inconsolable wail that meant something was *wrong*. Not a hunger cry. Not a wet diaper cry. This was pain. Distress.

They were both moving before they consciously decided to, down the hall, into Theo's room.

Shane quickly reached him in bed.

"He is burning up!"

His face was flushed, his skin hot to the touch, his cries ragged and desperate. Shane scooped him up immediately, cradling him against his chest, bouncing gently. Ilya grabbed the thermometer and his phone in his other pocket.

"Call the pediatrician." Shane said, his voice calm but tight. "Now."

Ilya called. The next three hours were a blur.

The pediatrician talked them through it. Fever protocol, cold compresses, infant Tylenol, signs to watch for. They stripped Theo down, sponged him with cool water, held him through every wave of misery. He cried. They cried a little too. They took turns walking him, rocking him, singing to him.

By midnight, the fever broke.

Theo's cries softened to whimpers, then to silence, then to the soft, even breathing of exhausted sleep. Shane held him against his chest, rocking slowly, tears still wet on his cheeks.

"You're okay." Shane whispered. "You're okay."

Ilya wrapped his arms around both of them, pressing kisses to Shane's hair, to Theo's downy head. "He is okay."

They stayed like that for a long time, the three of them tangled together. Eventually, they moved to the bed, Theo between them, still sleeping, still safe. They didn't sleep much. Just watched him, breathed with him, reminded themselves that he was okay.

The ring waited in Ilya's pocket, forgotten.

All he cared about now was taking care of his son.

During the night, the fever kept coming and going, and they would move and do everything the doctor told them to do.

In the morning, Theo woke up a little tired and didn't want to eat much. Shane made scrambled eggs. Ilya made toast. They ate together on the porch, the three of them, watching the lake wake up. Theo really liked watching the lake, but all he wanted was to rest in Ilya's or Shane's chest, something unusual in the mornings.

Ilya's hand caressed Theo's head, while enjoying the sound of the calma waters.

Shane was enjoying a different view, of how similar Ilya and Theo were physically. He wished he knew Ilya when he was a child to see if their son was like his little version, because Shane was definitely not as much as agitated as Theo when he was a child.

"Last night was scary." Ilya said quietly.

"Yeah." Shane said, sighing. "We should probably go back today to take him to the doctor."

Ilya nodded and placed chin on top of Theo's head, protective. "Yes."

The ring waited. It could wait.

Five:

The idea came to Ilya on a random Tuesday.

They were lying in bed, Theo finally asleep after a long evening, and Shane was scrolling through his phone. He paused on a photo from almost a year ago, the night they'd left Theo with his parents, the night they'd had the house to themselves, the night that had ended with them tangled together on the living room, on the kitchen, on their bed.

"Remember this?" Shane asked, smiling softly.

Ilya remembered. Vividly. "Yes."

"We should do that again sometime. A real getaway. Just us."

Ilya's heart kicked against his ribs. "Where would you want to go?"

Shane thought about it. "Montreal, maybe? Close by. A nice hotel. Good food. No responsibilities for a whole weekend." He glanced at Ilya. "Too much?"

"Not enough." Ilya said.

"I will plan it, then."

And he did.

Two nights at the most luxurious hotel in Montreal. A suite with a king bed and a view of the city. They would order service room for dinner and they would have time. Just time, for the two of them, with nothing to do but be together.

Shane's parents were thrilled to take Theo for the weekend. Yuna practically shooed them out the door. "Go. We've got this."

The drive to Montreal was easy, comfortable. They talked about a few things they could improve for next season in the team, how Ottawa was likely to raise Shane's salary deal after they won the Cup, how they should tell the team to plan a intimate party for after the hockey camp, so the rookies could get along.

They held hands, smiled at each other like idiots and enjoyed the views outside the car windows.

The hotel was even better than Ilya had hoped. The suite was beautiful, all warm lighting and soft sheets and a bathroom with a tub big enough for two.

"Every time I enter a hotel room I remember when we would secretly meet each other before our games."

"It was hot." Ilya hugged Shane, facing him.

Shane kissed him then, slow and sweet.

Dinner was perfect. The food, the wine, the way Shane's eyes crinkled when he laughed. Ilya watched him across the table and kept thinking how lucky he was.

Back in the room, the evening took a natural turn.

They were kissing before the door fully closed, stumbling toward the bed, hands everywhere. Shane's shirt hit the floor. Ilya's followed. They fell onto the mattress, still kissing, still touching, still *wanting*.

Shane pulled back just enough to look at him; flushed, breathless and beautiful.

"I love you." he said. "I love you so fucking much."

Ilya's hands framed his face. "I love you too."

Ilya opened his mouth. The words were there. *Marry me. Please. Forever.*

He turned them both in the bed, his body pressing Shane's against the mattress, and started kissing his neck, chest and stomach. Shane's little moans were music to his ears, a very hot and sexy song.

That was it. Simple. Them. Both of them in their most intimate moments, loving each other deeply and profound. So Ilya reached for his pocket.

Empty.

His hand froze. He patted again. Nothing. The pocket where the ring box had been, where it *should* have been, was empty.

"Everything okay?" Shane asked, brow furrowing.

Ilya's mind raced. When had he last felt it? In the car? At dinner? On the walk? Had it fallen out? Been stolen? Lost?

Fuck, he should have left it in their bedroom.

"Yes." he said, forcing a smile. "Just... thought I felt something."

Shane's expression shifted to concern. "Felt what?"

"Ah... Just a... My belly."

"Are you feeling nauseous or something?" Shane sat down, making Ilya do the same. "I told you you should not eat that much cheese at on go, Ilya. You want to stop? I can order something from the pharmacy."

"No." Ilya leaned down, kissed him again, tried to pour everything into it. "No stopping. I want you."

"We can't have sex if you're feeling bad." He said with a hand on Ilya's chest.

“It’s nothing. I was wrong. I want to fuck you.” He said, the, sly.

Shane laughed, but he was genuinely concerned. “What are you feeling, really?”

“Nothing, Hollander. You see how hard I am? I am so horny right now that even my stomach got scared.”

Shane relaxed into him. “Okay. I’ll believe you.”

“Good.”

Ilya let himself be pulled under, getting back on kissing all of Shane. The ring was gone for now. He'd find it later. After. When Shane was asleep. When he could search without raising suspicion.

They made love. Fast, deep, desperate but they took their time. Shane's sounds, hands and body against his almost made Ilya forget about the now missing ring. Turns out he was going through a quiet panic he couldn't quite silence.

After, Shane drifted toward sleep, warm and satisfied in Ilya's arms. Ilya held him, counting breaths, waiting.

Finally, Shane's breathing evened out. His body went heavy. Asleep.

Ilya waited another ten minutes to be sure. Then, carefully, he extracted himself from Shane's arms and slipped out of bed.

The room was dark, lit only by the city glow through the curtains. He moved quietly, checking the floor where they'd undressed. Nothing. His pants, abandoned near the door, he patted the pockets. Empty. The bathroom counter. The nightstand. His bag.

Nothing. Nothing. NOTHING.

He was on his hands and knees, peering under the bed, when a voice came from behind him.

"Ilya?"

He froze.

Shane was sitting up, blinking in the darkness, confused. "What are you doing?"

Ilya's brain scrambled and he immediately stood on his feet with a nonchalant face and a shirt on his hands he grabbed quickly before standing up. "I was picking up clothes. They were on the floor. Messy. You don't like messy."

Shane looked as Ilya picked up more clothes, accumulating a small pile on his arms. Then at the floor, which still had a few items scattered. Then back at Ilya.

"...Okay."

Ilya dumped the clothes on the armchair. "Go back to sleep. I am coming."

Shane lay back down, but his eyes stayed open, watching as Ilya climbed into bed and wrapped himself around him, the big spoon, heart still hammering.

"Ilya." Shane's voice was soft. "Are you sure you're okay?"

"Yes. Fine. Tired." Ilya kissed his shoulder. "Sleep."

For a long moment, Shane was quiet. Ilya thought maybe he'd let it go.

Then: "I was remembering when I found out I was pregnant."

Ilya's arms tightened around him. "Were you?"

"I was so scared. I didn't know what to do." Shane's voice was distant, remembering. "I were at my parents' house for a while after that and... sometimes I would just... sit in my bedroom and think about it. About you."

Ilya pressed closer. "I wish I had been there."

"I know that now."

"I wish I had known. From the beginning. I would have..." Ilya stopped, swallowing. "I would have been there. Every day. Every moment. You should not have gone through that alone."

Shane turned in his arms, shifting until they were face to face in the darkness. His eyes glistened.

"But I wasn't alone. Not really." He reached up, touching Ilya's face. "I had my parents. I had Theo." He smiled and pressed Ilya's hand to his chest, over his heart. "And you were here the whole time."

Ilya's throat tightened. "I should have been *there*. Physically. Holding you. Telling you it would be okay."

"You're here now." Shane's thumb traced his cheekbone. "And everything turned out okay."

They lay in silence for a moment, breathing together.

"I think about that All-Star Game sometimes." Shane said quietly. "The one in Tampa. When we finally played together for the first time."

Ilya nodded. He remembered. The way Shane approached him after the all the 'Rose situation'. How he confessed his feelings and how Ilya didn't run away, wanting to tell he felt the same. The way something had shifted, finally, after years of pretending. Their feelings

hadn't shifted – they only got bigger, really –, but their minds were opening up to their possibilities together.

"We learned how to communicate that weekend." Shane continued. "Really communicate. Not just..." He gestured vaguely. "... bodies and secrets. Actual words."

"I think we learned to listen." Ilya agreed. "To what our bodies had been saying for years. And our bodies had been saying the same thing the whole time. We just refused to hear it."

"Yes..." Shane caressed Ilya's face, certain he was the most beautiful human being ever.

Ilya kissed his forehead. "We were stubborn."

"Very much."

Another pause. Shane's hand was still on his face, still tracing, still grounding.

"I love you." Ilya said. "You and Theo. You are the best thing that has ever happened to me."

Shane's eyes went bright.

"I love hockey." Ilya continued. "I love winning. I love the ice and the crowd and the sound of the puck hitting the net. But compared to you... compared to him..." He shook his head. "It is a small thing. Very small thing. Very little thing. Everything is pretty small compared to you two."

A tear slipped down Shane's cheek.

Ilya caught it with his thumb. "You are my everything. Both of you. Forever."

Shane grabbed his face and kissed him; fierce, desperate, full of everything he couldn't say right now. Ilya kissed back, pouring himself into it, letting Shane feel what words couldn't express.

Their hands started moving. Touching. Needing.

The missing ring was forgotten.

It was somewhere. Ilya would find it later. Tomorrow. Or they'd go home and he'd find it there, in some pocket, some bag, some corner of their life.

But lying here, kissing Shane, Ilya realized something. He really did realize this time.

He didn't need the perfect moment. He didn't need candles or sunsets or fancy dinners. He just needed this. Them. Together.

The ring would come. The question would be asked. But this, this quiet, this closeness, this love, was already perfect the way it was.

Shane shifted, his hands finding Ilya's shoulders, and with a gentle push, he rolled them until Ilya's back pressed against the mattress and Shane was on top, straddling his hips. The city lights from the window cast shadows across Ilya's face, his eyes dark and hungry, watching every movement.

Shane spread his legs wider on both sides of Ilya's hips, settling into place. He held Ilya's face with both hands, thumbs tracing the sharp cheekbones he'd memorized years ago, and kissed him deeply. Slow at first, then deeper, pouring everything into it.

When he finally pulled back, breathless, he didn't stop. His lips found Ilya's jaw, then his neck, pressing kisses along the pulse point that hammered beneath his mouth. Lower. His chest. The space between his pectorals.

And then Ilya's breath caught as Shane's mouth closed over one nipple, teeth grazing, then biting just hard enough to make him gasp. His hands flew to Shane's hair, gripping, holding on.

"*Blyad*." Ilya breathed.

Shane smiled against his skin and kept going.

Little kisses. Little bites. Trailing down, down, down Ilya's stomach, feeling the muscles jump beneath his lips. He paused at the happy trail, that dark line of hair that disappeared below Ilya's waistband, and pressed a reverent kiss there.

"I love this part of you." Shane murmured against his skin. "Your happy trail. Makes me very happy, actually."

Ilya's laugh was wrecked, breathless. "You just love knowing my dick is right at the end of it."

"I do."

Shane smiled and continued his path, kissing around, never on, the place Ilya desperately wanted him. Ilya's hips twitched involuntarily.

"You are..." Ilya gasped. "You have always been the most provocative, Hollander."

Shane looked up at him through his lashes, innocent and wicked all at once. "You taught me to be like this."

And then, finally, he took Ilya into his mouth.

There was nothing gentle about it. Shane was desperate, hungry, moving with an urgency that made Ilya's vision blur. His hands tangled in Shane's hair, not pulling and trying not to move his hips into fucking Shane's mouth, just holding, grounding himself as pleasure built.

"I'm close." Ilya warned, his voice ragged. "Fuck! Shane, stop-"

Shane pulled off immediately, lips swollen, eyes bright. He crawled back up Ilya's body, settling into place again, legs spread on either side of Ilya's hips.

"Fuck me." Shane said.

Ilya didn't need to be told twice. If he didn't hold on his shit together, he could cum just by looking at Shane being like that, all needy.

He reached for his bag on the nightstand, pulling out two condoms and the lube. His hands were shaking slightly as he opened the first packet, and he didn't even try to hide it from Shane anymore, cause he loved seeing Ilya like that too.

Ilya was going to put the first condom on Shane's, but Shane caught his wrist before he could do it.

"I want you to watch me come." Shane said.

Ilya's eyes went dark. A curse slipped from his lips in Russian, low and reverent, as Shane took the condom from him and rolled it onto Ilya's length with deliberate slowness. Then the lube, poured generously, Shane's hand working it in until Ilya was shaking.

Shane positioned himself above Ilya's dick, one hand braced on Ilya's chest, the other guiding. He sank down slowly, agonizingly slowly, all at once.

They both stopped breathing.

Shane's head fell back, a sound escaping him that was almost a sob. Ilya's hands flew to his hips, holding, not moving, just feeling. The stretch. The fullness. The impossible rightness of being connected like this.

For a long moment, neither of them moved. Shane's chest heaved. Ilya's thumbs traced circles on his hip bones.

"You okay?" Ilya whispered.

Shane opened his eyes. Met his gaze. Nodded.

Then he started to move.

He rode Ilya with a rhythm that was part desperation, part devotion. His hands found Ilya's, interlacing their fingers, using them as leverage. The sounds he made, gasps, moans, broken syllables that might have been Ilya's name, filled the room.

"*Tak krasivo*" Ilya breathed. *So beautiful.* "You are so beautiful."

"Harder." Shane gasped. "Please..."

Ilya sat up in one fluid motion, his spine straightening, bringing them chest to chest. Then he pulled Shane up with him until he was straddling his lap, legs wrapped around Ilya's waist. His hands found Shane's ass, each palm cupping a cheek, gripping hard.

They kissed, teeth clashing, tongues finding each other with desperate hunger, noses brushing as they fought for more, deeper, closer.

Then Ilya moved.

Shane gasped against his mouth as Ilya crawled on his knees across the bed, guiding them both toward the headboard while still connected. Every inch that moved was a wave of pleasure that broke in every corner of their bodies.

Shane's back hit the headboard with a soft thud, and Ilya didn't stop. Couldn't stop. He fucked into him fast and deep, still holding Shane's legs, opening him wider, taking him deeper. Shane's head fell back, a scream tearing from his throat, his nails digging into Ilya's shoulders.

He looked down.

Between them, Ilya's cock was buried inside him, moving in and out, slick and perfect, and his own was making a loud noise against Ilya's chest at each movement. The sight of it, the sight of them, sent something electric through Shane's entire body. He watched, mesmerized, as Ilya fucked him hard, as their bodies moved together like they'd been designed for this.

"I'm cu... Oh my God..."

Ilya kissed Shane's forehead and looked down too.

And Shane came.

Hard. Violent. Perfect. His cum spilled between them, hot and messy, hitting Ilya's chest, his chin, streaking across his skin. The sight of Shane's release, Shane's face and Shane's body shuddering around him pushed Ilya over the edge.

He came with a groan, low and hoarse, buried deep inside the man he loved.

For a long moment, neither of them moved. They just breathed, loud, ragged and desperate breaths, staring at each other like they were the only two people in the universe. Minds spinning. Hearts racing. Bodies still connected, still trembling.

Shane's gaze dropped to Ilya's lips. Red. Swollen. Perfect.

Then lower. To his chin. To the evidence of Shane's pleasure still marking his skin.

Shane leaned forward and licked it off.

Slowly. Deliberately. His tongue traced along Ilya's jaw, collecting himself, tasting himself. Ilya shuddered, a fresh wave of sensation rippling through him, and buried his face in Shane's neck.

They stayed like that for a breath. Two. Three.

Then Ilya gently lowered them both, laying Shane on the bed and settling beside him. Shane pulled Ilya closer, guiding his head to rest on his chest, right over his heart.

They didn't speak. Didn't need to.

Ilya's ear pressed to Shane's chest, listening to the steady thump of the heart that belonged to him. Of the one he belonged to. Shane's fingers traced lazy patterns through Ilya's hair.

They could communicate with a look now. A touch. A breath.

They were two completely different people, but just one soul.

+1:

Ilya woke to sunlight.

He blinked slowly, still heavy with sleep, and didn't feel Shane against his skin.

His eyes opened enough to get a glimpse of the bedroom. Shane was sitting up beside him, back resting against the headboard, gaze fixed on the window. The city of Montreal glittered beyond the glass, but Shane wasn't really seeing it. He was somewhere else, soft and distant, his hands folded together in his lap like he was holding something precious.

Probably just thinking, Ilya thought, still foggy. *He does that. Thinks.*

He shifted, the sheets rustling.

Shane moved fast, faster than someone just thinking should move. One hand disappeared beneath the sheets, then emerged empty, reaching for Ilya.

"Morning." Shane said, voice warm.

Ilya took his hand, squeezed. "Morning."

Shane leaned down and pressed a kiss to his forehead, soft and lingering. "Sleep well?"

"Mm. You?"

"Fine." Shane's thumb traced over Ilya's knuckles. "You can sleep more. It's not even six yet."

Ilya considered this. Considered the warmth of the bed, the comfort of Shane's hand in his, the rare luxury of a morning with nowhere to be. But his body right now felt wrong without Shane's skin against his.

"I will sleep." he said, "Only if you sleep."

Shane smiled, soft and familiar, and slid back down beside him. They settled face to face, close enough to share breath, and Shane's hand came up to trace Ilya's jaw, his cheek, the line of his brow.

Ilya let his eyes close, let himself drift in the feeling of being touched so gently, so *loved*.

Then Shane spoke.

"I wanted to come here." he said quietly. "To this hotel. To Montreal. With you."

Ilya opened his eyes. Shane was looking at him with an expression he couldn't quite name.

"I've been thinking..." Shane continued. "... about how we say 'I love you.' We say it all the time. Morning, night, in between. We say it so much that sometimes I worry..." He laughed softly. "I worry me or you will stop hearing it. That it'll become background noise. Just words."

Ilya shook his head. "Never."

"I know. I know. But I wanted..." Shane's hand stilled on his face. "I wanted to show you. In a way you couldn't miss."

He reached behind himself, above the sheets, and pulled out a small box.

A small blue one. A ring box.

Ilya's heart stopped.

"Shane..." he breathed.

"I got this one months ago. I was waiting for the perfect moment, but I realized every moment we share together is very much perfect."

Ilya couldn't speak. Could only stare.

Shane held out the box. "So. Ilya Rozanov. Will you marry me?"

Ilya's hand moved before his brain caught up, his ring finger extending toward Shane. He laughed, a wet, surprised, beautiful sound.

"Yes." he managed. "I will marry you, Shane Hollander."

Shane slid the ring onto his finger. A black band with a gold interior, just like the one Ilya chose himself.

It fit perfectly. Of course it did. Shane had been spending months trying to measure it somehow. He had to trust his instincts at the end and of course they were right.

He lifted Ilya's hand and pressed a kiss to the ring, then leaned in and kissed Ilya on the mouth, soft, deep, full of everything.

When they broke apart, Ilya was grinning, crying a little, completely overwhelmed.

"This is..." He shook his head. "This is exactly what I wanted. Except... I wanted to be the one asking."

"I know." Shane was grinning too.

Ilya opened his mouth to respond, but Shane moved fast and then, in the next second, Ilya felt something press into his other hand.

He looked down.

A black ring box. His ring box. The one he'd lost. The one he'd been searching for.

Shane was smiling, soft and knowing. "Now you ask."

Ilya stared at the box. At Shane. At the box again.

"You..." He couldn't find words. "You had it the whole time?"

Shane laughed, bright and nervous. "I know you've been trying. Multiple times. But I just found the box this morning while going to the bathroom. Imagine my surprise when I found out we chose the same ring."

Ilya opened the box. His ring, the one he'd chosen for Shane, gleamed up at him.

He looked at Shane. Shane looked at him.

"So, Shane Hollander..." Ilya said, pretending to be nonchalant. Shane laughed and Ilya smiled. "Will you marry me?"

Shane extended his left hand, ring finger ready. "Yes. I will marry you too, Ilya Rozanov."

Ilya slid the ring onto his finger. It fit perfectly. Ilya sighed in relief.

They looked at each other, rings on both their hands, morning light around them, the city of Montreal waking up outside their window.

"I can't believe you beat me to it." Ilya said.

Shane shrugged, still grinning. "You were taking too long."

"I was not taking too long. People and insects were getting in the way."

"Insects?" Shane looked at him curious. "Were you going to proposed the day a wasp stinged me?"

"Theo was going to bring the box to you and then I would propose."

Shane sighed. "That would have been really romantic."

"Of course, I'm very romantic."

Ilya kissed Shane's hand above the ring.

It wasn't the proposal Ilya had planned, but it was definitely romantic.

And it was much better.

Chapter End Notes

I have an important thing to clarify to you before, as always, saying that I'll see you soon for the next update.

Someone noticed while reading chapter 18 that there was an AI-generated line mixed into the narration and asked if I used AI to write the story, and if so, that I should mark it as AI-generated.

I was really confused at first and went to check it like it was some kind of joke, but it was really there. So I have to explain what happened, cause I am embarrassed as fuck right now.

As I mentioned in the notes of chapter one, I'm not a native English speaker. My only way to practice is by watching things in English, writing, or reading English content, since I'm surrounded by a completely different language every day. While writing chapter 18, I was having a hard time with the locker room scene where Shane tells Montreal the truth about him and Ilya. Grammatically and in terms of cohesion, it was really complex for me to make sense of what I was trying to write. So I took a specific part and sent it to a friend who also writes for AO3 and speaks English (though not fluently) and that was my mistake.

I asked her if she could correct that part for me. She said yes and sent it back a few minutes later. I did not check it, cause I fucking trusted her with that, thanked her and pasted it into my Google Docs, later posting it on AO3.

When someone pointed that out, I felt so embarrassed and frustrated that I went back to the chapter and changed a few parts in the locker room scene (nothing that will alter the story, I just went back to what I wrote before sending this piece to her, and turns out there were just a few changes), because I was really upset about it.

So honestly, I'm sorry for that mistake. I should have been more careful with revising my writing and should have talked to an actual beta reader to review the chapter. I felt really bad about it because I've been using my entire vacation to write this fic, and it's been bringing me a lot of joy. So I want to clarify: no, I did not use AI to develop the plot, narration, dialogues, or anything related to creative territory. I also have not use it to fix my english or correct any mistakes in terms of the language. I have not used it at all.

That being said, I still undersand if you want to drop the story. I really did not mean to tarnish a story that means so much to me and that have occupied special places in your hearts.

So, if if decide to stay, see you soon for the next chapter <3

Chapter 22: his firsts

They didn't want to wait.

After months of stolen moments and a lot of failed proposals, after finally being engaged, Shane and Ilya looked at each other one night and made a decision. They were going to marry in the middle of August, in a private and very intimate ceremony in their backyard. It would happen in a late afternoon, when the light would be soft and the weather wouldn't be so warm, since it was summer.

When the day came, it was all perfect. A few hours before, Shane and Ilya woke up together, kissed, exchanged little quiet 'I love you's and felt the soft breeze of the morning carrying the scent of cut grass and flowers entering their bedroom windows.

In the beginning of the afternoon, the backyard had been transformed already. White chairs lined up in neat rows, each tied with a simple blue ribbon. An aisle of white petals led to the arch at the end, draped in white fabric and covered with cascading flowers: white and blue peonies and other tiny blooms Shane couldn't name.

The sun was just beginning its late afternoon gold, painting everything in warm light when Shane stood in the bedroom, staring at himself in the mirror.

White suit. Crisp. Clean. Perfect. The fabric caught the light in a way that made it look almost luminous. His hair was longer now, curling slightly at the ends, and Rose had done something with it that made him look like he belonged in a magazine.

Behind him, Rose appeared in the mirror's reflection, leaning against the doorframe.

"You're going to make him cry."

Shane smiled, adjusting his cuff.

"He's going to cry anyway." Yuna said.

"He's not gonna cry." Shane said, though his voice wavered. "He saw me less than an hour ago."

Rose snorted. "Babe, you two are getting married. He's going to take one look at you in that suit and lose its entire mind."

"He's not..."

Yuna stepped forward, fixing his collar even though it didn't need fixing. Her hands were gentle, sure, the same hands that had buttoned his coat for prom, that had smoothed his hair before a hundred games.

"My baby is going to get married." She said softly, caressing his cheeks like a proud mother. "You ready?" she asked.

Shane looked at her. At Rose. At the door beyond, where music would soon start and his whole future waited.

He thought about Ilya. About Theo. About the life they'd built.

He took a breath. Let it out. Nodded.

"Yeah." His voice was steady now. Sure. "I'm ready."

Yuna kissed his cheek. Rose squeezed his hand. They left him alone with the mirror and the suit and the, and Shane realized there was no weight at all like people used to say when talking about marriage. Everything was light and good. Just like he wanted it to be.

In another room, Ilya was doing the same ritual. Getting ready, but with Svetlana.

The bedroom was quieter than Shane's. Just Ilya, standing before the mirror, and Svetlana, leaning against the dresser with that familiar smirk he'd known since childhood.

Black suit. Sharp. Elegant. The kind of suit that made people forget how to breathe. It fit him like it had been made for this moment.

Because it had, actually. He and Shane had their suits tailored weeks ago.

His hair was perfect. The usual.

His jaw was set. Determined.

His hands were shaking.

Svetlana noticed immediately. Of course she did. She'd known him too long to miss the small tells; the way his fingers trembled when he was nervous, the slight tension in his shoulders.

She moved to stand beside him, meeting his eyes in the mirror.

"Nervous?" She asked in Russian.

Ilya felt something loosen in his chest at the sound of his mother tongue. English was everywhere now, it was Shane's language, the language of hockey and Canada and everything he'd built. But Russian was still his heart. Still the language of home. He was glad Theo was picking up a few Russian words already, even forming little phrases too.

"No." he replied.

Svetlana's smirk widened. "You're shaking."

"It's cold."

She glanced at the window, open just a crack to let in the summer breeze. "It's summer."

"It's less warm than usual."

"Okay." She crossed her arms, clearly enjoying this. "So you're nervous."

Ilya held her gaze in the mirror for a long moment. Then, slowly, he nodded. Finally honest.

Svetlana's expression softened. She stepped in front of him, blocking his view of the mirror, and reached up to adjust his hair, a tiny movement on the right side, completely unnecessary, but somehow grounding.

"If you think about it..." She said quietly. "Nothing will change."

Ilya blinked.

"You two." She gestured vaguely. "You're already his. He's already yours. This is just..." She searched for the word. "... celebration. Of something that already exists."

Ilya stared at her and nodded, holding her hands.

"Yes, it is."

They stood in silence for a moment. From somewhere outside, music drifted through the open window, soft and instrumental.

"I've got the rings." She said, showing the box that was resting in her dress pocket. "I'll give it him when the time comes."

Ilya smiled adorably, not wanting to wait to see his son walking towards him and Shane.

Svetlana reached up and kissed his cheek, a quick, familiar gesture from their childhood. "You're ready. Go marry your man."

Ilya took a breath. Let it out. Nodded.

"Yeah," he said. "I am."

Ilya walked out of the bedroom and through the house, each step carrying him closer to the back door, to the backyard, to the life waiting for him on the other side.

Svetlana walked beside him, silent now, a steady presence.

At the door, she squeezed his hand once, then slipped away to find her place next to the altar, where Rose, Hayden and Wyatt should be already.

And then a hand landed on his shoulder.

He turned. David stood beside him, Shane's father, solid and warm, his eyes suspiciously bright behind the smile.

"Thought you might want some company." David said quietly. "For the walk."

Ilya stared at him. "I..."

"Shane's my son. I walked him down plenty of aisles in his life. First day of school. First hockey game. First time he left for the NHL. I'm sure Yuna can handle him." David's voice roughened slightly. "I can walk my other son to the altar now."

David squeezed his arm gently. "You know..." he murmured. "...when you and Shane told me and Yuna about you two I thought '*this is going to be complicated*'."

Ilya's lips twitched. "It was."

"It was." David agreed. "But then I watched you with him. Watched you with Theo. Watched the way you look at my son like he hung the moon." He paused. "That's when I knew you were family already."

Ilya felt something hot behind his eyes.

David's voice was gruff, thick with emotion. "You're not just marrying my son today. You're becoming my son too." He squeezed Ilya's arm one more time. "Welcome to the family, Ilya. Officially."

"Thank you."

Ilya couldn't speak more than that. Could only surprisingly hug David, who laughed softly and hugged him back.

They walked together.

The aisle stretched before them, white petals scattered like a path through a dream. Faces blurred on either side, friends, teammates, family. At the altar, waiting, was the officiant.

They reached the altar. David clasped Ilya's shoulder once, then stepped back to find his seat.

Ilya stood alone at the altar, facing the aisle, waiting.

The music shifted again. Softer. Slower.

And there he was.

Shane appeared at the back of the aisle, his mother on his right, they both framed by the arch of the house behind them, glowing in the golden light.

Yuna walked beside him, one hand on his arm, steadying him.

The world narrowed. The guests disappeared. The flowers, the music, the perfect summer evening, all of it faded until there was only Shane. Walking. Smiling. Eyes wet.

Ilya forgot how to breathe.

Shane reached the altar. Yuna kissed his cheek and slipped away to her seat. And then it was just them, Ilya and Shane, face to face, hands reaching for each other like they'd been doing this dance their whole lives.

"You look..." Ilya started, voice rough.

"So do you."

Shane glanced over Ilya's shoulder, toward where David had returned to his seat. "Did my dad just-"

"Walk me down the aisle? Yes." Ilya's voice cracked. "He said I'm his son."

Shane's eyes went impossibly wetter.

Shane smiled, bright and wet and beautiful. "Good. Because you're stuck with us now."

The officiant cleared her throat gently. "Should we... start?"

They barely heard her. They were too busy looking at each other.

They didn't exchange vows, although Rose complained about it. They exchanged rings after Theo got a few laughs from the guests, which he adored. The rings were thin gold bands to sit beside the black engagement rings they'd already been wearing.

"Ilya Rozanov." The officiant smiled. "Do you take this man to be your husband?"

Ilya's voice rang out clear and strong. "I do."

"Shane Hollander. Do you take this man to be your husband?"

Shane laughed, tears streaming. "I do."

"Then by the power vested in me, I pronounce you married. You may kiss."

They kissed holding each other's cheeks, more laughing than kissing.

And the crowd erupted.

The party that followed was small but perfect.

String lights had been hung everywhere, transforming the backyard into a fairyland as the sun set. Music was playing in the soundbox. A tent held tables of food and a cake that Theo wanted to eat as soon as possible.

"Harris wanted to play Dua Lipa." Wyatt explained, shaking his head as some of them gathered at the side of the dance floor. "Actually, no... he wanted *Diamonds* by Rihanna. For their first dance."

Zane's eyes went wide with horror. "Diamonds? ..."

"It's a good song, for the first dance." Harris offered, defending his choice.

"I stopped him." Troy confirmed. "And when we get married, I'll stop him again."

"When?" Harris asked smiling largely, to which Troy responded with a kiss on his nose.

Ilya's and Shane's first dance was slow. Simple. Perfect.

Chasing Cars by Snow Patrol filled the warm evening air as Shane and Ilya held each other in the middle of the dance floor. They barely moved, just swayed, foreheads together, eyes closed.

"If I lay here..." Ilya murmured, "if I just lay here..."

"Would you lie with me and just forget the world?" Shane finished, smiling.

Ilya looked at him with surprise. "You know this song."

"You've been humming it for weeks. I grew quite fond of it."

Ilya kissed his forehead. "It reminds me of us."

Shane pulled him closer and they danced staring at each other's eyes.

They danced. The world faded away. Around them, their family and friends watched, smiling, crying, celebrating.

At the edge of the dance floor, Theo sat on Wyatt's lap, watching his dads with big eyes. He didn't understand weddings. But he understood love. He saw it every day.

"Those are your dads." Wyatt whispered to him. "They love each other more than anything."

Theo nodded laughing. "They love me too!"

"Yeah, buddy. They really do."

Later, after the cake was eaten and the toasts were made and the last guests finally wandered home. Yuna and David took James in a promise to throw a sleepover party, but Shane and Ilya were sure he would sleep as soon as he got to his grandfather's house.

Now the backyard was quiet, still, suspended in that perfect moment between celebration and whatever came next. Shane and Ilya stood in the middle of it all, alone at last.

The string lights still glowed overhead, casting soft gold across the grass. The flowers still smelled sweet. The white chairs still stood in their neat rows, patient witnesses to everything that had happened, waiting for morning to come and take them away.

Ilya pulled Shane close, wrapping both arms around his waist, resting his chin on Shane's shoulder.

"I am your husband now." he murmured against his ear.

Shane shivered, not from cold, never from cold with Ilya this near. "You are." He tilted his head back, looking at Ilya above the stars that already covered the sky. "We're married."

"We are."

"I don't really feel like something has changed." Shane admitted quietly. "But I loved it. Every second."

Ilya pressed a kiss to his hair, breathing him in. "It's good. Showing you around. Telling people you're my husband now."

Shane laughed, the sound vibrating through both of them. "Yeah, I heard you saying that to everyone. As if they didn't know they were at our wedding."

"I wanted to be sure."

"Sure of what?"

Ilya tightened his arms. "Everyone falls in love with you. I had to make sure they knew you are taken."

Shane came up to cup Ilya's cheeks. "They don't fall in love with me."

"They do. They absolutely do."

"Who?" Shane was grinning now, playing along. "Our teammates?"

"They are all very open minded. It is possible."

Shane's thumbs traced Ilya's cheekbones, soft and slow. "But all I want is you." He kissed Ilya's nose. "All I need is you." His forehead. "All I crave is you." His chin. "And you're the one and only who will always have all of me."

He finished with a kiss, a small, soft peck that was somehow more intimate than anything they'd done all night.

Ilya breathed in deep. Let it out hard. "See? You can enchant anyone."

Shane laughed, bright and free. "Shut up and take me to bed, Rozanov. I thought I made it clear with my love declaration."

"Oh, you did." Ilya's voice dropped, that familiar rumble that always made Shane's stomach flip. "But I like when you get impatient. The bed gets more interesting that way. Wilder."

"Is that a promise?"

"It is a guarantee."

Ilya swept him up suddenly, one arm under his knees, the other around his back, carrying him slowly toward the house like they were in some kind of movie. Shane laughed, arms around his neck, pressing kisses to whatever skin he could reach.

Ilya carried Shane to their room, laid him on the bed like he was something precious, and stood back just long enough to look.

White suit, slightly rumpled now. Hair falling every which way. Eyes bright with love and want and everything they'd built together.

"I love you." Ilya said, grinning after. "I love you."

Shane reached up, pulling him down. "Show me how much."

Ilya did.

Life after the wedding settled into something warm and comfortable and absolutely beautiful.

Shane and Ilya kept playing for Ottawa, now using their wedding rings, and the team kept winning. There was something about that core group that just worked. They clicked on ice and off, a family in every way that mattered.

The seasons blurred together. Playoffs. Victories. Losses. More victories. Back-to-back cups just like Shane did with Montreal, who was going through a very ugly phase since Shane left. Theo grew, and the cottage grew with him, new toys in the yard, new books on the shelves, new memories layered over old ones until the walls themselves seemed to hum with love.

And through it all, Theo continued growing up.

The first time he stepped on skates at the Ottawa arena, the whole team came to watch.

He was three and a half, small and determined, wearing skates that Ilya Shane bought especially for his tiny feet. Troy held one hand. Wyatt held the other. Between them, Theo wobbled onto the ice like a baby deer taking its first steps.

"Papa! Daddy! Ya na ldu! " Theo shrieked. *Papa! Daddy! I'm on the ice!*

Shane looked at Ilya. "He said he's on the ice, right?"

"Yes." Ilya said, too concentrated recording Theo on his phone.

Ilya nodded and stopped recording, but was still looking at Theo. His phone hung loosely in his hand, forgotten for the moment. On the ice, Troy was helping Theo to his feet again, making exaggerated encouraging faces that had Theo giggling.

"My mom used to skate with me when the lake near home was frozen."

Shane's heart gave a small, familiar squeeze. He knew this story. Not the details, not really, but the shape of it. The love underneath. The loss that never quite healed.

"Near your home?" Shane asked gently. "In Russia?"

Ilya nodded. "There was a lake behind our building. Not big. But in winter, it froze. She would take me out every weekend when my father wasn't home. She was not very good at skating." A small smile touched his lips. "She wobbled more than Theo does now."

Shane smiled too, but his eyes were on Ilya, watching the way his face softened with memory.

"But she tried." Ilya continued. "For me. She put on old skates and she went out on that ice and she let me hold her hands and pull her around. I thought she was having fun." He paused. "I realized she was just happy to see me happy. That was enough for her."

Shane moved closer, their shoulders touching, his hand finding Ilya's. On the ice, Theo had discovered that if he fell intentionally, Troy would pick him up and spin him around, so he was now falling on purpose every few seconds.

"She sounds incredible," Shane said quietly.

"She was." Ilya's voice was steady, but Shane could hear the depth beneath it. "She was sad. Very sad. I did not understand it then. But she loved me. I know she loved me very much. And I love her very much too."

Shane squeezed his hand. He thought about all the times Ilya had mentioned his mother, always with tenderness, always with a kind of quiet reverence. He thought about the twelve-year-old boy who had found her. The weight Ilya had carried ever since.

"I wish she could have met you." Ilya said suddenly. "Met Theo. Seen this. She would've love you."

"I think she is watching." Shane said softly. Ilya looked at him, smiling. "I think she's here every time you're happy."

Ilya's breath caught. His eyes went bright, dangerously bright, and he looked away quickly, toward Theo, toward the chaos, toward anything that might steady him.

Shane let him have the moment. Just stood beside him, holding his hand, being present.

After a long pause, Ilya spoke again. "He looks like her, sometimes. The way his eyes crinkle when he laughs."

"Yeah?"

"Yes."

"So I think you've got that from her too, because your eyes also crinkle When you laugh."

Ilya snorted, but he was smiling now, eyes crinkling, which made Shane kiss his cheek.

On the ice, Theo had convinced Troy to pull him around in circles, his delighted shrieks echoing off the boards. Wyatt was filming now. Zane was timing how long Theo could stay upright. Luca was hovering nearby, ready to catch.

Shane tugged Ilya's hand. "Come on. Let's go play with him too."

Ilya nodded, and they skated forward together, onto the ice, into the chaos, into the life they'd built.

Theo spotted them and immediately changed direction, wobbling toward them with arms outstretched.

"Papa! Daddy! Watch me!"

"We're watching, *malysh*." Ilya called back, his voice steady now, full and warm.

And they watched. Played some more. Taught him how to hold the stick.

On the ice, Theo took another tumble, laughed, and scrambled back to his feet. The Ottawa players would roar with laughter. Shane and Ilya were glad he found it funny, meaning all the extra pads they had put on him were working and he was not getting hurt.

The hair conversation started like this:

Theo ran through the living room, chasing a ball, his dark blonde curls bouncing with every step. Light brown in some lights, almost golden in others, thick and wild and impossibly soft. He looked like a tiny lion, all energy and chaos and *hair*.

Shane watched him, heart full. Then he glanced at Ilya.

"We have to talk about the hair."

Ilya's face immediately fell. "No."

"Yes. It's in his eyes. It's in his food. He tripped yesterday."

"That was not the hair. That was the rug."

"The rug didn't trip him. The hair flopped into his eyes and he couldn't see the rug."

They had cut Theo's hair a few times over the years, never much, just a little trim here, a little shaping there, enough to keep it out of his eyes or tidy the back where it got hopelessly tangled during naps. But neither of them had the heart to take off more than necessary, and somehow there was always a reason to wait: summer was coming and the length would keep his neck from burning, or winter was coming and he needed the warmth, or he just looked so sweet with it curling around his ears that they couldn't bear to change him. So the trims remained exactly that: small snips, barely noticeable. And Theo's hair kept growing, longer and longer, until it wasn't so much that they had cut it as that they had merely visited the edges while the rest of it carried on, wild and soft and stubbornly, beautifully his.

Ilya was quiet for a long moment. Then, quietly: "I like his hair."

"I know." Shane moved closer, taking his hand. "I do too. It's beautiful. But he's starting school soon. He needs to see."

"School." Ilya's voice went strange. "School is another thing we need to talk about."

"We will. But first: hair."

Ilya sighed, long and dramatic. "A trim. A small one. Just enough to see."

"We have been doing 'a trim' for years now, babe." Shane squeezed his hand. "We have to cut it. At least to look like yours."

Ilya's hand went instinctively to his own hair.

"Like mine?"

"Like yours. Short, but not too much. Still curly." Shane smiled gently. "He'll still be Theo. And he would look like little you."

"Hm. Little me, but with freckles." Ilya's voice was barely a whisper. "But I love his hair."

Shane moved closer, wrapping both arms around Ilya, pulling him into a hug right there on the couch. "I know." he murmured. "I do to. Every time he falls asleep on me, my hand goes straight to his hair. It's automatic."

Ilya nodded against his shoulder.

"But here's the thing." Shane pulled back, meeting his eyes. "He's not going to stop being soft just because his hair is shorter. And his hair will continue to grow."

Ilya was quiet for a long moment. Then, slowly, he nodded. "Okay."

The haircut appointment arrived like a sentence. They took Theo to the same kids' salon where they'd taken him for his first trim, the one with chairs shaped like cars and cartoons playing on screens.

Theo bounced with excitement, completely unaware of the emotional turmoil his fathers, especially Ilya, were experiencing.

"I want the fire truck!" he announced, pointing.

"You got it, buddy." The stylist, a cheerful woman named Marie who had somehow survived three years of anxious hockey parents, helped him into the red fire truck chair.

Ilya stood frozen in the doorway. Shane grabbed his hand. Pulled him forward.

Marie glanced at them, clearly used to this. "So, Theo, what are we doing today?"

Theo looked at his dads. "Daddy? Papa?" Shane crouched down to his level.

"We're going to cut your hair a little shorter. Like Papa's. So you can see better and run faster."

Theo considered this. "Will it hurt?"

"Nope. Not at all. Marie is really good at this."

Theo nodded seriously. "Like Papa's."

Ilya made a small sound, something between a whimper and a sob before Marie got to work.

The scissors flashed. Curls fell to the floor in soft piles, each one a tiny monument to something ending. Ilya watched, eyes bright. Shane watched too, but he was also watching Ilya. Memorizing this moment. The way Ilya's jaw tightened with every snip. The way his breath caught when Marie revealed a patch of Theo's forehead. The way his eyes went impossibly soft when Theo laughed at himself in the mirror. "I'm Papa now!"

Ilya laughed, wet and surprised.

"You look very pretty."

When it was done, Theo looked like a different child. His hair was short now, a little darker but still with a golden glow like Ilya's, now with just enough wave to remind them of the curls that used to be. His face was fully visible, bright eyes, sharp little nose, that smile that could light up any room.

"What do you think?" Shane asked.

Theo studied himself in the mirror. Touched his hair. Touched his forehead. Touched his ears, which were suddenly visible.

"I'm handsome!" he announced.

Shane laughed. "You were always handsome."

"Now I'm more handsome." Ilya let go of Shane's hand long enough to scoop Theo up, burying his face in his son's newly short hair.

"*Ty prekrasen.*" he whispered. You're beautiful. "*Vsegda byl. Vsegda budesh.*" Always were. Always will be.

That night, after Theo was asleep, Shane found Ilya sitting on the edge of their bed, holding a small Ziploc bag full of Theo's curls. Shane sat beside him.

"Let's put it in his memory box."

"Yes, I will do that." Ilya's voice was rough.

"We can show him when he's older."

"When he's a teenager and hates us."

"When he is a teenager and loves us but pretends not to." Shane laughed.

The next morning, Theo ran into their room at dawn, bouncing on the bed, his new haircut already messy from sleep.

"Papa! Daddy! Wake up! I'm hungry!"

Shane groaned. Ilya pulled him close.

"Dobroye utro, malysh," Ilya murmured. Good morning, little one.

"Dobroye utro, Papa! " Theo bounced harder. "Good morning, Daddy! " Shane smiled, eyes still closed.

"Dobroye utro, baby." Theo laughed, like he did everytime Shane would say something in Russian.

Then he bounced off the bed and ran toward the kitchen, already shouting about pancakes. Shane and Ilya lay there for a moment, listening to their son's chaos echo through the house.

"His hair looks really good now." Ilya said quietly. Shane smiled, kissing him before getting up.

Outside, the sun was rising. Inside, their son was demanding pancakes. And in a small wooden box on the highest shelf, a piece of his babyhood waited, safe and soft and eternal, his memory box.

It was, Shane thought, a pretty perfect life.

Theo discovered questions. Not just questions, a LOT of questions. Why, how, what if, when, where do, can we, is it possible. His mind worked like a tiny machine, constantly processing, constantly wondering, constantly demanding answers from parents who quickly ran out of

them. The world was new and strange and endlessly fascinating, and Theo wanted to understand every piece of it.

"Why is the sky blue, Papa?"

"Why do we have to sleep, Daddy?"

"Where does the water go when I flush?"

"Where was I before I was born?"

"When my toys fall they get hurt?"

Shane, patient and steady, answered what he could and deflected what he couldn't. Ilya was more creative, invented answers that made Theo laugh.

"Papa?" Theo called one day during dinner, looking up from his plate with spaghetti sauce smeared across his cheek like a battle wound. His fork, loaded with exactly one noodle, hovered in mid-air.

Ilya glanced over from his chair. "Ya, malysh?"

"If I swallowed a seed..." Theo began, his brow furrowing with the intense gravity of a philosopher unraveling the mysteries of existence, "... and then I drank water... would a tree grow in my tummy?"

Ilya's hand stilled on the pot handle. Shane tried to contain a laugh to get Theo into thinking the question was dumb. For a 2 and a half year old it wasn't, after all. Ilya looked at Shane, who just grinned, leaning back in his chair, clearly settling in to watch the show.

Ilya turned back to Theo. His son's eyes were wide, waiting. Sincere. This was not a joke to him. This was a legitimate scientific inquiry.

"Um." Ilya dropped his fork. "Well. That is... a very good question."

Think. Photosynthesis. Stomach acid. Germination. Too complex. Too boring. He's not three yet.

"The thing is..." Ilya continued, stalling, "... your tummy is very warm. And dark. Like a cave." He was making this up as he went. "And seeds, they like... they like soil. And sun. They need to breathe."

Theo considered this, nodding slowly. "My tummy has air. I breathe." He patted his belly. "Air goes in there, Daddy told me."

Shit. He's good.

"Yes, but..." Ilya ran a hand through his hair. "But it is the wrong *kind* of air. For trees." He was digging himself deeper. "And also, there is no sun in there."

"The sun is outside." Theo agreed. Then, with the devastating logic only a toddler possesses: "But what if I ate the seed *and then* went outside? So the sun could shine on my belly?"

Ilya opened his mouth. Closed it.

He looked at Shane for help. Shane raised his eyebrows, miming a tree growing out of his own stomach, and Ilya had to bite the inside of his cheek to keep from laughing.

"No." Ilya said finally, definitively. Then, softer: "The tree would not grow."

Theo's face began to crumple, disappointed in this boring, tree-less reality.

No. No sad face. Fix it. Quick.

"But..." Ilya said, his voice dropping to a conspiratorial whisper, "if you swallowed a *watermelon* seed? A very special one? Then maybe..." He paused for effect. "Maybe you would grow watermelons in your ears."

Theo stared at him.

For a terrible, suspended moment, Ilya thought he had miscalculated. That Theo would see through the lie, would demand scientific rigor, would tell his grandparents that his papa believed fruit grew from human orifices...

And then Theo giggled.

It started as a small snort, the kind he got from Shane, and then it exploded into a full-body laugh, his whole face lighting up, spaghetti sauce stretching wide with his grin.

"Watermelons in my EARS?" Theo shrieked, slapping his hands over the sides of his head. "That's SILLY, Papa! I cant hold it with my ears, they are heavy!"

"Is silly?" Ilya grinned, relief flooding through him. "So you do not want watermelons here?" He reached out and gently tickled Theo's ear. "And maybe grapes here?" He touched Theo's nose. "And apples..." He pretended to pluck something from Theo's hair. "...growing from your head like hair?"

Theo was gone now, dissolved into helpless giggles, squirming in his chair as Ilya would tickle him more. "Stoy, papa!"

The question didn't stop when Theo was four years old, they just got more complex.

Bedtime routine had gone smoothly: teeth brushed, pajamas on, one story about a very brave turtle, and the requisite two glasses of water that Theo would always ask for him and his pucky plush Wyatt had gifted him on his three-year anniversary.

Ilya was just straightening the blanket when Theo's small hand reached up and grabbed his finger.

"Papa?"

"*Ya, malysh?*"

"Where did I live before I was born?" He asked in Russian.

Ilya froze.

Behind him, Shane, who had been attempting to sneak out of the room, stopped in his tracks, understanding the question. Ilya could feel his husband's presence like a physical weight, hovering in the doorway, absolutely not helping.

Theo's eyes were big and dark in the dim light of his dinosaur lamp. He wasn't being difficult. He genuinely wanted to know, and his brain was doing what it always did, trying to map the world, to find the edges, to understand before and after.

Shane would sometimes question himself if he wasn't too young to be asking those difficult questions.

"Before you were born..." Ilya repeated, buying time, now in English so Shane could intervene (which Ilya hoped for him to do).

"Mm-hmm." Theo nodded, clutching his stuffed puck, or Puckie, tighter. "Was I somewhere else? Was I with Puckie? Puckie doesn't remember."

Ilya's throat went tight. He had not prepared for this. He had prepared for dinosaurs, for why the sky was blue, for why they couldn't have a pet tiger. He had not prepared for *this*.

"Um. Well. You were... you were...." Ilya gestured vaguely. "You were... waiting."

"Waiting where?"

Shit.

"In the stars." Shane said suddenly from the doorway.

Ilya looked up. Shane's face was soft in the low light, his usual sharpness gentled by something tender. He crossed the room and sat on Theo's other side, the mattress dipping with his weight.

"In the stars?" Theo repeated, wonder creeping into his voice.

"Yeah." Shane reached out and brushed a curl from Theo's forehead. "You were a little star, waiting for the right time to come down."

Theo considered this, his fingers absently petting Puckie's stick hand. "Was I shiny?"

"The shiniest." Shane said. "So shiny we could see you from here. Every night, Papa and I would look up and there you were, winking at us."

Ilya watched his husband spin this story, something warm blooming in his chest. Shane caught his eye and gave the tiniest shrug.

"How did I get down?" Theo asked.

And there it was. The inevitable follow-up. The question that had been lurking underneath the first one all along.

Shane opened his mouth. Closed it. Looked at Ilya.

Ilya looked back. *Your turn.*

"How did you get down..." Shane repeated slowly. He could feel the weight of Ilya's barely-contained laughter next to him. "Well. You... you fell."

"I fell?" Theo's eyes went wide. "From the sky?"

"Not exactly fell..." Shane amended quickly. "You... floated. Like a feather."

"Where did I land?"

Shane swallowed. "You landed... in Daddy's tummy." He said, putting a hand in his belly.

Theo's head whipped toward Shane, his mouth dropping open. "You ate me?"

Shane snorted, then tried to cover it with a cough. "No, buddy. I didn't eat you."

"But you said..." Theo was sitting up now, completely awake, his little face a masterpiece of confusion and horror and fascination. "Was I in your tummy? How did I fit?"

Ilya rubbed the back of his neck. This was going spectacularly wrong.

"It's not... you weren't..." Shane started, then stopped, running both hands over his face. He looked at Ilya.

"Okay." Ilya said, taking his turn. "So. It's more like... there was a seed. A very tiny seed."

"Like the watermelon seed?" Theo's eyes lit up. "The one that grows watermelons in ears?"

Ilya winced. "Maybe not exactly like that one."

"But you said-"

"The seed..." Ilya interrupted firmly. "...was inside Daddy. Just a tiny, tiny seed. Smaller than a grain of sand. You couldn't even see it."

"And I was in the seed?" Theo was leaning forward now, utterly captivated.

"Yes. It was your spaceship." Ilya looked at Ilya helplessly.

"Wow! I had one?"

"Yes, but you got too big for it because you grew."

"Like a watermelon?"

No, no, no...

"Like a baby." Shane said quickly. "You grew like a baby. Very slowly. For a long time."

"And then I came out?"

"Then you came out." Shane agreed.

Theo was quiet for a moment, processing. Then he looked down at his own belly, patting it thoughtfully. "Do I have seeds in me?"

Ilya and Shane exchanged a look.

"No, you don't." Ilya said carefully.

"Will I have seeds later?"

"Well... You are more like Papa, you're an alpha, and alphas don't store seeds. Daddy is an omega, so I can store seeds." Shane said.

Theo nodded, apparently satisfied with this. He lay back down, pulling Puckie close. "I was a star." he murmured, already half-asleep. "A shiny star. And I floated into Daddy's tummy like a feather, but with my spaceship."

"Exactly." Ilya whispered.

"And then I grew up."

"Yes."

"How did I get out?"

Shane made a strangled noise that might have been a laugh or a cry for help. Possibly both. Ilya was frozen in place.

Theo's eyes were tired, his body soft with sleep, but his little mouth kept going, that liminal space between waking and dreaming where the really dangerous questions lived.

"Did Daddy sneeze me out?"

Shane clamped a hand over his own mouth, shoulders shaking.

"No." Ilya managed, his voice slightly strangled. "Daddy did not... no."

"Was it like the watermelon?" Theo mumbled, snuggling deeper into his pillow. "Did I come out his ears?"

"Absolutely not." Shane said.

Shane was turning pink, fighting for control, tears of suppressed laughter gathering at the corners of his eyes.

Ilya took a deep breath. He could do this.

"The body." he began carefully. "... has a special place. For babies to come out."

"Where?"

"A place that... opens. When it's time."

"Is it like a door?"

Ilya seized on this desperately. "Yes. Exactly like a door. A special door."

"The tummy has a door?"

"Yes."

Theo's brow furrowed slightly, still half-asleep. "My tummy doesn't have a door."

"When you were ready, there was a door, and you came out."

"A door in Daddy's tummy?"

Ilya stopped. Looked at Shane again.

"The door..." Shane said firmly. "... is not important right now. What's important is that you came out, and you were perfect, and we were so happy to meet you."

"I am happy too." Theo said with his eyes closed before the room went quiet.

They sat there for a long moment, watching their son breathe, the dinosaur lamp casting its gentle glow, the night pressing against the windows.

Finally, Shane leaned over and spoke very quietly.

"So. Just so we're clear. Our child believes he arrived on Earth via interstellar spaceship the size of a grain of sand and performed a feather-like landing into my abdomen."

Ilya snorted softly. "He's gonna be a handful when he's older."

They both looked at Theo. Theo slept on, dreaming whatever four-year-olds dream; stars and spaceships and doors in tummies.

Ilya leaned over and pressed a kiss to Theo's forehead. "Sleep well, *Malenkaya zvezda*" Little start, he whispered.

Theo smiled slightly in his sleep, as if he heard.

And in the quiet of the night, with their son dreaming of distant galaxies, Shane and Ilya sat together and held on to each other, to this moment, to the strange and wonderful truth that a piece of the stars was currently asleep in a dinosaur pajama set and clutching a stuffed puck.

Tomorrow they would wake up and do it all again: the questions, the made-up answers, the impossible task of raising a child who arrived by spaceship.

Later, Ilya collapsed onto the couch next to Shane.

"I think he's going to be a scientist." Shane said. "Or a philosopher."

"He is curious." Shane corrected gently, a soft smile on his face. "Curious is good."

"Is good, but he is too curious, just like you."

"Why am I curious?"

"See? Always asking questions. You too have too many of them since we met." Ilya pulled him closer, kissing his temple. "And you were curious too when we first hook up."

Shane snorted, leaning into the touch. "Maybe."

"Not maybe, you told me so."

"I was confused."

Ilya's eyes glinted with mischief. "You were horny, Hollander."

Shane was quiet for a beat, a grin tugging at his lips.

"... Okay. That too."

One of Shane's favorite things in the world was listening to Ilya and Theo speak Russian together.

It started naturally—Ilya would murmur to Theo in his mother tongue during quiet moments, bedtime stories, gentle reassurances after a fall. Theo, soaking up language like a sponge, started answering back. Not full sentences at first, just words. Then phrases. Then entire conversations that Shane could only follow pieces of.

But he tried.

And sometimes he succeeded.

He'd been studying Russian for years now. Not obsessively, not with any formal lessons, but in stolen moments and as much as he could. A language app on his phone during bus rides. Flashcards during lunch breaks. Listening to Ilya talk to Svetlana on the phone, picking out words, memorizing sounds.

He wasn't fluent. He'd probably never be fluent. But he understood more than Ilya realized.

And nothing – *nothing* – made him happier than watching Ilya's face light up when Theo responded to him in Russian.

"Papa, smotri!" Theo would shout, pointing at something. *Papa, look!*

And Ilya would beam like the sun had just come out.

"Ya vizhu, malysh. Ochen krasivo." *I see it, little one. Very beautiful.*

Shane would watch from across the room, heart swelling, and thinking he was the luckiest person on earth.

Sometimes, when Theo wasn't looking, Shane would try out a phrase. Just a small one. Something he'd practiced.

"Kak ty segodnya?" he'd ask Ilya. *How are you today?*

And Ilya's whole face would shift; surprise, warmth, that particular softness he saved just for Shane.

"Ty uchishsya." Ilya would murmur. *You're learning.*

"Da." Shane would answer, smiling. *Yes.* "Now answer the question, I'm trying to practice, Rozanov."

Shane wouldn't make a big deal of it, but Ilya would. And when they were all alone, Theo in Shane's parents' or spending time with uncle Hayden and aunt Jackie, Ilya would go feral in bed with Hollander speaking Russian, another reason for Shane to learn more and more each day.

Reading came next, and it was like watching a door open in Theo's mind.

He had always loved books, that wasn't new. Since he was two, he would crawl into Shane's or Ilya's lap with a board book, demanding to be read to in whichever language struck his fancy that day. English for Daddy, Russian for Papa, sometimes a chaotic mix of both that left both parents stumbling over pronunciations. The ritual was always the same: a warm lap, an open book, a small finger pointing at pictures while a small voice asked: "What is that? And that? Why is that?"

But somewhere around his fifth birthday, something shifted.

It happened gradually at first. Shane would catch Theo staring at words on cereal boxes, lips moving silently. Ilya noticed him tracing letters with his finger in books, both in Russian and English, not just looking at pictures. They didn't say anything, didn't want to pressure him, didn't want to make it a THING. They just watched, quietly amazed, as their son's brain made connections they couldn't see.

Then one evening, everything clicked.

They were on the couch, Theo tucked under Shane's arm, reading one of his favorite picture books. It was a simple story about a cat and a dog, one they'd read a hundred times before. Shane was half-asleep, letting Theo turn the pages at his own pace, when a small finger jabbed at the page.

"Daddy." Theo's voice was urgent. "That says 'cat.'"

Shane blinked, suddenly very awake. He looked at the word. It did, in fact, say cat.

"Where did you learn that?" Shane asked, sitting up straighter.

Theo shrugged, utterly casual about the whole thing. "The letters." He pointed again. "C-A-T. Cat. It makes this sounds when you read for me."

Shane looked at Ilya, who had frozen mid-sip of his coke across the room. Their eyes met. Ilya set down his cup and was reaching for his phone within seconds, already recording.

"Say something else." Ilya said, trying to keep his voice calm. "Read something else."

Theo studied the page with the concentration of a tiny scholar. "Dog." He pointed. "D-O-G. Dog."

Shane's eyes were already wet.

He pulled Theo closer, kissing the top of his head, those curls they still couldn't bear to cut too short. "You're doing amazing. You're reading."

Theo looked up at him, pleased with his parents' happiness.

From that day on, Theo would try reading everything, although sometimes he thought he would never learn how to read everything. Some words were harder, like his own surname.

"It's so big!" Theo would say when reading Rozanov-Hollander on his own customized jersey.

When they brought him to practice or before the games Theo begged to watch, he would sometimes stand in front of the locker stalls, sounding out letters with intense concentration, only to get overwhelmed halfway through.

"What if I never learn how to spell it?" He asked one time while skating with Shane after practice, with a big pout on his lips, lower lip jutting out in that way that made his father want to scoop him up and never let anything frustrate him again.

"I was once afraid I would never learn how to read or write too, baby." Shane said, the arena quiet and empty, just the two of them gliding across the smooth surface. Theo was getting better on skates every day, though he still wobbled when he tried to go too fast. "But I learned eventually. When you realize, you'll be reading and writing everything, including your own name."

Theo stopped skating, his tiny blades scraping to a halt. He looked up at Shane with those big eyes, so much like Ilya's, filled with doubt. "But... what if I never learn?"

Shane smiled, wide and warm and absolutely certain. He got down, lowering himself until he was facing Theo directly, their eyes level. The ice was cold beneath his left knee, but he didn't care. They both had their skates on, two hockey players having a conversation in the middle of an empty rink.

Shane reached out and took Theo's small, gloved hands.

"Theo." His voice was soft but steady. "Look at me."

Theo looked.

"Do you trust me?"

Theo nodded immediately. No hesitation. "Yes, Daddy."

"Do you trust yourself?"

Theo's brow furrowed. That was harder. He thought about it for a long moment, the way five-year-olds do when they're really considering a question. "I... I don't know."

"That's okay." Shane squeezed his hands. "But I want you to try something. I want you to trust that the boy who learned how to skate, and how to tie his own shoes, and how to ask a million questions every single day, that same boy can learn how to read his own name."

Theo considered this. His nose scrunched.

"Remember when you learned how to skate?" Shane continued. "At first, you fell all the time. Every two seconds. *Boom*, right on your bottom."

Theo giggled. "I remember."

"And what happened? Did you give up?"

"No!" Theo shook his head firmly. "I kept trying to be as good as you and Papa!"

"And now you're a great skater." Shane corrected. "And reading is the same. You're going to fall sometimes. You're going to look at a word and think, 'I'll never get this.' But then you'll try again. And again. And one day, you'll look at that big, scary name, Hollander-Rozanov, all of it, and you'll write it without even thinking."

Theo's eyes went wide. "You think so?"

"I know so." Shane leaned forward, pressing his forehead gently against Theo's. "Because you're my son. And Hollander-Rozanovs don't give up. We fall, we get back up, and we keep going. Together."

Theo was quiet for a moment, processing. Then, slowly, a smile spread across his face.

"Now come on. Let's practice skating to the other end and back. And while we go, you can sound out the words on the boards."

Theo took his hands and pushed off, wobbling forward. "Okay, Daddy. But you have to go slow."

"Don't worry."

They skated together, father and son, across the empty ice. Theo sounded out advertisements on the boards, stumbling over some, getting others right. And every time he got one right, Shane cheered like he'd just scored the winning goal in Game Seven.

By the time they left the ice, Theo was beaming.

"Daddy?" he said as they unlaced their skates.

"Yeah, buddy?"

"I think I can learn it. My big name. I think I can."

Shane pulled him into a hug, skates and all. "I know you can, Theo. And you are a pretty fast learner. I'll tell you a secret." He leaned close to Theo, who was expectant. "I learned how to read only when I was six, almost seven, actually." Shane said slowly and Theo's eyes went wide.

"Seven? That's so old!" Shane laughed.

"It felt old at the time, yeah."

"But you're so good at reading now! You read all the big words."

"I had to practice. For a long time." Shane finished untying his own skate and set it aside, giving Theo his full attention. "You know what? I was the last one in my class to learn, I think." Theo gasped.

"No!"

"Yes. Everyone else could already read, and I was still looking at letters like they were puzzles I couldn't solve."

"But you're smart, Daddy."

"Yes, but back then, I just needed more time." Shane reached over and helped Theo with a particularly stubborn knot. "My mom, your grandma, she stayed with me every night, sounding out words. Same books, over and over, until one day, it just... clicked."

"Clicked?"

"Like a lock opening. Suddenly all the letters made sense, and I couldn't stop reading." Shane smiled at the memory. "After that, Grandma couldn't get me to stop. I'd read at breakfast, at

dinner, under the covers with a flashlight when I was supposed to be sleeping."

Theo giggled.

"So it's okay if I learn how to read when I'm seven?"

Shane's heart swelled. He reached out and cupped Theo's face in his hands.

"It's more than okay, buddy. Everyone learns at their own speed. Some kids learn when they're four. Some learn when they're seven. Some learn when they're ten. The only thing that matters is that you keep trying."

Theo nodded solemnly. "I'll keep trying, Daddy. I promise."

"I know you will." Shane kissed his forehead. "And me and Papa will be right here, helping you with the knots. Soon you'll be reading English and Russian like no one."

"Even the really big words?"

Before Shane could respond, Ilya's voice reached them.

"Especially the really big words. Hollander-Rozanov is a champion-level word. It takes time." Theo grinned and ran towards Ilya to ask for a hug, who took him in his arms. "Ready to go, buddy? Papa finished the meeting."

They waited for Shane to finish unlacing in comfortable silence, the arena quiet around them. They walked out of the arena together, Theo in Ilya's arms and Shane holding his and Ilya's bags.

It became their thing after that. Spelling names. Pointing out words. Building a world out of letters, one sound at a time. Theo would find words everywhere, on signs, on screens, on the backs of jerseys, and announce them with the triumph of someone who had just discovered a superpower.

Eventually, he learned how to write his full name, both in English and in Russian.

And then, somehow, it was time for school.

The night before the big day, neither Shane nor Ilya could sleep.

They lay in bed, Theo between them – he'd crawled in around midnight, as he always did, dragging his favorite stuffed bear and a small book about dinosaurs. The room was dark and quiet, lit only by the soft glow of the nightlight in the hallway. Theo's face was peaceful in sleep, his lips slightly parted, one hand curled around Shane's finger.

They watched him for a long time. Just watched.

"Ty gotov, malysh?" Ilya whispered, stroking Theo's hair with infinite gentleness. *Are you ready, little one?*

"On gotov," Shane answered softly, surprising even himself with the words. *He's ready.*

Ilya turned to him, eyes wide in the dim light. *"Ty ponyal."* *You understood.*

"I understood." Shane smiled, reaching across Theo to touch Ilya's face. "I'm getting good, so you better watch out."

Ilya took his hand and kissed it.

"I love you." Ilya murmured, his lips still against Shane's knuckles. "I love that you learn my language for me. For him."

"I love that you speak it to him." Shane's voice was thick. "It's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen. The way you two talk to each other. The way his face lights up when you say something in Russian and he actually understands."

"He gets that from you. The face-lighting-up part."

"He gets everything from both of us."

They held hands over their sleeping son, fingers intertwined across his small chest, and watched the night slowly turn to morning. The clock ticked. The house settled. Somewhere outside, the world was getting ready for a new day.

And inside, a family of three waited for the sun.

"Are we ready?" Shane whispered in the morning while Theo was still asleep.

Ilya was quiet for a moment. Then: "No. But we will pretend to be. For him."

"That's what parents do, right?"

"That's what parents do."

They lay there, watching Theo breathe, holding onto this last night before everything changed.

It wasn't really changing, they knew. He would still be theirs. Still come home every afternoon, still crawl into their bed at midnight, still ask a million questions and read every sign and spell every name. School was just... more. More people to love him. More things to learn. More of the world opening up.

More life for Ilya, Shane and especially Theo to experience.

Chapter 23: his younger sister

Chapter Notes

Surprise, surprise!!!

Hope you enjoy <3

The house was too quiet.

That was the first thing Shane noticed when he walked through the door after his afternoon with Yuna. No Theo running to greet him, just silence, soft and strange, settling into the corners of the entryway.

He stood there for a moment, letting it sink in. Ten years old. Their baby was ten years old, and he was at a sleepover at his friend Marcus's house, probably eating too much pizza and staying up way too late and not missing his dads at all.

Shane smiled. That was the goal, wasn't it? Raising a kid who felt safe enough to leave, confident enough to be away, happy enough to not look back.

Still. The quiet was strange.

His afternoon with his mother had been wonderful, just the two of them, coffee and conversation, catching up on everything. She'd talked about Dad's latest gardening obsession. He'd talked about Theo's hockey progress. They'd laughed about old photos and cried a little about how fast time moved.

But now, walking into this empty house, Shane felt something shift.

"Ilya?" he called.

No answer.

He moved through the living room, toward the kitchen, and stopped dead.

The table was set. Not just set. Real plates, not the everyday ones. Candles flickering in the center. A vase with fresh flowers, blue and white, the same colors from their wedding all those years ago. Two glasses of wine already poured, catching the candlelight.

And Ilya, leaning against the counter, watching him with that soft smile.

"You're early." Ilya said.

Shane blinked. "You did this?"

Ilya nodded. "I had time. Three hours of time. You think I was just going to sit on the couch?"

Shane laughed, stepping closer. "Ilya. This is..." He gestured at the table, at the flowers, at everything. "This is perfect."

"It's your birthday dinner."

"My birthday is in two weeks."

"I know." Ilya pulled out a chair, gesturing for Shane to sit. "But Theo will be home then, and we will have cake and presents and all the chaos. Tonight, I wanted..." He paused, searching for words. "I wanted you to myself. To celebrate you. Properly." Then he kissed Shane's nape.

Shane sat, still slightly stunned. "You planned this whole thing while I was having coffee with my mom."

"I am very efficient."

"I can see that."

Ilya moved to the stove, lifting lids off pots, revealing food that smelled incredible. "I made all your favorites. Steak. Mashed potatoes. That green bean thing you like."

"The one with the almonds?"

"The one with the almonds." Ilya brought two plates to the table, setting one in front of Shane before sitting across from him. "And for dessert, ice cream."

They ate slowly, talking about when they were younger and stupid, then younger and desperately in love. Shane told him about Yuna, how she was doing, what they'd discussed, the way she'd squeezed his hand when they said goodbye and told him she was proud of him. Ilya listened, asked questions, laughed at the right parts.

Then they talked about practice. The team. Their four Stanley Cups with Ottawa, the most recent from a month ago. A funny thing Wyatt had said in the morning in the middle of practice. A save Luca had made that everyone was still talking about. Theo's latest hockey progress, which was considerable. Normal things. Easy things.

But underneath it all was something else. Something warmer. The knowledge that they had this, time, space and each other. After years of stolen moments and hidden glances, after a decade of parenting and hockey and life, they still fit together perfectly.

After dinner, they moved to the living room, wine glasses in hand. Ilya put on music, soft, instrumental, the kind they'd danced to at their wedding. He held out his hand.

"Dance with me?"

Shane took it. "We never dance, you're really romantic today."

"I'm always romantic. And your mom told me I look like Patrick Swayze sometimes, so I watched Dirty Dancing last week and got inspired."

Shane laughed and they swayed together in the middle of the living room. Ilya's hand was warm on Shane's back. Shane's head rested against Ilya's shoulder. The music played on.

"I love you." Shane murmured. "Thank you for this."

"Thank you for being born. Almost thirty-seven years ago. So I could find you."

Shane laughed softly. "That's a very romantic thing to say."

They danced in silence for a while, letting the music carry them.

"I love you too." Ilya kissed him, slow, sweet, full of years and years of everything. "Happy early birthday, *moy lyubov*."

"I loved it."

"Good. But it's not over yet." Ilya's voice dropped, that familiar rumble that still made Shane's stomach flip. "I have more plans."

"Oh yeah? You do?"

"Yes." Ilya pulled him closer. "Theo's not home until tomorrow afternoon. We don't have practice tomorrow."

Shane grinned. "What should we do then?"

Ilya got his lips really close to Shane's ear before replying: "I was thinking of getting you to our bedroom, rip your clothes off and suck you until you can no longer speak properly."

Shane let out a loud moan, surprising himself and hiding his face in Ilya's neck.

"Fuck. You should hurry." He whispered.

Ilya took Shane by the hand, fingers lacing together, and guided him toward their bedroom. The hallway felt longer than usual, charged with something electric, something that had been building all evening, through dinner and dancing and every look they'd shared across the table.

Shane followed willingly, heart already picking up pace.

Once they were inside, Ilya closed the door behind them with a soft click. The sound sealed them in, shut out the rest of the world, left only this room and this moment and the two of them.

Then Ilya's arms wrapped around him from behind.

Shane let out a breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding, leaning back into the warmth of Ilya's chest. Ilya's lips found the back of his neck, soft at first, barely there, then firmer, pressing against that sensitive spot he'd learned years ago still made Shane shiver.

"*Moy lyubov.*" Ilya murmured against his skin.

Shane couldn't answer. His eyes had fluttered closed, focus narrowing to the sensation of Ilya's mouth trailing slowly across his shoulders. Each kiss was deliberate, unhurried, a map being drawn across his skin. His nape. The curve where his neck met his shoulder. The line of his jaw, just barely reached from this angle.

Ilya's hands moved at the same time, sliding up Shane's sides, over his chest, down his stomach. Tracing. Learning. Remembering. Even after all these years, Ilya still touched him like he was something precious, something worth memorizing.

Shane gripped Ilya's biceps, holding on as the world tilted. His head fell back against Ilya's shoulder, a soft sound escaping him as Ilya's hands found the waistband of his pants. Not pushing, just resting there. Waiting.

"I've wanted this all night. I've waiting to touch you like that for so long." Ilya whispered against his ear.

Shane's breath hitched. "Then stop waiting."

Ilya's hands moved lower.

Shane moaned, quiet and involuntary, lost in the feeling of Ilya's palms pressing against him through the fabric. He could feel himself responding, could feel the heat building, could feel Ilya's own body pressed against his back, hard and ready and wanting.

"I can feel you." Ilya murmured, a smile in his voice.

"Shut up."

"Make me."

Shane turned in his arms, capturing Ilya's mouth with his own. The kiss was deep, years of love pouring into it, and when they finally broke apart, both breathing hard, Shane looked at him with those eyes that would always make Ilya go crazy, even after almost twenty years.

"Bed." he said. "Now."

Ilya didn't need to be told twice. He lifted Shane effortlessly, the way he had a thousand times before, and Shane's legs wrapped around his hips on instinct. His arms locked around Ilya's neck, holding tight as he carried him those few steps to the bed, short distance, long history, every inch of it sacred.

They fell onto the mattress together, a tangle of limbs and laughter. Shane was smiling, because even after all these years, being with Ilya still felt like coming home. The love he felt would still grow every day more and more.

"What?" Ilya asked, hovering above him.

"Nothing." Shane traced his jaw. "Just happy."

Ilya's expression softened into something impossibly tender. "Me too."

Then they were kissing again, slow and deep, and the world narrowed to the space between them.

Clothes came off piece by piece, each garment discarded with care. Shane's shirt first, then Ilya's. A pause to kiss the newly exposed skin. Shane's pants, pushed down by careful hands. Ilya's, kicked off somewhere at the end of the bed. Every movement was deliberate, unhurried, a conversation in itself.

They laughed when Shane's sock got stuck. They smiled when Ilya's head bumped the headboard. There was no rush, no desperate urgency, just the deep, comfortable intimacy of two people who knew each other completely.

But underneath it all, the heat was building.

Shane could feel it in the way Ilya's hands lingered on his skin. In the way Ilya's breath caught when Shane arched into his touch. In the way their bodies pressed together, bare now, skin to skin, heart to heart.

They always felt the urge to possess each other. That hadn't changed in fifteen years. But they'd learned, over time, that the best moments came from waiting. From drawing it out. From letting the tension build until it was almost unbearable, and then, letting go.

Ilya kissed him again, slow and deep, and then his mouth began to wander.

Shane's head fell back as Ilya's lips traced down his throat. Down his chest. Across his stomach. Each kiss was followed by a gentle bite, not enough to hurt, just enough to feel. Just enough to remind Shane that he was wanted, that he was claimed.

Shane shivered. Whimpered. Gripped the sheets.

Ilya looked up at him, eyes dark and full of promise. "You're so beautiful," he murmured against Shane's hip. "Every time. Still."

Shane couldn't answer. Could only moan as Ilya's mouth continued its journey, exploring every inch of him with the kind of devotion that made his heart ache.

By the time Ilya worked his way back up, they were both rock hard, trembling with the effort of holding back.

"Ilya." Shane's voice was rough, desperate.

Ilya kissed him, swallowing the plea. "Not yet."

Shane groaned, but he was smiling.

He kissed Ilya again, deep and claiming, and then with a sudden shift of weight, he flipped them over. Ilya found himself on his back, looking up at Shane straddling him, hair falling messily across his forehead, eyes dark with want.

"My turn." Shane murmured.

Ilya opened his mouth to respond, but the words died in his throat as Shane began to move. His lips traced down Ilya's chest the same way Ilya's had traced his, slow, deliberate, worshipful. Each kiss left a trail of heat. Each gentle bite made Ilya's breath catch.

Shane knew exactly where to touch. After fifteen years, of course he did. His tongue found the spot just below Ilya's collarbone that made him shiver. His teeth grazed a nipple and Ilya's hips bucked involuntarily. His lips pressed against the sensitive skin of Ilya's stomach, right where the muscles tensed in anticipation.

Ilya's moans grew deeper, rougher, escaping without permission. His hands found Shane's hair, threading through it, holding on as the pleasure built.

Then Shane went lower.

Ilya felt the first touch of Shane's tongue against his lower sensitive skin and his whole body jerked. Shane's lips wrapped around the tip, soft and teasing, and Ilya cursed in Russian, —a broken stream of words he couldn't control, wouldn't remember later.

"Blyad, Shane! Bozhe moi!"

Shane looked up at him through his lashes, mouth still working, and the sight alone was almost enough to undo him.

But Shane didn't rush. He knew what Ilya liked, had learned it years ago, had perfected it over time, and he delivered it with exactly the right intensity. Enough to drive Ilya wild. Not enough to push him over the edge. Just enough to keep him hovering there, suspended, stomach rolling with anticipation.

Ilya's grip on Shane's hair tightened. His hips moved in small, helpless thrusts. His moans became words, became pleas, became sounds that weren't quite either.

Minutes passed, or hours, or seconds. Time had no meaning for them anymore.

Then Shane paused. Pulled back. Looked up.

"Fuck my mouth." he said, voice rough, lips swollen. "I want you to fuck my mouth, Ilya."

Ilya's breath stopped. His whole body went still for one electric second.

Then he moved.

He flipped them in one fluid motion, Shane landing on his back beneath him, looking up with those eyes, dark and wanting and completely, utterly his. Ilya positioned himself above

Shane's face, one hand bracing against the headboard, the other threading back into Shane's hair.

"You're sure?" he asked, because he always asked, even now.

Shane's answer was to open his mouth and pull him back in.

Ilya groaned, deep, guttural, uncontrollable. He started slow at first, testing, letting Shane set the rhythm. But Shane's hands on his hips urged him deeper and faster, he wanted more.

So Ilya gave him more.

He thrust into Shane's mouth, careful even in his need, watching Shane's face for any sign of discomfort. There was none. Just Shane's eyes, half-closed, watching him back. Just Shane's moans, vibrating around him, sending sparks up his spine. Just Shane's hands, gripping his thighs, holding him close.

"Fuck!" Ilya gasped. "You're so perfect, Shane. Come here."

Ilya got his dick out of Shane's mouth and pressed three fingers inside it for a while before kissing him deeply. When he stopped, Shane tried following Ilya's lips for more, looking up with questioning eyes. Ilya tugged gently at his hair, before flipping so he was now facing Shane's red and desperate cock.

Shane understood. His body shivered again, longing to have Ilya again in his mouth and to be inside Ilya's.

Shane's knees bracketed Ilya's head; Ilya's shoulders settled between Shane's thighs. They looked at each other upside down, and both of them smiled, because even in the middle of desperation, they could still find joy.

Then Shane's hands found Ilya's hips, pulling him down to take him again, and Ilya's mouth found Shane, and the smiles dissolved into shared moans. It was overwhelming.

Ilya lost himself in the sensation of fucking Shane's mouth while having his own mouth on Shane, the impossible intimacy of giving and receiving at the same time. He couldn't tell where he ended and Shane began. Couldn't separate his own pleasure from the pleasure he was giving. They were tangled together, breathing together, and Ilya was praying they would come together as well, because he would not be able to hold for long.

His hands, which had been gripping Shane's hips, began to move. Slowly at first, teasing, tracing circles on the sensitive skin of Shane's inner thighs. Shane's response was immediate, a shudder, a soft sound around him, a shift of weight that opened him up more.

Ilya's fingers found their target, slick and ready from earlier. He pressed one inside, slow and deliberate, feeling Shane's whole body react. Another sound, muffled by Ilya's skin. Another tremor.

He added a second finger, curling slightly, searching for that spot he knew better than anyone. When he found it, Shane's whole body jerked, a sharp intake of breath, a desperate moan, his

rhythm faltering for just a moment before he found it again. Ilya kept moving, kept touching, kept pushing them both toward the edge. His fingers worked in counterpoint to the rhythm of their mouths, stretching, preparing, loving.

Then Ilya felt it, a shiver running through Shane's body. A tremor that had nothing to do with the act itself and everything to do with the overwhelming intimacy of the moment. Shane was shaking with need, with want, with the sheer intensity of how much he loved this, loved him.

That was what pushed Ilya over. He came with a broken cry, Shane's name tangled in it, spilling into Shane's mouth as his whole body tensed and released. The pleasure ripped through him, wave after wave, and through it all, he felt Shane shudder, felt the warmth of Shane's release against his tongue, knew they had fallen together.

After they both swallowed, they collapsed apart, breathing hard, tangled in sheets and each other. Ilya pulled Shane close, wrapping him in his arms, pressing kisses to whatever skin he could reach.

"You kill me every time, Hollander."

Shane laughed weakly against his chest. "It's too much love, I think."

Ilya kissed his forehead, his temple, his lips. "It's never too much. You are incredible. You are everything."

Shane smiled, soft and satisfied. "I love you so much."

"I love you too, sweetheart."

They lay there tangled together, breathing slowly returning to normal, but it would not last for long, cause as soon as Shane's heart was stabilized, Ilya was already kissing his sensible skin again, wishing for more as Shane asked for more as well.

The room was dark except for the sliver of moonlight cutting through the curtains, painting a silver line across the foot of the bed.

Shane's head rested on Ilya's chest, rising and falling with each breath. Ilya's fingers traced lazy patterns on his back, the way they always did after.

For a long time, neither of them spoke. The silence was enough.

Then Shane shifted, lifting his head just enough to look at Ilya's face in the dim light.

"I was thinking..." he started.

Ilya's lips twitched. "Hm. Dangerous."

"Shut up!" Shane laughed, swatting his chest weakly.

Ilya caught his hand, held it over his heart. "What is that you're thinking now?"

Shane's smile faded into something softer, more thoughtful. He looked away for a moment, gathering words, then back at Ilya.

"I was thinking..." He paused. "I'm not asking because I necessarily want it. Now. Just..."

Ilya's brow furrowed slightly, but his voice stayed gentle. "Shane. Just say it."

Shane took a breath. Let it out.

"What if we... had another baby?"

Ilya's hand stilled on his back. "Another baby?"

"Yeah." Shane's voice was quiet, almost uncertain. "Another baby."

Ilya processed this, his expression shifting through several emotions: surprise, consideration, something warm and wondering underneath.

"You are talking about us having another baby? You getting pregnant?"

Shane nodded. "...Yes."

Ilya was quiet for a moment. Then: "Do you want to?"

Shane shook his head slightly. "I don't know. Do *you* want to?"

"I want if you want."

Shane's brow furrowed. "Me too. I want it if you want it, but..." He hesitated. "I don't want you to want it just because I want it."

Ilya's hand came up to cup Shane's face, thumb tracing his cheekbone. "So you want it?"

Shane met his eyes and after long seconds he confessed: "I do."

"Then I want it too."

Shane shook his head, pulling back just enough to look at him properly. "No, Ilya, you... you can't just want it just because I want it."

Ilya blinked, genuinely confused. "You are confusing me, Hollander."

"You have to want to have another baby because *you* want it. Not because I want it."

"I want."

"No, you don't understand..." Shane gestured with his free hand. "It's a very significant step to just accept. You can't just accept it, you have to want it. Really want it. For yourself. I'm not gonna be mad or sad if you don't want it."

Ilya looked at him for a long moment, something soft and knowing in his eyes. Then he reached up, pulled Shane down, and kissed him.

Shane melted into it for a second before pulling back. "You can't just kiss me like that in the middle of a discussion."

"We are fighting?"

"No, we... We're not." Shane sighed, hiding his face in Ilya's shoulder. "Forget it."

"Shane." Ilya called, making Shane look at him again, and caressed his cheek. "I wanted to kiss you, so I did." Ilya's voice was calm, certain. "Also, I want to have another baby. Because I want to." He paused. "But I am not the one who will carry the baby. That is why I said I want it if you want it too. Because it's your body. Your choice. Always."

Shane stared at him, something shifting in his chest.

"So you want another baby?" he asked quietly. "Actually want one?"

Ilya smiled, soft and real and full of everything. "I want another baby."

Shane felt his eyes sting. "Yeah?"

"Yes." Ilya pulled him closer, pressing a kiss to his forehead. "I want another baby. With you. Another piece of us to love."

Shane buried his face in Ilya's chest, hiding the tears that were definitely forming. "Okay."

"Okay?"

"Okay." Shane's voice was muffled but clear, and then Shane was laughing. "Let's have another baby. I really want it."

Ilya's arms tightened around him. "Not tonight, though. I need to recover."

Shane laughed loudly this time, the sound wet and bright. "Shut up."

They lay there in the dark, holding each other, the future suddenly bigger than it had been an hour ago.

Another baby. Another piece of them. Another life to love.

But before Shane could drift toward sleep, another thought surfaced. One that had been living in the back of his mind for months now, waiting for the right moment to speak it aloud.

"I've been thinking about something else too." he said quietly.

Ilya's hand stilled on his back. "What?"

Shane traced a pattern on Ilya's chest, not looking up. "Retiring."

Ilya went very still.

"Hockey." Shane continued. "I've been thinking about retiring from hockey. After this season."

Ilya was quiet for a long moment. Then: "You love hockey."

"I know." Shane finally looked up. "But I've done everything I wanted to do. Cups. Records. Awards. Playing with you. Winning with you." He smiled softly. "I don't think I have anything left to prove."

Ilya searched his face. "Are you sure?"

"I'm getting there." Shane shifted, propping himself up on one elbow. "I've been thinking about it for a while now. Watching Theo grow up. Thinking about another baby. Realizing that hockey is... it's amazing. It gave me everything. It gave me you. And it's not the only thing anymore."

"What does your heart say?"

Shane pressed Ilya's hand to his chest. "It says you're here. Theo's here. Our future is here. Hockey will always be part of me, but I don't need to play it in the NHL forever to be whole. And I really want to have another baby with you, but I don't think I could get into perfect shape again to continue playing."

"I think you're pretty much capable of it."

"I don't want to, Ilya. I realize I really don't want to."

Ilya was quiet for a long moment. Then, slowly, a smile spread across his face.

"I have been waiting." he said softly.

Shane blinked. "Waiting for what?"

"For you to want to retire." Ilya's thumb traced his cheek. "I have seen you happy on the ice. But I have also seen you tired. We try to be with Theo every time we can, but we still miss things." He paused. "I was not going to push. But I was waiting for you to realize that you could stop."

Shane stared at him. "You've been waiting for me to retire?"

"I have been waiting for you to want to retire. There is a difference." Ilya pulled him closer. "I will support you either way. Always. But if you want to stop, if you want to be home, then I am ready. We are ready. I want to retire too, after this season."

Shane felt tears prick his eyes again. "You really mean that?"

"I really mean that." Ilya kissed his forehead. "You have given enough to hockey. More than enough."

"We have." Shane corrected him.

They lay there in the dark, the weight of the conversation settling around them. Retirement. Another baby.

"Thank you," Shane whispered eventually. "For waiting. For not pushing."

Ilya kissed his hair. "Always, *moy lyubov*. Always."

The new season ended with Ottawa lifting its fifth Stanley Cup in another back-to-back cup. It was a dynasty now, unquestionably, and Shane and Ilya had been there for every single one. But when they announced their retirement together at the following press conference, the media lost its collective mind. Headlines blazed across every sports outlet:

"HOLLANDER AND ROZANOV RETIRE TOGETHER" and *"END OF AN ERA IN OTTAWA"* and, in one particularly dramatic tabloid, *"HOCKEY'S GREATEST LOVE STORY LEAVES THE ICE"*.

Fans mourned, wrote heartfelt tributes, rewatched old highlights with tears in their eyes. But underneath the sadness was something else: pride. Because Ottawa wasn't crumbling without them, the team they'd helped rebuild was strong, deep, more than capable of carrying on. They'd done their job. They'd left something behind. And so, with the season finished and their legacy secure, Shane and Ilya turned their attention to the future they'd been dreaming about.

They started trying for another baby. It happened fast. Absurdly fast, actually, as if their bodies had been waiting for permission. Less than a month after Shane stopped his birth control, the two little red lines appeared and then a blood test confirmed it.

Just like that, they were having another baby.

Theo took the news better than anyone expected.

When Shane was eight weeks pregnant. Shane and Ilya had planned it carefully: sitting him down after dinner on the couch, no distractions, both of them calm and ready for any reaction. They'd prepared for excitement, for confusion, for the possibility that their ten-year-old might feel threatened by the idea of a new sibling taking attention away from him.

They had not prepared for Theo to literally jump off the couch and start running laps around the living room.

"YES! YES! YES!" he shouted, arms pumping, hair flying. "I'm going to be a BIG BROTHER!"

Shane looked at Ilya. Ilya looked at Shane. Both of them were laughing.

"Theo, baby, calm down..."

"I CAN'T CALM DOWN! THIS IS THE BEST NEWS EVER!"

He launched himself at them, somehow managing to hug both at once, his arms stretched wide. "I'm going to teach them everything! How to skate! How to read! How to scare grampa!" He turned to Ilya. "*Ya nauchú yevó rússkomu, Papa! Potomú chto rússkaya própís', éto trúdno!*"

I'll teach him russian, Papa! Because cursive Russian is hard!

They laughed. It was hard, Shane had tried. Theo tried to teach him once.

"We're going to have so much fun! They can sleep in my room! We'll have sleepovers in the backyard! I'll push them on the swings! I'll show them the playground! We'll have a pool party!"

Shane caught Ilya's eye over Theo's head. Both of them were misty.

"Okay, okay." Ilya pulled Theo in tighter. "They're going to be very lucky to have you as a big brother."

"The luckiest!" Theo agreed seriously. Then he was off again, already planning, already dreaming.

"Just remember..." Shane said, shifting carefully on the couch to make room for Theo to sit beside him, "the baby will not come ready. They won't be able to do all those things you're planning right away."

Theo's face fell slightly. "Why?"

"The playground and the pool will have to wait a little until the baby is old enough." Shane reached out and ruffled Theo's hair, the same curls that had once been long and wild, now shorter but still impossibly soft. "Babies need time to grow. To learn things. Just like you did."

Theo processed this, brow furrowing in that way that reminded Shane so much of Ilya.

"How long does it take?" Shane thought about it.

"You learned how to walk when you were one year and two months old. It takes time. Babies are very delicate. You have to be very careful during their first year."

"So I'll show them my favorite TV shows." Theo said, already problem-solving. "And we'll sleep together in their crib. That way they won't be alone."

Ilya, who had been only listening, said:

"I think you're too heavy and too big to fit in a crib, Theo."

Theo looked at him, completely undeterred. "So you buy one with extra legs!"

Ilya snorted, covering his mouth. Shane's lips twitched.

"Theo," Shane said carefully, "That's not how cribs work."

"Then we make it work!" Theo's voice was rising with the passion of a truly committed older brother. "I can sleep on the floor next to the crib! I'll hold their hand through the bars! She won't be alone, I promise!"

Shane felt his eyes sting. He pulled Theo from Ilya's lap and into a hug, squeezing maybe a little too tight.

"Buddy," he said, voice thick, "you are going to be the best big brother in the entire world." Theo hugged him back, fierce and immediate.

"I know. That's why you guys had me first, right? To practice?" Ilya laughed, the sound warm and surprised.

"Exactly. You were the practice baby." Ilya said.\

"The best practice baby." Shane agreed.

Theo beamed, clearly proud of his role. Then he squirmed free and ran off to his room saying he had to pick up his best toys to show to his younger sister or brother. Shane watched him go, heart so full it hurt.

"He's going to be an amazing big brother." Ilya said quietly. "He already is. And our baby is the size of a bean." Ilya pulled Shane close, careful of the belly, and pressed a kiss to his temple.

"You still remember the sizes of a baby growing up?"

"Of course! I studied very hard when I learned I would become a parent."

Shane smiled and kissed Ilya's cheek, resting against his chest while they heard Theo making a mess in his bedroom.

The news traveled slowly, carefully, to the people who mattered most.

Shane's parents cried, of course. Yuna immediately started knitting tiny baby clothes. David just kept hugging Shane, patting his back and saying he was very happy, unable to form actual words.

"Another grandkid." he finally managed. "We're the luckiest people alive."

Ottawa's teammates took the news exactly as expected.

"So let me get this straight." Troy was grinning, arms crossed. "You two retire. Suddenly you have all this free time. And now..." He gestured at Shane's still-flat stomach. "... there's a

baby?"

Wyatt nodded sagely. "The math checks out. They retired to make get into each other's pants."

"We were at each other's pants all the time when we played for Ottawa." Ilya corrected.

"I hate all of you." Shane said, but he was laughing.

"You brought this on yourselves." Zane added. "Retiring together? What did you think would happen?"

"Babies." Luca supplied quietly. "That's what happens."

"Oh my God, we planned this, guys!"

Hayden found out via Facetime, since he was on a vacation trip with his family.

"Another one?" his voice was a mix of shock and delight. "You're actually doing it again?"

"Don't pretend to be surprised, Pike. You have five children." Ilya said side-by-side with Shane.

"I know, idiot. I just didn't expect you to do it again after ten years. Thought you two had stopped after Theo."

"We actually know how birth control works, Pike. You should try it sometime."

"Okay, please stop you two. I'm trying to deliver some good news here."

"Dude, I'm super happy for you!" Hayden says, locking behind the camera. "Jackie! JACKIE! They're having another baby!"

Jackie's voice came through in the background, distant but warm. "Oh my God! Congratulations!" She said, showing up in front of the camera. "Theo's going to be the best big brother! That kid has been ready for years."

Rose's reaction came via Facetime too after Shane sent her a photo of little baby shoes, her face filling the screen with an expression of pure, unbridled joy.

"SHANE HOLLANDER!" she shrieked. "YOU'RE PREGNANT?!"

"I'm pregnant."

"OH MY GOD!" She was laughing out of joy. "Another baby! Another tiny hockey player! I get to be aunt again!"

"You get to be aunt again."

"I'm buying so many gifts. So many. Theo's getting presents too, I have to make sure he doesn't feel left out. This is going to be amazing. I love this baby already."

Svetlana's reaction was the most Russian thing Shane had ever witnessed. She was visiting when they told her, sitting at the kitchen table with a cup of tea. Shane just said, "So, we're having another baby," and waited.

Svetlana stared at him for a full five seconds. Then she looked at Ilya. Then back at Shane. Then she cursed in Russian out loud before hugging them both with the biggest smile coming out of her face.

Later, when she was trying to hide the fact that she cried a little, Svetlana pulled out her phone. "I need to order some tiny Russian and Canadian jerseys."

The pregnancy itself was smooth, smoother than the first, in every way.

Shane had time now. Real time. No infinite thoughts of how it would be after the birth with parenting and hockey clashing. No worry about Ilya going away. He slept when he was tired. Ate what he craved. Let himself just be.

And Ilya was there for all of it.

He attended every appointment. Held Shane's hand through every ultrasound. Brought him tea at 3 a.m. when he couldn't sleep and ice chips at noon when nausea struck. He was present in a way he hadn't been able to be the first time, and neither of them took it for granted.

"I love this." Shane said one night, sprawled on the couch, Ilya's hand on his barely-there belly.

"Being pregnant?"

"Having you here since the beginning." Shane turned to look at him. "This is what I wanted last time. What I wished for, although I was too scared to tell you."

Ilya's eyes went soft and he kissed Shane's temple. "Now we have it."

"Now we have it."

At twenty weeks, they found out it was a girl.

Theo was, if possible, even more excited than before. "A SISTER! I'm getting a SISTER!" He did another lap around the living room, then stopped abruptly. "I'm teaching her hockey."

"You're going to be an excellent teacher."

Theo nodded seriously. "I know."

Shane could only laugh of how Theo was a tiny version of Ilya and how he was doomed if their little baby girl turned out to be a 'little Ilya' too.

As the months passed, Theo became fascinated by the pregnancy.

Every week, he'd come home from school and inspect Shane's belly. "It's bigger!" he'd announce. "Definitely bigger." Then he'd press his ear against it, listening for sounds that were probably just Shane's digestion but that Theo insisted were his sister talking to him.

"It's the size of a banana now!" he said one evening, watching Shane's stomach shift as the baby moved. "I'm studying with Papa."

Shane laughed surprised.

Then, Theo put his two open hands on Shane's bump and pressed his mouth against it. "Hi, sister. I'm Theo. I'm going to be your favorite older brother."

Shane and Ilya exchanged a look, both fighting smiles.

"She's very lucky." Shane said.

"I know!" Theo agreed. "She's getting me!"

By month eight, Shane was enormous.

Not uncomfortable, exactly, just large. He moved slowly, deliberately, like a ship navigating calm waters. Ilya hovered constantly, bringing him things before he could ask, fluffing pillows, rubbing feet, holding his belly so Shane could rest his back, doing absolutely everything except letting Shane lift a finger.

"I'm pregnant, not dying." Shane reminded him, although he loved to be pampered.

"People don't massage the dead or go out at 2 a.m. to buy ice cream for the dead, Hollander. That was a shitty comparison."

Theo found the whole thing endlessly entertaining. "You walk like a penguin." he informed Shane cheerfully.

"Thank you, Theo. When your sister is born, I'm going to run like a tiger after you and tickle you until you can't breathe properly."

"You're welcome, Dad!" He laughed.

But he also loved the baby's movements, pressing his palm against Shane's stomach and gasping when he felt a kick. "She's strong! She's going to be so good at hockey!"

"She's going to be whatever she wants."

"Hockey," Theo said firmly. "Definitely hockey."

"I think he gets his obsession with hockey from you, Hollander." Ilya said.

When they sat Theo down to talk about the birth, he was less enthusiastic.

"So you want me to sleep at Grandma and Grandpa's?" His voice was carefully controlled, the way it got when he was trying not to show how he really felt.

"For a few nights." Shane said gently. "Just until your sister arrives. We don't want you to worry if it happens suddenly."

"But what if she comes and I'm not here?"

Ilya knelt beside him. "You will come as soon as she is here. Grandma and Grandpa will bring you to the hospital the moment we call."

Theo's lip trembled slightly, but he held it together. "But I'll only sleep at Grandma's right? During the day I'll be with you?"

"That's right."

"Promise?"

"Promise." Ilya held up his pinky. "I promise."

Theo hooked his pinky around Ilya's. "Okay. But you have to call right away. Like, immediately. As soon as she's born."

"The second she's born."

"And you have to let me hold her first. After you guys."

Shane smiled. "You can hold her as long as you want."

Theo considered this, then nodded firmly. "Okay. I'll go to Grandma's. But only because I have to."

"We know, buddy."

He hugged them both, fierce and quick, then ran off to pack his overnight bag with the intensity of someone preparing for a major expedition.

That night, lying in bed, Shane rested his hand on his stomach. The baby stopped moving a few days before as a sign he was almost ready.

"Any day now." he murmured.

Ilya's hand covered his. "We're ready."

"Are we ever really ready?"

"No." Ilya kissed his shoulder. "But it's a secret."

Shane smiled in the dark and kissed him.

The water broke only two days later and, unfortunately for Theo, at midnight.

They had prepared for this. The hospital bag had been sitting in the car for three days – diapers, clothes, chargers, everything they might need. Ilya had checked it twice. Shane had checked it once more just to be sure. Ilya moved through the room with quiet efficiency, grabbing their documents from the nightstand, slipping on shoes. Shane changed into fresh clothes with the help of Ilya, pausing only briefly when a contraction rolled through.

"Time it?" Ilya asked.

"Not yet. Still early."

Ilya helped him to the car, settled him in the backseat with a towel beneath him, then slid into the driver's seat.

The drive to the hospital was smooth, quiet, almost peaceful. Streetlights glided past. The city slept. Shane leaned back, breathing through another contraction, and watched Ilya's reflection in the rearview mirror. Calm. Focused. Present.

"I love you," Shane said. Ilya's eyes met his in the mirror.

"I love you too. We're almost there."

The hospital was quiet at this hour. They were led to a private room, soft and warm, where a nurse checked Shane's progress and smiled. "Four centimeters," she said. "You're doing great. Take your time."

Ilya settled into the chair beside the bed, holding Shane's hand. They talked about Theo, how strange it was to be here again without the chaos of their first time. How hard had been for Shane and how strangely calm everything was going now. Not in a bad way.

"We should call your parents." Ilya said eventually.

"Later." Shane shook his head. "When I'm closer. No point in them worrying all night."

Ilya nodded. "Agreed."

They waited. The hours passed. Contractions came and went, each one bringing them closer. And through it all, they stayed calm, together, ready.

By 6 a.m., the sun was just beginning to lighten the sky when their daughter arrived. She was perfect. Tiny and pink and absolutely beautiful, with a full head of dark hair and lungs that announced her arrival to the entire floor.

When the nurse placed her on Shane's chest, he started crying before he could stop himself.

"Hi, baby." he whispered.

Ilya leaned over them both, one hand on Shane's shoulder, the other reaching down to touch their daughter's cheek. He was crying too, silent tears sliding down his face, his smile so wide it looked like it might crack him open.

A few hours later, after Shane had rested and the baby had been checked and everyone was steady, Yuna and David arrived with Theo, who was bouncing between them like a small, excited kangaroo.

The moment he saw Shane, he froze in the doorway, eyes fixed on the tiny bundle in his father's arms.

"Theo." Ilya smiled, exhausted and radiant. "Come meet your sister."

Theo approached slowly, reverently, as if walking toward something sacred. He peered down at the baby, at her tiny nose, her closed eyes, her impossibly small fingers curled into fists.

"She's so small." he whispered.

"She won't be for long." Theo looked up at Shane, then at Ilya, then back at the baby. A single tear slid down his cheek, catching the soft morning light filtering through the hospital window.

"I love her." he said, his voice small and fierce all at once.

Shane's heart cracked open right there, in the best possible way. He reached out, cupping Theo's face with his free hand, wiping the tear with his thumb. "She loves you too, baby." Shane's voice was thick, barely above a whisper.

"She's been waiting to meet you." Ilya moved then, circling the bed.

He lifted Theo carefully, settling him onto the mattress beside Shane, positioning him so he could see his sister without jostling anything important. Theo leaned in slowly, reverently, like he was approaching something sacred. He pressed a gentle kiss to his sister's forehead, soft, deliberate, full of promises she couldn't yet understand. The baby stirred in her sleep. Her tiny face scrunched, then relaxed. And then, impossibly, her small hand reached out, fingers brushing against Theo's cheek before falling back to rest against her chest. Theo's eyes went wide.

"She knows you're here," Yuna said softly from behind them, her own eyes glistening. "She knows her big brother is watching over her."

David nodded, slipping an arm around his wife's waist. "You talked to her a lot while she was in Shane's belly." He smiled, warm and proud. "She might have recognized your voice."

Theo's face lit up. "Really?"

"Really." Ilya confirmed. "You were very loud. Very enthusiastic. She could probably hear you from blocks away."

Shane laughed weakly, still exhausted, still overwhelmed. "He's not wrong."

Theo beamed down at his sister, already planning, already dreaming. Then he looked up at his dads.

"What's her name gonna be?" he asked.

"Oh my! Did you finally decide her name?" Yuna asked excited.

Shane and Ilya exchanged a look, one of those looks they'd perfected over twenty years, full of silent communication and shared history.

Shane nodded. "We did."

Ilya smiled. "Sophia Rozanov-Hollander." The name rolling off his tongue like it had always been hers.

The room went quiet for a moment. Yuna pressed a hand to her chest. David's eyebrows shot up.

"Wow!" David exclaimed, a grin spreading across his face. "Very Canadian, but very Russian."

"The best of both worlds." Yuna agreed, already reaching for her phone.

"She looks like a Sophia." Theo tested it out. "It sounds like a princess name." Theo nodded solemnly. Then he leaned down again, closer this time, until his forehead was almost touching hers. "Welcome to the family, Sophia." he whispered.

Sophia sighed in her sleep, a tiny sound that seemed almost like a recognition.

Yuna snapped a photo and David finally showed Shane and Ilya the tiny clothes they had bought and washed in case they needed still in the hospital.

Ilya pressed a kiss to Shane's temple. And in that hospital room, surrounded by the people they loved most in the world, the Rozanov-Hollander family grew by one more. Shane and Ilya held their new daughter and watched their son fall in love with her. It was, they agreed later, the best morning of their lives.

Chapter 24: his surprise

Chapter Notes

I'm back!

Sorry, guy, I was busy graduating college!! Now I'm officially an architect!

But whatever, back to what really matters: HOLLANOV!

As someone might have already noticed, this is the last chapter before the epilogue :'(

I swear I could write it forever, but I have a lot of plots cooking in my desk, so it's time to start saying goodbye to Hold Me Tight's Hollanov.

For this chapter I really wanted to write a smut, so that it, this chapter and 90% smut, guys 🙌🙌🙌🙌

Hope you enjoy clingy and deeply in love hollanov 💕💕

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

The rink was cold, the way rinks always are, but Shane barely noticed anymore. His body had spent so many years on ice that the chill had become background noise, just another part of the experience, like the smell of popcorn and the echo of skates against boards.

Sophia shifted on his lap, her small body warm against his chest. At four years old, she was all angles and energy, but right now she was completely still, her dark eyes fixed on the ice where her brother was mid-game.

"THEO!" she shouted, pointing. "GO, THEO!"

Shane smiled, smoothing her dark, almost black, hair, like his own. Sophia had his coloring, his light brown eyes, but she had Ilya's moles scattered across her skin like a constellation, and when she smiled, she had heart-wrecking dimples.

On the ice, Theo was flying.

Fifteen years old and already better than Shane had been at that age. Shane didn't say it to embarrass him, didn't make a big deal of it, but privately, watching his son move, he knew the truth. Theo had his instincts, Ilya's hands, and a work ethic that put them both to shame. He was going to be something special.

"He's so fast!" Sophia bounced on Shane's lap. "Daddy, did you see? He's so fast!"

"I saw, baby."

Ilya leaned over from his seat beside them, his shoulder pressing warm against Shane's. "He gets that from you."

Shane snorted. "He gets that from hard work."

"And from you." Ilya reassured, kissing Shane in the cheek. "But he has my style."

"What style?"

"See? That's why we know it came from me."

Sophia ignored their bickering, too focused on her brother. "GO, THEO!" she screamed again, and from the ice, Theo glanced up, found her in the crowd, and winked.

Just like Ilya.

Sophia lost her mind.

Shane laughed, pulling her closer. He kept his eyes on the game, on his son's effortless stride, on the way the other players struggled to keep up. But his mind, as it always did these days, started to wander.

Twenty-five years. That's how long he'd known Ilya. Twenty-five years since Shane introduced himself to Ilya at Saskatchewan, before they were even rookies. Fifteen years since they'd made it official, since Theo had been born, since everything had truly begun.

And in all that time, Shane thought, Ilya had never once put himself first.

Shane thought about it more often now, watching his husband cheer for their son, his profile sharp and beautiful even after all these years. Ilya had waited for Shane to want to retire, and then retired with him, no hesitation. He'd waited for Shane to bring up they having another baby, and then wanted it just as much. He'd followed Shane to Ottawa without a second thought, never once asking Shane to do the same. Shane did, but stil...

Even now, even after everything, Ilya's priority had always been Shane. Their family. Their life together.

Shane had given Ilya things too, he knew that. Love. Loyalty. A family. But somehow, looking back, it felt like Ilya had given more. Had been more. Had shaped his entire life around making Shane happy.

"Daddy?" Sophia's voice cut through his thoughts. "You're not watching."

Shane blinked. "I am, baby. Just thinking."

"About what?"

"Nothing. Just... how much I love you. All of you."

Sophia accepted this with the simple grace of a five-year-old. "I love you too. Now watch Theo. He's gonna score!"

She was right. He did.

Ilya leaned over as the crowd erupted, Theo's goal still echoing through the arena, his voice low enough that only Shane could hear over the cheers.

"You're doing it again."

Shane blinked, pulled from his thoughts. "Doing what?"

"Thinking too much." Ilya's eyes were soft, knowing, the kind of look he'd perfected over twenty-five years of reading Shane's every mood. "I can hear it from here. The gears turning."

Shane smiled, a little embarrassed at being caught. He shifted Sophia on his lap, her small body still bouncing with excitement over her brother's goal. "Just overthinking. Like always."

"About what?" Ilya insisted, taking Sophia from his arms to give Shane a break. Shane gave her to him.

How could he explain the weight in his chest? The overwhelming gratitude that sometimes felt like guilt? The realization that Ilya had spent at least fifteen years – probably more – putting him first in every decision, every sacrifice, every moment of their life together?

Ilya must have seen something in his face, because his playful expression shifted into something more careful.

"Middle age crisis?" he asked, trying for lightness that he wasn't finding in Shane. "I would be like that too if I had your age."

Shane snorted, grateful for the attempt at humor even if it didn't quite land. "We're the same age. Our birth dates are like a month apart. You're right there with me."

Ilya raised an eyebrow, that familiar spark of mischief returning. "Ah, but I age better."

"You do not."

"I absolutely do." Ilya gestured at himself with mock grandeur.

Shane laughed despite himself. "You're European!"

"And you're Canadian!" Ilya shot back, grinning now. "What's the point?"

Sophia, oblivious to their banter, was still cheering. "THEO! THEO! THEO!"

On the ice, Theo raised his stick in acknowledgment, and Shane felt something settle in his chest.

Ilya's hand found his, squeezing gently. "Whatever you're thinking..." he murmured. "... stop. I know you well enough to know it's not a good thing you're thinking of."

Shane squeezed back. "Yeah." he said softly. "Maybe."

The game continued. Theo scored again. Sophia screamed herself hoarse. And Shane let himself stop thinking, just for a while, and simply be.

But he would definitely think more about that later at home.

The idea came to Shane in the middle of the night.

Not a dramatic revelation, just a quiet thought that settled into his chest and refused to leave. He lay awake, watching Ilya sleep beside him, counting the gray hairs that had started appearing at his temples, tracing the lines around his eyes.

He's given me everything, Shane thought. *When's the last time I did something just for him?*

The answer came too easily. He couldn't remember.

So he started planning.

It took three weeks to arrange. Three weeks of planning what he should do and coordinating with Yuna to take the kids for a full weekend. Three weeks of pretending nothing was different while his heart raced every time Ilya looked at him.

"Are you okay?" Ilya asked one night, suspicious. "You've are acting weird."

"Weird how?"

"Weird like you're hiding something."

Shane kissed him. "I'm not hiding anything."

Ilya's eyes narrowed, but he let it go.

Shane felt a little guilty about the lie. But not guilty enough to stop.

The weekend arrived.

Shane had told Ilya they were going away, just the two of them, a little getaway. Nothing special. He'd packed Ilya's bag himself, choosing clothes he knew would look good, would make Ilya feel comfortable and seen.

The drive to the nearby city took just over an hour. Ilya spent most of it watching Shane with curious eyes, trying to figure out what was happening.

"Are you going to tell me where we're going?"

"It's a surprise."

"That is why you've been acting weird?"

"Maybe?"

Ilya considered. "You're not very good at hiding things, Hollander." He smiled, taking Shane's hand to his own.

The hotel was one of those places that didn't need to advertise its luxury, it just was. Marble floors in the lobby. Fresh flowers everywhere. A concierge who greeted them by name before Shane could even speak.

Ilya's eyebrows climbed higher as they were led to the elevator, then down a quiet hallway, then through the doors of a very nice suite.

The room was enormous. Floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the city skyline. A king-sized bed draped in linens. A bathroom with a tub big enough for two and a shower spacious enough to make Ilya dream about doing a few things with Shane. Champagne chilling in a bucket. Chocolate-covered strawberries on the table. Rose petals scattered across the bedspread.

Ilya turned to Shane, eyes wide. "What is this?"

Shane shrugged, trying to look casual and failing completely. "Just a weekend. For us."

"A romantic trip."

"Yes." Shane stepped closer, taking Ilya's hands. "Especially for you."

Ilya blinked. "I don't understand."

Shane took a breath. This was the vulnerable part, the part he hadn't practiced.

"You've spent our whole life putting me first." he said quietly. "Every decision. Every sacrifice. You came to Ottawa when I told you I was pregnant with Theo and moved in with me. You sacrificed a season when I was going through a difficult time after Theo was born. You gave us all your time and care. You waited for me to retire and retired with me. You waited for me to want another baby and then wanted it too. You..." His voice caught. "You gave me everything, Ilya. And I don't think I've ever properly thanked you for that."

Ilya opened his mouth, but Shane pressed on.

"So this weekend is for you. I know it's just a weekend and it's not enough for everything you've done for me all those years, but I wanted to make it special. So, you'll just relax while I take care of you, okay?"

Ilya stared at him for a long moment. Then his eyes went suspiciously bright and he pulled Shane into a kiss.

Ilya's lips brushed against Shane's like he was relearning him, tasting him, savoring. But soft didn't last, it never did, not with them. The pressure deepened, Ilya's hand sliding into Shane's

hair, tilting his head, taking control.

Shane let him. Let himself be pulled closer, let himself be claimed, let the world narrow to the heat of Ilya's mouth and the steady rhythm of their hearts.

Ilya's other hand found the button of Shane's shirt. He undid it slowly, one button at a time, his knuckles brushing against Shane's skin with each release. Shane's breath hitched when the fabric parted, when cool air met the heat building beneath his skin.

"My turn." Shane murmured against Ilya's lips.

His hands were less patient. He tugged Ilya's shirt free from his pants, pushed it up, over his head, somewhere forgotten. His palms spread across Ilya's chest, feeling the familiar muscles, the familiar heartbeat, the familiar home of him.

Ilya groaned, pulling Shane closer, and the kiss turned desperate, teeth and tongue and years of wanting even after all these years together.

They stumbled toward the bed, a dance they'd perfected over decades. Ilya's hands were at Shane's belt, working it open, pushing his pants down his hips. Shane returned the favor, fingers fumbling with Ilya's zipper, both of them laughing breathlessly against each other's mouths.

By the time they reached the bed, they were half-naked, shedding the last pieces of clothing with impatient hands and shared laughter.

They were face to face now, chests pressed together, Shane's arms wrapped around Ilya's neck, Ilya's hands low on Shane's hips. The city glittered beyond the windows, millions of lights watching, but neither of them noticed. The world had shrunk to this room, this bed, this moment.

"You said this weekend was for me." Ilya murmured, kissing Shane's cheek. When he pulled back, his eyes were bright, impossibly soft. "You really have no idea of everything you have done for me, Hollander."

He let his forehead rest against Shane's, their breath mingling in the small space between them.

Shane didn't say a thing. His curious eyes just kept looking at Ilya's, waiting, letting him take his time.

"You know my life was... not so great before I met you."

"Ilya..." Shane held his cheeks, trying to hold back his own sadness like every time Ilya talked about this part of his past. His thumbs traced gentle circles on Ilya's skin, a silent promise that he was here, that he was listening, that he was ready to wipe away whatever tears came.

Ilya shook his head slightly, a small smile tugging at his lips, not quite sadness, not quite joy, something in between that only Shane was allowed to see.

"My father..." He paused, choosing his words carefully. "He was not kind. To me, to my mother. He made sure I knew I was never enough. Never good enough, never strong enough, never worthy enough." He swallowed. "And then my mother... when I lost her, I thought that was it. That I would always be alone. That I deserved to be alone. I love hockey, but it was more of a way out for me. Something to escape to. Something to prove I was worth something."

Shane's hands tightened on his face, but he didn't interrupt. He just held him, grounded him, loved him.

"And then I met you." Ilya's voice softened, warmed, like the first rays of sun after a long winter. "This annoying, boring, perfect, impossible Canadian who played better than anyone else."

"You don't get to say that." Shane murmured, tears already forming in his eyes. "You were drafted first."

Ilya's smile widened. "I let you win Rookie of the Year. I think we're even."

"You let me?" Shane laughed, pushing Ilya so he was now on his back and Shane was on top of him.

"Yes, now listen..." Ilya was laughing too, his hands finding Shane's hips again, settling there like they belonged. "You were the most perfect challenge that ever happened to me, Hollander. You made me realize I deserve to be loved. That I am loved." His voice softened again. "You gave me a family. And I'm not talking only about our children. You gave me a mother and a father too. Yuna says I am her child all the time. The favorite, by the way."

Shane laughed, but tears were streaming down his face now. "She loves you very much. My Dad loves you a lot too."

"I know." Ilya's thumb brushed away a tear. "And they love you too. But I am definitely the favorite." He said with this playful expression.

Shane kissed him, sweet and deep, tasting the salt of his own tears, feeling the warmth of Ilya's smile against his lips.

"I was kind of obsessed with you before you introduced yourself to me in Saskatchewan." Ilya admitted when they broke apart. "I really wanted to beat you on the ice, because I knew you were really good at hockey." His hand slid up Shane's side, slow and reverent. "But when I saw you in person, I really wanted to kiss you. And all those beautiful freckles too. Since day one."

Shane's heart stuttered. "I was kind of obsessed too, you know?"

Ilya looked at him, curious, his eyes travelling to Shane's lips and then back to his eyes, cataloging every shift in expression.

"I think I've always wanted you to myself, but..." Shane took a deep breath and smiled, caressing Ilya's face. "I started to realize that all this annoyance I felt since you won the international championship in 2008 was..." He paused, letting the truth settle. "...a really deep desire to have you for myself. To kiss you. To touch you."

Ilya's eyes darkened. "Yes, you are really dirty, Shane Hollander." He leaned into Shane's touch, his breath warm against Shane's palm.

"Well..." Shane's smile turned knowing. "I think I am. But it's all your fault."

He finally admitted it after years of denial, and Ilya laughed, a low, warm sound that vibrated through both of them. He pulled Shane closer, and Shane felt him, hard and ready, pressing against his thigh.

"This weekend is still about you." Shane reminded him, shifting his hips deliberately. "I'm not done spoiling you yet."

Ilya's hands tightened on Shane's hips. "You have already spoiled me. For life."

"Then I'll keep going." Shane kissed his nose. "Forever."

Ilya's smile turned sly. "So watch for a surprise too."

Shane raised an eyebrow. "It's not a competition."

"Oh, Hollander." Ilya flipped them again, pinning Shane to the mattress, rose petals scattering around his head like a crown. "It is definitely a competition now. And when I do something even more romantic and win, I will be consecrated the most romantic husband ever."

Shane looked up at him, at this man he had loved for years, at the face that still made his heart race, at the smile that had become his whole world.

"Maybe." Shane said, pulling him down, "but not for long."

He kissed him then, deep and claiming, and the competition was forgotten for the moment.

Ilya's hips pressed against Shane's, who groaned at the friction. He could feel Ilya, hard and ready and he arched up into it, chasing the sensation.

"Impatient." Ilya murmured against his mouth.

"You started it."

Ilya laughed, low and rough, and then he was moving, grinding down against Shane in a slow, deliberate rhythm that made Shane's hands fist in the sheets. Each roll of Ilya's hips sent sparks up Shane's spine, the pressure building, the need coiling tighter.

"Like this?" Ilya asked, his voice a tease.

"Faster." Shane managed.

Ilya obliged, his pace quickening, the friction sending heat pooling low in Shane's belly. Their breaths came faster, their movements growing more urgent, the slick slide of skin and the scent of roses filling the space between them.

Shane's hands found Ilya's back, nails dragging lightly, and Ilya groaned, his rhythm faltering for just a moment before he found it again, harder, deeper.

"Fuck! Don't stop."

Ilya didn't. He drove them both higher, the pressure building until Shane could barely breathe, could barely think, could only feel. His hips moved to meet Ilya's, chasing that peak, needing it, needing him.

Then Ilya pulled back.

Shane's protest died in his throat as Ilya reached for his mouth, kissing deep.

Ilya's fingers found Shane's dick, already looking desperate for a release, and then he slid them to Shane's entrance. Shane gasped, his hips lifting into the touch and his nails marking Ilya's thighs.

Ilya breathed. "You're beautiful. Every time, you're beautiful."

Shane couldn't answer. Could only watch as Ilya prepared him, slow and thorough, one finger becoming two, stretching, opening, making him ready. The pleasure built again, different this time, deeper, more focused.

"Now." Shane gasped. "Ilya, now..."

Ilya positioned himself, the head of his cock pressing against Shane's entrance, and for a moment, they both just breathed. Then Ilya pushed in, slow, deliberate, and Shane's world narrowed to the stretch, the burn, the fullness of him.

Ilya paused when he was fully inside, his forehead pressed against Shane's now, their breath mingling. "Okay?"

Shane nodded, unable to speak. His legs wrapped around Ilya's waist, pulling him deeper, and Ilya groaned, his composure cracking.

Then he began to move.

The rhythm was slow at first, deep strokes that had Shane clinging to him, nails digging into his shoulders, sounds escaping his throat that he couldn't control. The city glittered beyond the window, the whole world watching, but Shane couldn't see anything beyond Ilya's face. The way with which they looked at each other made everything feel a million times more intense. Shane felt he could cry with how much he loved Ilya, all of him, infinitely.

"Faster." Shane gasped.

Ilya's pace quickened, each thrust sending shockwaves through Shane's body, pleasure building and building until he couldn't tell where he ended and Ilya began. They were tangled together, breath mingled, hearts beating in time.

"I'm close." Shane warned, his voice ragged.

"Come for me, sweetheart."

Ilya's hand found his cock, stroking in time with his thrusts, and Shane shattered, crying out, back arching, pulsing around Ilya as waves of pleasure ripped through him.

Ilya followed moments later, buried deep, Shane's name on his lips like a prayer. Like Shane was his cure, his life, his own heart and soul.

"I love you. I love love you so much. So much." Ilya said in a low tone, feeling tears while kissing every inch of Shane's skin. "Fuck, I love you a lot, Shane. I love you forever."

Shane's arms tightened around Ilya, pulling him impossibly closer. His body was still humming, still trembling with the aftershocks of what they'd just done, but beneath the physical was something deeper, something that had been growing since they met for the first time and still hadn't found its limit.

"I love you so much too, Ilya." His voice was rough, scraped raw by everything he was feeling. "I don't think the amount of love I feel for you fits inside my heart or my whole body."

The words hung in the air between them, too big for the small space of the hotel room, too big for the moment, too big for anything. They should have been impossible to say. Instead, they felt like the truest thing Shane had ever spoken.

Ilya stared at him with a frown, as if the words had hit him somewhere too deep to process. His brow was furrowed, his lips parted, his chest still rising and falling rapidly from exertion, but it wasn't just the sex making his heart race now. Shane could feel it, pounding against his own chest, wild and fast and alive.

Ilya looked like a man who had been struck by lightning. Like all the love Shane had poured into him had overflowed again, filling every corner, leaving no room for anything else.

"Fuck, Shane."

His voice cracked on the name.

Then he collapsed, his full weight pressing Shane into the mattress, his face burying in the warm curve of Shane's neck. His shoulders shook. His breath came in ragged, uneven gasps. And Shane felt the wetness of tears against his skin.

Shane's own eyes burned. His throat closed. He blinked, and tears spilled down his cheeks, tracing warm paths through the sweat and rose petals still clinging to his skin.

He didn't try to stop them. Didn't try to hide.

He just held Ilya tighter, one hand cradling the back of his head, fingers threading through his hair in the slow, familiar rhythm. He pressed kiss after kiss to Ilya's hair, to his temple, to anywhere he could reach.

"I've got you." Shane whispered against his skin. "I've got you."

Ilya's arms wrapped around him, holding on like Shane was the only thing keeping him grounded. His tears soaked into Shane's neck, but Shane didn't care. He just kept holding, kept kissing, kept loving.

They lay there for a long time, tangled together in the ruined sheets, the city glittering beyond the window. Neither of them spoke. There was nothing left to say.

The tears slowed eventually. Ilya's breathing evened out, his grip loosening from desperate to simply holding. Shane's hand still moved through his hair, a steady, soothing rhythm that said everything words couldn't.

"I'm sorry." Ilya finally mumbled against his skin.

"For what?"

"For crying." He laughed wetly.

"You don't have to be sorry for crying."

Shane pulled back just enough to look at him, at his red-rimmed eyes, his tear-streaked cheeks, his impossibly beautiful face, so Ilya could see his eyes were just as wet and red too.

Ilya stared at him for a long moment, something shifting in his expression, wonder, maybe, or awe, or just the overwhelming realization that after all these years, he was still discovering new ways to be loved.

Shane looked down at himself, at the red smudges across his chest, at the petals caught in his hair. He should probably shower. Should probably change the sheets. Should probably...

Ilya's arms tightened around him. "Stay. We'll shower later."

Shane exhaled, letting himself sink back into the warmth of Ilya's embrace. "Okay."

They lay in silence for a moment, breathing together, the city lights painting shifting patterns across the ceiling. Rose petals rustled with every movement, their scent filling the air, sweet and earthy and real.

Ilya spoke again, his voice low and steady, like he'd been holding these words for a long time and was only now letting them go.

"You know... every sacrifice you think I made, you made too, Shane." His hand traced slow circles on Shane's cheek. "You moved to Ottawa too, even though you had a very solid career in Montreal. You had a legacy there. And you gave it up. For our family." Shane opened his mouth to protest, but Ilya pressed on. "You also sacrificed a season to carry our child. Nine

months of your body not being your own. Nine months of waiting, of wondering, of carrying the weight of our family inside you. And after Theo was born, you fought yourself to get better. You fought the doubts, the fear that you would never be the same." Ilya's voice cracked, just slightly. "I watched you do that. I watched you climb out of something that could have swallowed you whole. And you did it for him. For us." Shane's eyes burned again.

"Ilya..."

"And about our retirement..." Ilya smiled, soft and real. "I already was planning on doing it. I think it was an instinct that hit us at the same time. The same way we used to know where the other would be on the ice. The same way I know when you're thinking too much, even when you're not saying anything." Shane laughed wetly.

"You do know that."

"I know everything about you." Ilya's hand came up to cup Shane's face, thumb brushing away fresh tears. "And you know everything about me too, I feel it everyday. You should know you gave me everything too, Shane. Two amazing children. Two amazing parents who love me like I was always theirs. A reason to wake up every morning." He paused, letting the weight of his words settle. "You are the love of my life, Hollander. My sacrifices are not burdens. They never were, and they never will be." He pulled Shane closer, pressing their foreheads together. "And they are not bigger than yours."

Shane couldn't speak. Couldn't move. Could only lie there, pressed against the man he'd loved, and let the truth of it wash over him.

"So stop counting." he murmured. "Stop weighing. Stop wondering who gave more. We're even. We've always been even." Shane laughed, the sound breaking on a sob.

"When did you get so wise?"

"I have always been wise. I'm like a hockey guru and you're drama guru."

"Drama?" Shane shoved him weakly.

"Of course, you cried after sex."

"You cried first!" Shane laughed again, and Ilya joined him, and they lay there in the ruined sheets and laughed until their sides ached.

"I love you." Shane said finally, and one more time, when the laughter had faded to something softer. "I love you so much it doesn't make sense sometimes, cause you're an asshole." Ilya kissed his forehead.

"I love you too. Now stop thinking. You're going to give yourself wrinkles."

That night, Shane still made good on his first promise.

Every touch was for Ilya. Every kiss, every caress, every moment of pleasure was focused entirely on him. Shane explored Ilya's body like he was learning it for the first time, finding

every spot that made him gasp, every place that made him moan, every sensitive inch that had been neglected for too long.

Ilya tried to reciprocate, tried to turn the focus back on Shane, but Shane wouldn't let him.

And eventually, Ilya let go. Let himself be loved. Let himself be worshipped while worshipping every part of Shane's body he could touch.

"I don't think I'll survive this romantic trip." Ilya laughed weakly in bed, holding a glass of whiskey with one hand while hugging Shane with the other.

Shane pulled himself closer, pressing his back to Ilya's chest. "You will. I'll make sure of it."

They were both now by the window, admiring the view. The city sprawled beneath them, endless lights flickering like earthbound stars, the whole world reduced to this single room, this single moment.

Shane pressed his palms against the cool glass, breath fogging slightly as he looked out at the endless twinkling lights.

Behind him, Ilya's hands found his hips.

"Beautiful view." Ilya murmured against his ear.

Shane shivered. "Yeah."

"Not the city." Ilya's lips traced down his neck. "You."

Shane laughed softly, tilting his head to give Ilya more access. "Smooth."

"I have my moments. And it's a delicious ass."

Ilya's hands roamed up Shane's sides, over his chest, down his stomach; every touch deliberate, reverent. Then he guided Shane toward the column beside the window, a sleek marble pillar that divided the glass from the rest of the room.

"Hold on to it." Ilya instructed softly.

Shane wrapped his arms around the column, the marble cool against his heated skin. He glanced back at Ilya, question in his eyes.

Ilya just smiled, stepped closer, and pressed against him from behind.

"Oh." Shane breathed, understanding dawning.

"Okay?"

He kissed his way up Shane's thigh, slow and deliberate, his tongue tracing patterns that made Shane's grip on the pillar tighten. By the time he reached the soft skin behind Shane's

balls, Shane was already trembling, already gasping, already completely lost.

Then Ilya's mouth was on him, on his entrance.

His tongue pressed against the sensitive skin, licking a slow, wet line that made Shane's hips jerk forward. Ilya's hands tightened, holding him steady, and he did it again, and again, each pass of his tongue sending sparks up Shane's spine.

"Fuck, it's perfect." Shane said between little moans.

Ilya just pressed closer, his tongue delving deeper, and Shane's head fell back against the pillar.

The marble was cool. Ilya's mouth was hot. The contrast was dizzying, overwhelming, perfect. Shane's fingers scrabbled for purchase on the pillar, his knuckles white, his breath coming in ragged gasps. Ilya worked him with the same focus he brought to everything, thorough, relentless, completely devoted to the task at hand.

His tongue circled, pressed, claimed, and Shane felt his knees start to buckle.

"Ilya..." Ilya's hands tightened on his hips, holding him up, holding him steady.

His mouth never stopped. His tongue never stopped. He took Shane apart piece by piece, slowly, deliberately, until Shane was nothing but sensation, nothing but need, nothing but the man on his knees before him.

"I'm close, please fuck me." Shane gasped. "Ilya, I'm..." Ilya pulled back.

Shane's protest died in his throat as Ilya looked up at him, lips slick, eyes dark. "Not yet."

Ilya stood, pressing his body against Shane's, pinning him to the pillar, but bringing Shane's mouth to his by grabbing his chin. His kiss was deep and tasting, and Shane could taste himself on Ilya's tongue, could feel the evidence of his own desire pressed between them.

"I want to feel you come." Ilya murmured against his lips. "With me inside you."

Shane's hands fisted in Ilya's hair, pulling him closer, the sting of it making Ilya's breath hitch. "Then fuck me right here."

Ilya smiled, that slow, wicked smile that had been ruining Shane for years. He turned Shane until they were face to face and lifted him easily, legs wrapping around his waist, and pressed him against the cool marble of the pillar. The stone was cold against Shane's heated skin, a shock of sensation that made him gasp, made him cling tighter.

"I love it when you get all slutty for me." Ilya breathed against his neck, teeth grazing the sensitive skin there.

Shane's head fell back, exposing more of his throat. "Always just for you. I'm all yours." His voice cracked as Ilya bit down, just hard enough to leave a mark. "I'll always be just yours."

Ilya's hands settled on Shane's ass, holding him steady, spreading him open. He was still slick from earlier, and when Ilya positioned himself, Shane could feel the heat of him, the pressure building.

"Look at me." Ilya commanded.

Shane opened his eyes. Ilya was watching him, dark-eyed and wild, and when he pushed inside, Shane's head fell against his shoulder, a broken sound escaping him.

The city glittered beyond the glass, millions of lights watching as Ilya began to move.

Each thrust was deep, measured, perfectly aimed. Shane's hands scrabbled for purchase on the pillar, knuckles white, his body pinned between the cool marble and the heat of Ilya's chest. The angle was perfect, deeper than usual, hitting places that made his knees weak, made his vision blur.

"Right there." he gasped. "Ilya, right there."

Ilya adjusted, hitting that spot again and again, and Shane could only moan, could only press back, could only let Ilya take what he needed. The rhythm built slowly, steadily, the city their only witness. Ilya's hands never left Shane's ass, guiding, claiming, loving. His breath came in harsh gasps against Shane's throat, his grip tightening with every thrust.

"Ilya." Shane gasped, the pleasure coiling tighter and tighter, winding him up like a spring about to break. "I'm close..."

Ilya slowed immediately, pulling almost all the way out, and Shane whimpered at the loss, but not for long. Ilya pushed back in, harder this time, the force of it driving Shane against the pillar, stealing his breath.

He set a brutal pace, fast and deep, groaning louder, and Shane could do nothing but hold on, could do nothing but take it, could do nothing but feel. His nails dug into Ilya's shoulders. His legs tightened around Ilya's waist. His mouth found Ilya's, desperate and claiming.

They kissed like they were drowning, like the other was air, like nothing else in the world existed beyond this moment. Shane could see everything when they broke apart, Ilya's face, his eyes dark with want, the way his lips parted with each breath, the way his hands trembled slightly as they held Shane.

The pleasure built again, faster this time, undeniable. Shane could feel it coiling in his belly, could feel himself teetering on the edge, and he wrapped his arms tight around Ilya's neck, holding on as the world dissolved into sensation.

"I'm coming," he gasped. "I'm..."

He shattered.

His release spilled between them, hot and sudden, and he felt Ilya follow, felt the stutter of his hips, the guttural sound torn from his throat, the warmth of him filling Shane as he came.

They collapsed against the pillar, both of them trembling, both of them gasping for air.

Shane's legs were still wrapped around Ilya's waist, his arms still locked around Ilya's neck, his body still pressed against the cool marble of the pillar that had held them up. He could feel Ilya's heartbeat against his chest, still fast, still strong. The sweat was cooling on their skin, the evidence of their love everywhere.

Ilya didn't move to pull away. Didn't reach for a towel, didn't suggest the shower. He just held Shane there, against the pillar. His forehead pressed against Shane's, his breath warm on Shane's lips, his hands still splayed across Shane's lower back, keeping him close.

Shane's hands moved from Ilya's hair to his face, cupping his jaw, tracing it with his fingers. The laugh lines around his eyes. The small scar above his eyebrow from a game that had left Shane terrified. The almost invisible gray at his temples that had appeared sometime in the last year, unnoticed until one day Shane had looked at him and realized they were both getting older, both changing, both somehow more beautiful with every passing year.

Ilya's eyes were closed, his face peaceful in a way it rarely was in the waking world. He looked younger like this, softer, like the boy Shane had met in Saskatchewan all those years ago, before the weight of the world had settled on his shoulders.

Ilya opened his eyes then, and the way he looked at Shane made something crack open in his chest. It was the same look he'd given Shane across the ice when they were still pretending it was casual, when neither of them had known what to do with what they were feeling. The same look he'd given Shane in that hospital room, when Shane had invited him to his cottage and they still didn't know about the pregnancy. The same look he'd given Shane at their wedding, when they'd promised forever and meant it.

"I love you," Shane whispered.

He kissed Shane in the mouth before pulling back himself back. They untangled with loud moans, and Shane set foot on the cold floor, holding to Ilya when he felt his strength evaporate.

"*Ya tebya lyublyu, moy lyubov.*" Ilya said softly, his voice barely a whisper too. "And I'm going to spend the rest of my life proving it." His thumb traced the corner of Shane's mouth, the curve of his cheek, the shell of his ear.

"You already have."

Chapter End Notes

I don't know when I'll come back with the epilogue, but I promise it will be really soon! I'm writing a new hollanov fic, so I hope to post the first chapter before posting the epilogue.

Thank you all for reading and please leave a comment!!

Love y'all 

Chapter 25: EPILOGUE: his draft

Chapter Notes

After a loooooong time (I'm sorry about that), I'm back with the final chapter. I hope you enjoy those +12k words 

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

The arena was electric.

Twenty thousand voices roared, a living wave of sound that crashed against the glass and echoed through the rafters. Flags waved. Faces painted. The air itself seemed to vibrate with anticipation.

And on the ice, wearing the maple leaf, was their son.

Shane watched Theo glide through warmups, his number 21 jersey a blur of red and white against the blue of the Swedish opponents. He moved like water, effortless and smooth, his stride a perfect fusion of Shane's fast movements and Ilya's strength.

The boy who had once wobbled across the ice holding his parents' hands, now commanding it like he was born there.

"He's nervous," Ilya said beside him.

Shane glanced over. Ilya's eyes were fixed on their son, his expression unreadable, but his hands were clenched on his knees.

"He's focused." Shane corrected.

"Focused and nervous."

"I think you're more nervous than him, babe." Shane reached over and took his hand, squeezing. "He's got this."

Ilya took Shane's hands with both of his own without letting his eyes off of Theo and kissed it.

On Ilya's other side, Sophia shifted in her seat, trying to get a better view. At six years old, she was all restless energy, her dark hair pulled back in two ponytails that Ilya loved to do in the mornings. And he always did it perfectly.

"He's gonna score today!" Sophia announced with the certainty of someone who had never doubted her brother for a single day of her life. "At least two goals. Maybe three."

"That's a hat trick." Shane reminded her.

"I know." She grinned, all dimples and confidence. "But I changed my mind! Now want him to score four goals! I want one for each one of us!"

Shane laughed, and Ilya, now keeping one hand firmly on Shane's thigh, reached over with the other to gently caress Sophia's dark hair. She leaned into the touch without looking away from the ice, already so much like both of them it was almost uncanny. Then Ilya pressed a soft kiss to Shane's shoulder, lingering for just a moment, before turning to Agatha, who slept peacefully in Shane's arms, her tiny face relaxed, her small fist curled against Shane's chest. He kissed her forehead too, light as a whisper, full of everything he couldn't say.

She was almost two now, a surprise in every sense of the word. Unplanned, unexpected, but absolutely, completely theirs. Her hair was a wild tumble of dark curls, her eyes a startling hazel that seemed a mixture between Shane's and Ilya's eyes, and she had the most precious laugh.

Her arrival had been anything but easy.

Shane was forty-three when they found out. The pregnancy had been hard from the start; nausea that lasted all day, fatigue that left him sleeping ten hours at a stretch, complications that meant more doctor visits than he could count. By the sixth month, they'd stopped pretending everything was fine and started preparing for the worst.

The worst had come early.

Shane remembered the c-section with a clarity he wished he could forget. The fluorescent lights. The frantic voices. Ilya's hand gripping his, white-knuckled, as the doctors worked. The sound of Agatha's first cry, too weak.

She was a month early than expected.

The c-section had saved Agatha's life, but it had nearly cost Shane his. The doctors hadn't prepared them for the blood loss. The sudden, terrifying drop in Shane's vitals that sent monitors screaming and nurses sprinting and Ilya's world collapsing into a single, devastating moment. He remembered watching the medical team work on Shane with a kind of detached horror he'd never experienced before.

Not him, Ilya had thought, over and over, a prayer and a plea and a threat all at once.

Not him, not him, not him.

The minutes that followed were the longest of his life, longer than any overtime, longer than any season, longer than the years he'd wasted being away from each other.

When the doctors finally stabilized him, when Shane's color returned and the monitors settled and they said that he was going to be okay, Ilya had collapsed into the floor, sobbing like he hadn't sobbed since he was twelve years old.

He didn't tell Shane all of this until a few months later, he didn't want to burden him, didn't want to add to his recovery. But Shane noticed the way Ilya held him tighter at night, the way he checked on him during the smallest cough, the way he never quite took his eyes off him for those first few months.

Some scars were invisible. But they were there, carved into Ilya's heart, a reminder of how close he'd come to losing everything again. And between all that, he still managed to be the best father ever for all of their three children.

The thirty-two days in the hospital had been the longest of their lives. Shane recovering, Agatha growing stronger, although she was still too little, Ilya splitting himself between the hospital and home, making sure Theo and Sophia didn't feel forgotten.

Yuna and David had brought the kids to their home, taking over meals and school runs and bedtime stories, holding everything together while their son fought to heal and their granddaughter fought to grow healthy.

By the time they'd brought Agatha home, Shane had lost almost eighteen pounds he couldn't afford to lose and gained a new understanding of what it meant to be loved.

Ilya had been there every day. Every night. Every moment.

"Let me hold her so you can rest now." Ilya's voice was gentle, pulling Shane from the memory like a hand reaching through fog. His fingers brushed Shane's arm, warm and steady.

Shane blinked, disoriented for a moment, caught between the past and the present, between the terror of that operating room and the quiet miracle of Agatha sleeping in his arms.

"What?"

"I'll hold her," Ilya repeated, his eyes soft with understanding. He knew where Shane's mind had gone, could always tell, after all these years. "So you can rest."

Shane looked down at Agatha, at her peaceful face, at the tiny chest rising and falling. The weight of her was familiar, comforting, but his arms were tired. His body remembered what his mind had been replaying.

"I can hold her a little longer."

"I know you can." Ilya's hand covered his, stilling the protest before it could fully form. "But let me."

Shane exhaled, something loosening in his chest, a tension he hadn't even realized he'd been carrying and that it often showed up. Carefully, he transferred Agatha into Ilya's waiting arms, holding his breath as her tiny body shifted, praying she wouldn't wake. Ilya took her gently and Agatha settled almost immediately, her small fist curling against Ilya's chest like she already knew she was safe.

"See?" Ilya murmured, not looking away from their daughter, his voice low and full of wonder. "She sleeps like a rock. People look at her like this and think she's a calm kid."

Shane laughed softly, shaking his head. "She fooled everyone. I've never met a more chaotic kid." He paused, his smile fading into something softer, more private. "I'm so glad she is, though. After everything."

Ilya's eyes met his, warm and understanding. He knew. He'd been there for all of it, the fear, the relief, the slow recovery. He'd held Shane's hand through the worst of it and never let go.

Shane leaned back in his seat, his head resting on Ilya's shoulder, and watched his husband hold their youngest child. They were in a reserved area of the arena, one of those private cabins where the glass muffled the roar of the crowd, turning twenty thousand voices into a distant hum.

Through the glass, Shane could see Theo on the ice, still in the middle of warm-ups. Sophia, though, was bouncing in her seat, too restless to sit still, her eyes fixed on her brother. And in Ilya's arms, Agatha slept on, completely oblivious to the noise, the lights, the weight of the moment.

Shane looked at them, at their daughters, at their son, at the man who had been by his side for more than half his life, and felt something settle deep in his chest.

"I was thinking," he said quietly.

Ilya's thumb traced a slow circle on Agatha's back. "About?"

"How lucky we are."

Ilya's expression softened, the sharp lines of his face easing into something almost boyish. He leaned over and pressed a kiss to Shane's temple, lingering there for just a moment.

"We are," he agreed, his voice barely above a whisper. "The luckiest."

Theo was everywhere. Backchecking, forechecking, winning face-offs, setting up plays. He moved like the ice was an extension of himself, like he could sense where the puck would be before it even got there. He wasn't flashy, not like some of the other prospects who tried to dazzle with highlight-reel moves. He was smart. Positionally sound. The kind of player who made everyone around him better just by being there.

Shane recognized it. Ilya recognized it. The scouts in the stands, clustered together with their clipboards and knowing glances, certainly recognized it.

"He's better than us," Ilya said, pride in his voice and the quiet awe of a father watching his son already surpass everything he'd ever been.

Shane nodded slowly, his eyes never leaving Theo. "He definitely took the best of both of us." He paused, watching a Swedish defender close in on Theo, watching his son pivot and pass and create space where there was none. "But the team isn't clicking. They're not reading each other yet."

Ilya hummed in agreement. "He'll adapt. He always does."

The first period ended scoreless. The second period brought a Swedish goal, a quick shot from the slot that the Canadian goalie never saw, and then, minutes later, a Canadian equalizer. Theo had the secondary assist, a simple touch pass that set up the whole play, but he didn't celebrate. Just turned, skated to the face-off circle, and got ready for the next shift.

The tension in the arena ratcheted higher with every passing minute. Every hit drew gasps. Every scoring chance held the crowd's breath. This was what hockey was supposed to feel like, urgent, electric, alive.

"He's going to be drafted," Shane said quietly, more to himself than to anyone else.

"First round." Ilya nodded, his eyes fixed on their son. "Maybe top ten."

Shane was quiet for a moment. Then, almost casually: "Maybe top two. Like us."

Ilya turned to look at him, a slow grin spreading across his face, the same grin Shane had fallen in love with all those years ago, in a different arena, in a different life.

"You got top two. I got top one, sweetheart." Ilya said before winking.

Shane had to bite his tongue to keep from telling Ilya to go fuck himself. The kids were right there, after all. His face was dead serious, almost furious, but with a glint of amusement lurking beneath the surface. Inside, despite everything, he felt that familiar warmth stirring. However infuriating Ilya could be, Shane had to admit: he loved it when his husband was a cocky asshole.

The third period was chaos.

End-to-end action, scoring chances for both teams, the kind of hockey that made your heart pound and your throat go raw from shouting. Theo took a hit along the boards that made Shane's stomach drop. Ilya's hand found his knee, squeezing hard, but Theo bounced back up, shook it off, and kept playing.

With two minutes left, the puck came to him at the blue line.

Shane held his breath.

Theo faked left, went right, stepped around a defender like he wasn't there. He drove toward the net, pulled the goalie out of position.

Shot.

Score.

The arena exploded.

Shane was on his feet before he realized it, screaming, crying, laughing. Ilya was beside him, shouting something in Russian that Shane couldn't understand. Sophia was jumping up and down. Even Agatha had woken up, startled by the noise, but instead of crying, she started laughing and clapping her tiny hands.

On the ice, Theo was being mobbed by his teammates. His helmet had come off, his light and curly hair – almost like Ilya's – was a mess, and his face was split by the biggest grin Shane had ever seen.

Theo looked up at their box. Found them in the crowd. Waved.

Shane waved back, tears streaming down his face.

Canada won, 2-1.

The locker room after the game

The corridor outside the locker room was chaos. Reporters, cameras, teammates, coaches

In a distance enough for them not to be bothered, Shane and Ilya waited to see their son. Agatha was in Ilya's arms playing with his hair and making Shane laugh, and Sophie was hugging Shane's legs, occasionally glancing up at the door where her brother would eventually appear.

"The Swedes played well," Shane said, breaking the comfortable silence. "Their goalie stood on his head."

Ilya nodded. "Not well enough. They lost."

"Yeah, they lost, but that forward, number seventeen, he was everywhere."

"Brate." Ilya's voice had an edge to it, something Shane couldn't quite place. "He is a beta and is probably going to be drafted. High chance. Even with the loss."

Shane glanced at him. "You noticed him?"

"I noticed he was following Theo all game." Ilya's eyes were fixed on the door, his expression carefully neutral. "Every shift. Every zone. Like he was magnetized."

"That's... not uncommon. Scouts assign players to shadow top prospects."

"It wasn't just the game." Ilya shifted Agatha slightly, adjusting her weight. "Before the tournament, during practices, he was there. In the bleachers. Watching."

Shane frowned, his brow furrowing as he tried to dismiss the implication in Ilya's voice. "It's normal to watch other teams practice. You scout your competition, you prepare. I did that too, you know," Shane continued slowly, almost to himself, as if the words were being pulled from somewhere deep. "Before the draft. When Canada was scheduled to play against Russia,

I watched their practices. I wanted to see who I'd be facing." His voice dropped, barely a whisper, heavy with the weight of a memory he'd revisited more times than he'd ever confess. "I watched you."

Ilya's smile was slow, spreading across his face like sunrise, warm, certain, absolutely insufferable. "I know. You loved me already."

Shane's mouth opened, then closed. His face went through several expressions in quick succession, denial flashing first, then embarrassment creeping in at the edges, and beneath both of them, something softer, something he'd never quite been able to hide no matter how hard he tried. "That's—no. That's not..." He straightened his shoulders, clinging to plausibility. "I was scouting. It was professional."

"Professional," Ilya repeated, savoring the word like it was something sweet. His eyes glinted with amusement. "You watched me skate for three days and told yourself it was professional."

"Of course!" Shane's voice rose slightly. "And I was with my mom."

Ilya's grin widened. "That's very romantic. You wanted to introduce your mother to your future husband ten years before we got married."

"No, I didn't!" Shane could feel his cheeks warming, could feel the familiar spiral of losing an argument he hadn't even known he was having. "And you watched me too!"

"Yes." Ilya said it simply, without hesitation, without shame. "I was in love already. Had to see your freckles up close again after you introduced yourself to me days before the game." He shrugged, as if this were the most obvious thing in the world.

Shane blinked. His mouth opened. Closed. Opened again. The silence stretched between them, filled with years only growing love.

"Oh." He exhaled, a small laugh escaping him, surprised and soft and a little bit helpless. "Well, at the end of the day we're married and have three kids, so yeah." He shook his head, finally giving in. "I was fascinated with you already. Whatever."

Ilya's smile was open now, unguarded, the kind of smile he used to hide behind sarcasm and indifference, before Shane had taught him that he didn't have to.

Shane laughed, the sound breaking the tension, and Ilya joined him. Two grown men, standing in a corridor outside a locker room, laughing at how stupid they could still act after all these years. At how love had snuck up on them before they even knew what to call it. At how some things never changed, and never should.

Before either of them could say another word, the locker room door swung open.

Theo emerged in his suit, his hair still damp from the shower, his smile tired but brilliant. He looked like a man who had just played the game of his life, because he had.

"There you are," Sophia called out, already running in his direction.

Theo took her in his arms and hugged her before he was engulfed in a family hug.

"I miss you!" Agatha said, even though Shane had pointed to her brother several times during the game to show her he on the ice.

"I missed you too, little A!" He said, now taking her in his arms while Sophie hugged his legs.

"We're so proud of you, baby." Shane said, holding his son's face and kissing his forehead.

"Did you see?" he asked, his smile big and bright. "Did you see the goal?"

"We saw," Ilya said, pulling him into another hug, kissing his head too. "We saw everything."

"You were amazing! I told everyone you were going to score!" Sophie said while jumping and pulling his suit.

Theo laughed. "You're my good luck charm."

"I know!"

Six months later, the draft arrived like a storm they'd been watching on the horizon for years.

The hotel ballroom was packed with prospects in crisp suits, families clutching good-luck charms, and agents pacing like nervous fathers. The air hummed with anticipation, every whisper and shuffle carrying the weight of futures about to be written. Cameras flashed from every angle, capturing the nervous smiles, the clenched hands, the mothers dabbing at their eyes before anyone had even been called.

Shane and Ilya sat at a table near the front, close enough to see the stage, close enough to watch their son's face when his name was called. They'd given their interviews already, brief things, full of the usual words: *proud, amazing, he worked so hard*. Both of them had managed not to cry during the actual interviews, which Shane considered a victory.

Shane held it together better, though.

As soon as they were settled at their table, away from the cameras and microphones, Ilya had announced, very seriously, "There is something in my eye," and pressed a napkin against it for nearly a full minute. His other hand gripped Shane's under the table like a vise, knuckles white, as if letting go would mean falling apart entirely.

Shane didn't call him out on it. Didn't tease, didn't smirk, didn't say a word. He just rubbed slow circles on Ilya's back with his free hand, grounding him the way he'd been doing for many years now, steadying him without ever needing to be asked.

"It's still there," Ilya mumbled behind the napkin. "The thing in my eyes."

"I know," Shane said softly. "Take your time."

It wasn't a thing in his eye. They both knew it. But neither of them said so.

Agatha and Sophia were with Yuna and David at the family home, probably building block towers and negotiating over snacks. The evening belonged to Theo.

But Theo had been gone for a while.

"He said he was going to the bathroom," Shane said, checking his phone for the third time. "That was fifteen minutes ago."

Ilya glanced toward the corridor. "He's nervous."

"I know. But still—"

"He's fine. He's a grown man. He can find his way back from the bathroom."

Shane shifted in his seat, unconvinced. Five more minutes passed. Theo's seat remained empty.

"I'm going to check on him," Shane said, standing.

Ilya sighed but didn't stop him. He knew that look. He'd been on the receiving end of it too many times to argue.

The corridor was quieter than the main floor, the roar of the crowd muffled by concrete and distance. Shane walked past the concession stands, past the media area, toward the restrooms, his footsteps echoing slightly in the sudden stillness.

Then he heard voices.

Low. Close. And very, *very familiar*.

He stopped at the corner, just out of sight, and listened.

"I'm not nervous," Theo was saying. "I just don't like waiting."

"Liar." The other voice had an accent. Soft, amused. Swedish. "You've been bouncing your leg since you got to your table."

"Maybe I just have good circulation." A pause. "And what now? You're following me or something?"

Shane peered around the corner.

Theo stood with his back against the wall, arms crossed, trying very hard to look casual. Beside him, leaning against the same wall with an ease that was probably meant to seem casual but wasn't, was a tall blond boy in a navy suit.

Emil Brate. Number seventeen. The Swedish forward Ilya had pointed out at the world championships.

They were standing closer than two strangers should. Closer than two rivals should. Maybe closer than Shane and Ilya had stood at his first draft, before either of them knew what to call the thing sparking between them. But that was maybe a thing Shane was imagining. Maybe.

"So," Emil was saying, a small smile playing at the corner of his mouth, "If you go first and I go second, I won't be offended."

"If I go first and you go second, *I* won't be offended."

"Oh, so you already think you'll win this."

"There's nothing to win, it's not a competition. And I won the actual competition six months ago, actually."

Shane wanted to scream at how much Theo was sounding like Ilya.

"You probably will go first anyway." Emil said after a while ginning.

"You don't know that."

"Oh, I know." Emil's voice dropped slightly. "I have eyes. I've seen how you play. I watched many times."

They were both trying not to smile. Both failing spectacularly.

Shane's brain short-circuited.

He backed away from the corner, hand clapping over his mouth, and nearly collided with Ilya, who had apparently followed him, silent as a shadow.

"What—" Ilya started.

Shane grabbed his arm, pulled him back around the corner, and pressed a finger to his lips with enough force to be comical.

Ilya's eyebrows shot up. He pointed toward the corner, then mouthed: *Theo?*

Shane nodded, eyes wide, still covering his mouth. Then he pointed again, more emphatically, and mouthed back: *And Brate.*

Ilya's expression shifted. Confusion, then recognition, then something caught somewhere between amusement and disbelief. He leaned past Shane, just enough to peek around the corner.

When he pulled back, his eyes were shining.

They are standing very close, he mouthed.

I know! Shane wanted to scream, but together with his moving mouth he only knew how to flail his hands.

They are talking very quietly, Ilya added after another glance.

I KNOW!

He's touching Theo's arm. Ilya's eyebrows had climbed so high they'd nearly disappeared into his hairline.

WHAT?

Shane's hands covered his whole face. This wasn't happening. This was absolutely not happening.

Ilya grabbed his wrist, pulling it down. His mouth was moving, forming words Shane couldn't quite decipher at first. Then he slowed down, enunciating like Shane was learning English all over again.

This. Is. Adorable.

Shane shook his head violently, mouthing back: *No! Not adorable!*

"I'm glad we got to talk after the championship," they heard Emil saying, his voice softer now, more private.

"Me too." Theo's voice was lower too, softer, warmer, and Shane's eyes went wild. He pushed past Ilya to peek again.

They were extremely close now. Emil's hand had moved from Theo's arm to his sleeve, fingers loosely curled around the fabric. Theo wasn't pulling away.

"I'm glad you decided to apologize for shoving me into the boards... So many times." Theo said.

"I'll be doing that a lot more times if we get drafted to different teams, you know?" Emil's smile widened.

Theo's lips twitched. "That doesn't sound so bad."

Shane yanked himself back, his eyes so wide that Ilya actually looked worried. He tugged at Shane's arm, but Shane resisted, his hands flapping vaguely as he tried to communicate a dozen thoughts at once.

Did you see that? Did you hear that? They're standing so close! He's holding his sleeve! What does holding a sleeve mean? I can't believe this is happening! We need to do something!

None of it making sense to Ilya, who just watched him with growing concern if he was the one forgetting English right now.

Finally, Ilya cupped Shane's face in both hands, forcing him to stop.

Breathe, he mouthed.

Shane breathed.

What do we do? Shane asked in exaggerated silence, over-enunciating every word like a bad actor in a silent film.

Ilya shook his head slowly. *Nothing*, he signed, deliberate and calm. *Let's go*.

Shane stared at him. Then, reluctantly, he nodded.

Ilya held his hand and turned, walking back toward the main floor with his husband, not even giving Shane a chance to take one last glance around the corner.

Behind them, Theo and Emil were still there. Still close. Still talking in voices too low to hear.

Away from the corridor, tucked into a quieter alcove where the roar of the crowd faded to a distant murmur, Shane freaked out again.

"Oh my God. Oh my God. Oh my God!"

"Hollander."

"No, no, no, no, no." Shane paced in a tight circle, running his hands through his hair so frantically that. "Please don't call me Hollander right now. Oh my God."

"*Moy lyubov*."

"Ilya, did you see that?"

"Yes." Ilya leaned against the wall, arms crossed, looking far too calm for the situation, like he was watching a mildly interesting documentary instead of witnessing their son's potential romantic entanglements unfold in real time. "Not a big deal."

"Not a big deal?" Shane's voice climbed an octave. "That's... they were too close, Ilya. Too close."

"I saw that too."

"What if they're in love or something and they're hiding it? Does Theo not trust us?" Shane's voice cracked slightly, a thread of genuine hurt weaving through the panic. "I mean, look at our history! He shouldn't be afraid of our reaction!"

Ilya pushed off the wall, moving to stand in front of Shane. "You are thinking too much and too far ahead." His voice was calm, measured. "If they are doing something, probably it's for

fun or whatever." His lips twitched, threatening a smile.

"Ilya, they've been doing something since the final in January! It's been six months!"

"We did that for seven years." Ilya held up seven fingers, then let them fall.

Shane blinked. Opened his mouth. Closed it. "Where did Theo learn to lie like that?" he said, ignoring Ilya's point entirely, but Ilya just looked at him with raised eyebrows and an amused expression that said "*really*"?

"We did that for seven years," he repeated slowly, savoring each word.

"Fuck!" Shane resumed pacing. "That kind of thing shouldn't come through genetics! I don't want my son to be in an eight-year-long situationship, Rozanov!"

"Our story is pretty unique." Ilya shrugged, utterly unbothered. "I don't think it is going to repeat itself." He paused, tilting his head thoughtfully, a mischievous glint appearing in his eyes. "At least his face is decent. If he's going to play me."

Shane stopped pacing so abruptly he nearly tripped over his own feet. "What the fuck? Don't say that ever again. No one is going to play no one. And why would the Swedish guy play you? Theo is literally your son! He is basically your copy!"

"The guy is European. I used to be European too." Ilya waved a dismissive hand.

"You are European."

"No, I am Canadian. I married a boring Canadian for citizenship, remember?"

Shane laughed slightly and Ilya complemented:

"But okay. Theo is me and you are the Swedish guy, who is probably going to me drafted as number two."

Shane stared at him.

Ilya stared back.

"Fuck." The word escaped Shane like a deflating balloon. "If they're drafted as number one and two, they're going to be rivals too."

"Maybe."

"Not maybe, Ilya." Shane's hands flew up. "Ottawa got the first pick and fucking Toronto got the second!"

Ilya considered this, then nodded slowly. "At least they will be in the same country."

"You're not following me here."

"I am following you perfectly." Ilya pushed off the wall and crossed the small space between them, his hands coming up to cup Shane's face with a tenderness that belied the chaos of the past few minutes. "He will tell us whatever is happening when he's ready," he murmured, thumbs brushing gently over Shane's cheekbones. Then he leaned in and kissed him. Soft, grounding, a reminder that they'd survived worse than a son with a secret. "Just like someone else I know."

Shane closed his eyes and breathed. The panic was still there, buzzing under his skin, but Ilya's hands were warm and steady, anchoring him.

"Okay," he said finally. "Okay. When he's ready. But we assure him it's okay." He opened his eyes, searching Ilya's face. "I mean, it's okay, right? This Swedish boy is okay? Have you looked him up?"

Ilya's expression shifted to something caught between exasperation and fondness. "Okay, you will not dig into his life, Hollander."

"I can just put his name on Google. See what pops up."

Ilya sighed. "Okay. Nothing more than that. Just Google."

Shane nodded, already reaching for his phone.

"Not now, Hollander. Let's go," Ilya added, grabbing his wrist before he could open a browser. "Our son is still about to be drafted. Focus."

"Fine," he said. "But I'm Googling him tonight."

"Of course you are."

They walked back toward the main floor, hands intertwined, ready to cheer for their son.

Behind them, the alcove emptied, the echoes of their conversation fading into the hum of the crowd.

Some things never changed.

And some things, Shane was beginning to suspect, were just getting started.

"With the first overall pick," the announcer's voice boomed through the ballroom, "Ottawa Centaurs's Theo James Rozanov-Hollander!"

The room erupted.

Shane and Ilya shot to their feet, screaming, crying, laughing, all of it at once. Around them, strangers cheered. Cameras flashed. And there, on the stage, walking toward his future with his head held high, was their son.

Theo shook the commissioner's hand, pulled on the jersey, and posed for photos. His smile was radiant, his eyes searching the crowd, looking for them, finding them, holding on.

Shane waved. Ilya whistled, loud and proud.

And already on the stage, a tall boy with blond hair holding a Toronto jersey was watching too with a little smile on his face.

Shane was sure no one was noticing.

Ilya didn't bother pretending.

"He's smiling," Ilya observed.

"Who?"

"Sweden guy."

Shane elbowed him.

"Do not stare."

"Am not," Ilya added, although he was staring, and said in russian for only Shane to understand. *"He's smiling even though he is second. You were furious when you came second."*

Shane understood all of it, because at this point in life he was practically fluent, but didn't answer. He was too busy watching his son, feeling his heart swell with a pride so fierce it almost hurt.

Theo was walking toward his future.

And whatever, *or whoever*, that future held, Shane knew one thing for certain:

They would be there. Every step of the way.

Just like they always had been.

When Theo finally returned several minutes later, cheeks slightly flushed, looking like he'd just run a lap around the building, neither of them said a word.

Ilya just squeezed his shoulder, and both him and Shane hugged Theo tightly.

The next morning, the hotel restaurant was bathed in soft light, the kind that made everything look gentler, like the world was still waking up. A few other families dotted the tables, parents in fancy clothes, prospects in team-branded sweats, the quiet hum of post-draft exhaustion settling over everyone.

Shane, Ilya, and Theo sat at a corner table near the window, a spread of half-eaten pancakes, empty coffee cups, and one very good-looking omelet between them.

Theo was scrolling through his phone, occasionally texting and smiling at something, probably congratulations messages, probably friends from home. Shane tried not to read into it. He failed.

"So," Shane said, pushing a piece of pancake around his plate, "I was thinking about our draft."

Theo looked up, eyebrows raised. "Our draft?"

"Me and your father's." Shane gestured between himself and Ilya.

Ilya set down his coffee, watching Shane with the expression of a man who knew exactly what was happening and had decided to let it play out. He'd seen this before, Shane circling a topic like a plane waiting for permission to land, unable to just come out and say what he meant.

"Oh, it's crazy sometimes to think you two were drafted together." Theo dropped his phone and smiled while reaching for the omelet. "It's kind of romantic, actually."

"Yes. Very." Ilya grinned, his eyes flicking to Shane with amusement.

Shane continued, aiming for casual and landing somewhere around awkward. "We were so young. Didn't know who we were. Things were kind of difficult, but we figured it out eventually."

Theo frowned slightly, setting down his phone. "Okay?"

"Took us a while, though. Years, actually. Because we were scared." Shane laughed, a little too brightly, to ease the mood. "Of what people would think. Of what it would mean for our careers. Stupid, right? All that time wasted because we couldn't just... say what we were feeling for each other."

Ilya reached under the table and placed a hand on Shane's knee. Squeezed gently.

Too much, the squeeze said.

Shane ignored him.

"The point is," he pressed on, "that even when you think people won't understand some things, even when you're terrified, sometimes they do. Sometimes they surprise you. And you don't have to hide forever."

Theo stared at him. His brow was furrowed, his mouth slightly open, like he was watching a puzzle piece spin in the air and couldn't figure out where it was supposed to land.

"Dad," he said slowly, "are you okay?"

"I'm fine."

"You're being weird."

"I'm not being weird."

"You're definitely being weird." Theo looked at Ilya for help. "Papa, is Dad being weird?"

Ilya took a long, slow sip of his coffee, his eyebrows up and eyes dancing. "He's just reminiscing. It's his age."

Shane kicked him under the table. Ilya didn't flinch, he just smiled behind his mug, and Theo smiled too.

"We're basically the same age."

"Technically, Dad, you're older." Theo's grin was pure Ilya.

"By a month!"

"Still older." Ilya shrugged.

"Theo," Shane said, ignoring them both and leaning forward, "if there was ever anything you wanted to tell us, anything at all, you know you could, right? We would never judge you."

"I know that." Theo said simply.

"Great." Ilya said suddenly. "Do you want more of that ugly green juice, sweetheart? I'll order some more." He tried to redirect, to end the conversation before Shane spiraled further.

"No." Shane dismissed it quickly. "Theo, all I want to say is that whatever you need, we'll always be here for you. Sometimes the path might be a little turbulent, so although we won't always be physically there, you can always count on us. For whatever."

"I know, Dad."

"And we know how hockey life is." Shane's words were tumbling out now, faster than he could stop them. "I loved it. I still love hockey very much. But there will always be a lot of challenges you have to face off the ice. People can be... mean. Stupid. Some decisions require a lot more care and attention than you think. You don't have to be alone through any of them. I don't want you to make rush decisions or to deprive yourself from different experiences. I know that all that is part of growing up and you're almost nineteen, but the new age for adulthood is actually twenty-five now, so you have six more years to become a fully grown adult, you know..."

Ilya reached over and gently placed his hand on Shane's arm. "Okay, I think he got it, sweetheart."

"Dad, I'm okay." Theo's voice was patient, kind. "Are you worried about me being away when the season starts? I'll call and text you guys every day while I'm on the road. And I'll

play for Ottawa. It's not like I'm going to another city like you guys did back in the day." He paused. "I mean, I'll still live with you for a while. Eventually I'll move out, but that will take a long time."

"You will move?" Ilya asked, startled. His jaw tightened, and his eyes glowed with the beginnings of emotion.

"Papa, that will take a while. I'm not moving right away."

"You do not have to move. Why move? You will play for Ottawa. We live in Ottawa. No need to move."

"Okay, we don't need to discuss that now while having breakfast in a hotel." Shane reached over and caressed Ilya's shoulder. "Don't cry, baby."

"I am not crying. There is dust in the air." Ilya grabbed a napkin and pressed it to his eyes with great dignity.

"You better call every day on the road, or your father is going to cry," Ilya said, the napkin still covering half his face.

"You're the crying baby!" Shane turned to Theo. "Your 'Russians-do-not-cry' father cried for minutes yesterday before the draft."

"I had something in my eye."

"Tears, Rozanov."

"Dust, Hollander."

Theo watched them, shaking his head but smiling. "Are you like this since you met?"

"Yes." Ilya nodded. "Your dad loves it."

"Yeah." Shane was still caressing Ilya's shoulder. "Ilya has been annoying since we met."

"You never told me exactly how you two met, you know." Theo leaned back in his chair. "I mean, I know you were drafted together, and there are articles on the internet, but you've never told me the real story. How you actually got together."

A brief silence fell over the table.

"Oh," Shane said. "We didn't?"

"No."

"Well." Shane cleared his throat. "It's a very complicated history. That maybe should not be discussed over breakfast in a hotel."

"I made the first move," Ilya announced, to Shane's visible horror.

"Ilya..."

"We are together thanks to me."

"No, we're not. It's a very nuanced story."

"I would love to hear all of it," Theo said, genuinely curious.

"We can tell you once we're back home." Shane's voice was firm.

Theo smiled at his parents, a warm, open smile that reminded Shane of all the mornings they'd spent exactly like this, a family, together. Then his phone buzzed.

He glanced down, and his expression shifted, just slightly, just for a moment. Something soft, that looked almost like a smile.

Then it was gone.

"I'm going to organize my things back in my room," he said, already typing a quick response.

Shane's heart stuttered. "Won't you finish breakfast?"

"Yeah." Theo shoved the entire remaining piece of omelet into his mouth. After a few seconds of chewing, he said, "I'll catch you guys later. Love you."

And then he was gone, weaving through the tables toward the exit, already looking at his phone again.

Shane stared after him.

"I think he's going to meet him," Shane said quietly.

Ilya reached across the table and stole a piece of pancake from Shane's plate. "Yes. He's too obvious."

"We weren't that obvious. In the beginning of our... thing."

Ilya chewed thoughtfully. "If you think about it, we were a bit obvious. The people around us were just stupid."

Shane turned to face him, his expression caught somewhere between panic and wonder. He didn't need to say anything more for Ilya to understand his concern.

"*Moy lyubov*." Ilya set down his fork and took Shane's hand. "You just spent about ten minutes giving a very strange speech about our draft and hiding and being scared."

"It was not that long. And I was trying to be subtle."

"Was not."

"I just want to make sure he trusts us." Shane's voice dropped. "I don't want to be a bad parent."

Ilya's expression softened. He lifted Shane's hand and pressed a kiss to his knuckles. "You are an amazing father, Shane. Do not doubt that. Ever."

Shane was quiet for a moment. Then: "I googled him. Emil. Last night. There's nothing on him. Just draft stuff and hockey articles."

"Maybe that's not a bad thing."

"Now I feel bad that I googled him." Shane ran a hand through his hair. "So that's kind of bad, if I'm not supposed to think I'm a bad parent."

"You're just worried. Is normal."

"And you're too cool about it."

Ilya stood, still chewing the last of his stolen pancake. He held out his hand. "Let's go to our room. I will make you relax so you can be cool as me."

Shane looked up at him, at this man who had been by his side through every panic, every fear, every joy. Then, he smiled and took Ilya's hand.

"Maybe I need to relax a little," he admitted.

Ilya pulled him to his feet. "Don't worry, you will relax."

They walked out of the restaurant together, hands intertwined, leaving behind the half-eaten pancakes and the empty coffee cups and the weight of a conversation that would continue later.

The drive home from the airport had been quiet, the kind of silence that came from exhaustion and the slow settling of emotions too big to process. Theo had stared out the window for most of it, his reflection ghosting over the glass, a small, private smile playing at his lips whenever his phone buzzed. The city lights blurred past, casting fleeting shadows across his face, and in those brief, glowing moments, he looked like he was somewhere else entirely. Somewhere good.

Shane noticed. Ilya noticed. They didn't say anything, though.

Ilya drove with one hand on the wheel and the other resting on Shane's knee, grounding them both.

When they finally pulled into the driveway, the house was dark except for the soft glow of the porch light Yuna had left on. Agatha and Sophia were still at their grandparents' house, a deliberate choice, since they'd known the adults would be arriving late and exhausted.

They walked inside together, the familiar creak of the front door welcoming them home. Theo kicked off his shoes, mumbled something about being tired, and headed toward his bedroom.

"Goodnight," Shane called after him.

"Night, Dad. Night, Papa."

His footsteps faded down the hall, a door clicked shut, and the house settled into stillness.

"He seems normal, right?" Shane said as they finally made their way to their own bedroom.

Ilya sat on the edge of the bed, pulling off his socks. "He did."

"Normal normal. Not pretending normal."

"I think so." Ilya paused, one sock dangling from his fingers. "He was... spaced out sometimes. But not in a bad way."

Shane looked at him. "What do you mean?"

Ilya considered his words carefully, the way he always did when he wanted to get something exactly right. "Happy spaced out. Like he was thinking about something that made him smile." He looked up at Shane, his eyes soft with memory. "Not worried. Not stressed. More like... when I texted you. Before we got together. I smiled like that. Cliff used to say I blushed, is not true."

Shane felt his own lips curve in response. He'd smiled like that too, staring at his phone in the middle of the night, reading and rereading messages from a rival who shouldn't have made his heart race. He'd noticed it in Theo as well. The way he stared at his phone at odd moments, the corner of his mouth turning up like he was sharing a secret with himself.

"Happy spaced out," Shane repeated, testing the words. "That's good, I think."

Ilya pulled him down onto his lap, wrapping his arm around Shane's waist with the ease of decades of practice. "We survived the draft."

Shane laughed softly. "We survived the draft."

"Our son is officially a professional hockey player." Ilya pressed a kiss to Shane's temple. "Drafted first overall. Just like his Papa."

"Okay, I'll accept that, since he's all like you, even though I was the one who carried him for nine months."

Shane leaned into him, letting the weight of the weekend finally settle. The anxiety, the pride, the fear, the hope, all of it pressing against his ribs, demanding to be felt. For a moment, he just breathed, letting Ilya's warmth anchor him.

"We did okay," Shane said quietly. "Didn't we? As parents."

Ilya was quiet for a moment, his hand moving in slow circles on Shane's back. "I think we did more than okay."

Shane closed his eyes. Breathed.

There was a soft knock at the door.

They both looked up. Theo stood in the doorway, still in his travel clothes, his hair a mess, his expression caught somewhere between hesitant and determined. He was twisting his hands slightly, a nervous habit he'd picked up from Shane, though neither of them had ever pointed it out.

"Hey," he said. "Um..."

"Hey, honey." Shane straightened up and got up from Ilya's lap, concern flickering across his face. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing." Theo shifted his weight from one foot to the other, his eyes darting between them. "I just... I was wondering." He paused, like he was gathering courage from somewhere deep. "Can you tell me? The story. How you actually got together."

The room went very quiet.

"Now?" Shane asked.

"Yeah..." Theo's voice wavered slightly. "If you're going to sleep now, it's okay. We can talk about that another day."

"No, we're good." Ilya stood, crossing to the door and putting a hand on Theo's shoulder. His touch was steady, reassuring. "We can..." He looked back at Shane and he nodded.

"Yeah. We can tell you. It's kind of a long story, though."

Theo nodded, some of the tension leaving his shoulders. "I'm sure."

Ilya smiled, that warm, rare smile he kept for his family, and put his arm around Theo's shoulders. "Then let's go to the living room. I will make popcorn."

Shane followed them into the hallway, already reaching for the light switch. "It's too late for popcorn. It has too much oil. Only if you do it in the air popper."

Ilya sighed dramatically, shaking his head at Theo like a man who had been suffering for decades. "Your dad has been boring since we met back in 2008."

Theo laughed, a real laugh, the first one that had reached his eyes all night. "Yeah, I've noticed."

"I'm not boring," Shane protested, following them down the hall. "You have to take care of you body now that's you're a professional hockey player."

"That's what boring people say," Ilya called over his shoulder, grinning.

Theo settled onto the couch with the popcorn bucket in his lap, pulling his legs up beneath him. He looked younger in the soft light, more like the boy who used to crawl into their bed after nightmares, asking to hear stories about magic and faraway places.

Tonight, the story was a much realer one.

Shane took a breath, settling into the other couch across from Theo. Ilya sat beside him, close enough that their shoulders brushed.

"Okay," Shane began. "We met on December 26th, 2008. Before the finals between Canada and Russia in the World Junior Hockey Championship. I had seen Ilya play through some videos, and he was very good, so I wanted to introduce myself to him before we played against each other."

Ilya leaned back, a familiar smirk playing on his lips. "He wanted to destabilize me with his freckles."

Shane shot him a look. "No, I didn't. Get over it." He turned back to Theo. "Continuing, we exchanged a few words..."

"And then I beat him up and Russia won," Ilya interrupted, his smirk widening.

"Whatever." Shane waved a dismissive hand. "So, in June 2009, we got drafted. I went to Montreal, and Ilya went to Boston. And then..." He paused for effect. "I beat his ass at the World Junior Hockey Championship the following year. We were supposed to see each other again in about six months, when the season would start, but your father arranged for us to do a commercial together."

Ilya nodded, looking immensely pleased with himself. "Yes. I am very proud of that. Was very much in love already." Shane smiled shyly.

"We felt..." Shane paused, searching for the right word. The memory surfaced, the way Ilya had looked at him across that commercial set, the way Shane's heart had raced for no reason he could explain after Ilya told him he looked pretty, the way things in the showers led to other things in the hotel... "Attracted to each other." He said finally, summarizing it all. "And we started to see each other in secret whenever Montreal and Boston played together."

Ilya sat up straighter. "Not true. You skipped a lot of things."

"Ilya..."

"We met twice in six months." Ilya counted on his fingers. "Twice. And then he played hard to get for two years."

Theo's eyebrows shot up. "Rude!"

"Yes!" Ilya pointed at him triumphantly. "Very rude. And after I finally conquered him..."

"Conquered?" Shane's voice climbed.

"Yes, conquered. After that, we used to meet when Montreal and Boston played against each other."

Theo frowned, doing the math in his head. "But that's only a few times a year."

"Exactly." Shane's voice softened. "It kind of sucked. But that was our life."

Ilya reached over and took Shane's hand, his thumb tracing slow circles on his skin. The gesture was small, unconscious, the kind of touch that had become second nature after all these years. "And still, those were the best days of the year for Papa."

Shane felt heat rise to his cheeks. Even after everything, Ilya could still make him blush.

"Then..." Ilya's expression shifted, darkening slightly. "Enters Rose Landry. 2016."

Theo's eyes went wide. "Auntie Rose?"

"The very same." Ilya's voice was dry.

"It's been twenty years, Ilya," Shane muttered.

"Still a punch in the stomach." Ilya pressed a hand to his chest dramatically. "Me and your father had a silent fight."

Theo leaned forward. "A silent fight?"

"Yes. We were having feelings. Neither of us wanted to talk about it. Then we realized we were expressing too much, and your father freaked out and left me with a dozen ginger ales in the fridge and dirty dishes with food that I had made for him to wash. And went to date Rose Landry."

Shane winced at the memory. "Yeah... But Rose made me realize I didn't like her, not like that, and she turned out to be very supportive of me and Ilya's relationship in the future." He glanced at Ilya, gratitude softening his voice. "So after that, me and Ilya made up during the All-Star Game in 2017 and..." He paused. "Well. A few weeks later, I was knocked out on the ice by Cliff."

Theo winced. "I saw that video once. It was pretty bad. Uncle Cliff knocked you out good."

Ilya's jaw tightened at the memory, his hand unconsciously pressing harder against Shane's. "He did not mean to do it. He felt very bad after, but yes." He swallowed. "I was very scared. I went to the hospital to see Shane, although no one knew about us."

Shane's voice dropped. "And after Ilya left, I discovered... I was pregnant. With you."

Theo went still. "Oh."

"But I didn't tell your father until I was three months along."

"Oh." Theo's voice was smaller now. He looked down at the popcorn bucket, then back up at them. "So... you two got together... because of me?"

The question hung in the air, heavy and fragile.

"No!" Shane and Ilya denied it in a rush, their voices overlapping, as if even suggesting it was absolutely wrong.

Shane leaned forward. "No, Theo. We were heading toward each other regardless. Pregnant or not."

Ilya nodded firmly. "If you think about it, we were already together for nine years. It was about time."

Shane turned to him confused. "Nine?"

Ilya's expression softened. "In my head, we have been together since Saskatchewan, 2008."

Shane felt something warm bloom in his chest. "Oh," he said softly. "That's... sweet."

Theo looked between them, processing. "But I wasn't planned, then."

"No, honey. You weren't planned." His voice cracked slightly at the thought of the bad moments he had been through before telling Ilya about the pregnancy. "But you, along with your sisters, are the best things that ever happened to us."

Ilya reached over, sat besides Theo and pulled him into a one-armed hug, crushing him against his side. "And I have won the family I always dreamed of." His voice was gruff, thick with emotion. "The best I could ever get."

Shane did the same and took Ilya's free hand, their fingers intertwining.

"We were a secret," Shane continued, "until you were about six or seven months old. Some paparazzi published photos of us together in the parking lot of the Bell Centre, in Montreal."

Ilya nodded. "I was already playing for Ottawa at the time. I decided to move here so we could be together. After the photos came out, Shane joined the team as well."

"And here we are." Shane gestured around them, at the living room, at the family photos on the walls, at the life they'd built. "Married. Three kids. Happier each year."

Theo was quiet for a moment. Then, softly: "So everything turned out okay."

Shane met Ilya's eyes. A lifetime passed between them in that single glance.

"After a lot of communication and sorting out our feelings," Shane said carefully, "yes, it did. But it was a painful process, I'm not going to lie. It was hard. Accepting our feelings. Fighting all the stupid comments from the media and the hockey world."

Ilya shrugged, his thumb still tracing circles on Shane's hand. "But we are legends now." A small, defiant smile tugged at his lips. "And all those stupid people are forgotten."

Theo laughed, a short, surprised sound. Then he looked down at his hands, thinking. The room settled into a patient silence. Shane waited. Ilya waited.

"So," Theo said finally, his voice quiet, almost careful, like he was testing the weight of the words before letting them go. His fingers tightened against each other. "I'm kind of seeing someone."

Ilya didn't miss a beat. "Emil Larsson."

Theo's head snapped up, his eyes wide. "What?"

Shane shoved Ilya's shoulder. "Ilya!"

Theo's eyes darted between them, searching their faces for an explanation, for some sign that this was a joke. "How do you know that?"

Ilya shrugged, utterly unbothered, though there was a gentleness beneath his casualness that Shane recognized, the careful way Ilya handled fragile things. "We were in your shoes, *malysh*." His voice softened. "We can feel it." He paused, a small smile playing at his lips. "We are psychics."

Shane sighed, running a hand through his hair. "We saw you two together. Next to the bathroom. During the draft."

The color drained from Theo's face, then flooded back twice as bright, spreading across his cheeks like a wildfire. "Oh my God." He buried his face in his hands, his shoulders hunching forward. "How much of it?"

Shane's own heart picked up at the question, a flicker of concern cutting through his amusement. "How much of what?"

"Nothing." Theo's voice was muffled behind his fingers. "Never mind." He dropped his hands, exhaling deeply. His leg was bouncing, a nervous habit he'd picked up from Shane, one he'd never managed to shake. "Okay. Yes. It's him. I'm seeing him."

Ilya leaned forward, his eyes sharp, assessing, but not in a threatening way. In the way he used to watch game tape, looking for the story beneath the surface. "Is it serious?"

"No." Theo shook his head, and Shane could see the uncertainty flickering behind his eyes, the way he was trying to figure out his own feelings in real time. "I mean... we haven't talked about it yet."

Shane studied his son's face, the vulnerability there, the way his jaw tightened and relaxed, tightened and relaxed. The hope hiding behind the hesitation. Theo wanted this to be something. Shane could see it. He could see himself too. He just wasn't sure Theo had admitted it to himself yet.

"Do you want to talk to him about it?" Shane asked gently. "Or is it... just fun?"

Theo's gaze dropped to the popcorn bucket forgotten in the coffee table. "I like him." The words came out soft, almost shy, like they were still too new to be spoken aloud. "So... yeah. I kind of do."

Ilya nodded sagely, a knowing gleam in his eye. "So you are in a situationship. Like we were."

Shane shot him a look, one part exasperation, one part affection. "Don't freak out our son, please."

But Theo was smiling now. Small, but real. A crack of light in the nervous tension that had been wrapped around him all night. "You guys were in a situationship for nine years." He looked between them, shaking his head slowly, almost in disbelief. "You're both insane."

"Yes," Ilya agreed, his own smile widening. "Insane that the first and second overall pick got together. Hm. Crazy." He said ironically.

Theo ducked his head, but he was still smiling.

"Yeah," Theo said quietly. "Well, the thing is... I don't know what to do."

Shane leaned back into the couch. He remembered this feeling, the weight of wanting something and not knowing how to reach for it. The terror of reaching and missing. "Communication solves a lot of problems, Theo." He paused, studying his son's face. "At the same time, this relationship you have is new, isn't it?"

Theo nodded slowly. "Yeah. We've been talking since the World Junior Hockey Championship. Six months."

"Very new, then." Ilya's voice was calm, steady, an anchor in the uncertainty.

"Yeah." Theo's leg had stopped bouncing. His hands lay still in his lap. "It is."

Ilya reached over and rested a hand on Theo's shoulder, a grounding touch, the same one he'd used to calm Shane before every big game, every difficult conversation, every moment that mattered. "I know I say it quite a lot," Shane said, his voice thick with the effort of holding back everything he felt, "but all we want is for you to be happy. And we will always be here for you, no matter what."

Theo's eyes glistened. He blinked quickly, looking away. "I know." His voice cracked, just slightly. "I'll figure it out."

He leaned forward and pulled Shane into a hug; tight, desperate, grateful. Ilya caressed his dark golden curled hair.

Shane held on, feeling his son's heartbeat against his own chest, feeling the years collapsing between them. This was still the boy who had once crawled into their bed after nightmares.

This was still the boy who had asked endless questions and learned to skate and fallen down and gotten back up.

He was older now. Taller. Stronger.

But he was still their baby.

They held each other for a long moment, no words, just warmth. Just family.

When Theo finally pulled back, his eyes were dry but bright. He wiped his nose with the back of his hand, almost embarrassed, but not quite.

Shane and Ilya looked at each other. A lifetime passed between them in that single glance. The fear. The hope. The love that had carried them through everything.

They smiled.

"Okay," Theo said, standing up and stretching. "I'm going to bed. For real this time." He paused at the edge of the living room, looking back at them. "Thank you. For telling me. For... this."

"Always, *malysh*," Ilya said softly.

Theo nodded. Then he was gone, his footsteps fading down the hall, a door clicking shut.

The house settled into stillness.

Shane leaned into Ilya's side, feeling the familiar weight of him. "He's going to be okay."

Ilya pressed a kiss to his hair. "Yes, because we taught him well."

Outside, the night stretched on, quiet and patient. And somewhere in the dark, their son was dreaming of hockey, of a Swedish boy, of a future unwritten.

Just like they had, once.

Just like they still did.

6 years later

The backyard was alive with the sounds of laughter and clinking glasses, of children shrieking and adults catching up. String lights stretched across the patio, casting a warm golden glow over everything. It was the kind of evening that felt suspended in amber, too perfect to be real, too full of love to be anything else.

Shane stood near the grill, though he wasn't grilling. Ilya had banned him from the grill years ago, after he burned the tip of his finger. Instead, he held his ginger ale and watched his family, his friends, his people, all gathered here for him.

Fifty years old.

He still couldn't quite believe it.

His mother appeared at his elbow, as if summoned by his thoughts. Yuna's hair was fully gray now, and her face was lined with decades of smiles and worries and love. But her eyes were still sharp, still warm, still the same eyes that had watched him take his first steps, score his first goal and fall in love with the best person in the world.

"Happy birthday, sweetheart," she said, leaning up to kiss his cheek.

Shane wrapped an arm around her shoulders, pulling her close. "Thanks, Mom."

They stood together for a moment, watching the party swirl around them. Sophia and Agatha were chasing each other across the lawn, their laughter bright and carefree. Theo stood by the drinks table, talking animatedly with some of his teammates, looking relaxed and happy in a way that made Shane's heart ache with gratitude. He already lived in his own apartment downtown, closer to the arena too.

"Theo is happy," she said softly. "I can see it in his face."

Shane nodded. "He is."

"And you?" Yuna turned to look at him. "Are you happy?"

Shane thought about it. About the years behind him, the triumphs, the losses, the moments that had shaped him. About the man he'd married, the children they'd raised, the life they'd built.

"Yeah, Mom," he said quietly. "I really am."

Yuna reached up and cupped his face in her hands, the way she'd done when he was small, when he was hurt, when he needed reminding that he was loved. Her palms were warm, slightly roughened by age, but her touch was as gentle as it had ever been.

"Of all the things I've done in my life," she said, her eyes glistening, "being your mother is the thing I'm most proud of."

Shane's throat tightened. "Mom..."

"No, let me say it." She smiled, blinking back tears. "I watched you grow into the most incredible man. A father, a husband, a leader. You faced things I couldn't protect you from, and you came through stronger every time." She squeezed his face gently. "I am so proud of you, Shane. Every single day."

Shane couldn't speak. He just pulled her into a hug, holding her close, breathing in the familiar scent of her.

"I love you, Mom," he whispered against her hair.

"I love you too, sweetheart. Always."

When they pulled apart, Yuna dabbed at her eyes with the edge of her sleeve, laughing at herself. "Look at me, crying at a party."

"It's my party," Shane said, his own voice thick. "Crying is allowed."

Ilya appeared then, materializing at Shane's side like he always did. A glass of vodka in one hand, the other hand finding the small of Shane's back, a touch so familiar, so automatic, that Shane barely registered it anymore.

Except tonight, he did. Tonight, he felt everything.

"Everything okay?" Ilya asked, glancing between them.

"Perfect," Yuna said. She reached up and patted Ilya's cheek, the same way she'd been patting his cheek for over twenty years now. "I was just telling my son how proud I am of him."

Ilya nodded, his expression soft. "He's worth being proud of."

"I know." Yuna's gaze shifted from Shane to Ilya, and something in her face changed, not softer, exactly, but deeper. "And I'm proud of you too. My other son."

Ilya's smile went wide, like it always did when she would call him her son. And for a moment, he looked almost young again, like the boy who'd first walked into this family unsure if he deserved to be there.

"Thank you, mom." He said back.

"Oh, honey. I'm proud of the father you are. The husband you are. The man you are."

Ilya didn't speak. He just leaned down and kissed her cheek, soft, reverent, lingering. When he pulled back, his eyes were wet.

"I love you," he said quietly. "You know that, yes?"

Yuna patted his chest. "Of course I know. Now stop being dramatic and get me another glass of wine."

Ilya laughed, the sound catching in his throat. "Yes, ma'am."

He disappeared toward the drinks table, and Yuna turned back to Shane.

"Good man," she said, nodding after him. "You chose well."

Shane smiled, watching his husband weave through the crowd, pausing to ruffle Agatha's hair, to clap Theo on the shoulder, to kiss Sophia's forehead.

"There was not really a choice." Shane said softly. "It was always just him."

Yuna looped her arm through his and leaned her head against his shoulder.

As the evening settled into that warm, golden hour when the light turned soft and the laughter mellowed, someone clinked a glass. The sound rippled through the backyard, conversations fading, heads turning toward the patio where Shane stood, his wine glass in hand, looking slightly embarrassed to be the center of attention.

"Speech! Speech!" Sophia chanted, and Agatha joined in, her seven-year-old voice rising above the crowd.

Shane shot a look at Ilya, who only shrugged, clearly enjoying this.

"Alright, alright," Shane said, holding up his free hand. "I didn't prepare anything, so you're all just going to have to bear with me."

The crowd laughed. Agatha climbed into Theo's lap. Sophia settled on the arm of David's chair. The string lights swayed gently overhead, casting everything in a soft, amber glow.

Shane took a breath.

"I'm fifty years old," he began. "Which is weird, because there's a new grey hair everyday now." A ripple of laughter. "But fifty years is a long time, and when I think about all the people who have helped me get here, who have loved me and supported me and put up with me, I think about all of you. So, thank you all for coming."

"Mom. Dad." Shane's voice softened. "A special thanks to both of you. You gave me the space to become who I was supposed to be." He raised his glass slightly toward them. "I don't say it enough, but thank you. For everything."

Yuna was crying. David cleared his throat gruffly, reaching for her hand.

Shane turned, scanning the crowd until he found Ilya.

"And then there's my husband, Ilya."

Ilya raised an eyebrow, but he was smiling.

"I could stand here for an hour listing the reasons I'm grateful for you, and I'd still forget half of them." Shane shook his head, a small laugh escaping him. "You gave me not only the best three things that have ever happened to me, Theo, Sophia and Agatha, but the most pure and genuine love I have ever known." He paused, his voice catching. "Twenty-five years of loving you, and I still don't have the words for what it means to me." He raised his glass. "So I'll just say this: thank you. For all of it. For our love. For our family."

The crowd erupted into cheers, glasses clinking, voices rising. Someone turned the music back on. The children ran across the lawn.

And in the middle of it all, Shane stood with his husband's arms still loosely around his waist, surrounded by the people he loved most in the world. The string lights flickered above them, casting soft shadows across smiling faces. Somewhere, Agatha was trying to steal another piece of cake. Somewhere else, Sophia was explaining the rules of a game no one else understood. And here, in this small circle of warmth, everything was exactly as it should be.

"That was beautiful, Dad." Theo stepped closer, his smile easy, his eyes warm. He looked so much like Ilya in this light, the same curve of the jaw, the same quiet intensity softened by affection.

"It was very beautiful indeed, Shane."

Shane turned toward the voice. Emil stood beside Theo, tall and composed, his accent softening the edges of his words. He'd been part of their family for a few years now, quietly, steadily, without fanfare. Just showing up, just being present, just loving Theo in a way that made Shane's heart ache with recognition.

"Thank you, honey. And thank you, Emil." Shane reached out and clasped Emil's shoulder briefly, feeling the young man's warmth through the fabric of his shirt. "I'm happy you could come too."

Emil dipped his head, a hint of color rising to his cheeks. "Thank you for having me. It's always nice to be here."

The words were simple, but Shane could hear the weight behind them, the careful way Emil always spoke about their family, the reverence he gave to being included. He'd never taken any of it for granted.

"At this point, you're here more than our son," Ilya said in a bickering tone, one he'd perfected over the four years since Theo had moved into his own apartment downtown. It was his way of saying he missed his son being around, wrapped in teasing so he could relieve the sadness.

Theo sighed, the sound caught somewhere between exasperation and affection.

"Papa, eta nepravda. Perestan', pozhaluysta." Papa, that's not true. Stop that, please. His voice was pleading rather than demanding, the voice of a son who loved his father too much to actually be angry at him.

Shane laughed, shaking his head, but still reached over to gently scold Ilya. "Stop saying that. He comes here whenever he can. You should accept that by now that he's a professional hockey player, like we were by the way, and he travels a lot."

Ilya's pout was theatrical, but his eyes were soft. "Okay. Okay."

Shane wrapped his arms around Ilya from behind, resting his chin on his husband's shoulder. The familiar weight of him, the familiar scent. It was home, always home.

"If it helps..." Emil said, grinning now, "I think Theo is too obsessed with hockey sometimes."

"What?" Theo protested, spinning to face him.

"Oh, yeah." Emil nodded, completely unbothered by Theo's indignation. "He's obsessed. Practices late, watches game footage at breakfast, talks in his sleep about forechecking."

"I do not talk in my sleep," Theo muttered.

"Oh, yeah, he got that from Shane and Shane got it from Yuna." Ilya said. "It gets better after retirement."

Theo threw his hands up. "Okay, are you all joining forces against me or something?"

Shane shrugged, grinning. "From my experience, people do that when they love you."

Theo snorted, trying to look offended and failing spectacularly. Emil pulled him into a sideways hug, and Theo melted into it, his mock annoyance dissolving into something softer.

"Okay," Theo said quietly, leaning into Emil's side. "I can accept that."

The party continued around them. Hayden was telling a story to anyone who would listen, something about a fishing trip and a very large trout that grew larger with every telling. Yuna was helping herself to another slice of cake, winking at Sophia, who was trying to sneak a second piece for herself. The string lights swayed in the evening breeze, casting everything in a warm, golden glow.

Shane and Ilya were hugging, looking each other in the eyes, so close they could feel their heart synchronizing.

"Fifty years," Ilya murmured, his lips very close to Shane's.

"Fifty years."

"Not bad, Hollander. You are old, but still hot."

Shane laughed. "Next month, you'll be the old one."

Ilya pressed a kiss to Shane's neck. "We're growing old together." His lips lingered on Shane's skin. "I'm loving every second of it."

"I love you so, so much."

"Lucky me."

They kissed, soft, unhurried, the kind of kiss that came from decades of practice, from knowing exactly how the other moved, from a love that had only deepened with time.

"*Ya lyublyu tebya sil'nee,*" Ilya whispered against his lips. *I love you more.*

Shane rested his head on Ilya's shoulder and looked out at the yard, at Theo and Emil, heads bent together, laughing at something on Theo's phone. At Sophia, now sneaking a third piece of cake while Yuna pretended not to notice. At Agatha, twirling in circles on the grass, arms outstretched like she was trying to catch the stars.

At his parents, still holding hands after all these years. At his friends scattered across the lawn, their voices rising and falling in easy conversation.

And he thought about the road that had brought him here.

The fears. The secrecies. The years of wanting and waiting and wondering if he would ever have this. The nights he'd lain awake, listening to Ilya breathe, terrified that it would all disappear. The mornings he'd woken up and chosen, again and again, to stay, to love and be loved.

Every difficulty, every sacrifice, every moment of doubt, it had all been worth it. Because it had led him here. To this yard, to this afternoon, to this man.

To Agatha's laugh. To Sophia's stubbornness. To Theo's smile.

To Ilya's arms around him, solid and sure.

Shane had spent so much of his life thinking happiness was something he had to earn, something he had to fight for, something that could be taken away at any moment. But standing here, surrounded by the people he loved most in the world, he understood something different.

Happiness wasn't a prize. It was a gift. And he had been given it, over and over, for fifty years.

He blinked, and his eyes were wet.

"Daddy." Agatha's voice cut through his thoughts. She was tugging on his sleeve, her small face tilted up toward his. "Daddy, you're crying."

Shane touched his cheek, surprised to find it damp. "No, I'm not."

"You are." She turned to Ilya with the authority of a seven-year-old who knew she was right. "Papa, Daddy's crying."

Ilya kissed Shane's cheek, soft and lingering. Then he scooped Agatha up, kissing her forehead too. "Happy tears, *solnyshko*. That's all."

Agatha considered this, her small brow furrowed. Then she nodded sagely, as if she had been told a great secret. "*Da*." She wiggled to be put down and ran off toward the cake table again, her mission clear.

Shane watched her go, his heart so full it ached.

"I love this," he said quietly. "I love all of this."

Ilya pulled him closer, his arm warm around Shane's waist. "Good. Because it's not going anywhere."

They stood together, watching their family, their friends, their life spread out before them like a gift they'd unwrapped together, piece by piece, year by year.

The string lights swayed. The children laughed. The night stretched on, gentle and full.

Fifty years old. Surrounded by family. Loved beyond measure.

Some birthdays, Shane thought, were perfect.

This was one of them.

And there were many more perfect birthdays yet to come.

Chapter End Notes

I'm so thankful for everyone who read it and waited for the final chapter! Thank you for reading, for commenting, for leaving kudos!! This fic was very important for me, cause although I write fanfics for at least 14 years, hollanov inspired a lot to publish my stories again.

I hope you guys liked it as much as I did writing! See you in my other fics 💕💕

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