

A genetic bloom between us

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](https://archiveofourown.org/works/83403841) at <https://archiveofourown.org/works/83403841>.

Rating:	Explicit
Archive Warning:	Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings
Category:	M/M
Fandoms:	Heated Rivalry (TV) , Game Changers Heated Rivalry - All Media Types
Relationships:	Shane Hollander/Ilya Rozanov , Shane Hollander & Ilya Rozanov
Characters:	Shane Hollander , Ilya Rozanov , Hayden Pike , Yuna Hollander , Rose Landry , Troy Barrett , Wyatt Hayes , Harris Drover
Additional Tags:	Mpreg , Male Pregnancy , Pregnant Shane Hollander , No Alpha/Beta/Omega Dynamics , Supportive Ottawa Centaurs (Game Changers) , Shane Hollander Loves Ilya Rozanov , Shane Hollander & Hayden Pike Friendship , Book 6: The Long Game (Game Changers) , Medical Procedures , Emotional Intimacy , Protective Ilya Rozanov , Book 2: Heated Rivalry (Game Changers) , Hockey , Eventual Explicit sexual content , Mpreg Gene , Hollanov - Freeform , Unexpected Pregnancy , Pregnant Sex
Language:	English
Series:	Part 1 of Beyond the Ice
Stats:	Published: 2026-04-19 Completed: 2026-07-07 Words: 50,339 Chapters: 24/24

A genetic bloom between us

by [Rikki_SPN4](#)

Summary

Lately Shane Hollander had been very sensitive to noise and certain smells.
When the final buzzer sounds he mysteriously disappears right after the sixth playoff game.

Notes

NOTE: This story has details from “the long game” written into it. If you have not read the book there will be spoilers.

Chapter 1: The damn buzzer

The final buzzer sounded, and the crowd erupted. Loud clapping and cheering filled the arena as the Ottawa team had just defeated Montreal in the sixth playoff game on home ice.

Shane had hoped Montreal would win this match, since he would have liked a longer break before going up against another team, but now Ottawa and Montreal were tied 3–3.

He had been so relieved that both he and Ilya had been allowed in the playoff games after they had accidentally been outed some weeks back.

Now he was even more determined to win, so he and his team could get another Stanley Cup. They were last year's champions, for fuck's sake.

After a loss, Shane would normally join his teammates in the locker room and make sure every one of them was alright after the game.

He felt it was the proper thing to do as the team's captain.

But today he got changed, took a quick shower in silence, and then went straight to the parking lot.

The sound of the buzzer had been both deafening and a relief for Shane that afternoon. For the past few days, he had been very sensitive to noise.

He would get sudden headaches or start to feel very dizzy when exposed for too long. Sometimes certain smells would provoke the same reaction, adding nausea to the list.

A long hockey game with loud music, sweaty teammates, and that damn buzzer had nearly been too much. He felt responsible for not leading his team to victory, but he had barely been able to keep himself steady on his skates while pretending to feel fine.

Just before the game, Hayden came up to Shane and placed a firm hand on his shoulder.

"You look a little green, buddy. Are you feeling, okay?"

"Yeah, I just didn't get much sleep last night, and I really want to win today," Shane had assured Hayden.

The first time Shane noticed something was off was two weeks ago, the day before the first playoff game. He was lying on the sofa in his apartment when the phone rang. He stood up as he answered it, but only managed to mumble a few words before his vision went blurry. A short moment later, he landed hard on the wooden floor.

"Shane...? Are you there? What happened?" Shane was confused when he opened his eyes. He heard his mom's panicked voice coming from the phone beside him and sat up slowly.

"I think I just passed out," Shane said in a groggy voice and placed a hand on his forehead.

Yuna then insisted that Shane should go see a doctor to get tested for a concussion.

Shane called Hayden and asked him for a lift to the hospital.

At the hospital, Shane was greeted by a tall doctor with green eyes and short dark blond hair, wearing an open white coat with rolled-up sleeves.

Shane couldn't help but notice his abs, which were visible under the tight grey T-shirt he wore beneath the coat.

"I'm Dr. Matt Hayes, nice to meet you, Shane," he said, stretching out his hand. "I specialize in sports medicine. I believe you're here because you fainted?"

Shane explained what had happened and also told him about his, at the time still mild, headaches and dizziness.

Hayes gave Shane a full physical examination, including checking for any signs of a concussion.

"I believe you've avoided any head injuries. But I would like to take a blood sample to see if everything is as it should be.

The results should be ready in a couple of weeks," Hayes assured him.

After the defeat in Ottawa, Shane was now driving towards Montreal to get the results. No matter the outcome of the tests, he knew he wanted Ilya to be there when he got home.

He knew that Ilya was probably planning to go out with his team to celebrate their victory, so Shane called him as soon as he got into his car.

"Good game," Shane said in a flat tone as Ilya picked up the phone. "I'm going to Montreal. Will you meet me at home later? I might not be there when you arrive, but just wait for me, okay?"

Ilya was still celebrating with his teammates in their locker room and therefore kept his response short: "Okay, see you."

Chapter 2: Something to do

In the locker room after the game, Ilya was practically ordered by his teammates to join them at a local restaurant they often visited after victories. They wanted to celebrate with their captain, who was one of the main reasons they now had a chance to beat fucking Montreal, the defending champions, and be one step closer to the Cup.

Ilya had not felt like this in a long time. He felt exhilarated, and for once, he was more than ready to celebrate with the team—his team, which he now loved so much.

Just before leaving, his phone rang. He saw it was Shane and answered it. Everyone around him was eagerly talking the game through, so it was hard to hear everything Shane said. He managed to understand that Shane wanted him to come to Montreal that night. He guessed that could only mean one thing, and with a slight eagerness in his voice, he agreed.

“Sorry, boys, I really want to, but I can’t go tonight. I have something to do in Montreal,” Ilya said in a slightly too excited voice.

“I get the feeling you mean *someone*,” Troy said, rolling his eyes.

“In three days, there will be plenty to celebrate when we beat Montreal on home ice. I promise you it will be the best night in years,” Ilya shouted. Some of his teammates booed, while others made flirty whistling sounds as Ilya left, all teasing him for choosing his boyfriend over them.

After an hour in the car towards Montreal, Ilya had cooled down a bit.

Had Shane sounded more worried than angry on the phone? Ilya thought to himself. Normally, Shane would be angry, but also more in the mood on nights when he was defeated by Ilya. At first, Ilya pushed the thought away. He was sure Shane had changed his mind on the way home and now wanted Ilya so badly that he needed him to be there.

But Ilya hadn’t even seen Shane leave the ice, which was odd. Normally, they would have a short moment to determine whether or not they were going to spend the night together. Instead, he was just gone—apparently heading straight to Montreal. And then he had called and wanted Ilya to come.

Why hadn’t he just stayed in Ottawa?

Chapter 3: Breathe

At the hospital, Shane was guided to the same examination room he had been in two weeks prior.

Hayes made a gesture with his hand towards a chair opposite the desk he was sitting at. He looked over some information on his computer before moving to the other side of the desk, turning towards Shane, and starting to speak in a calming voice.

“So, I’ve looked over the results of your blood tests,” Hayes began.

Shane was still feeling pretty ill, and both his mind and heart were racing. What if something was seriously wrong with him?

He could not bear the thought of having to give up hockey, leaving his team, never competing against Ilya again.

Oh fuck... Ilya. They were engaged and about to start this amazing life together. What if it was something so bad that he would not be able to go through with the wedding, which was only three months away?

“Overall, the tests came back normal, and the physical exam showed that you are in very good shape, though I wouldn’t have expected anything else from a star athlete,” Hayes said, before continuing in a more serious tone.

“The only abnormal finding is your hCG level, which is elevated. Now, I don’t want to scare you, but an elevated hCG level in men could be an indicator of testicular cancer.”

Shane went pale and struggled to breathe.

Hayes grabbed Shane’s arm and helped him over to an examination table a few steps behind his chair, asking him to lie down.

He gave Shane a moment to steady his breathing.

“Shane, there is one more test I would like to run. Normally, with testicular cancer, hCG is only slightly elevated, but yours is much higher. I’ve only seen this a few times before, and I’d like to do an ultrasound. Would that be okay with you?” Hayes asked, still calmly.

Too calmly, Shane thought. Cancer was not something light. It was a sentence, a sentence he had not even considered, since he was so young and took great care of his body.

With a nod and a weak sound, Shane agreed.

While Hayes stepped out of the room to get the machine, Shane felt a wave of thoughts and emotions rush over him and slowly started to hyperventilate. Before he could even decide whether he was mostly scared or completely in denial, he felt someone take his hand.

“Breathe, Shane. A long, deep breath. It will be alright,” Hayes said soothingly.

He had only been gone a minute, which apparently was a minute too long. He had assumed Shane, being who he was, would know some coping mechanisms for high-stress situations.

“Should I take my pants off?” Shane asked after letting go of Hayes’ hand. He thought Hayes was going to examine the area in question.

Hayes briefly looked unsure before answering, “No, that won’t be necessary. I just need you to pull up your shirt.”

Hayes moved the scanner over Shane’s well-defined abdomen. As he slowly moved lower, he suddenly stopped, turned the screen towards Shane, and pointed.

“Do you see that little flicker right there?” he asked. “That’s a heartbeat.”

“But my heart isn’t all the way down there,” Shane blurted out. He immediately regretted it, knowing how ridiculous it must have sounded.

“I mean... how can there be a heartbeat in my stomach?”

Hayes turned off the machine and handed Shane a paper towel to wipe off the gel. Shane then sat up and looked at Hayes, expecting a rational explanation for what he had just witnessed. He wasn’t that lucky.

Hayes gave Shane a slightly uncertain look. He had only heard about similar cases from colleagues, and they were few and far between.

“You have a special condition, which we only see once, maybe twice a year in the whole country.” Hayes began to form a small smile. “The good thing is that you don’t have cancer. Actually, you’re not even sick.”

Shane was very confused. Not sick? During the game, he had never felt worse in his entire life. If this was something untreatable, he didn’t know what to do. Tears of frustration began forming in his eyes.

“You’re pregnant,” Hayes finally said.

Shane slightly opened his mouth but wasn’t able to say anything.

Did he just say *pregnant*? As in there was a baby inside him? He wiped his eyes with the back of his hand.

“It’s still a fairly new discovery, medically speaking. We only know that a few men carry a special gene that allows them to become pregnant. Even fewer of those men happen to be gay, so they actually do.”

Hayes adjusted his chair. “I know you and Ilya were recently outed, so I suspected this could be the case with you.”

Shane crossed his right arm over his abdomen and muttered, “What now?”

Hayes handed him another paper towel. “You are in the early stages, about five weeks along. There is still time to decide if this is something you want to go through with.”

Shane tried to think back five weeks. It had been before the playoffs started, but after Hayden had accidentally outed him and Ilya in that unfortunate fan mail video.

Suddenly, Shane felt himself blush as he remembered.

The fucking trophy room... That day, Ilya had placed him in the room, teased him, touched him, reminded him who he was and belonged to, while giving Shane everything he had ever dreamed of.

Shane got back into his car with tears still in his eyes.

The only thing he wanted was Ilya. He had to get home, where he knew Ilya would be waiting for him.

Chapter 4: Meet me at home

Chapter Notes

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

“I’m here,” Ilya texted Shane and unlocked the front door to Shane’s apartment. It was dark inside.

Ilya tossed his gym bag on the floor and turned on the light in the kitchen.

Ilya texted Shane again, “Where are you?” and grabbed a cola from the fridge. He sat down on the sofa, waiting for a response.

After ten minutes with no reply, he went back to the kitchen. He was hungry and searched the fridge for something to eat. Since he was in Shane’s home, expectations were pretty low. The shelves were mostly empty except for cola and ginger ale cans. Because Shane had been in Ottawa, they did not contain the usual amount of fresh fruit and vegetables he used to make his smoothies with, but still some. Ilya turned to the freezer instead.

When he opened the top drawer, he noticed a container dated April 4th, which must be leftovers from the last time they played in Montreal before heading to Ottawa. The strange thing was that it clearly contained some sort of pasta dish.

Ilya placed the container back and opened the next drawer. He thought to himself that Shane probably would also be hungry when he got home. He should prepare something for them both.

As expected, Shane had a lot of frozen salmon, which Ilya decided to prepare for a salad together with some kale and tomatoes.

As Ilya placed the salad bowl in the fridge, he got a text from Shane saying he would be home in ten minutes.

Shane was going to tell Ilya everything, but at this moment he just wanted to be near him and feel his arms around him.

When Shane closed the front door, Ilya immediately stood in front of him.

“I waited for you,” Ilya said as he put his hands on Shane’s lower back and pulled him closer.

Shane didn’t say anything. He just leaned in and softly started kissing Ilya’s lips.

Before long, Ilya placed his hands under Shane’s thighs and lifted him off the floor. He then walked over to the sofa, placed Shane on it, and lay on top of him. Ilya started aggressively kissing Shane’s neck before putting his hand behind his head, digging his fingers into the soft black hair, and guiding Shane’s lips towards his own.

Shane liked the weight of Ilya's body on top of his, but then became fully aware that this position might not be the best. Shane broke the kiss, put a hand on Ilya's chest, and pushed him backward until they were both sitting upright. Shane then crawled on top of Ilya instead and started kissing him deeply. Ilya pulled Shane's shirt off over his head and kissed his chest while keeping a tight grip around Shane's hips.

They ended up curled together on the sofa. Shane could feel one of Ilya's hands resting on his hip and warm breath on his neck.

"I made dinner," Ilya said in a low voice. "I'll go get it, okay?"

After a quick kiss on the back of Shane's head, Ilya got up, took the salad bowl out of the fridge, and started filling two smaller bowls.

Shane was actually starving but hadn't noticed until now. A few weeks back, he had been forced to start eating pasta, which wasn't normally included in his diet plan, but he had not been able to keep anything else down. The smell and taste of the smoothie he would usually drink in the morning had made him extremely nauseous. The worst, however, was his former go-to protein...

Ilya handed Shane the bowl and sat back down next to him. But Shane didn't stay seated for long, as he nearly missed the table, when placing the bowl on it, and then ran in the direction of the bathroom.

Ilya didn't react at first because it happened so fast. A moment later, he could clearly hear Shane in the bathroom. He then stood up and walked toward it.

He pushed the half-open door aside and found Shane sitting on the floor next to the toilet. He was sweating and completely pale.

"Fuck, Shane, what is wrong?" Ilya said in a frightened voice and then moved in front of Shane, placing a hand on the side of his cheek.

Shane took the hand down and held it. "I went to the hospital after the game, that's why I wasn't home when you got here."

"Hospital? What do you mean, Hollander? Are you hurt?" Ilya was getting really worried.

"I got some blood taken right before we started the playoffs because I fainted. I was there today for the results."

Shane took a deep breath. "The doctor told me that I may have cancer..."

Shane was interrupted by Ilya. "Cancer?! No. No. No. Not you." Ilya rose from the floor, placed his hands behind his head, and started pacing.

Shane got up, wrapped his arms around Ilya, and made some soothing noises to calm him.

"It's not cancer," Shane reassured Ilya. "But I know exactly how you feel right now. It was so fucking scary."

Shane hugged Ilya tighter and took another deep breath. "I will tell you what's going on."

They stood in each other's arms for a moment before walking out of the bathroom and back toward the sofa, when Shane stopped.

"Please just get rid of the bowls."

How could Shane explain what was going on when he himself hadn't fully understood or accepted it?

"For some weeks I've been feeling like shit. Getting bad headaches, feeling dizzy, and experiencing nausea and vomiting when smelling and eating certain things, which was pretty obvious from what just happened," Shane started.

"So, you are allergic?" Ilya didn't know the English word for food intolerance, so he just said the word that was closest and had a similar meaning. He sincerely hoped that was it and nothing more serious.

"It's not the food. It's something inside me. I mean, I have this thing inside me." Shane scratched the back of his head and looked at Ilya.

"It's a baby... I'm... I'm pregnant."

Shane buried his face in his hands. It was the first time he had said it out loud, which made it so much more real.

Ilya could not believe what Shane had just told him. How was this even possible? And did he say a for some weeks?

Ilya got a bit annoyed that Shane hadn't said anything, and mad at himself for not noticing. He could only think of one thing to ask.

"So, am I the father?" Ilya blurted out.

Shane removed his hands and stared at Ilya. "Fuck you. Of course, you are."

They shared a nervous smile and a brief laugh.

Ilya stretched out his arms towards Shane, who completely lost it and started sobbing as they embraced.

Ilya gently rubbed Shane's back, letting him feel that he was there for him.

Chapter End Notes

I've been waiting for a few weeks to get access to AO3, so I've pre-written some chapters, which is why they are being posted pretty fast.

At some point, there will be longer gaps between chapters.

Hope you enjoy the story so far!

Chapter 5: Practice

The next morning, Shane was lying on his back in bed, only covered from his hips down. Ilya was awake. He stared at Shane's stomach, which was as well-defined as always. Their baby was in there. He still could not believe it. What had they done wrong? Ilya thought to himself. Or rather, what had they done right?

Even though the idea of a baby was still new and unplanned, Ilya could not help but smile. Both he and Shane had wanted a child one day, but he had never dreamed that the child would be 100% their own. He was thrilled by the thought.

But Ilya worried about Shane. He would be the one carrying the baby and therefore having to sacrifice the most. Ilya knew that massive changes were not Shane's strong side. He would have to take a break from hockey and possibly from friends, at least for some time.

Ilya lightly placed a hand on Shane's chest and moved closer.

Shane turned his head toward Ilya as he began to wake up. He inhaled and exhaled. "Morning."

He still wasn't fully awake when he felt Ilya's hand move lower and stop on his abdomen.

"Good morning. I love you," Ilya said, looking into Shane's eyes. With the natural sunlight in them, they almost looked like they glowed.

Shane placed his hand on Ilya's. "I love you too."

"Did the doctor say anything I need to know? About you. About the baby?" Ilya asked.

"He said that I am in very good shape and that I am five weeks along." Shane paused to see if Ilya came to the same conclusion as him.

Ilya's eyes grew wide, and an open smile started to form on his face.

"We will need to figure out a more romantic story about how this baby was conceived, if he or she ever asks," Shane said, also smiling.

"More romantic than you bending over a leather chair? Not possible," Ilya grinned.

Shane looked at the clock on Ilya's nightstand. "We can't stay here much longer. I have practice in a few hours, and your team should arrive soon," Shane said.

Ilya let go of Shane and sat up, looking serious and confused at the same time. "Practice? What do you mean, practice?"

Obviously, Ilya knew the meaning of the word. He just could not believe that Shane would participate in anything that could potentially harm him. Harm them.

"You mean to go and tell people you will go on break, yes?" Ilya continued.

Shane looked up at him. “No? the last playoff game is in two days. I have to go,” Shane said, looking a bit annoyed.

With the cancer scare followed by the baby reveal, Shane just needed something in his life to continue as normal. He needed something he could control. He had played in all previous playoff games before knowing about the baby. He convinced himself that one more game wouldn’t change anything. He was team captain. He needed to be there.

Ilya looked at Shane as he left the bed and headed for the bathroom. He was willing to do anything if he could stop Shane from attending practice and the subsequent game.

Shane came out of the bathroom and headed straight toward the front door. Ilya ran up to him, took his hand, and stopped him before he got there.

“What if we both stay home? No practice, no game,” Ilya said in desperation. He knew how absurd this suggestion was. It was the most important game for both teams this season, and in reality, Ilya didn’t want to miss it for the world. But to Ilya, Shane was more important than hockey, and keeping him safe was now his top priority.

Ilya continued with his weak arguments. “Without both of us, it would still be a fair game.”

“Everyone will think we ditched the game and stayed in bed together all day,” Shane argued.

Neither of them wanted to let their team down, but for Shane, whose team hated the fact that he and Ilya were together, both of them not being there would make them question his loyalty.

Shane placed a hand on Ilya's cheek and gave him a soft kiss. “I’ll be fine. I promise,” he said.

He then picked up his bag and went out the door.

Ilya just stared at the closed door for a while. He hoped so. He really hoped so.

Chapter 6: Tripping

Shane had not had a considerable amount of time to really think about how much he would have to sacrifice if he decided to have the baby.

He agreed with himself that after this last playoff game, he would figure out a plan together with Ilya.

Ilya had not been able to talk Shane out of playing in the last game. He was deeply in distress about it and didn't know what to do. He could not tell his teammates about the baby, since he had promised Shane that it would stay between the two of them for now.

Ilya gathered his team right before hitting the ice.

"I am so proud of you all. Six months ago, none of us thought this could be possible. Now we are about to go out and beat fucking Montreal on home ice," Ilya started.

The room filled with positive cheers toward him. "I trust each and every one of you. And now I need you to trust me when I say this."

Ilya took a deep breath. "You cannot tackle Hollander tonight." The room went quiet.

"But Roz, he is the best player on the Metros," a rookie on Ilya's team, Luca, said.

"You can still steal the puck from him. Use your techniques and stick skills," Ilya said in an embarrassed voice. "I hope I can explain later, but please just trust me."

The team remained silent, as they all felt the seriousness coming from Ilya. Before hitting the ice, they all passed by him and gave him either a pat on the back or a light hug.

Shane thought about Ilya right before the game. Ilya had told him not to play, so he knew he probably was terrified of what could happen.

He pushed the thought aside to focus on the game. He had his own nerves to calm. Shane would not be reckless. He was going to avoid taking hits as best he could.

Shane managed to play all three periods without taking any big hits. A few times, it actually felt like some of the players on the Ottawa team actively avoided him.

The game went into overtime, fuck...

Shane was exhausted and did not feel as steady on his skates anymore.

One goal, that was all they needed, so he pulled himself together and got on the ice.

He was in a face-off with Ilya.

At this point, Shane did everything he could to hide how weakened he felt, but he did not manage to fool Ilya.

"Long game," Ilya said. "You look like shit, to be honest." Ilya was partly concerned and partly trying to psych Shane out.

Ilya won the face-off, but Shane quickly managed to get the puck and passed it to one of his teammates, J.J., before nearly getting tackled by Troy Barrett from the Ottawa team. Shane got the puck back from J.J., but when he tried to pass it a second time, Ilya came in between and snatched it.

Ilya headed straight toward the goal, the only other player in reach was Shane.

Shane was inches away from making a move against Ilya when he instead lost his grip on the ice and tumbled forward, hitting the ice hard.

He couldn't do anything to stop Ilya, who forcefully sent the puck between the Metros goalkeeper's legs and into the net.

The Ottawa team gathered around their goal, ecstatically hugging each other and celebrating.

Shane sat up, still resting one knee on the ice. In the most important moment of the season, he had fucking tripped.

Hayden went to Shane and pulled him up.

"That's it for this season. Come again, buddy," Hayden said and gave Shane a pat on the shoulder.

Shane was the last one to enter the locker room. He knew his mistake had cost them the victory.

"I just want to say that you are not to blame for what happened tonight. The mistake was 100% mine," Shane said in an apologetic tone.

The room was silent.

"If it was a mistake," one of Shane's teammates whispered to another.

"What was that?" Shane asked.

"Your 'mistake' ended up giving the win to the team where your boyfriend happens to be captain," the Montreal player said, this time in a clear voice.

Shane's team had accepted it when he had told them he was gay, but none of them liked the fact that he was dating Ilya.

Hayden placed himself beside Shane. "Guys, this is Shane we are talking about. He would never lose to another team on purpose."

No one said anything. A few of the players shook their heads as they all scattered toward their respective stalls.

Ilya waited for Shane in the hallway of the arena. He would head out with his team to celebrate the victory, but he had to know if Shane was hurt after the fall.

A lot of Shane's displeased teammates passed Ilya before he spotted Shane.

Shane looked angry as he walked toward Ilya. “Why are you here? All the others can’t stand the sight of you. Tonight, less than usual.”

“I could not leave before I knew you were okay,” Ilya said in a caring tone. “Troy said you hit the ice pretty hard.”

“Well, now you’ve seen me. I’m fine. Go back to your team.” Shane turned around as tears started to form in his eyes.

Ilya grabbed Shane’s hand. “Hey, you cannot just walk away like that.”

Shane could not hide his frustration as he turned back toward Ilya. Not only had they lost the game because of his mistake, nearly everyone on his team thought he fell on purpose. He had put himself and his baby at risk, and ended up being treated like this.

“They think I fucking tripped on purpose,” Shane said.

“What? Who thinks that?” Ilya exclaimed.

“The whole team!” Shane nearly screamed. “Except for Hayden, my whole team, and probably everyone who watched, believe I let you win.”

Ilya felt deeply offended. Would people really think cheating was necessary for him to score that goal?

Him and Shane had never let their relationship affect their play, not before they were outed, and not now.

Ilya knew that Shane would be even more affected by the accusation and opened his arms toward him. But just as the tightness started to form around him, Shane felt a stabbing pain in his side. He flinched and inhaled sharply, which immediately made Ilya let go of him.

Ilya slightly raised his arms in response to Shane’s outburst. “What did I do?” he said, starting to panic. “You are hurt. Do not lie to me.”

The pain had stopped as soon as Ilya had let go, meaning it probably came from external bruising after the fall.

“You just touched the spot where I landed. I don’t think it is anything serious,” Shane said, trying to calm Ilya. And himself.

“You are going to get checked out, both of you, tomorrow,” Ilya insisted. “And this time I will be with you.”

Shane could not argue. He had started to worry himself, and agreed to Ilya’s plan.

Chapter 7: A much-needed checkup

Ilya placed a hand on Shane's thigh, gently settling his leg as it was twitching. Shane hadn't even noticed; he was too overwhelmed. Neither the media, the Montreal fans, nor his own teammates had been gentle about the alleged fall, and he could not stop beating himself up about it.

Shane had talked to his mother on the phone the night before. She had reminded him that the people who matter know the truth, and Shane clung to that desperately.

They were sitting in Dr. Hayes' examination room.

"Dr. Matt Hayes," Ilya stated, looking at the name tag on the desk. "Wyatt told me his brother was a doctor."

Wyatt was the goalkeeper on the Ottawa team. The thought of him knowing about his condition and revealing it to everyone sent chills down Shane's spine. Doctors are bound by confidentiality, right? He tried to calm himself.

As Hayes entered, they both stood up.

"You must be...", Hayes started, extending his hand toward Ilya.

"The father, yes," Ilya responded, shaking Hayes' hand firmly.

Ilya's unexpected statement made Shane blush deeply. At first, he was embarrassed, but then he thought about how proud Ilya must be to introduce himself like that.

Ilya was proud, but in truth, he had been just as surprised as Shane to hear those words come out of his mouth. After the night he'd had, his mind wasn't exactly clear.

Yesterday, Shane had insisted that Ilya should celebrate the playoff victory with his team.

Ilya entered the bar, surrounded by his teammates, who were overjoyed after the victory. Many of them had brought their partners too.

He quickly split from the others and sat down at a table in the corner. He wanted Shane to be there, but joining their rival team's celebration was still where both Ilya and Shane drew the line.

Ilya was joined by Wyatt and his wife Lisa, who put a jug of beer and some glasses on the table.

"Fantastic goal, Rozy!" Wyatt said and started pouring a beer. He filled two more glasses and clinked them together before chugging his own. Lisa shook her head at him.

Ilya smiled lightly and took a sip of the beer. It wasn't cold enough.

“Is Shane okay?” Lisa asked. “It looked like he hit the ice pretty hard when he fell.”

“We will go and get him checked tomorrow.” Ilya knew Lisa was a doctor. For her to be concerned was not something he took lightly. But there was nothing he could do until tomorrow.

Ilya decided to focus on his team. Ottawa was now closer to the Cup than they had been in years. He wanted the evening to be about them, so he pushed the thoughts of Shane aside as best he could.

Just after midnight, Ilya crawled into Shane’s bed. He had left early, but he’d also had a little more to drink than he should have, and he was more than ready for sleep after a day like this. When he lay down next to Shane, he noticed he was sleeping in a black T-shirt, which was unusual.

Throughout the night, Shane struggled to find a comfortable position, as he was sore from the fall.

All the movement kept Ilya awake as well.

“I saw the game yesterday. Can I ask why you were playing?” Hayes looked at Shane.

“It was stupid, I know, but—”

Shane was interrupted by Ilya. “He cares a little too much about hockey and can be really stubborn,” Ilya said, smiling at Hayes and giving Shane a few strokes on his back.

Hayes could sense how nervous they both were.

“Babies are tough. But I guess you’re here to check if everything is alright?” Hayes said.

Shane sat down on the examination table. He had been sleeping in a T-shirt, trying to hide what was underneath from Ilya, but now he had no choice but to reveal it.

A large bruise covered the right side of Shane’s ribcage. It was still so sore that Shane had difficulty removing his shirt.

Ilya was not prepared. His eyes widened as he stared at Shane. Not knowing what to say, he took a few steps back, making way for Hayes to examine him.

“It could be a couple of bruised ribs,” Hayes said as he carefully examined the area. “I know you’ve been through worse. I’m not worried.”

Shane stretched out a hand toward Ilya. “I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to scare you.”

Ilya closed the space between them and let Shane rest his forehead against his chest. Tears ran down both their cheeks.

“No, no. You were the one who was scared. I should have protected you.”

Ilya wanted to hug Shane so badly. Instead, he dried the tears from Shane's face and looked at him lovingly.

"Can I please meet our baby now?"

Shane smiled. As he lay down, Ilya moved to the other side of the exam table so they could both see the screen, and took Shane's hand.

Both of them stared nervously at the screen as Hayes searched for the baby.

"There we are," Hayes said and pointed. "The heartbeat looks as strong as it did last time."

Shane looked at Ilya, who couldn't take his eyes off the screen. A weight lifted from Ilya's chest. The baby he and Shane had created together was right there in front of him, and it was healthy.

Shane kissed Ilya's hand, bringing him back to reality.

"You are amazing. I love you," Ilya said, leaning in to give Shane a soft kiss.

While Hayes turned off the machine, Shane and Ilya sat back down in front of the desk.

"If you decide to keep the baby, I will have to refer you to another doctor, who specializes in pregnancies," Hayes said. "My sister-in-law, Lisa, works at a children's hospital in Ottawa. I believe you might know her already?" He made eye contact with Ilya.

"Of course. Wyatt's wife. She is very nice," Ilya said.

Shane turned toward Hayes. "You haven't told any of them, have you?"

"I haven't told anybody about you, Shane. And if I refer you to Lisa, neither will she," Hayes reassured him.

Back home, Shane and Ilya were lying in bed, facing each other.

"You did not tell me your doctor was hot. And Wyatt's brother," Ilya said, raising his eyebrows.

"I had no idea he was."

"You have eyes?"

"Fuck you. You know what I meant." Shane turned onto his back, rested his hand on his chest, and took a few deep breaths.

"Are we really doing this?"

For Ilya, there was no doubt. He already felt attached to the baby and couldn't stand the thought that Shane might not want to go through everything it would take to have it.

"There will be sacrifices," Ilya said quietly. "But there will also be a baby. Our baby."

“I know... but I wouldn’t be able to play hockey next season.” Shane put his hands behind his head. “I am free agent now, and after how they’ve treated me, I seriously think I should find a new team.”

“How about Ottawa?” Ilya suggested. “We could explain the situation to Coach Wiebe. He would probably grant you leave for the first season.”

Shane knew that the Ottawa team had shown a lot more support for him and Ilya when they were outed. They would need that support now more than ever. Ottawa was not a bad choice.

“We would be living solely on your income for a year,” Shane continued.

“I think we will manage,” Ilya grinned.

Shane felt stupid for bringing money into it. They both had healthy savings, and if he was going to play in Ottawa, he would move in with Ilya and sell his apartment in Montreal.

“Okay,” Shane said, smiling as he locked eyes with Ilya.

“Okay... as in we're doing this?” Ilya asked excitedly and placed himself above Shane.

“We’re doing this. We’re having a baby.” Shane barely got the words out before Ilya’s lips pressed against his.

Ilya continued kissing Shane gently as he moved down his neck, chest, and finally his stomach.

“I love you,” Ilya whispered, meant for both the baby and Shane.

Chapter 8: Birthday boy

It was the beginning of May, and Shane had invited his parents to the cottage. It was his 30th birthday, which he wanted to celebrate. He had decided to keep it small, with just him, Ilya, and his parents. They were planning to tell them about the baby.

Shane still mostly ate healthy food, but he wasn't as strict about it as before. His constantly shifting cravings led him to indulge more and eat a wider variety of foods.

Ilya liked that Shane now had a more relaxed relationship with food. He was a lot easier to cook for or take out to a restaurant. Ilya also thought it was good for the baby that Shane was more relaxed in general.

May had been unusually warm this year, making it ideal to fire up the grill. Shane had decided to make cheeseburgers, as red meat was something he really craved these days.

For dessert, Ilya had made a rich chocolate cake with coffee glaze, Shane's favorite. It was his birthday, after all.

As Shane stood by the grill, Ilya came up behind him, placed his hands low on Shane's abdomen, and rested his head on his shoulder.

"Ready to tell them?" Ilya asked, gently stroking Shane.

"Let's eat first," Shane said.

Two years ago, Shane had basically told his parents that he had been fucking his archrival for nearly 10 years. In comparison, this was good news, but he still dreaded his parents' reaction, especially his mom's.

Shane forcefully ate two massive cheeseburgers, which he washed down with a large amount of ginger ale. Afterwards, he had a big slice of the chocolate cake. It might have been a bit too much, but Shane was pretty nervous, and all the food had been so delicious.

During dinner, Shane's parents exchanged a few surprised looks. They hadn't seen Shane or Ilya for some time and therefore didn't know about Shane's changed eating habits.

Ilya had sensed that Shane's parents were concerned. He had tried to keep the mood light to show them, that he was comfortable with the situation, but it hadn't made much of a difference.

"Too bad about the playoffs, Ilya. Ottawa really improved this season," Yuna said, trying to distract herself from Shane.

Ilya's team had been defeated in the second playoff round, 4–1. But they had improved so much this season. He couldn't be prouder of them.

“Next year, the Cup will be ours,” Ilya smiled and took a sip of red wine.

“I think a certain Montreal team will do everything to get their revenge next year,” David said, turning to look at Shane.

“Actually, I have decided to sign with Ottawa from next season,” Shane said. “Everyone on the Metros except Hayden and J.J. believes I tripped on purpose and gave Ottawa the victory. I can’t stay there.”

Shane’s parents were surprised, but also understanding of his choice.

“I can’t wait to see you two on the ice together. No other team will stand a chance,” David said as he raised his glass for a toast.

Shane and Ilya looked at each other. Without saying a word, they knew now was the time.

Shane looked at his parents. “Well, you’ll have to wait another season for that.” Ilya took Shane’s hand as he took a deep breath.

Yuna was worried. “Are one of you injured?” It had to be something serious, if one of them was out for a whole season.

“No, Mom, I’m fine. I’m just... I’m...” Shane wanted to say the word, but was suddenly unable to.

“Shane is pregnant,” Ilya exclaimed.

Both Yuna and David looked at Ilya as he said it. Then they looked at Shane and burst into laughter.

“You had us really worried for a moment there,” David said, still laughing.

“It’s true,” Shane said in a low voice, to indicate that it wasn’t a joke.

The laughter faded.

“Shane, it’s not possible,” Yuna said.

“Do you remember the day I fainted and you told me to go see a doctor?” Shane was going to stick to the facts, which was the easiest way for him to explain. “He took some tests and found that I carry a special gene, which allows me to become pregnant.”

“But you fainted before the playoffs even started,” Yuna stated. “Shane... the fall.”

“They were both unharmed, except for a minor bruise on Shane’s part,” Ilya said, deciding to tone down the severity of Shane’s injury since everything had turned out fine.

Yuna let out a sigh of relief. “How far along are you, then?”

“About two months,” Shane said.

“Or 8 weeks and four days, to be more exact,” Ilya added, giving Shane a knowing look.

Shane nudged Ilya with his elbow, but could not keep himself from smiling as his ears turned bright red.

“At least the kid will not be born out of wedlock, then,” David joked, which made everyone giggle.

A few hours later, Shane stood in the kitchen, cleaning up after his parents had left. Ilya was bringing the last plates to the sink when he got distracted by Shane bending over the dishwasher.

“You’ve got to bend your knees more,” Ilya instructed.

Shane shook his head. “Oh, you mean like this?” Shane went down into a deep squat, which made the fabric of his shorts tighten over his ass.

“Exactly like that.” Ilya moved closer to Shane, who stood up and placed his hands on the back of Ilya’s neck.

Ilya’s hands rested low on Shane’s back.

“It went well today,” Shane said, locking eyes with Ilya as he let his hands glide down below his shoulders.

“Really well.” Ilya gently pressed Shane up against the kitchen counter. “How does the birthday boy want to celebrate?”

“You know how,” Shane said quietly.

Ilya lifted Shane onto the counter, pulled his shirt off, and softly kissed him. He only broke the kiss briefly as he removed his own shirt.

He then ran his hands over Shane's thighs with a firm grip.

Shane was hit by a wave of warmth that filled his entire body. With one hand he tangled his fingers in Ilya’s hair and deepened the kiss. Shane’s other hand was pressed against Ilya’s lower chest. He felt every muscle and every breath of the man he loved.

Ilya started to move lower, which made Shane put one arm behind himself and lean it against the counter. He lifted himself up a little, giving Ilya room to lower his shorts.

Ilya knew what Shane wanted and was happy to oblige.

Chapter 9: A taste of his own medicine

At least three days a week, Ilya and Shane would work out together in the morning. With guidance from Hayes, Shane had rearranged his training program. He was determined to stay in shape, which made him feel he still had some control over his body. He notably more quickly felt out of breath when he used the bike or treadmill, even when not pushing himself like he used to. Ilya knew this, and he always watched Shane closely to make sure he didn't overdo it.

"That's too much weight, Hollander," Ilya yelled to Shane, who was about to do back squats. The exercise focused on core and lower back, which Shane knew would become important later.

Shane had increased the weight by 5 pounds beyond what his new program recommended. Ilya had immersed himself in the program, thinking it was a good way to support Shane.

"It's 30 pounds lighter than it used to be, Ro-za-nov," Shane said the name in a slightly provocative tone.

They normally called each other by their last names during games and in the gym. But lately, Shane had noticed Ilya using it to correct him in all sorts of situations: "You can't eat that, Hollander. Not too much coffee, Hollander. And now the weights." It was starting to get on his nerves.

After breakfast they drove over to Hayden and Jackie. Shane and Ilya had promised to babysit the kids, since Hayden was going to surprise Jackie with lunch and a movie for their anniversary.

Jackie opened the door a short moment after Shane had knocked. They were a bit early, but normally the Pikes didn't mind.

"Hi guys, what are you doing here?" Jackie asked, confused. The youngest child, Amber, stood next to her, holding her hand.

In the background they heard Hayden as he ran across the living room. "Fuck! I thought it was next week."

Hayden ran up to Jackie. "I've made a reservation at that little Italian restaurant in town, but we have to be there in an hour."

"I thought it was meant to be a surprise?" Shane asked.

Hayden's face turned red. "Oh. It was... sorry." He looked at Jackie, then past her and gave Shane a hug. "So glad you could come and watch the kids." He then ran towards the bedroom to find some nicer clothes to wear, not really acknowledging Ilya.

Typically Hayden, Ilya thought to himself, before he turned his attention to Amber. “Why don’t you show Uncle Shane and me your favorite toy, while mom and dad get ready?”

Amber took Ilya’s hand and led him into the living room. Shane followed right behind.

Pike’s three other kids were sitting on the sofa, deeply focused on the TV, where the Disney film Coco was playing.

Emma was the first one to spot them. “Ilya!” she shouted as she got off the sofa and ran over to hug him. She was quickly followed by Ruby. “Shane!” It was clear they had their favorite.

The only boy, Arthur, didn’t move. Instead, he signaled for everyone to come back and watch the movie.

Ilya put his arm around Shane as they sat down next to each other. Here it felt natural, as they didn’t need to hide their relationship around the kids.

Ten minutes before the film ended, Hayden and Jackie had waved goodbye to everyone and left.

Not long after the final song, Arthur looked at Shane. “Again?” His sisters looked excited and waited for Shane’s response. Neither Shane nor Ilya had a problem with watching it again, and restarted the movie.

Seconds after the movie ended a second time, Emma turned to Shane and Ilya. “So, are you still married?”

They looked at each other and smiled. “Yes, still married,” Ilya nodded.

“Have you had any children then?” Ruby asked bluntly.

Ilya and Shane knew that children had a different concept of time, but even if it was normal for two men to have a baby together, it would not have been possible to get multiple children that quickly.

“Not yet,” Ilya said as he sent Shane a loving gaze.

“We can play house then!” Emma stood up excitedly.

All the other children wanted to join and shouted out which roles they wanted to play. They soon began arguing because none of them wanted to play the baby. It was the boring role.

“Do we need a baby in the family?” Shane tried to settle the kids.

“There could just be a baby on the way,” Ilya suggested. “Then no one needs to be the baby.”

“So, one of you will be pregnant?” Ruby grinned as she looked at Shane and Ilya.

“Sure, I will be pregnant,” Ilya said instantly and winked at Shane. He then took one of the smaller pillows from the sofa and placed it under his sleeveless top.

The sight of Ilya made Shane let out a small laugh. Without even realizing it, one of his hands had moved to his stomach. In a few months it would probably be around the same size.

Emma instructed Ilya to sit back down on the sofa. He decided to exaggerate how hard it was for him to sit down, holding a hand under his fake belly and letting out a groan when he finally managed.

“You just stay there. We will do everything for you,” Emma said and patted Ilya on the head. “Amber, bring Ilya a meal.”

Amber loved playing chef and ran to the small kitchen, which was filled with a variety of food items and kitchen tools in plastic.

“We will be your sisters, who are taking care of you,” Emma gave Ruby a quick squeeze. “Amber will be your private chef, and Arthur...”
Emma looked at him.

“I’m a zookeeper,” he proudly said, grabbed a stuffed lion from the floor, and made a roaring sound. “Don’t worry, I won’t let it eat you.”

Shane loved how random Arthur always was. A firefighter at their wedding, and now a zookeeper with a lion in their home.

“What about me?” Shane looked at the twin girls, who rolled their eyes at him.

“You are Ilya’s husband,” Ruby stated. Apparently, that was not something that needed to change.

Amber ran over to Ilya. She had prepared a slice of bread with a whole fish on it.

“Mmm... looks too good,” Ilya said and sniffed the plastic, and was about to fake eat it.

“Wait!” Shane put his hand between the bread and Ilya’s mouth. “What kind of fish is this?”

“Tuna. My favorite,” Amber said.

Shane gazed at Ilya. “Too bad, Rozanov, then you can’t eat that.” Shane took the bread out of his hands and handed it back to Amber.

“Sorry, can he get something else, preferably something cooked all the way through and tasteless?”

Amber looked a little confused, then quickly got excited again and ran back to the kitchen to make another dish.

Ilya also looked confused at Shane. They were just pretending, why was Shane so stiff all of a sudden, and why did he call him by his last name? Ilya let it slide for now.

Shane started to feel a little sick. He gave Ilya a certain look, which he acknowledged by nodding, and headed to the bathroom. This still happened from time to time, but not as frequently as it used to. It was no longer something Ilya got distracted by.

Shane broke out in a cold sweat as he closed the door behind him and bent over the toilet. He stood there for a few seconds, but nothing happened this time.

He went to the sink, splashed some water on his face, and looked in the mirror. He knew he should confront Ilya instead of just letting him taste his own medicine. But he just really wanted Ilya to figure out what bothered him on his own.

In the living room Ilya had begun to reorganize the furniture. Arthur had asked him to, as he wanted to do a show with his now fully-trained and non-human-eating lion.

As Shane entered the living room, Ilya was lifting a heavy armchair. "Put that down, Rozanov, you are not allowed to lift anything."

This time Ilya got annoyed. He put the chair down hard and walked over to Shane. "Okay. What's wrong?" Ilya asked frustrated and threw his arms out.

Just as Shane was about to say something, the front door opened.

All the children ran to their parents, giving them hugs and kisses like they had been gone for days.

"Did you have fun?" Jackie asked.

"We played house," Ruby said excitedly. "Amber was the chef, we were Ilya's sisters, and Arthur had a lion."

"A lion? Why do more people not have a lion in their household? Would be good for protection," Jackie stated.

"And Ilya is pregnant," Emma said and pointed to Ilya's now weirdly shaped fake belly.

"I can see that," Hayden smirked at Ilya, amused by the thought.

Out of the blue Shane stepped forward, and even managed to surprise Ilya. "Actually, I'm the one who is pregnant," Shane exclaimed.

He hadn't planned to tell Hayden and Jackie today, but now that the subject was brought up, he felt like it was the right time.

Hayden stepped closer to Shane and leaned towards him. "I think you're taking these kids' games a bit too seriously. You know that you are in fact not married yet either, right?" he said in a quiet voice.

Ilya nearly stepped forward to tell Hayden to back off. But somehow Shane knew what he was about to do, stretched out his arm behind himself, and stopped him.

Jackie grabbed Hayden by the shoulders and pulled him back a bit. "Shane seems pretty serious."

"You can't be serious, right buddy?" Hayden let out a nervous laugh.

“You’re really going to have a baby?” Ruby broke the awkwardness.

Shane smiled down at her. “Yeah, me and Ilya are having a baby.”

Ruby stretched out her arms towards Shane, who squatted down and slowly lifted her up for a big hug.

Ilya nearly said something, but then realized that there was no benefit in correcting Shane every time he got nervous about the baby, and chose to let him enjoy the moment instead.

Shane and Ilya spent the first 10 minutes in the car not saying anything to each other. Ilya was behind the wheel and ended up breaking the silence.

“I’m sorry,” Ilya said quietly and started to tear up. “I don’t mean to control you. Sometimes it just feels like that is the only way I can be involved in this pregnancy. I just want to protect you both.”

Shane let out a sigh and placed his hand on Ilya’s thigh. “Of course I want you to be involved. I just feel like you have been too overprotective lately. Sometimes I feel like you are suffocating me with all your concern. I would never do anything to deliberately harm the baby. There are just so many fucking rules.”

Normally, Shane was the one of the two who stuck most closely to the rules. With many of his routines being disrupted and his hormones fluctuating, it was sometimes hard for him to think clearly, which really weighed on him.

Overprotective. Ilya went over the word in his head. “What can I do?”

“You can stop using my fucking last name when something I do concerns you,” Shane said in a high-pitched voice, which made them both let out a short laugh.

“That I can do.” Ilya smiled and gave the back of Shane’s hand a gentle kiss.

Chapter 10: Two meetings in one day

A month before the wedding, Shane had moved in with Ilya and had just signed the sales contract on his old apartment. He had also announced that he was not going to re-sign with Montreal for next season, which meant a lot of offers had come his way from both Canadian and U.S. teams.

In reality, there was nothing for them to fight about. Shane wanted Ottawa to be his team. From what Ilya had told him about them, he could not think of a better team to play for. They would respect both him and Ilya as individual players and together as a couple.

Now he just had to convince coach Wiebe to let him on the team, even though he wouldn't be playing in his first season.

Shane had set up a meeting with Wiebe late in the morning, giving himself some time to prepare. He was still not sure what he was going to say. He took a shower to clear his head.

Out of the shower, he threw on a pair of shorts and a white T-shirt. He was about to leave the bathroom when he looked at himself in the mirror.

"Ilya!" Shane's voice traveled through the house.

Ilya, who was in the kitchen, ran to the bathroom and now stood there, anxiously staring at Shane. "Are you okay? What's wrong?"

"This." Shane turned to the side and gestured at his stomach with both hands. "When did it become so obvious? I can't meet Wiebe looking like this."

Even though it wasn't a particularly tight T-shirt, you could see a tiny bump underneath the white fabric, only really noticeable if you knew it normally wasn't there.

Ilya sensed that Shane had started to panic before he even got there, which would make him harder to calm. He placed himself behind Shane, hugged him tight, and breathed slowly.

"You are there to talk about hockey. He will not notice anything," Ilya said. The reassuring words slowed Shane's breathing.

"And, unfortunately, there's barely anything to see yet."

Ilya couldn't wait for Shane to start showing for real, and to feel the baby beneath his soft, outstretched skin.

Ilya turned Shane around and pressed a firm kiss to his lips. "Now go get on the team," Ilya nearly yelled, and smacked Shane's butt, encouraging him to leave.

Shane felt better, but still ended up bringing a hoodie to wear for the meeting, despite it being 21°C outside.

Shane knocked on the door to Wiebe's office. The door had a glass window, so he noticed the excitement on Wiebe's face as he got up from his desk and opened the door.

"Shane! I'm so glad you wanted to talk. Come inside." Shane stepped in and sat down on a sofa in the corner of the room.

"Can I offer you something? Water? A beer?" Wiebe walked over to a mini fridge beside the desk.

"Water is fine," Shane replied. He was already beginning to sweat. There were no windows in the room and only a single fan to move the hot air around.

Wiebe handed Shane a bottle of water, sat down in a chair in front of him, and went straight to the point. "I know you have a lot of options, but I believe you saw how we improved during last season. Am I wrong to assume that you want to be a part of this team?"

Shane had already emptied half the bottle, but his mouth still felt completely dry.

"I really want to join your team. You are actually my first choice." Shane took a deep breath and stared at the ground for a few seconds before looking up. "There's just one thing..."

"If it's about the captain position, I can't change it. Ilya has done so much for this team," Wiebe said, hoping it would not change anything.

Shane grinned a little. "I don't want Ilya's position. But I intend to fight him for it in the future."

Wiebe liked Shane's determination. He nodded and gave him a smile. "I'll make sure to tell him that when you hit the ice in October."

Shane's smile faded. "That's actually what I wanted to talk to you about. I won't be able to play in the first season. I will need to take a leave of absence."

After Shane's statement, Wiebe first looked surprised, then grew serious. Before he could say anything, Shane spoke again.

"I know it is a lot to ask. I am so sorry for putting you in this position. I don't expect to get paid. I..."

"Hey... Shane!" Wiebe made eye contact with him, rose from his chair, and placed a firm hand on his shoulder. "It's alright. You're okay."

He sat back down in front of him. "Whatever it is, we'll figure something out. I want you on this team, even if I have to wait a season to use you on the ice."

Shane didn't know what to say. Instead, he just nodded.

Wiebe nodded along with him. "I know how committed you are to the game. For you to ask this, something serious must be going on."

"There is," Shane said quietly. He was not comfortable with the thought of Wiebe knowing the truth, not yet at least. He had just met the guy. "I'm sorry, but I can't give you a reason

right now.”

“Let me be honest, Shane. I already have a contract for you. I just need to print it out. You’ll officially become part of the team when you sign. I will add that your first year will be without playing time.”

Shane could not believe how easy this had been, how nice coach Wiebe was. His old coach would have yelled at him and probably used a lot of condescending words to express his disapproval.

Wiebe sat in front of his computer to make the adjustment to the contract. In the meantime, Shane was about to overheat in his hoodie.

“Enjoying the free time, I see.” The T-shirt underneath had ridden up a bit as Shane removed the hoodie, revealing his slightly rounded midsection. He quickly covered it up.

“Relax, Hollander. I have had my fair share of ice cream and beer during breaks. We always bounce back,” Wiebe laughed and printed the contract.

Back home, Shane stepped inside and saw that the table was set. Ilya walked toward him from the kitchen, drying his hands with a small towel.

“What’s all this?” Shane asked.

“Celebration lunch, I hope?” Ilya said, hinting at the paper in Shane’s hand.

Shane smiled and lifted the paper. “I got offered a spot on the team,” he said in a modest tone.

“Hollander... we’re going to be on the same team!” Ilya was overjoyed. He grabbed Shane’s face and kissed him. His lips tasted like curry.

“And what about...?” Ilya looked down at Shane.

Shane placed a hand on his stomach. “He accidentally noticed, but was super cool about it. But then again, I didn’t tell him what is actually going on in there.” Shane grinned. “You were right. He’s so nice. I didn’t even need to explain anything before he granted me the leave.”

“I love that man,” Ilya exclaimed, relieved that coach Wiebe had taken Shane seriously.

“Love? Really? More than me?” Shane made a fake offended expression.

“At this moment, a little bit, yes.” Ilya gave Shane a crooked smile as he moved closer and kissed him again.

Ilya had prepared a curry dish with vegetables, chicken, and rice. They had to eat their lunch at a slightly high pace, as they had an appointment at the hospital in the afternoon.

It was the second time their new doctor, Lisa Hayes, would check if everything was progressing as it should with Shane and the baby. Because of the rarity of Shane's condition, he needed more frequent check-ups than in a normal pregnancy.

At the first appointment, Lisa asked a lot of questions to understand Shane's journey so far. She also presented the plan going forward, including how the baby would be born. It had been no surprise to Shane when Lisa told him that the baby would have to be delivered by C-section when it was "fully baked." Shane estimated it would be early to mid-December.

Because Shane and Ilya risked getting recognized at the hospital, they were allowed to wait for Lisa in the examination room.

Lisa entered with a big smile on her face, as always. "Ilya! Shane! So good to see you." She lightly hugged them both before they all sat down. "So, Shane, how have you been since last time?"

Shane still got lightheaded sometimes, but the headaches, nausea, and vomiting he had experienced were almost nonexistent now. But his cravings were still all over the place.

"What I find most difficult at the moment is my training and eating habits. I used to train harder and eat healthier, but now I can't control the urges when it comes to food. And this morning, I became very conscious of how it has affected my body. I don't think I should be this big yet."

"Well, you're about four months along, so body changes are totally normal," Lisa reassured him.

"He ended up having a panic attack this morning," Ilya said, worried, as it had happened multiple times in a short period.

He knew Shane wouldn't be happy about him mentioning it.

Shane's ears turned red, and he gave Ilya a disapproving stare.

"How long do the attacks last? And are you able to calm yourself?" Lisa asked as she wrote something down.

"I can calm myself, but most of the time Ilya is there, and then they don't last as long."

Saying it out loud for the first time made him tear up.

He looked at Ilya and saw he wasn't the only one getting emotional.

Lisa smiled at them. "I believe you are doing just fine. Ilya is clearly a strong support for you."

Shane wanted to change the subject, and told Lisa that he was going to sign with Ottawa.

"Oh, Shane, I'm so glad. There are so many great people on and around the team. I'm sure you will love it." Lisa was excited but also knew she had to be careful, since Shane would be both her patient and one of her husband's teammates.

“I think it’s time to check the baby. Please lie down.” Lisa gestured toward the examination table.

Shane removed his shirt and lay down. Ilya sat beside him.

Lisa gently pressed on the side of Shane’s belly. “Any discomfort when I press here?” Shane shook his head. “There is no need for you to worry. You are very fit for a guy who’s four months pregnant.”

Shane knew there weren't many other cases to compare him to, but when it came from Lisa, he chose to believe the assessment.

Lisa squeezed some gel onto Shane’s belly and searched for a place to see the baby clearly.

“Here we go. This is the head, the arms, the feet.” She presented and examined the baby at the same time. “Everything is as it should be. And...” Lisa stopped and looked at the two men with wide smiles across their faces. “...I can even tell you the gender if you would like to know.”

“Yes,” Shane said.

“No,” Ilya said at the same time. They looked at each other.

“No?” Shane was confused. Everything would be easier to plan. They could start discussing a name, buy clothes, paint the room.

“I want it to be a surprise,” Ilya said. “As long as there’s only one baby and it’s healthy, that’s all I need to know.”

“I can assure you, there is only one baby,” Lisa laughed lightly and turned to Shane.

“If Ilya closes his eyes, I can write the gender down, show it to you, and toss it right after.”

Shane was not a big fan of surprises, and this one was about as big as they come. He agreed to Lisa’s idea.

Shane was driving back home from the hospital. Ilya sat next to him, staring while smiling.

“You know,” Ilya stated.

“Yes, I know.” Shane nodded. Knowing made him feel empowered and also more connected to the baby.

Ilya knew Shane would slip up sooner or later, but he didn’t mind.

Chapter 11: Tacos and cocktails

Chapter Notes

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

Shopping was something Shane wasn't good at, and he knew it. But a certain wedding was only a few weeks away, and he had not been out searching for a suit yet. Partly because he didn't know what he wanted, but mostly because he was afraid that if he bought it too long in advance, he wouldn't be able to fit into it.

He decided to call Rose for help. He must have sounded pretty desperate, because Rose agreed to come and help him the following day.

Ilya had already bought a suit about a month ago. When Shane told him he was going to be out with Rose most of the day tomorrow, he texted Svetlana to see if they could meet up. It felt like ages since he had seen her. Luckily for him, she had some business to attend to in Montreal and could rearrange her schedule so they could meet up in Ottawa.

The next morning Shane and Ilya kissed each other goodbye before Ilya got picked up by a taxi. They had agreed that both Rose and Svetlana should know about the baby since they were two of their closest friends.

Shane had met Svetlana once a few weeks before they were outed. Ilya had told her about him and Shane, and she had been very eager to meet the one who had made Ilya settle down. Shane had agreed, as he had been curious to meet the woman Ilya had once suggested he could marry.

The meeting had gone very well and had included Svetlana telling all kinds of stories about Ilya, which Shane had enjoyed.

Ilya had never expressed a desire to meet Rose. Therefore, Shane didn't expect that it would happen before the wedding, but it didn't bother him, so he hadn't insisted.

"Two weeks! Who waits to buy their wedding suit only two weeks before they get married?" Rose walked towards Shane with her arms wide open. When she got close enough, she greeted Shane with a warm embrace. "I missed you. It's been too long."

"It's in two weeks and two whole days," Shane corrected Rose. "But yeah, I'm sorry, so many things have happened," he said in an apologetic tone.

"I know." Rose smiled. "You plan to sign with the Centaurs! It must be nice for you and Ilya. The other teams need to step it up next year to beat you."

"Yeah, we'll be invincible..." Shane didn't want to lie, but it was not the right place to tell her.

They stood outside a restaurant, which Shane had picked. Rose had been afraid that she once again had to sit and eat something delicious in front of Shane, while he sat with his kale and cabbage salad.

“Mexican?” Rose asked, confused.

“Since I prevented you from getting tacos last time, I thought I’d make it up to you.” Shane opened the door and held it for Rose.

Ilya entered one of the more high-class restaurants in town, where Svetlana had asked him to meet her. Inside, the light was dimmed and the room was filled with dark, heavy furniture. The place was pretty empty, as it was around noon on a Thursday. He easily spotted Svetlana, who stood facing the bar and hadn’t seen him enter.

“We can’t continue meeting like this,” Ilya said quietly as he stood behind her.

Svetlana jumped a little as she turned around, faced Ilya, and shoved him away. “Oh, fuck. You scared me,” she said in Russian.

“I’m glad to see you too,” Ilya switched to Russian. He leaned in and kissed her on the cheek before giving her a tight hug.

They sat down on a sofa at a low table. Svetlana had a menu in her hand.
“Have you been here before? I was just recommended this place by a friend.”

Because of Shane’s former strict diet, they had not explored that many restaurants in Ottawa yet. But he had also heard of the place from some of his teammates. It was said to be a place where you shared small dishes and had really great cocktails. Ilya snatched the menu from Svetlana and looked at it thoroughly.

“Who are you, and what have you done to Shane?” Rose grinned.

Shane nearly dropped the taco he was about to take a third large bite of. He realized that his behavior must seem very strange to Rose.
He swallowed and dried his face with a napkin.

“Oh yeah, I’m more relaxed now when it comes to food.”

“I can see that. What has changed?” She had a heavily cheese-covered nacho in her hand, which she pointed at Shane before dipping it in guacamole.

Again, he felt the need for a white lie. “After most of my teammates in Montreal thought the playoff fall was intentional, I guess I started to doubt all the rules I had set up in my head, including the food-related ones. No matter how good I was on the ice, it didn’t change the fact that they didn’t have my back in the end.”

Could that actually not be a lie? Shane thought to himself after he’d said it.

“I’m so sorry you had to go through that,” Rose said as she took Shane’s hand. “But I am so glad that we now can enjoy a cheesy, delicious meal together once in a while.”

Shane sighed and let out a small laugh. “Me too.”

After two cosmopolitans and an espresso martini, Ilya was pretty tipsy. Back in the day he would not feel anything yet, but these days he didn’t really drink because Shane couldn’t. He knew he’d properly end up like this, which was why he had taken a taxi.

He decided it would be a good idea to tell Svetlana while he was still mostly clear-headed.

“I have some good news.” A broad smile spread across Ilya’s face. “I’m going to be a father.”

“That’s amazing!” Svetlana said with excitement in her voice. “You don’t waste any time, do you? A wedding in two weeks, and a baby on the way already.”

“Well, it wasn’t exactly planned,” Ilya admitted.

The comment confused Svetlana. “How is it not planned? Adoption or surrogacy has to be.”

“Shane is carrying the baby. We didn’t know he could become pregnant.” He really hoped she believed him.

Svetlana moved her hand in front of her mouth. “OMG! I have heard rumors that could happen, but I never thought they were true.”

She turned to Ilya and placed a hand on his cheek. “Your very own kid. You are going to be such a good dad.”

Svetlana grabbed the menu again. “We need something good to celebrate this.”

Shane pulled back the dressing room curtain. He was wearing the fourth suit Rose had picked out for him to try. This suit was gray, his favorite so far, after the black and blue ones had been a bit dull, and the white too bridal.

“Something is still off.” Rose could not figure out what it was. “Can you please remove the jacket?”

Shane had been able to hide behind the jackets until now. He took it off, knowing that he had to reveal his secret.

“That’s not how it is supposed to fit. Let me help you.”

Rose walked inside the changing room and started adjusting the shirt around Shane’s waist.

“You might want to cut back on the tacos if you want to be in shape before the start of next season. You’re starting to get a bit of a belly.” Rose teased and gently patted Shane on the stomach.

“A-actually...” Shane stuttered as his heart felt like it was in his throat. “It won’t make a difference since it’s a baby, which is taking up the space.” He looked anxiously at Rose to see her reaction.

Rose tilted her head slightly. “You can be so silly sometimes. Where do you get ideas like that from?”

Shane caught hold of Rose’s hands. “Rose, you know me. Why would I wait until the last minute to find a suit for my wedding? It’s not something I’m making up.” He started to get emotional.

“But Shane, you’re a...” Rose said quietly, before Shane interrupted her.

“A guy. I know. It’s a genetic thing.” Shane waved his arm around. He was too worked up to go into details right now. “Everything is changing. Moving in together, getting married, switching team. And the baby will change everything even more.”

Shane suddenly had a hard time breathing.

Rose guided Shane to a stool in the corner of the changing room. He was about to bury his face in his hands when Rose stopped him.

“Shane, listen,” Rose said firmly. “I know it seems overwhelming, but if you break down each of those changes, they all lead to something you’re going to love. You already love Ilya. Marrying him and living with him has been your dream for so long. And when you sign, you’ll be part of a team that respects and supports you.”

Shane took some deep breaths and looked at Rose, who was crouched in front of him.

“And the baby, however it came to be, is truly a gift. I am so happy for you. You will feel so much love when it arrives.”

“He,” Shane said and smiled softly. “It’s a boy.” He took a short break. “Ilya doesn’t want to know, so you can’t tell anybody.”

“Am I the first one to know?” Rose asked, surprised.

“About the gender, yes. I trusted you with a big secret before. Now you have a new one to keep for me.”

“Lucky me,” Rose said with a little sarcasm in her tone. They both stood up. Rose wrapped her arms around Shane, who instantly reciprocated the hug. “He’s going to be so loved, with you and Ilya as his parents.”

A few tears made their way down Shane’s cheek. “I like this gray suit. I’m buying it,” he mumbled into Rose’s shoulder.

Shane got home first. He decided to read a book and lay down on the bed. He supported his upper back with two pillows.

Ilya got home half an hour later, quickly located Shane, took off his shirt, and got into bed. He then rested his head on the arm Shane used to hold the book. Ilya lifted up Shane's T-shirt and gently stroked the small bump, which had started to smooth out his abs.

Shane first kissed Ilya on top of the head, and afterwards put his free hand under Ilya's chin to guide his lips to his own for a tender kiss.

Shane could taste the alcohol on Ilya. "Did you tell her?" he asked.

"Yes. She was very happy for me, and we... celebrated." Ilya's voice was slightly slurred.

"I figured something like that happened," Shane smiled at Ilya.

"And what did Rose say?" There was always a note of jealousy in Ilya's voice when he said Rose's name, which Shane had learned to ignore. He hoped they could meet properly at the wedding.

"She was very happy for us, and said that..." Shane stopped himself as he was close to using the term "He". "...the baby will be lucky to have us, as it's parents."

Ilya didn't say anything. He just placed his arm around Shane and nuzzled himself closer to him.

Before long he fell asleep, while Shane continued reading his book.

Chapter End Notes

The next chapter will focus on the wedding, which I'm very excited to write about. I think the wedding part in the book was a bit short. Therefore, I intend to include more of the day in my version.

Chapter 12: Wedding day

Ilya was lying in bed facing Shane, who was still asleep. Later today they were going to get married. The thought filled Ilya with excitement and a deep longing for Shane. He could not wait for him to wake.

Ilya woke Shane up by gently stroking his hair. "Good morning."
I need you. The thought filled everything in Ilya.

Shane took a deep breath and lightly stretched his body before opening his eyes. He tangled his legs with Ilya's and pressed their foreheads together.

Ilya stroked his fingers across Shane's arm from his shoulder down past his fingers. He then firmly gripped his thigh and pulled him closer.

He needed to be closer. He moved Shane onto his back as he initiated a passionate kiss.

Ilya was careful not to put his full weight on him, as he eagerly kissed Shane's jawline and neck. Meanwhile, Shane had his hands placed on Ilya's hips, which moved in slow, rolling motions. Combined with Ilya's intensity it was already a lot for Shane to handle.

"You can't ambush me like that, when I've only just woken up," Shane breathed out. He didn't truly mean it. Everything about it was so fucking hot, and he needed Ilya to slow down a little.

Sensing how half-hearted the protest from Shane was, Ilya continued down Shane's torso and ended up between his thighs.

Ilya knew that Shane was more than ready for him, but instead of giving him what he wanted right away, he rolled him onto his side and placed himself behind him.

"Why do you always have to drag it out? Please just fuck me". Shane was getting impatient, which was exactly what Ilya wanted.

Ilya wrapped one arm around Shane's chest and used his other hand to carefully opening him up.

"Impatient. Even on our wedding day." Ilya whispered into his ear, pressing soft kisses to the back of Shane's neck and his shoulders, just as eager to close the distance between them.

Shane felt heat curling low in his stomach, though the feeling was a little different than usual. He had a hard time figuring out what the new sensation was, but it felt more bubbling. He placed his hand on it but couldn't feel anything from the outside. The thought left him again as the sensation of Ilya slowly entering him was overwhelming. He gasped and firmly grabbed Ilya's arm.

Shane sat on the terrace in a pair of shorts and a blanket over his shoulders. In a few hours

the garden would be filled with friends and family. Ilya had just taken a shower and came out of the house with two cups of coffee. He handed one of them to Shane as he sat down next to him.

“It’s not too cold out here?” Ilya rubbed Shane’s back.

The fact that it was July and Shane always ran hot, pregnant or not, made him roll his eyes at Ilya.

“I’m fine,” he smiled, took Ilya’s hand and placed his palm on his rounded stomach. “We’re just fine.”

Shane had invited his parents to come over early. The wedding was at 4 p.m., with guests invited an hour beforehand. It was not going to be anything fancy; there wouldn’t even be chairs for people to sit on during the ceremony, but it was nice to have someone to help with the drinks table and preparing the food.

They had gotten the most delicious freshly baked bread and a variety of cold cuts and cheese from a local specialty shop in town. There were also going to be a few warm servings of chicken skewers and meatballs. Nice and simple, so no one had to stand in the kitchen all evening.

Yesterday, Ilya and Shane had made a layer cake for dessert, filled with strawberry whipped cream. Today it just needed to be decorated with various fruits, berries, and dark chocolate shavings.

The doorbell rang at the gate, and Ilya let in Shane’s parents. Yuna was the first to enter. She embraced Ilya and gave him a quick kiss on the cheek. “So good to see you. Finally, the day is here.”

“Yes, we’re so excited,” Ilya said as he got a quick hug from David. “But also, a little terrified.” Ilya made eye contact with Yuna and gave her a nervous smile. He had been rehearsing his vows with her so he hopefully wouldn’t forget or mispronounce too many of the words later.

“You’re going to do great, honey.” Yuna gave Ilya’s arm a tight squeeze. She then walked over to Shane, who was standing in the kitchen, and wrapped him in a long, warm hug. Her hands briefly rested on either side of his waist as she pulled away. “You look good. How are you feeling?”

“Thanks, Mom,” Shane blushed a little. He knew more people would eventually start putting their hands on his belly and asking about it, but there hadn’t been much of it yet, so he got a little flustered and didn’t quite know how to react. “Besides the increased appetite (*both for food and sex*), I feel great.”

Because of his athletic figure, Shane was still barely showing. If you knew, you could spot the rounding under the white dress shirt, which normally wasn’t there. But with the gray jacket on, no one would blink an eye.

Shane was glad he could still hide it. Both because some of the guests didn't know about his condition, and also because he wanted this day to be about him and Ilya.

Shane looked out the window from the bedroom he was getting dressed in. The guests had started to gather in the garden.

Hayden and Jackie were talking to Shane and Ilya's neighbors, while all of their children were playing some kind of tag game together.

Beside the drinks table, a large group of Centaur players and their partners were laughing at a story J.J. was telling with great enthusiasm. Though some of the single players were more focused on trying to not obviously stare at Rose and Svetlana, who stood on the other side of the garden talking to Troy and Harris.

At the moment he could not see Wyatt and Coach Wiebe, but he knew they were there with their wives. Knowing Lisa was there was a great comfort to Shane, as she could step in if anything unexpected happened. It also helped having her nearby to distract his new teammates from the fact that he wasn't drinking alcohol at his own wedding.

Yuna was in the room with Shane. She stood with her hands in his hair, helping him with the last details before the wedding began. "So handsome," she exclaimed and moved her hands away from his hair. "I'm so proud of you. You've been so brave, and you deserve all the good things that are coming your way."

Shane was clearly emotional. "I just hope everything goes well and Ilya likes this suit." Shane suddenly got self-conscious about his appearance. None of his new teammates knew about the baby. What if the suit wasn't hiding the bump well enough?

Yuna gave Shane a comforting smile. "Knowing Ilya, you could be standing out there in your underwear and he would still want to marry you just as badly."

The thought made Shane smile. He lowered his shoulders. The image of Ilya standing in the room wearing only underwear crossed his mind.

In a guest room at the other end of the house, Ilya was also getting ready when there was a knock on the door.

"Can I come in?" It was David.

"Of course."

"Ready to go out there? Yuna said you might be nervous about your vows?"

On the outside, Ilya was fully dressed and ready. But inside, his nerves were beginning to set in. He wanted everything to be perfect for Shane, and he wasn't sure he could live up to his own expectations.

David placed a hand on Ilya's shoulder. "You know, no matter what you say out there today, it won't change how you and Shane feel about each other. A wedding is not an end to a chapter; it's a beginning."

Ilya turned around. "Yuna and I were only able to have one child, and we never imagined one day getting blessed with another son we'd love just as much."

Ilya started to tear up. No one from his own family was going to be at his wedding, and he wasn't the least bit sad about it. All the family he needed was here today in the form of Shane's parents, Svetlana, his teammates, and of course Shane himself.

"I'm the one who is blessed." A couple of tears ran down Ilya's cheeks as he hugged David.

David and Ilya joined the other guests, while Shane and Yuna were still inside.

Ilya went to the drinks table and grabbed a cola. Drinking before the ceremony would not be helpful.

"Is Shane okay in there?" Rose asked Ilya, as she suddenly stood beside him.

"Yuna is in there with him. He has all the help he needs," Ilya said flatly before taking a sip of his can and looking away. He knew he was being rude, but he couldn't help it. Every time Shane talked about Rose, and especially now that she was standing right beside him, he couldn't stop thinking about the time he and Shane had been apart, a period that had been incredibly hard on him.

Rose could tell that Ilya was trying to avoid her. Shane had mentioned that Ilya wasn't exactly fond of her, and she wanted to change that.

"Listen, Ilya. We have only heard of each other through Shane. From what he's saying, I know how much you love him. And I just need you to know that I love him too," Rose started, trying to loosen Ilya up a bit.

Ilya gave Rose a concerned look. She then realized how it had sounded. She had just told Ilya that she loved the man he was going to marry.

"Sorry, that didn't come out right. I'm not in love with Shane. I just meant that I want him to be happy because he means so much to me. And I believe that's something we have in common," she spoke softly, making her explanation sound sincere.

Ilya had always pictured Rose as this perfect person. Seeing her being awkward like this made her seem more human and harmless. He gave Rose a small smile. "We can both agree on that."

Shane had come out from the house and saw Ilya and Rose talking in the distance. He decided not to interfere. When he saw the smile on Ilya's face, he felt relieved.

Shortly after, Shane's attention shifted as the wedding officiant signaled toward him. It was time.

Shane walked over to Ilya and grabbed his arm. “Ilya, we need to...” Shane didn’t get another word out before Ilya pulled him close and pressed his lips against his.

“Fuck,” Ilya said softly. They parted and he looked at Shane. “All this for me?”

“Obviously,” Shane said quietly as he blushed, and all of his previous worries melted away.

A few moments later they both stood in front of the officiant, facing each other.

“I would like to welcome you all to the wedding of Shane Hollander and Ilya Rozanov. First, Shane and Ilya have some words they would like to share.”

They had written their own vows but had agreed to make them short, as they knew how quickly words like that could turn them both emotional.

Ilya looked at Shane and took a deep breath. He had practiced, but he knew his words would still come out with a strong accent. At this moment he didn’t mind, and he knew Shane didn’t either.

“Shane. Meeting you felt like being struck by lightning, one in a million chance and a bit terrifying. Here today, every day, you make me feel curious, calm, and madly in love all at the same time.” Ilya took Shane’s hands. “I believe I will love you forever, until it all ends.”

“How do you expect me to follow that?” Shane whispered to Ilya. He knew he needed to say his words before getting too emotional.

“Ilya. Some days I still can’t believe that you are mine. You are my safe space, my home. I know I don’t say this enough, but you are the only one. The way you say my name, the way you protect me, the way you love me. You have my heart, and I’ll trust you to do whatever you want with it, because I want to spend my whole life with you.”

Ilya lost himself in Shane’s face, mainly staring at his lips. It was hard for him not to grab Shane and devour him right there.

Ilya snapped back when Shane took his hands. “And now I ask you, Ilya Rozanov, do you take Shane Hollander to be your husband?” Shane had already answered his version of the question with a formal “I do.”

Ilya regained eye contact with Shane and grinned. “Yes, I do. Today, tomorrow, every day!” he proudly declared.

As instructed, they then exchanged rings and were finally allowed to kiss.

Ilya grabbed Shane’s face and planted two warm, passionate kisses quickly after each other on Shane’s lips, followed by one last slower and deeper one.

The combination of kisses made Shane feel like he was on a high. After the third kiss, he looked at Ilya completely lovestruck. “We’re really married,” he said, trying to catch his breath.

They both knew they still had paperwork to sign before it became completely official, but after the ceremony, it already felt real to both of them.

Some hours went by celebrating, eating, drinking, and socializing with the guests. Ilya also spent some time joining the kids in their made-up tag game, which he strangely lost every time. As the children started getting tired, both moms took them to the neighbor's house to put them to bed.

A spot on the lawn suddenly cleared, and the guests turned to stare at Shane and Ilya, who stood by the drinks table talking to Shane's parents.

"I believe it is time for your first dance," Yuna whispered.

Then it dawned on them. They hadn't prepared a first dance. They didn't even have a song.

Ilya gave Shane's arm a light squeeze. "I'll be back." He walked over to Harris, grabbed him, and walked toward the speakers. "I need you to choose a song for our first dance."

Out of all his friends, he believed Harris was the best choice for this assignment, having heard all of the bad songs his teammates listened to in the locker room.

"Jeez! Um... okay. What kind of song do you want?" Harris fumbled with his phone and connected it to the speakers.

"Just play something suitable. I trust you." Ilya went back to Shane, grabbed his hand, and dragged him out into the middle of the empty spot.

Ilya signaled to Harris, who pressed play.

The tune of "Hungry eyes" performed by Greyson Chance filled the air.

Hearing the intro made Ilya grin. Harris had no idea how perfect this song was.

Since Ilya was clearly the better dancer of the two, he softly placed one hand in Shane's and the other on his back. As the song began, Ilya began to lead with slow, simple steps."

Right before the last chorus, Ilya stopped and placed his hands on either side of Shane's face. As the words "Hungry eyes" played one last time, Ilya focused on Shane's dark brown eyes and gorgeous freckles. He gently stroked his thumb over one of Shane's cheeks before kissing him deeply.

The guests loudly cheered and whistled as the song ended.

Shane had to break the kiss as he suddenly realized it had been going on for a little too long, and the guests had begun to scatter.

"That was..." Shane mumbled slightly out of breath.

"Yes," Ilya replied and rested his forehead against Shane's.

Holding hands, they started walking back toward the drinks table together.

Out of nowhere, Shane felt his vision start to blur. He stopped and looked at Ilya. "Ilya, I don't feel so..." Fortunately, Ilya reacted quickly when Shane suddenly collapsed, catching him before slowly kneeling to the ground with him in his arms.

"Shane, what happened? Hey?!" Ilya gently shook Shane as panic set in.

"Lisa, help! Please!" He held Shane's limp body in his arms as Lisa came running over.

"He just collapsed," tears streamed down Ilya's face.

Lisa checked and found Shane's pulse. "Can you carry him? He can't stay here on the ground."

Ilya forced himself to focus. Carrying Shane while he was completely limp was much harder. He lifted him off the ground, carried him inside, and gently laid him on the sofa.

Only Lisa and Yuna followed them, while Wyatt instructed everyone else to stay in the garden to give them space.

Lisa placed three large pillows under Shane's legs and opened his jacket. She was about to check his eyes, when he started to move.

Shane was groggy and confused when he opened his eyes. "Wha... what happened?"

"Shane, you fainted, but I believe you are alright since you weren't out for too long," Lisa said.

She stepped back to make room for Ilya, who could finally breathe again. "Shane..." Ilya buried his head into Shane's chest and embraced him. "Fuck, you scared me."

Yuna sat behind Ilya, comforting him, being just as relieved to see Shane awake again.

"Have you been eating and drinking enough today, Shane?" Lisa asked.

Shane honestly couldn't remember. "Properly... I don't know."

"I have seen him both eat and drink well today," Ilya insisted.

"Then I think it's just a mild case of exhaustion. The excitement from the wedding, the dancing, combined with the pregnancy and the lower blood oxygen levels that can come with it, could certainly have been enough to make you faint."

Ilya looked concerned at Lisa. "The baby?"

"Since you caught him, I don't think anything happened. I can do a quick check."

Lisa gently pressed on Shane's abdomen. Shane didn't feel any pain.

"Have you felt any movement yet?", Lisa asked as she was curious. "You should be starting to feel it soon if you haven't".

Shane thought back to the odd feeling that morning. “Maybe. I’m not sure.”

Ilya looked surprised at him.

“Can I go back out there? I don’t want the wedding to end like this,” Shane asked.

“If you rest here for 20 minutes and can stand without getting dizzy, I will allow it,” Lisa said.

Ilya and Shane exited the house 30 minutes later, rejoining the celebration and enjoyed the rest of the evening.

Ilya was holding Shane as they lay in bed together after the guests had left. “Why haven’t you told me you felt the baby move?”

Shane turned toward Ilya, stared softly at him, and smiled. “We were kind of in the middle of something else when I felt it.” He looked down and placed a hand on his belly. “Besides, it’s only a strange inner bubbly feeling. You can’t feel anything from the outside.”

Shane breathed out. “I’m sorry that the whole *being carried over the doorstep* got so intense, and that I scared you today.” Shane gently kissed Ilya.

Ilya pulled Shane closer. “I still have the doorstep memory from our first wedding. And yes, you scared me, but you’re okay, that’s all that matters.”

Shane melted into Ilya’s embrace. “I love you so much it hurts sometimes.”

Chapter 13: Stuck on the sidelines

“I’m not going to discuss this with you, Hollander,” Ilya said in a firm tone. “No ice and definitely no skates.”

“I’ve been on skates nearly my entire life. Mom, can you please talk some sense into Ilya? It’s not like I’m playing a game, we’re only teaching kids.”

“I’m on Ilya’s side on this,” Yuna said. “Take a look at yourself. Your center of gravity has shifted, it would not be safe.”

About a week after the wedding, Shane had finally popped. The bump was now clearly visible when he wore his usual clothes, like today.

“You could be by the benches, taking notes, like a coach would,” Ilya suggested.

It was still their project, and Ilya didn’t want to exclude Shane, he just wanted to make sure Shane wouldn’t take part in any activities on the ice at camp this year.

After signing, Shane had gotten his new Ottawa Centaurs jersey. It was oversized, so he could wear it at camp and avoid being noticed. But they still needed an excuse for why Shane wouldn’t be on the ice. They knew the kids, their parents, and especially the other professional players would start asking questions otherwise.

“How about asking Dr. Hayes if you could borrow a walking boot?” Ilya looked at Shane. “We can say you slipped and hurt your ankle.”

Shane could not think of a better idea. With a walking boot on, no one would expect him to be on the ice, and a leg injury he could walk on would not keep him from the camp.

It was the fourth day of camp in Ottawa, and the fourth day Shane had been forced to be by the benches, watching all the other players train a new bunch of excited kids. Occasionally the kids and players came close enough for Shane to hear what they were talking about, but most of the time he just observed.

Already after day two, Shane had stopped taking notes since no one ever asked for them. It definitely wasn’t the same as being out there with the kids, giving advice right when they needed it.

At lunch, Shane sat silently and poked at his pasta salad, when Scott Hunter approached him. “That sucks about your ankle. What happened?” Shane briefly made eye contact with Hayden, who sat next to Scott and also knew the injury was a cover.

The lie was short and believable. “I slipped on a wet rock in the garden and twisted it badly.” Shane sounded almost robotic as he said it.

Later that day, a reporter asked Shane the same question. He had obviously given her the same lie. But an ankle injury wouldn't last him all the way to October and beyond the new season, he knew that.

Ilya sat in the driver's seat and looked at Shane, who was limping toward the car. When Shane got inside, he ripped off the boot in frustration and tossed it into the back seat.

"I hate this stupid thing. And I fucking hate lying," Shane said, slamming his hand on the seat before burying his face in his hands.

Ilya tried to comfort Shane by placing a hand on his thigh. "I know. We're all doing our best to incorporate you." Shane pushed Ilya's hand away.

"Oh, are you? I'm sitting on the bench alone all day," Shane said as he angrily looked at Ilya.

"It's our job to teach the kids, Shane. We can't stop by the bench every ten minutes," Ilya struggled to stay calm as he pulled up in the driveway.

Shane stormed through the front door and started to ramble. Ilya was right behind him.

"I'm going on the ice tomorrow, okay? We'll say my ankle got better, and I will take it slow. I can't stay by that fucking bench for one more minute."

Ilya walked slowly over to Shane, who was frantically pacing the living room. "Hey, Shane... Hey. It frustrates me too, okay?" Ilya got a hold of Shane's shoulders, gently pushed his arms down, and held his hands in a firm grip. "I miss teaching the kids with you. This is our thing. I hate to see you on that bench for so many hours. And I don't think this situation benefits you or the baby."

Shane was exhausted and let himself fall into Ilya's arms. "What are we going to do?"

Ilya held Shane for a moment, then had an idea. "How about setting up an area outside where the kids can train shooting, stickhandling, and balance? You can be there all day, and the rest of us can come by in small groups."

Shane immediately relaxed, looked up at Ilya, and took his idea further. "I'll be able to take the boot off and tell everyone that my ankle is not strong enough for skating yet, but I can train the kids on the grass."

The next day, everything the kids needed for training on the grass outside the arena was set up. At last, Shane could work with them up close and give them proper coaching. The kids were ecstatic as well, having been looking forward to being trained by one of their favorite players.

The first group of the day had been led by Ilya and Wyatt, who were now back inside the arena. The second group, which was about to start, was led by Scott and Hayden.

Twenty minutes into the training session, Shane suddenly got a strange feeling in his stomach. He discreetly placed a hand on it and clearly felt something press against his palm.

He quickly retreated from the crowded field.

Hayden noticed that Shane was walking away and followed him.

Scott was deeply focused on shooting training with the kids and continued without concern.

Shane had stepped behind a tree and was still holding a hand on his stomach as the sensation continued.

Hayden caught up to him. "Hey Hollander, are you okay?" He saw the surprised and slightly panicked look on Shane's face and that he was holding his stomach. "Does anything hurt?"

Shane shook his head. "No, it just feels really strange," Shane muttered.

Hayden was calm, as he thought he knew what was going on. "May I?" Hayden reached a hand out toward Shane's stomach.

Shane nodded and moved his hands away. The sensation continued as Hayden placed his hand on one side. He moved it a bit toward the center, stopped, and smiled.

"There's a lot going on in there." Hayden removed his hand again before it got too weird. "Is it the first time you're really feeling it kick?"

Shane nodded again. He had suspected it was the baby kicking, but getting it confirmed by Hayden, who obviously knew the feeling well, helped put his mind at ease.

Though he was relieved, he was definitely not going to tell Ilya that Hayden had felt the baby move before he did.

"Hey guys, are you going to come back and help me?" Scott yelled toward Shane and Hayden, who then rejoined Scott at the field.

On the car ride home, Shane felt the baby move again as Ilya talked about the different challenges he'd had with the kids during the day. He chose not to react this time, as he didn't want to distract Ilya while he was driving.

Back home they both sat on the sofa and were about to start eating poke bowls with pulled chicken when Shane got up and walked to the fridge. Ilya sighed, as he knew what Shane was getting.

"No... please, can you not, just for one day?" Ilya wailed.

Shane had already opened the jar of sauerkraut and was about to add it to the bowl. "Sorry. I can't help it." For a few weeks, it had been Shane's number one craving, and Ilya hated it. Even after Shane brushed his teeth, Ilya could still smell it on him, which was not very romantic, to say the least. Luckily for Shane, Ilya loved him enough to tolerate it most days.

Ilya continued. "Why can it not be strawberries or orange juice? You know, nice things." Shane had already taken a couple of mouthfuls and deliberately breathed into Ilya's face as he

walked past and sat down next to him.

“I hate you,” Ilya frowned.

Shane smiled. “I have something to tell you.”

Ilya gave Shane an unamused look. “What? Are you going to switch to eating durian tomorrow?”

“I felt the baby kick today, properly, so I could feel it from the outside.”

Ilya’s eyes widened as a smile spread across his face. He placed both his and Shane’s bowls on the table, positioned himself between Shane’s legs with his knees on the floor, and gently pressed his hands to Shane’s stomach.

Nothing happened.

Shane tried to move one of Ilya’s hands to the areas where he had felt the strongest kicks earlier, but still nothing.

“He’s probably just asleep, try talking to him. It worked earlier in the car,” Shane suggested.

Ilya was about to say something but paused and looked up at Shane instead. “Him?”

Shane moved one of his hands to his mouth. “Fuck, I’m so sorry, I didn’t mean to, I…”

“It’s okay.” Ilya leaned in and softly kissed Shane.

He had forgotten about the sauerkraut and recoiled slightly, grimacing at the taste.

Shane closed his eyes tightly. “Sorry.” They both laughed.

Ilya still had one hand on Shane’s stomach, as he suddenly felt a tiny movement underneath it.

“Was that...? Did you feel it too?” Ilya pulled up Shane’s shirt and moved his hand to the same spot. Ilya felt the movement again.

Shane smiled. “Yeah, I’m still not used to it. It feels so weird.”

Ilya gently placed a couple of kisses on Shane’s stomach. “You’re incredible. I love you so much for doing this.”

Shane was glad both the wedding and most of the pregnancy-related things had happened during the off-season. They’d had so much time to enjoy each other. But he knew it wouldn’t last forever. In a couple of months, Ilya would start playing again, and he wouldn’t.

Should they tell the team, their coach, the media? Okay, definitely not the media. He felt the team deserved to know the truth, but the thought of telling so many people also terrified him.

He tried not to dwell on it, but Ilya sensed that Shane was troubled by something.

“Do you regret doing this?” Ilya asked, concerned. He sincerely hoped it wasn’t the case.

“What? No, of course not.” Shane ran a hand through Ilya’s hair as he saw him breathe out in relief.

“I’m just afraid of how much I’m going to miss both you and the game, when you’re back on the road and I’m not.”

“Oh, Shane... come here.” They both stood up and tightly embraced.

The same thought had been lingering in Ilya’s mind for a while, and he had no idea how they would handle it when the time came.

Chapter 14: No need to hide

Chapter Summary

Shane and Ilya spend their honeymoon in southern Spain.

Chapter Notes

I've been to southern Spain myself over 20 times, and it is one of my favorite places to visit.

Imagining Ilya and Shane on their honeymoon in the same area, was really fun to write.

A week after the last day of camp in Montreal, Shane and Ilya were sitting on a plane, which was going to take them to southern Spain for their honeymoon.

It was Scott who had recommended the place. Hockey was not popular in that region or in the country in general, so the chances of them being recognized there were very slim, which was exactly what they wanted.

Right before take-off, Ilya sat staring out the window. He had barely spoken that day. Though he had been on many flights since the near-crash scare with his team, this would be the longest one yet.

Shane gently slid his hand into Ilya's, intertwining their fingers. He was there to give Ilya all the support he needed.

"How are you feeling?" Shane asked quietly.

"Fine," Ilya said stiffly, not meaning it at all. Honestly, he would have preferred to get knocked out and just wake up in Spain.

Shane tightened his grip and rested his head on Ilya's shoulder. Having Shane there definitely made it easier, and he was excited to go somewhere where they were completely unknown. It had been years since either of them had tried anything like that.

After nearly 13 hours, they finally landed in Málaga. In August, it was still hot, though not quite as intense as June and July. Stepping out of the airport, they were hit by a warm wall of damp heat and a smell that was difficult to describe as anything other than different from home, not unpleasant, just different.

They took a cab for the short trip from the airport down to a street filled with rental shops. Ilya had, of course, already decided from home which car they were going to drive while they were there.

They left to drive further down the coast in a dark grey Jaguar F-Type convertible.

“So, you’re deliberately trying to blow our cover?” Shane knew Ilya was never going to settle for less when it came to the cars he drove, so his pick wasn’t really a surprise.

“It’s our honeymoon. I want to celebrate in *every* way possible.” Ilya winked and placed a hand firmly on the back of Shane’s neck.

Forty minutes later they drove through a gate, parked the car, and checked into a luxury hotel right by the beach. They had booked the penthouse for three weeks. It was equipped with two large bedrooms, windows facing the ocean, a large bathroom with a big tub in the center and a private pool. The entire floor of the apartment was white marble, but various rugs were laid out as a contrast to the cold hard surface.

It had been a while since they had been in a hotel room together, it reminded them of all the times they used to secretly meet over the years. Although the feelings still lingered in both of them, they were now married and no longer had to hide from anyone.

During the tour of the apartment, Ilya’s eyes had drifted to the tub, and the faint, flirty smile he had sent Shane hinted that he was already imagining exactly how they could make use of it.

Trying to avoid too much jetlag, they had not slept on the plane and were both pretty exhausted. It was 10 pm local time, making it the perfect time to go to sleep and start fresh the next day.

Shane lay on his side on the bed while Ilya settled behind him, wrapping an arm around his chest.

“I can’t believe we’re really here.” Shane kept a hold of Ilya’s arm. He had only been to Europe with his parents, attending major sports events where a lot of cameras had been pointing at him. Though very few people had known who he was, he had still been in the spotlight. But this time it would be completely different.

Ilya didn’t react as he was already lightly snoring. Shane smiled and quickly fell asleep as well.

The next day after breakfast Shane and Ilya had decided they wanted to have a relaxing first day. They had both changed into swim shorts and were about to put on sunscreen.

“Can I do it?” Ilya asked Shane, who stood with the bottle in his hand. He handed it over to Ilya and turned his back to him.

Ilya spread a good layer of sunscreen on Shane's back, and kept the bottle in his hand as Shane turned around and reached for it.

"I'll do the front as well." Ilya stepped closer, looked down and then up.

"Okay." Shane didn't protest as he felt Ilya starting to run his hand over his chest in soft circular motions. Ilya slowly slid his hands over Shane's hips and then got to his stomach. They both felt a movement when Ilya ran over the lower part of the abdomen.

"Someone is awake," Ilya smiled. Shane had gotten used to the movements, and didn't really react unless they were more significant.

Shane had zoned out due to the feeling of Ilya touching him all over, so the baby wasn't really on his mind at the moment.

He sighed in a way, which quickly made Ilya shift his focus as well.

Ilya looked Shane straight in the eyes as he moved his hand into Shane's shorts. He started out with gentle strokes. Shane bit his lip and close his eyes.

Ilya pressed his forehead against Shane's; they both breathed heavily into each other's mouths as the intensity of the strokes progressed. He felt Shane's hands digging into his hair.

Ilya smiled as he briefly pressed their lips together before tugging the shorts down to Shane's ankles and got on his knees to finish the job.

After Shane had a chance to catch his breath, he looked at Ilya. "Your turn?"

Ilya didn't want to wear Shane out before the day had really begun. "I'm good... Later." Ilya smiled and placed a kiss on Shane's cheek.

Before leaving, they put on oversized light shirts. Ilya's shirt had a colorful leaf print on it, while Shane's was plain white.

They got down to the beach, where the hotel had its own private section. The sunbeds looked like actual beds, with a thick white mattress, a light wooden frame, under parasols made from fresh straw.

Ilya immediately took off his shirt. Not all the way down from his high yet, Shane gazed at him, admiring his husband's incredible physique. He felt like the luckiest man alive, being able to call Ilya his.

"Are you coming?" Ilya stretched out his hand towards Shane, as he wanted to go to the water.

Shane was not comfortable taking his own shirt off. *Would people notice?* He left his shirt on and took Ilya's hand.

They walked together to the ocean, holding hands the entire way, proud as they were.

They were done hiding their relationship, done hiding their love for each other, and being in a place where no one knew them, no one cared, definitely made it easier.

As they got to the ocean and both stood with their toes in the water, Ilya turned towards Shane. “There’s no need to hide here”.

Shane was confused. Everyone on the beach and the nearby restaurant could see them standing there, holding hands.

“But we’re not?” Shane lifted their intertwined hands up in the air and even gave Ilya’s knuckles a kiss.

“Not what I mean.” Ilya pressed his other hand to Shane’s stomach and gently brushed his thumb over it.

Shane let go of Ilya’s hand and took a step back. “I...”, Shane stuttered and felt a rush of fear starting to build up. “...can’t. Everyone will notice”.

“Hey, hey... You don’t have to, but look around. You are definitely not the one with the biggest gut around here.”

Shane looked around. At least 10 other men, properly wealthy business men, who had never seen the inside of a gym, even some around his own age, were walking around in Speedos that were way too small, with their stomachs spilling over the edges.

Though his stomach protruded slightly more forward than the others, no one would likely give it a second thought.

“Okay.” Shane nodded.

Ilya grabbed the bottom of Shane’s shirt. “Yes?”

Shane nodded again.

Ilya pulled the shirt over Shane’s head, exposing his clearly rounded midsection.
Perfectly round and smooth – in Ilya’s opinion.

Shane didn’t know what to do with his hands. Resting them near the belly would just look weird.

He awkwardly crossed his arms high on his chest.

Shane’s pose made Ilya laugh. He tossed the shirt in the sand before sweeping Shane off his feet and carrying him out into the water in his arms, until it fully covered him.

In the water, Shane felt some relief as it lifted off the weight of his belly. He had his hands around Ilya’s neck and was looking up at him. “You’re crazy, you know that?”

“People in love do crazy things,” Ilya said, gently nuzzling his nose against Shane’s before putting him down and giving him a few eager kisses.

On the way back towards the sunbeds Shane grabbed his shirt. “Ugh, now it’s all covered in sand.”

Shane’s outburst made Ilya roll his eyes and grin to himself.

For lunch, they sat down at one of the beach restaurants and shared a variety of delicious seafood, including mussels cooked in garlic oil, together with octopus and sardines, which had been grilled over a wood fire set in a sand-filled boat.

Afterwards they spent a few hours more at the beach. Shane mostly lay on his sunbed under the parasol, reading yet another book about historic hockey events. While Ilya alternated between lying beside him, scrolling on his phone, and going for runs along the water.

When they got back to the apartment, there was still some time before they had to go out for dinner.

Ilya wrapped his hands around Shane, resting them on his lower back. “How about washing all this sand off together?”

He nodded towards the big tub in the bathroom and looked at Shane.

“Well, someone did get sand all over my shirt so...” Shane teased.

Ilya shut him off by vigorously pressing his lips against Shane’s, then planting a few kisses along his jawline. He then pushed him away with a smirk on his face, walking over to the tub, and started filling it up.

Shane was lying between Ilya’s legs. Ilya was gently moving a washcloth across Shane’s chest, then up the back of his neck, over his shoulder, and all the way along his arm. He then let go of the cloth and slid his hand down Shane’s thigh, gripping it tightly.

Shane softly moaned as he felt Ilya’s hand move up to his hips and back towards his ass. The warm water already helped Shane relax, so it didn’t take long for Ilya to open him up.

“I want to look at you”, Shane gasped and turned to face Ilya, resulting in some of the water spilling out over the sides.

Ilya had his hands on Shane’s hips, and watched Shane, as he slowly lowered himself onto him.

Shane sometimes liked being the one in control, and in this position he fully was. He lowered himself further. One hand pressed against Ilya’s chest, feeling the tightness of his muscles, while the other was on the edge of the tub.

Ilya sharply exhaled, let his head fall backward, and grabbed the edge of the tub with both hands, one on top of Shane’s, clutching it hard.

“Shane... Fuck... Don’t stop”, Ilya begged. With the slow motions of Shane’s hips, he wouldn’t last long.

Shane was equally close. Was he really going to come hands-free, again? He didn't care if that was going to be the case. He moved his hand from Ilya's chest into his hair instead, and pulled him up for a kiss, but in this position, he could barely reach Ilya's lips before the pressure on his belly significantly restricted his breathing.

Ilya could feel the hint of distress from Shane as he could not pull him in properly. He acted fast, as he broke the kiss, leaned back again, and let himself enjoy the sensation even deeper. "It's perfect. Don't stop", he encouraged Shane again.

Shane didn't have time to be frustrated, every fiber in his body tensed up, as he could not stop himself and had no choice but to release, he let out a loud moan.

The outburst from Shane also sent Ilya over the edge, forcing him to finish shortly after.

Afterwards, Shane positioned himself so he could kiss Ilya and still be able to breathe. He put a hand on one side of Ilya's face and looked into his beautiful blue eyes. "Today was amazing. And it's only our first day. I can't wait for the next three weeks." He leaned in and softly kissed Ilya.

That night they ended up ordering in instead of going out.

Two weeks passed, and it all felt like a dream to them both. Nobody had asked for selfies, there were no loud whispers behind their backs, and people didn't stare while they were eating.

They had visited some magnificent places during day trips, stayed in cozy little hotel rooms, and gone on sunset walks by the beach.

Among the places they visited was Seville, where several scenes set in Dorne for the TV show Game of Thrones were filmed.

One point during the visit Shane thought someone recognized him, as he was tapped on the shoulder by a young woman with a phone in her hand. But he soon realized that she simply wanted him to take a picture of her and her family in front of the beautiful buildings.

After taking a couple of pictures, he asked if she could take some of him and Ilya. He handed her his phone and wrapped an arm around Ilya, resting his hand on his hip.

As they posed together, Ilya unexpectedly kissed Shane on the cheek, making him blush instantly.

The young woman smiled as she captured the moment. "You guys are just the cutest," she said and handed the phone back.

Looking at the photos, Shane could not disagree.

On their last night they sat at a restaurant under a gigantic rubber tree, which covered the

whole outdoor area.

The restaurant was elevated, so they had an amazing view over the ocean.

They had ordered paella, which none of them had ever tried before visiting Spain, but they now absolutely loved it.

This was the fifth time they had ordered it during the trip.

“I’m going to miss this,” Shane said as he took a mouthful of rice.

“Me too,” Ilya sighed and gazed out over the sea. “Three weeks away from everything, just the two of us, it was really everything we needed.”

Ilya rested his hand on Shane’s arm and looked at him.

The weight of his hand had stopped Shane from taking another bite, and he looked pretty frustrated about it.

Ilya realized that Shane had meant the paella specifically, and smiled. “I’ll need to learn how to cook this for you at home.”

He moved his hand to Shane’s back and rubbed it gently.

Shane finished the bite and turned to Ilya. “As if I didn't have enough reasons to love you.”

Chapter 15: The Announcement

On the flight back to Canada, they had both managed to get some sleep, but they were still looking forward to being home in their own bed. They landed in Montreal, so they still had a few hours' drive ahead of them before they could fully rest after the long journey.

Ilya was driving when he noticed his phone vibrating nonstop in his pocket. He pulled it out, unlocked it, and handed it to Shane.

"Can you check what's going on? It's been going crazy since we left the airport."

Shane looked at the phone and saw that there were two missed calls and three unread messages. They all came from their neighbor Kate.

Kate and the rest of the family had been looking after the house, watering the plants, mowing the lawn etc. while they were away on their honeymoon. They had gotten a few pictures of the children Willa and Andrew playing in the garden, but otherwise they had not heard from her.

Shane read the first message out loud: *Hey Ilya. Everything is ready for you when you and Shane get home. I made a lasagna and put it in the fridge in case you're hungry. Otherwise, it'll still be good tomorrow.*

"Sounds delicious," Ilya said. He briefly looked at Shane, who was intensely staring at the phone. "Something wrong?"

Shane read the second message for himself: *Hi Ilya, I tried to call. You are probably still on the plane. Just a little heads up. We saw a couple of reporters outside your gate last week. They asked us if we knew where you were on your honeymoon. Obviously, we didn't tell them, but today there were a lot more, and they asked us if we had any comments about the picture.*

A chill ran down Shane's spine. "There's a picture," he said quietly. He suddenly felt really sick. "Can you pull over?"

"A picture...? What do you mean?" Ilya looked at Shane and saw that he had gone completely pale. He pulled over and stopped the car, then hurried over to Shane, who was standing a few steps away, bent over, and visibly sick.

Ilya supported Shane as he threw up a second time. He then guided him to sit on the ground, and went to get his phone in the car.

Ilya read the second message and then the third, which was sent only ten minutes ago: *Okay, there's a lot more reporters now. I have tried telling them that this is a private road, but there are just too many. Please get home safe <3*

Ilya searched on his phone and quickly found The Picture. He sighed in relief when he saw it clearly had been taken from a long distance with a cheap phone, leaving it blurry and low quality. It was them, walking along the beach.

There was a caption on the picture - *Has Shane Hollander completely let himself go? He's nowhere near being in game shape with the season starting next month.*

Shane was wearing a white t-shirt in the picture, and with his belly being the size it was, Ilya could see why people would think he was seriously out of shape.

But it could have been so much worse. During the end of their honeymoon, they had felt so safe and comfortable that Ilya a few times had put his hand on Shane's belly and discreetly stroked it, even while they were out in public. If a professional photographer had captured a moment like that, people would seriously have freaked out. Ilya figured that was exactly what Shane feared the picture showed.

Ilya walked over and sat beside Shane.

"How bad is it?" he mumbled, looking at Ilya with tears in his eyes.

"Good news and bad news," Ilya tried to lighten the mood and thereby make Shane calmer.

"Good news. It's a shitty photo of us on the beach. And no one has brought up anything pregnancy related," Ilya started.

Shane dried his eyes as some weight lifted. "Good, that's good."

"Bad news, the belly is pretty obvious, and a lot of people are worried, because they think you have gotten fat and out of shape," Ilya smiled nervously.

Shane looked down and placed a hand on his stomach. "Well...I would also be pretty shocked if I saw an athlete suddenly have a belly this size." He gave Ilya a genuine smile. He was very relieved. This was something they could work with.

All the reporters gathered outside their house were there to get a glimpse of Shane, to see if he had actually gained weight, and ask him if he was going to be ready for the upcoming season.

Shane had placed a backpack on his lap, as they were about to drive through what looked like at least 25 reporters, who had placed themselves in front of the gate to their house.

If you didn't know any better, it almost looked like the reporters had been there for the entire three weeks they had been away. They had even set up a small camp, complete with a tent and chairs.

Ilya took Shane's hand before driving towards the gate. "I'm not going to stop. Just ignore them while we drive past them."

"Good to be home," Shane said, his voice heavy with sarcasm.

The last three weeks had been like a dream, but now reality hit them really fucking hard.

Though it was nearly dark outside, both Shane and Ilya had put on their sunglasses, making it clear they were not going to speak with anyone tonight.

Ilya drove slowly through the horde of reporters as camera flashes went off and questions were being shouted from every direction.

“Hollander, are you ready for next season?” “What’s behind the bag?” “Do you have any comment about the picture? Is it real?” – were just a few of the questions Ilya could make out. It deeply frustrated him that he couldn’t stop all the taunts directed at Shane.

As the gate finally closed behind them and Ilya parked the car, they remained inside, as they could still hear the reporters and see cameras poking up over the wall.

They hadn’t come up with a convincing cover story for why Shane wouldn’t be playing in his first season with the team.

“I think we need to tell Coach Wiebe. A statement, which we can use as a cover story, will sound more believable coming from him,” Shane suggested, trying to get Ilya to loosen his grip a bit as he was about to crush Shane’s hand.

“Sorry.” Ilya snapped out of the tense state he had slipped into and let go of Shane’s hand. “Wiebe. Yes. I would trust him with this.”

“At some point, I also want to tell the rest of the team. I think they deserve to know. But for now, let’s start with Wiebe,” Shane said and tried to give Ilya a comforting smile.

Two days later, Wiebe was outside the gate. From his phone Ilya could see that some persistent reporters remained. Though none of them had dared to trespass, he hated knowing they were still out there. He opened the gate so Wiebe could enter.

Ilya greeted Wiebe at the door. “Good to see you, Coach.” He gave him a quick hug.

Wiebe placed a hand on Ilya’s shoulder. “No need to be so formal. The season has not started yet.”

Ilya felt weird calling him Brandon, even in the off-season, so that wasn’t going to happen.

“How was the honeymoon? All you dreamed of, I hope? You two really went off the grid.” Wiebe followed Ilya into the dining area.

“It was nice,” Ilya replied. Which, of course, was quite an understatement.

“The only thing we’ve seen is that picture. I believe that’s why there are a couple of reporters outside?” Wiebe sat down across from Ilya at the dinner table.

“Yes,” Ilya said, clearly annoyed about the fact.

Shane entered the room from behind Wiebe. He was wearing a light grey t-shirt with a tight fit over his stomach. He didn’t feel the need to hide, as they were going to tell him anyway.

“Hi Coach, has Ilya offered you some coffee?” Shane asked, making his presence known.

Wiebe turned around and got a full view of Shane. “Holy...” Wiebe stopped himself from saying something inappropriate and just stared at Shane, clearly shocked. “I was sure that picture was a fake, but that... I’m just... wow.”

Shane stroked his belly. “Yeah, this was kind of what we wanted to talk to you about.”

“Hollander, what happened?” Wiebe had never seen such a rapid physical transformation in any of his teammates during his years of playing hockey.

Shane sighed. “You told me I don’t need to explain why I can’t play this season. Well, I’ve decided to tell you, because we’re going to need your help.” He stood next to Ilya.

“Ilya and I are having a baby, and I’m carrying it.” He placed one hand on the side of his stomach.

Wiebe looked at Ilya, seeking confirmation, trying to process what he had just been told.

Ilya could sense what Wiebe needed. “It’s true,” he said with confidence, making it clear that Shane wasn’t joking. He placed a hand on Shane’s stomach, but Shane gently removed it again, as he thought it was a bit too much for Wiebe to handle at the moment.

“With that picture out and people speculating, we need a more official reason for why I’m not going to play,” Shane said, putting one hand on the table to support himself as he sat down next to Ilya. “I know we’re asking a lot. For you to lie on our behalf.” Shane felt ashamed and at a loss, but he knew it was necessary.

Wiebe rose from his chair and looked seriously at Shane and Ilya. “What exactly do you want me to say?”

Later that week, Ilya drove to the arena for the first team practice since he got home from Spain. The rest of the team had already met a few times, and he was eager to see their reactions to their captain's return.

When Ilya entered the locker room, everyone gathered around him, wanting to greet him.

“So good to have you back, Captain,” last year's rookie Luca smiled, as he patted Ilya on his shoulder a few times.

“Hey Rozy! Did you enjoy the honeymoon?” Wyatt winked at Ilya and gave him a big bear hug.

“This is going to be our year!” Troy yelled, shaking Ilya and making the room erupt in cheers.

After the initial reunion joy had settled down and the team was ready to hit the ice, Troy turned to Ilya again. “Hey, where is Hollander? Did you not drive here together?”

Several of his other teammates had wanted to ask the same question and looked to Ilya for an answer.

“He felt sick this morning and stayed home,” Ilya answered, looking down at the ground while he said it. He had planned to tell the team about what Coach Wiebe was going to say, after practice, but with them already asking questions, he decided to tell them before.

As Ilya got on the ice, he went to the bench where Wiebe and their assistant trainer were talking.

“Hey Coach, can we gather the team before we start practice today, and inform them about, you know what?”

Wiebe clapped his hands to get the team’s attention. “Gather here boys, your captain and I have something important to tell you.”

Before long, the entire team was standing in front of the bench as Ilya began talking. “Most of you probably heard when I said that Hollander is not here today because he is sick. That’s not true, Shane is fine.”

“Should he not be at practice then?” Luca asked.

Wiebe stepped in. “He will not come to practice, as he will not be playing with us this season. He is still on the team, but I have granted him a year of absence.”

The players started firing questions at them, all clearly confused.

“Hey! Hey, listen,” Ilya said firmly. He waved his arms around and silenced them. “Shane wants to explain what’s going on, we both do, but for now, you are going to have to trust me when I say now is not the time.”

Wiebe stepped forward. “There will be a press conference, and I will make a statement about Hollander. You are not to comment on anything regarding the statement to the press. Got it?”

Most of the players agreed by nodding.

“Got it?” Wiebe yelled again.

A unified “Yes, Coach!” erupted from the players.

“Good. Let’s see how rusty you’ve all become over the summer,” Ilya grinned as he threw a puck onto the ice and started stickhandling it around.

At the press conference, which was held three days later, only Coach Wiebe and his assistant coach were going to be present. All the players, except Ilya, were gathered after practice in a conference room at the arena, where they could follow along on a screen.

Ilya had left practice early so he could be with Shane when Coach Wiebe made the announcement.

The TV was on when Ilya stepped through the front door. Shane was sitting on the sofa, staring at the empty table on the screen.

Ilya sat down next to Shane and took his hand. He felt terrible having to witness this. Shane had already sacrificed so much, but this would be his biggest sacrifice yet. For the first time since he started playing hockey, he wouldn't return to the ice, and it was about to be announced, about to become real.

Shane grabbed Ilya's hand tight as the two coaches sat down at the table.

Wiebe tested the microphone before starting. "Welcome everybody. This will be a short announcement with no time for questions afterwards," Wiebe started in a serious tone.

"This year we signed Shane Hollander, who was expected to begin his first season in Ottawa next month. Unfortunately, there was an incident during a practice involving Hollander. While I know he is not proud of his actions, the severity of the situation leaves me no choice but to suspend him for his first season with the Centaurs."

The reporters in the room rose to their feet, shouting questions as they spoke over one another.

The coaches remained calm, stood up, and walked out without saying another word.

Back home, Shane had not looked at Ilya, as he was once again staring at the empty table after the announcement.

A tear slowly ran down his cheek.

Ilya turned off the TV and placed himself in front of Shane. "Shane? Shane, look at me."

Shane's expression slowly changed until he finally broke.

Ilya pulled Shane close as he intensely started sobbing into his shoulder.

"Shh, it's going to be okay." Ilya did his best to comfort him, as he suddenly realized how much this also affected him. They were meant to be by each other's side every day in the upcoming season, finally, but instead they yet again would be forced to endure days apart. He intensified his embrace and allowed himself to be vulnerable too.

"I can't leave you," Ilya said after a while, now equally as broken.

"And I don't want you to," Shane mumbled.

Normally one of them would have to be "the one in control", but this time they both let themselves feel the weight of the imminent time apart they knew they soon had to face.

Lying outside in the hammock a few hours later, Shane decided to film an Instagram story, something he usually never did.

He felt the need to address the situation himself and make sure people knew the team had nothing to do with his suspension.

A lot of people had been looking forward to seeing Shane and Ilya on the same team, especially the Ottawa fans, who really believed the team had a chance to win the Cup this

year. Shane hated disappointing so many people, but both he and Ilya knew there had to be some seriousness behind the story, otherwise it wouldn't be believable.

He pulled up his phone and started recording.

"Hi, it's me Shane, but you can already see that," he started out awkwardly. "I know many of you were looking forward to seeing me on the ice this season, especially all you Centaurs' fans. I'm sorry that I won't be playing with the team this year. The actions that led to my suspension did not involve any of my teammates, but were the result of me damaging property in a moment of rage and stupidity. For this I take full responsibility."

Still recording, he paused, bit his lip, and looked around, as he didn't know how to end the video properly. "Just needed you to hear it from me, have a good day, bye."

He posted the video immediately without hesitation, as he was aware that reviewing it likely would have stopped him from posting it altogether. It wasn't easy, but he felt it was necessary for him to lie. Shane didn't want any of his teammates to be blamed for his fake suspension, which was why he needed to make it clear that the fault was entirely his.

Ilya came from the house and walked in Shane's direction, holding his phone in his hand.

"Oh God Hollander, you really suck at social media." He had a big smile on his face.

Shane struggled to haul himself up from the hammock, as he grabbed Ilya's arm, which was stretched out towards him. "Fuck y..."

Ilya got a hold of Shane, as he was about to fall out, and instead got him to his feet. "But the message was clear, and you look so fucking adorable, when you don't know what to say." He brushed a lock of Shane's messy hair to the side and kissed him softly.

"Next time, maybe ask Harris for advice before you post. Pretty sure he's going to cry himself to sleep after this one," Ilya teased, winked at Shane, and kissed him again before he had time to protest.

Chapter 16: Old habits

The morning after the announcement Shane woke up as a text made his phone vibrate beside him.

“Hey Hollander, I just heard about your suspension. That really sucks. Let me know if there’s anything I can do. And let’s catch up before the season starts, it’s been ages – J.J.”

Fuck. Shane had totally forgotten about J.J.

This was the second time he had kept a major life event from him, despite considering him one of his closest friends.

Normally, J.J. would call whenever he wanted to catch up. But he hadn’t called since Shane left the team, probably because of the way things had ended. Also, they had barely spoken at the wedding, which Shane now felt awful about.

Back when he played for Montreal, he used to go out for dinner or watch a movie with J.J. and Hayden pretty often. If they could catch up before the season started, he could tell J.J. about the baby instead of keeping him in the dark any longer than he already had.

It was the middle of September, and Hayden was driving to Ottawa to meet up with Shane and J.J.

He had asked if J.J. wanted to carpool, but he had already gone to Ottawa a couple of days earlier to visit some family.

With him, Hayden had a stuffed lion, which his son Arthur had given him. Arthur wanted Shane’s baby to have the lion, and he had made Hayden promise to explain that the lion had now been trained to protect its owner. Hayden thought the request was a little odd, but also kind of adorable. Maybe Shane would get it.

Shane had told him and J.J. to meet at a café in town. It was Tuesday around noon, so the place would probably be half-empty, which Hayden suspected was exactly what Shane wanted. The fewer people around, the less attention he would draw to himself.

When Hayden arrived, J.J. was already standing outside.

“Hey man, how is Ottawa?” He gave J.J. a light hug. It had only been three days since they’d last seen each other at the latest practice back in Montreal.

“It’s not Montreal, that’s for sure,” J.J. said. He thought it was a boring city compared to Montreal, both city- and hockey-wise.

Hayden shook his head and smiled. “I think they are going to be this year’s dark horse. Or maybe next year, when Shane is ready to get back on the ice.”

“I know the suspension was necessary, but it still sucks. And then that whole picture thing on top of that,” J.J. said, sympathizing with Shane. After everything that had happened in Montreal, it seemed unfair to him that he had to go through this as well.

“Yeah, but when you know what’s actually going on, it’s funny that so many people think he’s just fat.” Hayden grinned, but quickly stopped when he looked at J.J., who had a weird expression on his face.

Hayden then realized J.J. didn’t know about the baby. He was sure Shane had told him, and they were just going to chill today, like they used to back in Montreal.

At that moment Hayden saw Shane walking towards them.

Shane was running a bit late to his meet-up with Hayden and J.J. as he had struggled to find something to wear that could still hide the bump while he was out in public. He had managed to find something, but he was in serious need of some new clothing soon.

As he was walking to the café, he could see Hayden and J.J. standing outside. It looked like they were discussing something important.

“...what do you mean with *actually going on*?” It sounded to Shane as if J.J. was upset about something.

“Hey guys, everything okay?” Shane asked.

J.J. turned to Shane. He clearly *was* upset. “Is there something important you haven’t told me?”

Shane opened his mouth but didn’t say anything at first. He briefly made eye contact with Hayden, who was standing behind J.J., and saw him mouthing the word “Sorry” while giving him an apologetic look.

Shane closed his eyes for a moment and then looked at J.J. “What exactly did Hayden tell you?”

“Nothing really, but there’s definitely something going on I don’t know about,” J.J. said. He was starting to get frustrated.

“Can we go inside, please? Let’s sit down and talk.” Shane opened the door, and J.J. rushed through it.

“What the fuck?” Shane said in a low voice so only Hayden could hear him as he passed him on his way through the door. Hayden gave Shane a nervous smile.

Shane had booked a table in the farthest corner of the café, in a frosted-glass enclosed section with its own door, so they could talk in private.

As the waiter, who had shown them to the table, left and closed the door behind him, they all sat down around the round table in the room.

“Alright, we’re sitting down. Would you please tell me what’s going on?” J.J. crossed his arms and leaned back in the chair.

“I would have told you sooner, I promise. But so many things happened since I found out. Leaving the team, finding a new team, the wedding, summer camp, the honeymoon, the picture... And you’re usually the one who contacts me, so I forgot all about telling you. I’m very sorry.”

Shane looked at J.J., not realizing he actually hadn’t told him anything specific yet.

“Found out what exactly?” J.J. stared at Shane, confused.

“Right, sorry... I found out around the time of the last playoff game that I’m pregnant.”

J.J. sat quietly for a moment. “So, when you tripped?”

Shane sighed. “I had just found out I was pregnant, and I felt like shit that day.”

Hayden interrupted. “Hey, you never told me that. You knew you were pregnant during that last playoff game, and you played anyway?”

Shane blushed and looked down at the table. “Yes. And I know it contributed to us losing the game. I’m still so mad at myself for that.”

“Fuck the game. You risked hurting both yourself and the baby. We would never have let you play if we’d known,” Hayden said in a caring voice and gently grabbed Shane’s arm.

J.J. nodded. “No game is worth a risk like that,” he said in French.

Shane looked at his friends, smiled, and felt his eyes starting to tear up. “He’s going to be so lucky growing up with uncles like you two.”

“As long as he doesn’t come out speaking with a Russian accent, I’ll love him as my own,” Hayden joked, which earned him an eye-roll from Shane.

“Oh, before I forget.” Hayden pulled out the stuffed lion and handed it to Shane. “It’s from Arthur, for the baby. I was told to tell you that it has been trained to protect its owner.”

Shane smiled as he took the lion. He leaned back a bit and placed it on his stomach. “Of course it has.”

Both Hayden and J.J. stared at Shane as he leaned back, revealing the true size of his stomach beneath the loose shirt.

“Wow, it must feel so weird,” J.J. said bluntly.

“Yeah.” Shane ran a hand across his stomach before placing both hands on top of it, holding onto the lion. “It starts to get in the way now and then, and carrying all this weight out front is something I’ve never tried before. I can’t imagine what it’ll be like two months from now. But I’ve almost gotten used to all the movement.”

“He’s moving now?” J.J. asked curiously.

“A bit, yes. Why? Do you want to feel?” Shane asked hesitantly. He knew J.J. was not one to make a big deal out of things, but he didn’t want to make things awkward.

“Sure.” J.J. confidently reached out toward Shane’s stomach, stopping right before he touched it.

Shane took J.J.’s hand and guided it to the area of his stomach where he had last felt movement.

Meanwhile Hayden was keeping watch for the waiter or anyone else coming toward the door. *Someone had to* - he thought to himself.

Meanwhile, Ilya was at practice. He was sitting on the bench with a water bottle in his hand, observing the other players, when Troy came and sat beside him.

“Hey Roz, like what you see? Are they any good?” Troy nudged Ilya.

“We’re getting there. We still have two weeks.” Ilya was sulking. The team looked good. He had no doubt this season had the potential to be the best one in years. But in two weeks, he would have to leave Shane for several days. He would have no one on the team to talk to about, why it was so much harder this time.

“Shame about Hollander. We would have been in a much stronger position with him on the team.” He looked at Ilya, who didn’t respond.

“On another note, I want to invite you and Shane over on Saturday for a barbecue. A bit short notice, I know, but I thought it would be nice to spend time with the team outside the arena before the season starts. A lot of the others are coming too,” Troy said with excitement in his voice.

“Will Wiebe be there? You know him and Shane...” Ilya hoped Wiebe was going to be there, so he had an excuse for Shane.

“No. One of his kids has a dance performance or something, so I was hoping to see both of you.” Troy paused for a moment. “Actually, me and the other guys just really want to meet Shane properly,” he said more quietly.

“I’ll ask him,” Ilya sighed as he rose from the bench to join his teammates on the ice. He already knew the answer.

Back home, Shane placed the stuffed lion on a shelf in the room they were getting ready to use as a nursery. It was still almost empty except for a couple of shelves and a comfy chair in the corner.

The front door opened and closed. “Shane?” Ilya called out.

“In here,” Shane responded.

Ilya placed himself behind Shane and wrapped his arms around him. “How did it go?”

Shane grinned. “Good. But it could have gone a lot smoother if Hayden hadn’t nearly told J.J. before I arrived.”

“Sometimes he really is as dumb as he looks,” Ilya sighed.

He then saw the lion on the otherwise empty shelf. “Is that Arthur’s?”

“Yeah. Hayden said Arthur wanted the baby to have it, and that it has been trained to protect its owner.”

He moved Ilya’s hands to his belly, rested his own on top, and turned his head towards Ilya.

“That’s probably the cutest thing I’ve ever heard,” Ilya said softly. He gave Shane a gentle kiss and rested his head on his shoulder.

An hour later, they were lying in bed. Ilya had pulled Shane’s shirt halfway up his chest, exposing his belly, while his head rested on a pillow beside it. He was gently moving his hand in circular motions across the belly while softly speaking Russian, smiling whenever he got a response back.

Shane understood some of the words, but he wasn’t paying much attention. Instead, he let himself drift into the feeling of Ilya’s soothing touch, finding it deeply relaxing.

Ilya paused his hand on the side of Shane’s stomach and switched to English. “I have something to ask you.”

Shane put his hand in Ilya’s hair and ran his fingers through it. “Mmm... what?” His breathing was deep and slow.

“Troy asked if we wanted to come over to his house on Saturday. A lot of the other guys are coming as well, and they want to meet you properly.” Shane sat up, and Ilya followed shortly after.

“Ilya, I’m not ready for them to know yet,” Shane said firmly.

“What do you want me to tell them? I lie to them every fucking day,” Ilya snapped. He really needed the team to know, why didn’t Shane get that?

“Tell them Coach Wiebe is the one keeping me away. That he’s forbidden me from showing my face at the arena. He said it was okay to use him as a scapegoat,” Shane suggested.

“I already have, but more questions keep coming. I’m constantly having to come up with new excuses for why you won’t even come watch us practice, join us for a beer, or attend team events. Half the time Wiebe isn’t even there for those,” Ilya’s voice went up in a higher pitch, as he was starting to get really frustrated.

“What do you want?” Shane looked confused as to why Ilya sounded like that. He had just told J.J. earlier today. Would Ilya want a whole team to be next, already?

“Isn’t it obvious? I want us to tell fucking them?!” Ilya wanted to scream, but he kept it inside.

What he said instead was something he would come to regret just as much.

“I want you to pull yourself together and meet your team, our team,” Ilya said forcefully, sounding like a captain giving orders to one of his players on the ice.

Shane stared at him in silence, clearly enraged after Ilya’s outburst towards him.

He got out of bed, put on a jacket, and stormed out, slamming the front door behind him.

Ilya collapsed onto the bed, grabbed a pillow, pressed it over his face, and let out a scream.

As his anger faded, his frustration turned into sadness. Shane had left.

He realized they had been in a similar situation right before the plane incident. He felt stupid for not realizing sooner, for not stopping himself before Shane left. How had he allowed this to happen again?

This time, it was obviously Shane who was sacrificing the most. He was carrying their baby, for fuck’s sake. Ilya knew he had no right to put that kind of pressure on him. A whole team was a lot of people to trust with such a big secret.

A few hours went by, and Shane had not returned.

Ilya decided to call Yuna. If he had gone home to his parents, he would at least be somewhere safe.

“Hi Ilya, nice to hear from you,” Yuna said as she answered. Her cheerful tone made Ilya doubt that Shane was there.

“Hi. I just want to know... is Shane with you?” He really hoped so.

“No, he’s not. Is everything okay?” Her tone immediately shifted.

“God, I hope so. I mean... I don’t know,” Ilya broke. He cried softly as he continued. “We had a fight. I yelled at him, and he left.”

“Oh honey, I’m sure he’s fine. How long has it been?” She sat down on a chair in the kitchen.

“A little over two hours,” Ilya said, while wiping tears away.

“When he was younger, he would disappear for hours when he needed to clear his head. Have you tried calling him?” she asked.

“No... I don’t think he wants to talk to me,” Ilya sat down on the sofa. One of his legs was twitching as he crossed his arm over his chest.

“You don’t know that unless you try. Maybe he needs you just as much as you need him right now,” Yuna said calmly.

Ilya took a deep breath. “Okay, I’ll try.”

“Good. Please call me when you hear from him.” She tried to keep her voice from sounding as worried as she actually was.

Ilya hung up and sat with the phone in his hand for a moment. He had no idea what he was going to say. Should he apologize? Would Shane even accept an apology right now?

He loved him. Maybe that would be enough for today, just reminding him of that.

He dialed Shane’s number.

Only a few seconds passed before he heard the ringing of Shane’s phone coming from inside the house. Ilya got up and followed the sound.

The phone was lying on the kitchen table. He stared at it. Then he rushed to the front door and tore it open.

No cars were missing out front, which meant Shane had left on foot.

It was starting to get dark outside.

Ilya stood frozen in the doorway, his phone still in his hand as the faint sound of Shane’s voicemail began to play.

Chapter 17: The way back home

Ilya slowly closed the door, turned around, and took a few steps back inside the house before hanging up the phone.

Without his own, Shane would have to borrow someone else's phone to reach out. But since he hadn't come home or called either Ilya or his parents, Ilya couldn't shake the fear that something had happened to him, and that he was out there all alone, unable to call for help.

He struggled to keep his head clear. He could not bear the thought, that something had happened to Shane or their baby.

Should he call the police? No, that would be too soon and far too drastic. Shane had only been gone for two hours, and the last thing he would want was for an entire police department to know about his condition.

Maybe he could call Harris? Chiron, or one of the other family dogs, might be able to search for Shane. But as far as he knew, none of them had been trained for anything like that. They probably wouldn't understand what he wanted them to do.

There was no point in going out to search for Shane blindly. Reluctantly, he decided to wait and see for the time being.

He lay down on the couch, clutching a pillow to his chest, trying desperately to calm himself, but it was impossible. He needed to see Shane, needed to know he was all right. Until then, his mind would not rest.

After little more than an hour of agony on the sofa, the sound of the front door opening made Ilya jump to his feet.

Shane had started walking at a high pace the moment he closed the front door behind him. He wasn't headed anywhere in particular. He just needed to put some distance between himself and Ilya.

He made it all the way to a small wooded area on the edge of the city after a twenty-minute walk from the house. There, his angry haze was broken when he felt something sharp brush against his leg.

He looked down and saw that he had walked too close to a blackberry bush, and his leg was now bleeding slightly from a long, superficial cut.

He found a rock that didn't look too uncomfortable and sat down. Only then did he realize how exhausted and out of breath he was. He took a few deep breaths, trying to calm himself, and rested a hand beneath his stomach. The baby was moving more than usual, as though it could sense how stressed Shane was.

He looked down. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to get so worked up."

Then he started to feel pain in his side. He closed his eyes, took a sharp breath in, and exhaled slowly.

Fuck... He had definitely overexerted himself. He took a few more deep breaths.

He wanted to call his dad to come and get him, but then discovered that he didn't have his phone.

He realized he had put himself in a difficult situation.

After some time, the pain in his side started to fade, only to be replaced by a cramp in the back of his thigh.

Then he heard someone call his name.

"Hey, Shane, what are you doing out here?"

Shane looked up and saw his neighbor Kate approaching him in her running gear.

She stopped in front of him. She could see, that he was not looking too good. "Is everything alright? It looks like you're in pain."

Shane sat bent forward slightly to hide his stomach, one hand grabbing his thigh. "It's a pretty bad cramp. I think I pushed myself too hard."

"May I help you? Most of the time you can walk it off." She placed a hand on his upper arm.

He felt he had no choice but to let Kate help him, though it would be impossible to conceal his stomach from her.

"I'd appreciate it," Shane said. "But I'm a bit heavy these days." He extended a hand toward Kate while supporting his belly with the other as she slowly pulled him up.

Kate placed Shane's arm around her shoulders as she helped him into an upright position. His enlarged midsection was hard to miss in the process, but she strangely seemed to ignore it.

"You good? Should we try walking?"

Shane took a few painful steps, heavily supported by Kate, and then gradually began to feel better.

Once he felt steady on his own, he let go of Kate. "Thank you for that."

Shane smiled and walked at a slow pace beside her.

"Why don't we take it slow and walk home together? Then I'll be here if you need help again," Kate suggested.

Shane nodded. He was still confused as to why Kate hadn't reacted to the size of his stomach.

After walking for ten minutes and talking about everyday things, Kate became too curious. “So... how did you end up out here?”

Shane sighed. “Ilya and I had a fight, and I needed to get away. I didn’t realize how far I’d walked or how much I’d pushed myself.”

“I suppose the fight might have had something to do with that?” Kate nodded toward Shane’s stomach.

Shane blushed slightly. “It’s not because I’ve gotten out of shape. It’s...”

“Oh, sorry,” Kate interrupted. “I just assumed that you were pregnant.”

Shane stopped and stared at Kate. She was the first person he’d met who knew that some men could become pregnant.

“Why would you think that?”

“My little brother is gay, and it happened to him. He decided not to keep it, but I supported him at the time,” she said calmly.

Kate, still certain she was right in her assumption, smiled at Shane. “You’ve been slowly putting on weight in a way that’s consistent with pregnancy, and I know you and Ilya care deeply for each other. So, if one of you got pregnant, I believe you would keep it.”

She let out a small laugh. “Also, the timing of your suspension felt a bit too coincidental.”

Shane could see how Kate had put all the pieces together. But she was also their neighbor, and they saw each other almost every day.

Shane wasn’t worried that other people would come to the same conclusion.

“Ilya wants us to tell the team,” Shane said uneasily.

“And you’re not ready,” Kate stated as she and Shane resumed their walk.

“How about a compromise? You tell one or two people on the team. That way Ilya would have someone to talk to when the season starts.”

Why had he not realized earlier, that this was what Ilya had been upset about?

Ilya wanted the team to know because he would be left alone with the truth, with no one to confide in when the season started. It would probably eat him up. Ilya loved that team, and those guys were his closest friends, yet Shane had declined every chance he’d had to meet them and had kept Ilya from telling any of them about the baby.

After about thirty minutes, they stood outside Kate’s house. Shane hesitated to go home. He wanted to discuss the compromise with Ilya, but maybe it was too early to return. Ilya might still be pretty upset. It had only been an hour since he’d left.

Kate could tell Shane was tense. “Would you like to come inside? Willa and I made apple pie.”

Shane exhaled. "I would love that."

As they entered, Willa ran up to Shane and looked at him. "What's happened to your leg?"

Shane had forgotten all about the cut. "Oh, I walked into a blackberry bush."

"I'll get some band-aids!" She quickly ran toward the bathroom.

Even though the bleeding had stopped, Shane didn't stop her. He found it really sweet that she wanted to take care of him.

A short time later, Shane sat on the sofa with five Barbie band-aids on his shin. He was drained both physically and mentally and decided to lie down to rest. He ended up dozing off before Willa could return with a piece of pie.

Kate noticed Shane had fallen asleep and covered him with a soft blanket.

When Shane woke up, it was dark outside. He looked confused at Kate, who was sitting beside him. "How long was I out?"

"It's been nearly two hours. I was going to wake you soon," she said quietly.

Shane was a bit groggy from just waking up. "Oh, I need to go home."

Willa sat on the opposite side of the sofa. "But you haven't eaten your pie yet."

A piece of pie didn't sound too bad. Shane was pretty hungry and needed some energy to properly wake up.

Afterwards, he felt ready to go home and face Ilya.

He was afraid Ilya would still be angry with him, but he knew they needed to talk things through.

Standing outside the front door, he could see the lights were still on in the living room. Ilya was most likely still awake.

He opened the door and quietly stepped inside.

Within seconds, he saw Ilya, who nearly ran toward him. They both teared up as they tightly embraced.

"I was so worried. I didn't mean to put so much pressure on you," Ilya sobbed into Shane's shoulder.

"Fuck. You're really back." Ilya placed a couple of kisses across Shane's forehead and finally one on his lips.

"No, I understand. You need someone to talk to on the team, and I have kept you from telling them," Shane apologized.

Ilya looked down and gently placed a hand on the side of Shane's stomach. "And...?"

“I got a little worked up, which he clearly felt too, but we’re fine now,” Shane reassured him. “Can we sit down?”

Ilya held on to Shane’s hand as they walked toward the sofa, never wanting to let go of him again.

As they sat down, he noticed the band-aids. “Shane, your leg?”

Shane grinned. “Oh yeah, Willa patched me up. I walked into a bush.”

Ilya looked confused. “Willa? Have you been next door all this time?”

Shane then told Ilya about the cramps, how Kate had helped him home, and how she had figured out he was pregnant from the signs she had picked up on, since her brother had been in the same situation.

“You’re comfortable with her knowing?” Ilya asked, given that it was more people knowing that had started this whole fight.

“Yes. And I’ll be okay with you telling one or two of the guys from the team too before the season starts,” Shane said calmly. “I realized you will need someone to talk to when you leave.” Shane rested his head on Ilya’s shoulder.

“I love you so much.” Ilya felt so relieved. Being able to tell someone on the team about the baby was all he wanted. He kissed Shane’s forehead. “I think I’ll tell Troy.”

“If you’re still planning to go to Troy’s party on Saturday, you could do it there?” Shane took a deep breath. “And since most of the team will be there, you should invite them all over for Halloween again this year. By then, I think I’ll be ready to tell them.”

Ilya guided Shane to sit astride him, wanting to look him in the eyes. “I’ll do that.” He leaned towards Shane and initiated a deep kiss, as his hands slowly slid down Shane’s back and ended up tightly grabbing his ass through his pants.

Shane deepened the kiss further from his higher position, and stuck his hands under Ilya’s shirt, grabbing his chest.

Ilya pulled back, as he felt Shane's breathing getting heavier. “You okay? You already got worked up once today.”

Ilya was concerned Shane’s body had been through enough for one day.

“Shut up. I want this so bad,” Shane sighed. He wanted to forget all about the fight and just enjoy the feeling of Ilya all over him.

Shane didn't get his way, as Ilya gently moved Shane off of him and walked to the kitchen counter.

“I forgot to call Yuna. I promised I would let her know when you got home safely.”

“Now? Really?” Shane was far too turned on right now to have Ilya bring up his mother.

“Just stay there, I’ll be back.” He dialed Yuna’s number.

Instead of staying put Shane placed himself with his back to Ilya, and slowly began to remove his clothes.

Ilya only just realized what Shane was up to, when he heard Yuna’s voice on the phone. “Ilya, hi. Have you heard from Shane?”

Yes... The sight of Shane made Ilya bite his lip.

Ilya then realized he needed to answer Yuna. “Oh, I mean yes. Yes, I have. He’s back home. He’s good.”

“That’s so great to hear. Can I talk to him?” she asked.

Shane turned around, and now stood completely naked in front of Ilya. Shane’s abs, though smoothed out, were still slightly visible across his beautiful round belly. He started to stroke himself on his neck before sliding his hand across his chest, and clearly intended to go lower.

“No... no, he’s just taking a shower. I’ll ask him to call you back.” Ilya hung up before Yuna could say another word.

“So now you’re lying to my mother?” Shane asked, flirtatiously raising an eyebrow.

“I didn’t lie. I was just a little ahead of time.” Ilya quickly removed his own clothes and pulled Shane towards him. “What was that about?”

“Just some mild payback.” Shane gently placed his hand on Ilya’s cheek before resting it on his chest.

Ilya then dragged Shane towards the bathroom as he passionately started kissing him.

In the shower Ilya turned on the water, and gently pressed Shane into the corner, waiting for the water to get a good temperature. He was tightly gripping Shane’s thigh with one hand, while the other was placed at his shoulder, holding him in place as he kissed him tenderly over his chest, neck and lips.

Ilya made sure Shane knew his desire for him, even in his current state, never wavered. If anything, it had only gotten stronger.

Not trying nor wanting to escape, Shane’s had his hands solidly planted on Ilya’s back, his fingers slightly digging into his skin, as he felt Ilya pulling him under the running water.

All wet, it didn’t take long for Ilya to take advantage of the slickness of Shane’s skin and drop to his knees.

Chapter 18: Late Bachelor party

Chapter Summary

Ilya is surprised by his team, who wanted to throw both him and Shane a late bachelor party.

Unaware of this, Shane drops Ilya off and drives to his parents' house, only to find a surprise waiting for him as well.

Chapter Notes

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

For a late September day in Ottawa, the weather was unusually good, with temperatures still in the twenties even though it was late afternoon.

Shane was driving Ilya to Troy and Harris's new house, which was located farther out in the countryside than their own.

A text from Troy popped up on Ilya's phone: *Are you on your way?*

Five minutes out, Ilya replied.

Shane drove in and parked the car in the large courtyard.

Troy and Harris had bought a charming country house surrounded by a big yard, which included a private lake with a small island at its center.

In the middle of the courtyard stood an old apple tree, its branches heavy with fruit that would soon be ripe and ready for picking.

Chiron came running and barked at the car.

Shane leaned in and kissed Ilya before he stepped out of the car. "Hope you have a great evening. Enjoy yourself. Just text me when you're ready to be picked up."

As Ilya stepped out, he excitedly greeted Chiron, giving him plenty of scratches and pats before closing the car door.

"Oh, I missed you so much! Did you have a good summer?"

Shane smiled at the sight of Ilya and Chiron. He could already picture them spending a lot of time here together once Shane got to know the team properly.

With Chiron occupied, Shane drove away. His parents had invited him over, and they lived closer to Troy and Harris, which would make it easier for him to pick Ilya up later that night.

Troy ran out into the courtyard just in time to see Shane drive away. “Was that Shane?”

Ilya straightened up. “Yeah?”

“Is he coming back to join us?” Troy asked, slightly out of breath.

Ilya looked in the direction the car had disappeared and scratched his neck. “No. He had plans with his parents tonight.”

“You can’t be serious. Why didn’t you say anything?” Troy looked very disappointed.

Ilya then realized he hadn’t actually told Troy it would only be him joining them tonight, even though he had invited both of them.

Still, he couldn’t understand why Troy was so upset that Shane wasn’t going to be there.

“Sorry, I should have let you know it was only me coming tonight,” Ilya apologized.

Troy reached out a hand, which Ilya took before being pulled into a light hug. “I guess we’ll just have to manage.”

Troy walked toward the house. Ilya and Chiron followed him.

As they entered the backyard, Ilya suddenly understood. Troy had been sent out to greet both him AND Shane and bring them back here.

Nearly the whole team was standing around a large table with drinks in their hands. When they saw Ilya, they all shouted, “Surprise!”

Ilya certainly was surprised. “What is this?”

“It was supposed to be a late bachelor party for both of you. Now it’s just for you,” Troy said, putting a firm hand on Ilya’s shoulder.

“With everything that happened around the time of your wedding, a bachelor party didn’t seem to fit at the time.”

“I’m sure Shane would have appreciated this. But he’s on his way to his own surprise party,” Ilya blurted out.

“Oh nice, what are they celebrating?” Troy asked.

Ilya froze. Shane’s parents had wanted to throw Shane a baby shower, and Ilya had suggested today so Shane could enjoy it with his parents and friends. Hayden was going to be there, and Ilya knew neither he nor Hayden would be able to resist offending each other somehow, ruining the mood and drawing attention away from Shane. But he couldn’t tell Troy that.

Ilya was saved by Wyatt, who ran over and gave him a massive bear hug. “Hey, Rozy! You won’t believe what we have in store for you,” he said, handing Ilya a beer.

Besides a parked truck loaded with ice and a shit ton of various beers, Ilya noticed two piles of random items farther down toward the lake. It looked as though two lanes had been

marked out.

Troy let out a sharp whistle to cut through all the chatter that had begun when they arrived.

Troy cut right to the chase. “Okay, guys, we are going to compete in four separate games. Each game represents an essential skill you must possess when entering married life. Follow me.”

They all headed toward the lanes. Troy, Harris, and Wyatt had been the ones organizing the whole evening.

Harris cleared his throat. “There will be two teams: the married and the unmarried.”

Loud talking and laughter broke out as the players started sorting themselves into the two groups, forcing Harris to stop explaining the rules.

The teams were fairly evenly distributed, with ten married and nine unmarried players.

Troy whistled again, and everyone went quiet.

“Thank you,” Harris said, looking at Troy with a subtle, flirtatious gaze, liking the way Troy took control of the situation.

“For each game, both teams will have five players. The teams are allowed to switch out as many players as they want between games. Except...”

Harris looked at Ilya with a wide smile on his face. Ilya could already imagine where this was going.

“...Ilya, who will have to participate in all four games. Two on the unmarried team and two on the married team.”

Ilya raised his hands in surrender, grinned, and shook his head as the guys around him playfully slapped his back and threw light punches.

Meanwhile, Shane arrived at his parents’ house. From the outside, everything appeared normal.

Shane let himself into the house. “Hey, it’s me.” He quickly adjusted his shirt, which fit awkwardly over his belly after sitting in the car.

Just as he walked into the living room, his parents, Hayden, J.J., and Rose was all gathered to surprise him.

The room was filled with light blue balloons, and the dining table was decorated to match, mostly in shades of light blue and white.

Shane greeted them all, and Rose was the last to approach him. She placed her hands on Shane’s belly. “How are you doing? You’ve grown so much since the wedding.”

Shane rested one hand on top of his belly and smiled. “Yeah, it’s so crazy. I’m good, but sometimes it feels like I can’t keep up.”

“I can only imagine, but you look so good.” Rose gave Shane a quick kiss on the cheek before joining Shane’s parents, who had gone into the kitchen to prepare the food, leaving Shane with Hayden and J.J. in the living room.

Shane turned to Hayden, hoping he knew what was coming. After all, he was the one with four kids.

“So, how does this work? Are we just going to eat and talk, or am I about to be ambushed with challenges and quizzes?” Shane asked in a low voice.

Neither Hayden nor J.J. had ever attended a baby shower before, and neither had Shane, so they had no idea what to expect.

“I don’t know,” Hayden admitted. “Jackie’s friends always made me leave the house when she had her showers. I just enjoyed the leftover cake when I got home.”

So “cake” was the only thing Shane could expect. He wasn’t thrilled about the lack of details, but it was a baby shower, how wild could it get?

Back in Troy and Harris’ backyard, Ilya was sitting in a wheelbarrow. Behind him stood Luca, who was going to steer through a maze of beer cans scattered across the entire lawn. At the end of the lane stood five bottles of beer. Each team had to navigate through the maze and grab a bottle for the person sitting in the wheelbarrow, who then had to finish the beer before they could cross the line and pass the wheelbarrow on to the next persons.

Ilya was sure that he and the others on the unmarried team had this in the bag, since they were younger than their married counterparts.

“First test: coordination!” Harris yelled out. “Important when two people begin to navigate life together.”

In the first lap, both teams got through the maze at the same time. Ilya was handed a beer, which he just managed to force down before Luca got them back over the finish line.

Ilya then switched to being the one steering as Troy placed himself in the wheelbarrow.

Ilya returned to the finish line a good ten seconds before the other team. All he could do now was watch and hope his team could finish the job. He let out a small burp and sat down on the grass to catch his breath.

During the final lap, Ilya’s assumption proved correct, as the last two members of his team finished first, thirty seconds ahead of the other team.

The team embraced and started chanting, “Un-married! Un-married!”

Ilya was happy for the win but didn't join the chant. Surrounded by his loud teammates, his mind drifted. He thought of Shane. He couldn't help but smile at the fact that he was not unmarried, he was married to Shane, who was carrying their baby.

But then a wave of guilt washed over Ilya. Shane was missing out on moments like this. Meanwhile, he was there, able to enjoy it carefree, because he was not the one carrying the baby.

Ilya snapped out of it as Troy almost knocked him over, still overexcited from the victory.

Shane sat at the head of the table, which was set with freshly baked buns, various vegetable sticks, hummus, an assortment of salty and sweet snacks, and blueberry muffins.

Shane hadn't heard from Ilya and wasn't expecting to. He knew just how immersed Ilya could become when he was with the team.

Shane would have liked Ilya to be there, even though it wasn't the usual practice. Then again, nothing about this situation was usual. HE was pregnant, which the baby hadn't failed to remind him of.

"Ow!" Shane exclaimed and pressed a hand to his stomach, drawing everyone's attention.

"Shane, are you okay?" Yuna asked, concerned.

"Yeah, he's just been giving me these hard jabs in the same place for the last hour." He thought maybe it was because Ilya wasn't around, the sound of his voice usually calmed him. Shane sincerely hoped he could find another way to do that, when Ilya had to leave for longer than a few hours. Otherwise, he was in for a rough time.

"How about opening some presents? Standing up for a bit might be helpful," David suggested.

A large present stood in the corner, surrounded by smaller ones. Shane was very curious and wanted to open the big one first.

"That's the one from us," Yuna said.

Shane neatly loosened each piece of tape before removing the paper, revealing a box with an elegant wooden crib inside. It was perfect.

Shane immediately went to hug his parents. He and Ilya had looked at cribs, but they hadn't seen one like this.

"And when you have time, just let me know, and I'll come over and put it together for you. It's part of the gift," David said.

There were three gifts from Rose, all soft and wrapped in fancy paper.

The first two contained new clothing items for Shane. Coming from Rose, the items were stylish but bought in a large enough size for him to wear during the final months of his pregnancy. Shane really needed that.

The last gift also contained clothing, but for the baby instead. One of the little shirts was even made from the same fabric as one of the shirts Shane had received.

“I know you’ve had trouble finding something nice to wear that wasn’t just from the oversized section, so I had these made for you,” Rose said, giving him one of her warm smiles.

Shane had thought about going to a tailor himself, but he couldn’t risk being recognized, so this was exactly what he needed.

Hayden and J.J. had teamed up for the last two gifts.

The first was a mini outdoor hockey set, complete with a net, sticks, and balls. It would be some time before the baby could use it, but it was still a nice gift.

The second gift was also the smallest. Hayden had bought the tiniest hockey jersey available on the Ottawa Centaurs website. He had been careful enough not to have “Rozanov-Hollander” printed on it, but the number “84” was on there, a hidden message in plain sight.

Tears started to form in Shane’s eyes as he looked at the little jersey before going to hug Hayden, J.J., and Rose.

“The second game tests physical strength,” Troy said, a playful grin spreading across his face. “Necessary when you need to pick up and move your partner around.”

Troy looked at Harris. He knew Harris loved to hate it when Troy randomly lifted him off the floor and ended up tossing him onto their bed or the sofa.

They had to carry a heavy sandbag to the end of the lane, take two shots of Baileys, then place the bottle on the ground and keep one hand on it while spinning around it ten times before passing the sandbag to the next person at the start line.

Everyone got extremely dizzy from the bottle spinning. Many tumbled, dropped the sandbag several times, and nearly threw up on their way back.

After his run, Ilya rolled onto his back in the grass, his head still spinning.

His team was still on their second-to-last run, when he looked at the other team.

Wyatt was the last player on the married team and had just received the bag. They were nearly a full lap ahead, and Ilya knew there was no way Wyatt was going to throw their victory away.

Ilya’s teammate ended up falling three times on his way back before he handed the bag to the last player on the unmarried team.

Only a moment later, Wyatt, on the other hand, ran straight and determined over the finish line like nothing bothered him.

Now Ilya was actually glad Shane wasn't there. Shane never really got drunk, even before he got pregnant. The underlying purpose of these games was obvious: to get everyone drunk, with Ilya being a particular target. Shane would have hated being put in that position. Then again, none of the people who had organized the evening knew him well enough to know that.

At the Hollander home, the guests were also drinking and competing, just under very different circumstances.

Yuna had organized a game for their younger guests: they were blindfolded and given baby bottles filled with different liquids. The first one to identify the liquid correctly scored a point.

Hayden and Shane were tied going into the final liquid. As they tasted it, they both started naming various fruits.

Finally, when Shane shouted "kiwi," he was announced the winner.

Competing against Hayden and J.J. was something Shane had to get used to. Next season, he would have to play against them when he was back on the ice, something he had never done before.

After what had happened to Shane in Montreal, both Hayden and J.J. had started looking for other teams, but they wouldn't be free agents for another year.

The third game was about sacrifice. Each player had to cross the lake to the island in the middle, drink three shots of some concoction Troy had mixed the day before, and then make their way back.

The water wasn't that deep, only knee-high, but with the speed they were moving, everyone ended up pretty wet by the end of the game.

Ilya had switched to the married team for this game, and they ended up beating the unmarried team once again.

Ilya could now clearly feel the effect of the alcohol, and it didn't make him think less of Shane. Quite the opposite.

Getting a little wet was not a sacrifice. Shane giving up his freedom, his body, and potentially his career to have their baby, that was a sacrifice.

They hadn't talked about it much, but they both knew the risk. Having the baby, and undergoing the operation it required, might mean Shane would never return to hockey.

After a few more baby games and an embarrassing quiz that Hayden and J.J. had made from all the stupid things Shane had said and done over the years on the ice together, Hayden and J.J. had now left, while Shane and Rose had moved to the sofa in the living room.

Rose was going to stay the night and head to the airport in the morning.

Shane was lying on his side on the sofa, one hand resting on his belly. Rose sat further down, both of them watching TV as one of the many medical dramas played.

One of the cases in the show involved a pregnant woman needing an emergency C-section. During the scene, Rose glanced at Shane and saw tears running down his face.

Rose placed a hand on Shane's lower leg. "Shane?" she asked calmly.

Shane sat up, stared at the floor for a moment, then reached out to Rose for comfort, wrapping his arms around her.

"I'm just so fucking scared. What if anything goes wrong?"

Rose tightened the hug. "Oh, Shane, don't think about that. Everything is going to be fine."

"So many things can happen to both the baby and me. What if I'm never able to play again afterwards?" Shane sobbed into Rose's shoulder.

"Shane, shows like that often exaggerate things for drama, but I understand why it scares you." She broke the hug, making Shane meet her eyes.

"But you go for regular check-ups, they would notice if anything was wrong, okay?"

Rose was right. Compared to a normal pregnancy, Shane was more carefully monitored, and he even had Lisa's number if anything made him unsure. He took a few deep breaths to calm himself before resting his head in Rose's lap.

Troy had set aside a dry change of clothes for Ilya, which he changed into before the last game.

The last game was about precision. For this, they didn't need to use the lanes.

The empty bottles from the first game were placed in two rows, and the participants got a string, with a pen on the end, tied around their waists.

The game was simple. First you had to down four shots of vodka, and then fit the pen inside the bottle. First team to fit all five pens in their bottles won.

The game started, and Ilya took the first shot. Though quite drunk, he could tell right away that this was some terrible, cheap vodka.

"How can you fucking do this to me?!" he swore in Russian before forcing down the remaining three shots.

All the spectators burst out laughing, not understanding the words, but they got the message anyway.

All ten players were lined up, and one by one, with great effort and concentration, they got their pens into the bottles.

Ilya had had the most to drink, so naturally he was the last on the married team to successfully place the pen. Still, he managed to beat two players from the unmarried team, securing the overall victory for the married team.

Shane looked out the window as he heard the rain start to pour down. Maybe it wouldn't be long before Ilya wanted to be picked up.

As Rose had gone to bed, his parents had now joined Shane on the sofa.

Shane let out a big yawn, which Yuna noticed. "It's getting late. Has Ilya not texted yet?"

"Nope," Shane sighed. Having an entire afternoon and evening with his friends and parents had been nice, but now all he wanted was Ilya.

Just then, a text from Ilya lit up Shane's phone.

Due to the sudden weather change, Ilya and the rest of the team had moved inside the house.

Ilya now found himself on a sofa in a small room, only accompanied by Troy and Wyatt.

They were all drunk, and also a little high, having shared a joint just before moving inside.

"You know, I actually thought about getting you a stripper," Wyatt said, his words slightly slurred.

"But considering you and Hollander's physics, I couldn't find anyone better-looking. So, what would've been the point?"

"Well, when it comes to me, sure. But Hollander... I think you would be..." Ilya searched his brain for the right word.

"...mesmerized, if he stripped down in front of you at the moment."

The word captured how Ilya felt when he looked at Shane these days. But it made Troy and Wyatt exchange a confused look.

"Mesmerized, even? You've been with the guy for over ten years. Has anything changed recently?" Wyatt asked.

Ilya saw his opportunity, since it was only the three of them in the room. He tried, but at this level of intoxication, he couldn't keep a straight face.

"Yeah. Mesmerized. Because he's carrying my baby." Ilya immediately covered his face and sank further into the sofa, as if that might somehow hide the fact that he was absolutely

glowing with drunken pride.

Troy and Wyatt both burst into laughter. “Oh, Roz, I know English can be hard sometimes, but do you know what you just said?” Troy asked, clearly convinced that wasn’t what Ilya had meant.

“I’m serious. I know what I said,” Ilya insisted, but he couldn’t stop laughing either. “Wiebe hasn’t suspended him. He’s granted him leave because of the baby.”

Wyatt finally realized Ilya was actually serious. “Fuck, Rozy. That’s big. But is that even possible?”

Ilya rolled toward Wyatt, still trying to breathe through his laughter. “You didn’t know some men can get pregnant? Lisa is our doctor. I thought she would’ve told you, that’s something that can happen?”

Wyatt was completely clueless, and so was Troy, who got up. “It’s amazing, we have to tell the others,” Troy said excitedly.

Ilya grabbed Troy’s arm and managed a serious expression. “No. Shane isn’t ready for the whole team to know. For now, we have to keep it between us.”

Ilya got acknowledging nods from them both. Then he rose from the sofa. “But I have something else I need to share with everyone.”

Ilya gathered everyone in the living room. “Listen, I know I said there wouldn’t be any more parties at my house. But Shane wants to invite you all over to get a chance to know you, even though he’s suspended this season. So, you’re all invited again for Halloween this year.”

All the teammates reacted to the invitation with great enthusiasm.

Having said all he needed to say, Ilya texted Shane to come and pick him up. He hadn’t been this drunk or high in months, and all he wanted now was Shane.

Twenty minutes later Ilya saw Shane’s car pull up to the house. He got himself in the car and released a big sigh.

“You changed your clothes,” Shane noted.

Ilya looked down. “Oh, yeah. I was in the lake”. Ilya was drowsy and had a clearly slurred voice.

Shane grinned. “Sounds like you had a good evening.”

He didn’t mind that Ilya was obviously drunk, or the strong smell of weed coming off him. He sometimes worried that he was keeping Ilya from nights like this, and that one day he would resent him for it.

Ilya looked at Shane. “It turned out to be a bachelor party. And it was actually supposed to be for both of us.”

“Shit, really? Were the guys mad that I wasn’t there?”, Shane asked, worried. He hoped not, as he didn’t want to give them a bad impression of him, before they got to know him.

Ilya placed a hand on Shane’s thigh and gently stroked it. “Don’t worry. They know I’m the one who forgot to tell Troy you weren’t coming.”

He leaned in and slowly pressed his lips to Shane’s.

Suddenly, they saw Troy and Wyatt coming out of the house and toward the car.

Troy signaled for Shane to roll down the window. “Ilya, you forgot your clothes.”

Shane looked at Ilya, who nodded. “It’s okay, I told them. Only them,” Ilya specified.

Shane rolled down the window, exposing his full figure.

“Wow, that’s so sick. I mean...” Wyatt shook his head and corrected himself. “Fantastic! You guys are really having a baby!”

Feeling relieved that some of his friends now knew, and also extremely proud, Ilya caringly placed his hand on Shane’s stomach and kissed him on the cheek.

Chapter End Notes

If anyone is confused about the number 84, it’s meant to combine Ilya and Shane’s numbers (81 and 24).

I considered adding them together, but players don’t usually wear numbers over 100.

Chapter 19: First time away

Ilya sat in bed. He leaned his head against the headboard and closed his eyes. Eight fucking days.

Tomorrow morning, Ilya would leave for an eight-day road trip to start the season, playing games across the East Coast.

Ilya had known this was coming for weeks, yet he remained painfully ambivalent about leaving.

The team ended last season on a high, making the playoffs for the first time in many years. Ilya had a great feeling about this season and couldn't wait to get back on the ice with the guys and prove to the other teams, that they were no longer a team anyone should underestimate. - But it came at the cost of being away from Shane.

Ilya took some comfort in the fact that Shane's parents lived nearby and wouldn't be far away if Shane needed anything.

He also knew Shane would be well occupied, at least for the first few days, as they had spent the entire weekend buying things for the nursery, which had properly kick-started Shane's nesting period.

Ilya wished he had a normal job, where he would return to Shane every day. They had done this before, been apart for longer periods of time because of their work schedules, but something about Shane now carrying his baby, about having to leave them both, made eight days feel like an eternity.

Shane came out fresh from the shower, only wearing a pair of boxers and a wide smile.

His smile faded as Ilya gave him a look that nearly tore him apart. Shane could see how distraught he was.

Shane placed himself on the bed next to Ilya and rested his head on Ilya's chest, as they embraced each other.

"I don't want to leave you," Ilya said quietly.

And Shane didn't want him to. But he knew that if he let himself be consumed by the sadness of the situation too, they would end up feeling miserable up until Ilya had to leave, which would be a waste of their last evening together. Besides, during his time in the shower, he had only been thinking about one thing.

Shane loosened the hug and gently started kissing Ilya's bare chest, while sliding one hand down, firmly gripping Ilya's thigh.

"You're still here, with me," Shane murmured.

Ilya smiled and took a deep breath. The feeling of Shane's touch and kisses released some of the tension that had built up inside him.

Shane moved himself on top of Ilya and pressed Ilya's arms into the mattress before intertwining their fingers. He slowly moved up from Ilya's chest, along his neck, stopping close to his ear.

"I need you inside me, I want to feel you for days", Shane moaned.

Shane slid off his boxers before he rolled onto his side, turning his back to Ilya.

Ilya reached out, wanting to start opening Shane up, when he felt something.

"You planned ahead?", Ilya let out a small laugh.

Shane had put in a butt plug, while he was in the shower, wanting to save some time.

Ilya poked and the slowly turned the plug inside Shane, making it push against his prostate.

Shane gripped the sheets as a wave of pleasure rushed over him. It felt good, but it was not what he longed for.

"Please Ilya. I want YOU", Shane begged.

Ilya carefully removed the plug and positioned Shane on all four.

As Ilya slid inside, Shane lowered his head, put one arm on the mattress above his head, while placing his other hand under his belly.

Ilya had not seen Shane do this before. It didn't look like he was in pain, but Ilya still got worried.

"Shane? Are you okay?"

"Yes, I'm fine. The belly is just getting heavy I need to support it", Shane reassured Ilya.

Ilya made a long stroke across Shane's entire back before placing his hands on Shane's hips. "Promise to let me know, if I need to stop."

Ilya started out slowly, paying attention to how Shane responded as he gradually went deeper.

Shane could feel how Ilya was restraining himself. He needed more.

"Don't hold back. I want you closer", Shane muttered.

Ilya pulled out, and rolled Shane onto his side on the bed. Ilya placed himself behind him, and got as close as he could possibly get.

Ilya's chest was up against Shane's back and their legs were tangled together, as Ilya pushed in again, more forcefully this time.

Meanwhile, Ilya was also all over Shane's neck and shoulders, passionately kissing and lightly biting him. While his hand was firmly placed between Shane's hip and abdomen, unconsciously in a protective position.

"Like this?", Ilya softly groaned.

Shane was unable to speak at that moment, as he was so close to coming, even though Ilya had been nowhere near his dick yet.

Shane grabbed Ilya's arm hard, as he couldn't hold it any longer. Only a moment after Ilya finished himself. Leaving them both out of breath, panting heavily.

In the morning, Ilya stood facing Shane as he was about to leave for the airport. He brushed his hand over Shane's belly. "Be nice to your dad while I'm gone."

Shane smiled. "And tell your other dad to give them hell out there."

Ilya knew a long goodbye would only make it harder. Therefore, he leaned in and gave Shane two soft kisses and a brief, tender look before picking up his suitcase and heading out the door.

"Bye."

At the airport, Troy and Ilya sat together, staring at their phones a short distance from the rest of the team when Wyatt joined them.

"Hey, I asked Lisa about, you know, what, and she explained it to me," Wyatt said quietly. "It's mind-blowing. Potentially, we could all have the gene without even knowing. Could you imagine the entire team getting pregnant at once? We would have no one who could play for a whole season."

Ilya grinned. "So, in this hypothetical scenario, everyone on the team has this rare gene, everyone gets fucked by a random dude at the same time, and they all end up getting pregnant?"

"That's the thing. The doctors don't know if the gene is that rare at all. They estimate that as many as 25% of men could potentially carry the gene, but they'll never know because most of them are straight and therefore never find out."

Troy cut in. "I wish Harris had the gene. Our very own child. That would be amazing." On the other hand, Troy wasn't sure if Harris could make it through a whole pregnancy due to his heart condition.

"But it's not easy to get pregnant even if you have the gene," Ilya pointed out. "We unknowingly tried for some time before Shane got pregnant."

"Actually, how far along is Shane?" Wyatt asked curiously.

“Do you remember the last playoff game against Montreal, where I asked you not to tackle him?”

Ilya remembered how worried he had been during that game.

“You knew he was pregnant, and you let him play?” Troy asked. It really shocked him that Ilya would have allowed that.

“He got pregnant before the playoffs started, but it wasn’t until before the last game that we found out.” Ilya started to tear up a bit. “I tried to talk him out of it, but he was determined to play. I couldn’t just do nothing. That’s why I asked you to stay off him, and then... fuck, that fall he took.”

“Hey, Roz, it’s okay. Everything turned out well. I understand how frustrated and scared you must have felt.”

Troy wanted to give Ilya a hug, but it would have drawn too much attention from the rest of the team. Instead, he put a hand on Ilya’s shoulder, patted it a few times, and then gave it a comforting squeeze.

Already at noon the next day, Shane’s dad walked through the front door carrying a large toolbox.

“Wow. You’re just here to assemble a crib, not build a playhouse,” Shane grinned.

“That’s next on my list,” David joked. “No, maybe it’s a bit too much, but it’s better to be prepared.”

David put down his tools and gave Shane a tight hug, or as tight as the belly between them allowed.

“Can we sit for a moment before we start?” David asked.

“Sure. Do you want something to drink?” Shane walked toward the fridge.

“A Coke would be fine.” David sat down on the sofa. It didn’t take long before Shane joined him.

“Look at you. Sometimes I still can’t believe that you and Ilya are going to be parents. That I’m going to be a granddad.” David gave Shane a warm smile, raised his can, and clinked it against Shane’s ginger ale.

Shane ran his hand across his stomach. “About two months to go.”

David gently laid a hand on Shane’s forearm. “You know, your mom and I are always here to support you. Whatever the future brings. Whether you go back to hockey or end up doing something else with your life.”

Shane was determined to return to playing after the baby was born and his body had time to recover. But knowing his parents were there for him, whether he played or not, meant a lot to him.

David rose from the sofa. “Now, let’s go build a crib.”

He carried his can into the nursery and placed it on a changing table next to the window.

The room was nearly fully furnished and decorated, with various stuffed animals on the floor, books on the shelves, and a few frames on the walls.

“Wow. When did this room get so... finished?” David asked.

“This morning.” Shane blushed a little. He had only meant to start setting up the room, but it had gotten a little out of hand since he had ended up using it as a distraction from the fact that Ilya wouldn’t be coming home for several days.

Shane had even started washing and folding the tiny pieces of clothing he and Ilya had bought that weekend, and neatly putting them away in the drawers.

David opened the box containing the crib and laid all the pieces out on the floor. He then sat down and held out his hand toward Shane.

“Come down here and let’s figure this out together.”

Shane leaned on his dad as he awkwardly lowered himself onto the floor.

“Shoot, we forgot the toolbox. Can you go get it?” David asked, obviously teasing.

Shane crossed his arms and rested them on his belly while giving his dad an annoyed stare.

“I’ll go get it. You just stay there.” David let out a small laugh and patted Shane a couple of times on the back.

When he returned, Shane was already carefully studying the instructions.

The days away from home went by slowly but surely. The Centaurs had won three out of the four games they had played on the road-trip.

After their victory in the last game, Ilya was interviewed.

A young, dark-haired female reporter started out with the usual questions about how the game had unfolded, and singled out one of Ilya’s goals as an early contender for Goal of the Season. But then she got more personal.

“So, Ilya. We all now know that you and Shane went to Spain for your honeymoon. How was it?”

The question caught Ilya off guard, and he wasn’t quite sure what to say. He mostly felt like telling her it was none of her business, and that they were here to talk about the game, but that wouldn’t make him look good.

“Uh... it was hot,” he eventually said. He was afraid of where this conversation was going.

“In more than one way, I imagine.” The reporter winked at the camera.

“Why haven’t we seen Shane in the stands at any of your first games? His suspension shouldn’t keep him from supporting his husband.”

“Shane is busy with his own things back in Ottawa. He would be here if he had the time,” Ilya answered in a monotone voice, trying to end the conversation.

“You miss him?” she finally asked.

Fuck, he really did.

Even though they had been talking on the phone at least once a day, and Ilya had tried to distract himself with hockey and team outings, he couldn’t wait to fly back to Shane in the morning.

Ilya looked at the reporter and ended the interview with a flat, emotionless “Yes.”

He then quickly headed for the locker room, not wanting to answer any more questions about Shane.

When he reached his stall, he grabbed the top shelf and leaned against it. He took a few deep breaths, not wanting to get emotional at that moment, when he realized he wasn’t alone.

“It wasn’t fair with all those personal questions. If you want to, I can prepare you for the next time that happens.”

It was Harris, sitting at the other end of the room with his phone, as he often did, probably editing a video for Instagram or something, Ilya thought to himself.

The rest of the team had already left, including Troy, which Ilya found strange.

“That would be great. It felt like being trapped out there.” Ilya walked closer to Harris.
“Aren’t you coming out to celebrate the win?”

Normally, Harris was happy to join them.

“I have way too much material from these four games to edit. Judging by how things are going, I’m sure there will be plenty more chances to celebrate.”

Harris rose from Troy’s stall, where he had been sitting, picked up his shoulder bag, and smiled. “See you tomorrow at the airport.”

“How long is this going to last?”

Ilya sat bent over the toilet. Shane was by his side, comfortingly stroking his back.

“It sucks that you still feel sick so often, but you’re doing great,” Shane said encouragingly.
“When you feel better, I’ve made you some borsjtj.”

Ilya hadn't had borsjtj since he was last home in Russia. The thought of it made the nausea disappear completely.

Ilya struggled, but eventually got off the bathroom floor, supporting his massive belly with one hand.

Ilya opened the bathroom door, which normally led out to the bedroom, but now it led straight into the kitchen, where he saw Shane standing by the stove.

Ilya hadn't even seen Shane leave the bathroom.

"Come sit." Shane walked around the corner with a bowl in his hand. He was wearing only sweatpants, leaving his gorgeous torso for Ilya to admire, from his well-defined biceps and pecs all the way down to his flat, toned abdomen.

Ilya wanted to grab him and pin him against the wall. But at the same time, when he looked at him, something felt off, like something was missing.

Ilya sat down and rested his hand on his stomach as he felt a strange sensation. Did he just feel the baby kick?

"He's pretty active today." Shane set the bowl in front of Ilya before lightly stroking Ilya's stomach and giving him a soft kiss.

Ilya had been longing for Shane. Being kissed and touched by him made a warmth spread throughout his entire body.

He closed his eyes.

Without even taking a spoonful of borsjtj, the taste of it suddenly tickled every taste bud in his mouth. It tasted like the one his mother used to make for him.

Ilya could not remember when he had last felt this satisfied. The combination of taste and touch felt like small bolts of lightning shooting through his entire body.

All of a sudden, Ilya was no longer in the kitchen but lying in bed. Shane had his head resting near Ilya's stomach while stroking and talking to it.

The odd feeling returned.

Ilya could not make out what Shane was saying. He was confused. This was not right. Shane was the one carrying their baby, not him.

In the next moment, Ilya and Shane were standing facing each other. Ilya looked down, and now neither of them was pregnant.

"Where is he?" Ilya asked, starting to panic.

"Who?" Shane asked.

“Our baby. Where is he?” Ilya cradled his torso and looked at Shane, who seemed completely unaffected by his outburst.

As Ilya opened his eyes, he immediately threw back the covers and ran a hand over his flat stomach.

No baby.

He didn’t even look at the time before he grabbed his phone and FaceTimed Shane.

“Ilya?” Shane said, confused. It was two in the morning, and he had been woken by the call.

“Shane. Is the baby okay?” Ilya tried, but could not hide the panic in his voice.

“What? What do you mean?” Shane mumbled.

Shane’s vague answer wasn’t helping right now. Ilya was terrified that he had dreamed it all, that there was no baby and never had been.

“I need to know if he’s okay,” Ilya tried again.

Shane pushed back the covers and stretched out his arm, revealing his entire torso. He held a hand underneath the belly, which was still perfectly round.

“He’s just fine. Why are you calling this late?”

Ilya sighed in relief. “Sorry. I just had this weird dream where I was the one carrying the baby.”

Shane woke up a little more, curious to hear the rest. “Really? What happened?”

“First it was awful. I felt so sick. Then you made me borsjtj and touched me, which felt really fucking good. But then the baby disappeared. Neither of us had him. Then I woke up and completely freaked out.”

“Fuck, Ilya,” Shane grinned. “How do you get stuff like that into your head?”

“I must miss you more than I realize.” Ilya looked tenderly at Shane.

Shane gave Ilya a reassuring smile. “We’ll both be here when you get back tomorrow.”

Chapter 20: Halloween disguise

“You really don’t have to. You have nothing to prove,” Ilya said as he took a spoonful of cereal, looking over at Shane, who sat across from him.

“I’ve made my decision. I’m going tonight. I want to support you and the team. The reporters have been coming down on you too hard because of my absence.” Shane looked very determined. “And people are surely speculating all sorts of things. An appearance could dampen all that.”

While eating breakfast, the TV had been running in the background. On ESPN, a story concerning “the disappearance of Shane Hollander” had played several times.

Every time Ilya was interviewed, the questions now seemed to focus more on Shane than on hockey.

Ilya had gotten help from Harris to handle the more personal questions, so for him it had more or less become routine. But for Shane, watching from the other side, it had gradually become more upsetting.

Shane showed up alone at the stadium thirty minutes before the game started. He was wearing a large puffy coat, which managed to hide the bump.

On his way to the seats reserved for the friends and family of the players, he stopped a couple of times for selfies, but nothing overwhelming.

Shane sat down in a seat next to Lisa, who was more than surprised to see him. “Shane? What are you doing here?” she whispered.

At his last checkup, they had discussed how Shane had been feeling more isolated and alone at home since Ilya had started playing again. She had advised him to get out more, but she hadn’t expected him to make a public appearance so late in the pregnancy.

“It’s been ages since I’ve been to a game. And I want to show anyone who suspects otherwise that I’m not hiding,” Shane said confidently.

It took some time, but between the second and third periods, Shane was spotted by the camera operator, and he ended up on the big screen for everyone to see.

“Is that? Yes, that’s Shane Hollander, back for the first time since his suspension!” the announcer loudly exclaimed.

Maybe half of the Ottawa fans cheered for him as Shane politely smiled and waved, while others were clearly not as excited about his return.

He knew his appearance would likely divide people, so the mixed reactions didn’t surprise him.

The Centaurs ended up winning the game 5–2.

Shane wanted to congratulate Ilya and the team, so he headed for the locker room. On the way, he passed a couple of reporters who at first didn't notice him. Shane was relieved by that, as he had feared a swarm of reporters would be waiting for him. Then again, no one had known beforehand that he was going to be there.

Little did he know that his appearance on the big screen had attracted the attention of many more reporters, who were crowded together in front of the tunnel leading down to the locker rooms.

As Shane turned a corner, he was startled by flashing cameras and the rapid approach of reporters, who immediately started asking questions.

"Shane, you've been MIA for months. Why show up now?"

Shane took a deep breath and tried to act as professionally as he could. "I needed some time to deal with the impact the suspension had on me. Today I'm here to support Ilya and my team."

A remark came in response to Shane's statement. "You actually consider yourself a part of the Ottawa team? You didn't even play a single game for them before getting yourself suspended."

The comment hit Shane hard. Though he had signed with the team, he didn't know them, and he had only himself to blame for that.

"From the day I signed, this became my team. Despite the suspension, I strive to contribute as much as I possibly can." Shane tried to sound convincing but didn't even believe his own words.

Another reporter jumped in. "Why haven't you joined the team, particularly Ilya, on road games? Is there a reason you've chosen to stay behind?"

Suddenly, out of nowhere, Shane saw Troy pushing his way through the reporters. Troy put an arm around Shane, firmly gripping his shoulder, then began leading him back the way he had come, toward the locker room entrance.

"That's enough. Go interrogate someone else," Troy said in a loud voice as they passed the reporters.

Shane had maybe expected Ilya to do something like this, but Troy? Sure, he knew about the baby, but for him to step in like this, really made Shane feel cared for, like Troy truly valued him as a teammate.

Ilya had just stepped out of the shower when he saw Troy enter with Shane. Unlike Ilya, Troy had watched Shane being ambushed by the reporters on a small screen in the room and had rushed to his aid without hesitation.

"What happened?" Ilya stepped toward Shane and Troy.

“The reporters were slaughtering him, so I got him out of there,” Troy said calmly.

“You were right, Ilya. I needed to prove a point. But it all went sideways so quickly.” Shane's eyes started to tear up.

Ilya engulfed himself in Shane's large jacket as he hugged him. At the same time, he looked at Troy, mouthing a quiet “thank you.”

Back home, Shane went straight to the sofa, feeling exhausted after the events at the stadium.

Ilya went over to Shane and placed pillows around and beneath him to make him more comfortable. Afterwards, he gently stroked his hair and kissed him on the forehead.

Ilya then went to the kitchen and took some time to make a cup of hot chocolate with whipped cream for each of them.

Shane sat up as Ilya settled beside him and handed him his cup.

“We need a better plan for the next time you come to a game,” Ilya said quietly.

Shane looked confused, but Ilya knew Shane wasn't content with the idea of staying home until the baby was born, nor should he be. That level of isolation wouldn't benefit anyone.

“Next time?” Shane asked. “You don't think what happened today is a sign that I should avoid public appearances?”

“No,” Ilya said firmly, looking at Shane with a serious expression. “You deserve to feel free, not trapped. I think that was one of the reasons you went today, yes?”

Shane had felt his sense of freedom gradually fading as his belly had grown larger, which may have contributed to his impulsive actions today.

“I don't want to hide, but I don't want the whole world to find out either. Sometimes it feels like there's nothing in between.” Shane sounded clearly frustrated.

Ilya took both of their cups and placed them on the table. Then he wrapped an arm around Shane and pulled him close, letting Shane rest his head on his chest.

“Relax, Shane. You don't want to upset Roger, do you?” Ilya said. He hoped Shane remembered a conversation they had had some time ago and was eager for his response.

“Is it our baby you're talking about?” Shane looked up at Ilya, giving him a displeased look.

“Yeah? Didn't we agree on Roger? What was it again, Roger Hollanov?” Ilya couldn't help but smile at how ridiculous it sounded.

“Fuck you. Definitely not,” Shane protested, letting out a small laugh.

“What then?” Ilya asked. “Have you thought of any names?”

Of course, Shane had thought of names, many names in fact, but he hadn't found one that felt quite right, which was why he hadn't discussed any of them with Ilya.

"I thought about a classic name like Adam or Thomas. But then again, I want it to reflect his heritage, both his Canadian and Russian side." Shane sighed.

"What about your Japanese heritage?" Ilya asked.

Not having a Japanese-sounding name himself, Shane hadn't really thought about choosing one for the baby.

Ilya had been searching for ideas online and had found a name that worked across all three countries. It had been stuck in his head for some time, and he thought it was the perfect name for their baby. Now he just hoped he could convince Shane.

Ilya lightly rubbed Shane's back. "You know both Russia and Japan have their own versions of Alexander?"

"Really?" Shane asked. It wasn't a name he had considered himself. He didn't hate it, but he needed some time to chew on it.

"Shane, can I show you now?" Ilya called from the bedroom.

Shane was standing in the kitchen, preparing avocado toast for lunch. Ilya had insisted on putting on the costume he was planning to wear to the Halloween party.

"Yes," Shane replied flatly as he dried his hands.

Ilya stepped out wearing fitted denim jeans, worn leather boots, a cowboy hat, and an open vest, confidently displaying his bare chest.

Shane stood with his mouth slightly open, taking in the breathtaking sight of his husband. After last year's gladiator outfit, he hadn't really expected anything to top that, but Ilya had somehow outdone himself.

"So..." Ilya moved closer to Shane. "Have you thought of a costume?"

"I, uh..." Shane was completely speechless.

Ilya placed a hand behind Shane's head and pulled him into a long, lingering kiss.

At first, Shane was tense, but he slowly began to relax as the kiss deepened. He let his hands wander across Ilya's firm abs, feeling every muscle with each breath.

When Ilya finally broke the kiss, he met Shane's eyes with a soft, tender look. "Better?"

Shane felt a little dazed after the kiss, but definitely better.

Mine, Shane thought to himself as he looked at Ilya, unable to stop smiling. "Better," he said quietly.

Ilya took Shane's hands and gently stroked them. "Good. Now, about *your* costume?"

Shane looked down. "Well, there's no easy way of hiding this, so I might as well incorporate it somehow."

Various characters with big bellies popped into Shane's head. None of them were scary or sexy, and all of them would probably be a nightmare to wear as a costume for an entire evening.

"I could be Santa Claus, Winnie the Pooh, or maybe Obelix?" Shane was embarrassed by his lack of imagination. But he needed a costume that could serve as a good disguise until it was time to reveal the news to the team.

"Those are terrible ideas." Ilya rested a hand on Shane's belly and smirked. "I think you should go as a belly dancer."

Shane's expression immediately turned serious, and he took a step back. "That's the worst idea. Everyone's going to notice the moment they see me. I thought we agreed we'd tell everyone together?"

For days, the thought of telling the team had been lingering in Shane's mind. He needed it to go well.

Ilya hadn't realized how seriously Shane was taking the decision. Then again, it would be the first time Shane properly met the team. Ilya strongly believed everyone would be supportive and happy for them, but Shane didn't yet share that same blind faith in them.

Ilya moved behind Shane, rested his chin on his shoulder, and placed both hands on Shane's belly. "I'm sorry. We're telling them together. Don't worry, we'll figure out something for you to wear."

A week later, the inside of the house was filled with scary decorations, way too many snacks and drinks, and a lot of people.

Ilya went to sit on the sofa next to Wyatt and Lisa. Wyatt was in the middle of a heated argument with Luca.

Wyatt had once again shown up dressed as a superhero no one had ever heard of, someone called Quasar. While Luca, a little unimaginative, had come as Batman.

Luca raised his voice to be heard over the music. "No one even knows who this Quasar dude is! Why come as a character nobody can relate to? I bet he doesn't even have any cool skills like Batman."

"You're the one to talk. It's much cooler to be someone unknown and mysterious rather than, ugh... Batman. And by the way he has super strength, he would crush Batman in close combat" Wyatt made a hand gesture towards Luca. "Rozy, back me up here."

Ilya looked at them. “Honestly, I think you both look and sound equally ridiculous,” he teased.

“Oh really? Have you taken a look at yourself, Woody?” Luca shot back.

Wyatt clearly enjoyed the comment and gave Luca an approving shove on the shoulder.

Ilya shook his head, smiling as he took a sip of his beer. Even off the ice, he liked being the one who brought the team together and settled minor disagreements. And he didn’t mind if it came at his own expense.

Lisa looked gorgeous dressed as Maleficent. “When are you going to tell them? Everybody's here now, right?”

Ilya looked around. He had promised Shane they would tell the team and their partners early in the evening, once everyone had arrived. But one of their teammates' cars had broken down, and he had shown up nearly an hour late.

“Yes. As soon as possible, I think, before everyone gets too drunk.” Ilya was afraid someone might make a drunken, hurtful comment if they waited too long. But at the moment, he couldn't see Shane anywhere.

Shane was in the hallway, where he had noticed that the bathroom light was on because the door was slightly open. As he walked over to switch it off, he nearly collided with Harris, who was coming out of the bathroom in a hurry.

“Oh, Shane. I’m so sorry,” Harris quickly apologized.

Though it blended in with his zombie makeup, Harris was clearly pale and didn't look well at all.

“That’s alright.” Shane had instinctively crossed his arms over his belly. “Are you feeling okay?”

Harris forced a smile. “Yeah, I think I’ve just had too much to drink already.”

In truth he hadn’t had anything to drink that night. Last time he drank was at Ilya’s bachelor party, where he had gotten drunk way faster than usual. And the day after he had never been more ill. Since that day, he hadn’t really felt like drinking.

“Cool costume, by the way.” Harris nodded toward Shane, trying to shift the attention elsewhere.

Shane had gone for a classic scary Halloween look, dressing as a murderous chef with a blood-soaked apron that fit tightly over his belly, holding a bloody fake meat cleaver in his hand.

“How did you get your belly so round and smooth? It looks completely real,” Harris said.

Shane honestly thought Troy would have told Harris about the baby. He wouldn't actually have minded if he had. He wasn't sure he would have been able to keep something that big from Ilya if the situation had been reversed.

Without warning, Harris reached out and placed a hand on Shane's belly, clearly thinking it was some kind of pillow. "Wow. It even feels kind of real."

At that moment, Ilya came around the corner and into the hallway.

Shane turned toward him and gave him a look that clearly said, *A little help here, please.*

"Shane. Harris. Just the two people I was looking for," Ilya said. "Everyone is waiting in the living room."

Harris removed his hand. "Waiting for what?" he asked curiously. "Do I need to go get my camera?"

"No camera. It's a personal matter that only concerns the team," Ilya said firmly.

"Okay, fair enough. I'll just follow along then." Harris smiled, completely unaware.

With everyone gathered in the living room, Ilya turned down the music, and got everyone's attention.

"You all know that Shane isn't actually suspended but has been granted a year of absence by Coach Wiebe," Ilya began. "You've been asking a lot of questions, and I promised you an explanation when the time was right. We've decided that the time has come."

Shane stepped forward. His hands were folded beneath his belly, making it even more noticeable.

"Before telling you what has been going on, I want to apologize for my absent behavior. I've only heard wonderful things about this team from Ilya, and I look forward to experiencing them myself after I've been completely honest with you today."

Shane took Ilya's hand and drew a deep breath.

"The reason I can't play this season, is because this isn't a fake belly." Shane placed Ilya's hand on his stomach, and covered it with his own.

"Ilya and I are having are having a baby. I'm pregnant."

Shane held his breath.

The room immediately erupted into a mixture of cheers, laughter, and excited conversation.

Only moments later, the team had formed a huddle around Shane and Ilya.

"Shane and Ilya are going to be dads!", Troy shouted enthusiastically.

"And they're going to be fucking amazing at it!", Wyatt added.

The whole team let out a unified roar, celebrating the news, as they started jumping and spinning around them.

Shane looked at Ilya and smiled. He could not have wished for a more positive response from the team. Though being the center of everyone's attention at the moment was a little overwhelming, he couldn't deny how much their support meant to him. When he had left Montreal, he had never imagined he would find the same sense of unity with another team. Yet, standing here now, he had never felt more welcomed or supported by a group of people. This was going to be his team.

Chapter 21: Unreachable

The day before Ilya was going on another road trip, this time to play in Buffalo and Toronto, Shane and Ilya sat on the sofa and watched the game between Montreal and Boston.

“Four years ago, that would have been us,” Ilya said.

“Yeah, it’s crazy. At that time, I thought I would play for Montreal indefinitely,” Shane sighed.

They watched as Hayden lined up opposite Cliff Marleau for a faceoff. The draw went Marleau’s way, and Hayden was visibly eager to win the puck back. Probably because Marleau had said something to him during the faceoff.

Hayden sprinted toward the Boston player in possession of the puck. Just before impact, the player sidestepped him.

Hayden dug his skates into the ice, trying to stop, but his momentum carried him forward. He crashed into the boards, feet first at high speed.

Hayden let out a scream and remained down on the ice after the crash. The game was immediately stopped, and the medical staff rushed onto the ice.

Shane sat at the edge of the sofa, watching Hayden being carried off the ice.

“Fuck...” Shane exclaimed and reached for his phone to call Jackie. Before he pressed call, Ilya stopped him.

“No,” Ilya said in a serious voice and gently pressed Shane’s wrist into the sofa.

“I need to know if he’s alright,” Shane said. He was unsettled by Ilya’s calmness.

“You need to give them space. Jackie won’t even know how serious his injury is at this point.”

Ilya wrapped his arms around Shane, comforting him, as the game continued in the background.

At least Hayden was able to cry out, Ilya thought to himself. He thought back to when Shane had taken a hit from Marleau and lay motionless on the ice, completely silent. That silence had been the most terrifying part of it all.

The next day, after Ilya had left, Shane could not wait any longer. He grabbed the phone and dialed Hayden’s number.

“Hey Shane,” Hayden said as he answered. He sounded normal.

Before Shane got to say anything, he paused and listened. He could clearly hear kids running around laughing in the background.

“You’re home already? It looked like you took a serious hit?”, Shane asked.

“It looked worse than it was. I only broke my shinbone, and luckily it was a clean break. So, they just put me in a boot and sent me home with crutches,” Hayden reassured Shane.

Shane was more than relieved that Hayden’s injury wasn’t as severe as it had seemed. Still, after all his worry, he wanted to see Hayden in person, just to make sure he was really okay, and to help if he needed anything.

“Ilya has just left. Do you mind if I drive to Montreal for a visit?” Shane asked blankly. It had been some time since his last visit.

He was curious about what they would all say when they saw him.

“Sure, if you bring your own ginger ale. We no longer have it in stock,” Hayden teased.

Shane packed a few things and got in his car within the hour. Outside, a thin layer of snow covered the ground as it continued to snow, but not enough to cause his car any trouble.

When he was about halfway to Montreal, he started to feel a bit uncomfortable. He wasn’t in any pain, but it was as if the muscles in his lower back and abdomen were tightening.

Shane chose to dismiss the feeling as nothing, thinking it must be the result of being eight months pregnant and sitting in the same position for too long.

As he approached Montreal, the snowfall got heavier. Walking from the car to the front door of the Pike house, it felt like an actual snowstorm.

Jackie opened the door and quickly let Shane inside.

“Hi Shane, so good to see you.” Jackie gave Shane a hug and helped him off with his jacket.

“Wow, there’s a lot more of you than the last time I saw you. I remember how I felt during my last month. Be grateful it’s not twins,” Jackie said as she grinned.

“I really am. I could not imagine being twice as heavy,” he said as he put his hands behind his back and stretched.

Shane was glad he had kept up with his training schedule throughout the pregnancy, now that there was so much extra weight out front. Though remarkably fit for someone eight months pregnant, he had started to spend more time off his feet.

Speaking of twins, Shane then got spotted by Emma and Ruby, who came running toward him. Before they reached him, he managed to slowly lower himself to the floor and sit on his knees. The girls hugged him from each side.

“When will the baby come out?” Emma asked as she pointed at Shane’s belly.

“Well, if everything goes as planned, he will be here on December 4th,” Shane said and gently stroked his belly, as the baby had given him a few good kicks as he sat down.

“Then he will be here in time for Christmas!” Ruby said excitedly. “He is going to get so many presents.”

Emma then bumped her sister. “He will be too little to open any of them. What’s the fun in that?”

Ruby bumped her sister back.

Shane decided to cut in before they started arguing for real. “Hey, did you get any cool gifts for your birthday that you want to show me?” he asked, knowing their birthday had been about a month earlier.

Shane watched the girls run away and tried to get up. He quickly realized that was no easy task.

“Oh, Shane,” Jackie laughed. “Let me help you.” She got a hold of Shane’s arm and pulled him up off the floor.

Shane felt a bit lightheaded as he stood, but the feeling quickly subsided. “I actually came here to check on Hayden and see if you needed help with anything now that he’s incapacitated?”

“That’s sweet of you, Shane. We had actually planned to go to the aquarium, but now Hayden has to stay home... You could stay here and keep him company?” Jackie suggested.

For a moment, Shane thought Jackie would invite him to join her and the kids. He loved them, but these days his feet would kill him if he had to spend several hours standing and looking at fish. He also felt really drained today. Relaxing on the sofa with Hayden sounded perfect.

In the living room, Shane found Hayden and his two youngest kids sitting together on the sofa, watching a movie.

Hayden put his hand in the air. “Hey man, good to see... all of you. God, you have gotten big.”

Shane took Hayden’s hand and bent down to greet him with a hug.

“I can still outrun you,” Shane grinned and nodded at Hayden’s boot.

Hayden pulled a silly face at Shane.

Shane then put a hand on Arthur’s head, ruffling his hair. “Thank you for the lion. I’m sure the baby will love it.”

Arthur looked up at Shane. “If he loves him, he will protect him in return.”

Shane couldn't help but smile at such thoughtful words coming from a kid.

Half an hour later, Jackie and the kids left for the aquarium.

Both Shane and Hayden were firmly planted on the sofa, which was much lower than the one at Shane and Ilya's home, while the game between Ottawa and Toronto was on TV.

"Fuck, I'm so glad you're here. It's been so long since it's just been the two of us hanging out," Hayden exclaimed.

"Not even one minute before the first swear word. That must be a new record," Shane grinned.

"You have no idea how much I've had to hold in. Fuck, shit... butt," Hayden began. "You'll find out soon enough."

"Butt? Careful, you're getting a bit out of line," Shane laughed.

Hayden lightly punched Shane on his upper arm and laughed as well.

"Less than a month to go. How are you feeling?" Hayden asked. "I'm not going to ask if you feel ready, because no one does, trust me."

"There are days where I just want him to stay in there forever because I love the feeling of him being so close to me. Then again, there are even more days where he kicks the shit out of me, and I can't wait for him to come out," Shane smiled and gently cradled his stomach.

Hayden looked at Shane. "It must be the weirdest feeling."

Shane wanted to provoke Hayden a little. On some level, he understood why Ilya did it so often; it was kind of fun to get Hayden out of his comfort zone. "Would you have carried one of your and Jackie's kids if you could?"

Hayden's facial expression looked like a mix of confusion and sheer fear. "I could never handle all that Jackie has been through. It would be a fucking nightmare."

Shane gave Hayden a judgmental look, though he was still teasing him.

"Oh, sorry Shane. I... I didn't mean", Hayden apologized.

"Relax, Hayd, I'm just messing with you." Shane certainly got the reaction he hoped for.

Shane looked outside. "Is it okay if I stay here for a few days until Ilya returns?"

Shane didn't want to risk driving home today with how much snow had fallen since he got there.

He also liked not being alone when Ilya was away.

"Of course. It's not like I'm going anywhere." Hayden lifted up his booted leg. "Should we make some lunch?"

“Sounds great.” Shane had been too eager to get to Montreal, so he hadn’t eaten all day.

For a moment, they sat and stared at each other, waiting for the other one to get up.

Shane then remembered Hayden was the injured one and tried to get up to help him.

Hayden struggled to keep back his laughter, as he watched Shane fail to get up three times.

Hayden rolled over the armrest and pushed himself upright before reaching a hand out to Shane.

“Now, who is taking care of who?” Hayden grinned.

Shane took Hayden’s hand and got pulled up. “We’re quite the pair, aren’t we?”

Shane thought about how ridiculous this must have looked from the outside, like a bad sitcom. But at least they both got up.

Shane walked in the direction of the kitchen when the uncomfortable feeling he had felt in the car came back, only stronger this time, now causing him a great deal of pain.

Shane leaned over the kitchen counter, trying to take some deep breaths.

Hayden noticed and limped over to Shane, resting a hand on his back. “Shane, what’s wrong?”

Shane pushed Hayden away.

“Don’t touch me right now. I just need a minute to… Oh fuck, this hurts,” Shane snapped and pressed a hand to his stomach.

“Fuck, Shane, what can I do?” Seeing Shane in so much pain, Hayden started to panic.

“I’m calling Ilya, alright?” Hayden grabbed his phone.

Shane didn’t want Hayden to call and worry Ilya, but he was in no condition to protest.

Since Ilya was still playing against the Toronto team, the phone rang out, and Hayden left a message.

“Hey Ilya, it’s Hayden. Shane is in a lot of pain. I don’t know what’s going on. He’s here with me in Montreal. Call me back.”

Hayden placed the phone on the counter.

“Should I call an ambulance?” Hayden watched as Shane shook his head and moved toward him.

Shane placed his hands on Hayden’s shoulders and breathed slowly as the pain gradually subsided.

“I need to call Lisa,” Shane said. Though not actively in pain anymore, he could still feel the tightness in his stomach.

Hayden guided Shane to a chair. Still limping, he managed to get Shane his phone from the sofa table.

“Hi Shane. Is everything alright?” It was the first time Shane had called Lisa. Normally they only spoke during his check-ups.

“I don’t know. I felt this tightness in my stomach twice today. First time wasn’t bad, but the second time I was in a lot of pain and I... fuck.”

The pain came back with the same intensity as before.

Shane leaned over the dining table, resting his head and arm on it, while his other hand went to his stomach.

Hayden took the phone. “Lisa, right? It’s Hayden Pike. Shane is in pain again. Can I do anything to help him?”

“When did the last wave of pain end before this one?” Lisa asked.

“Only one minute ago, maybe less,” Hayden said.

“And he was fine before that?”

“He seemed to be, yes.”

“Okay, try getting him a large glass of water and put me on speaker,” Lisa instructed.

Hayden got Shane a glass of water, which he started drinking.

“Shane, listen. I believe you might be having Braxton Hicks contractions. They’re not pleasant, but they’re not dangerous for you or the baby. It’s just your body adjusting because you’re so close to your due date.”

“Braxton Hicks? Jackie used to have those, but she said they were only mildly painful,” Hayden looked at Shane.

Shane shot Hayden a look. There was nothing mild about the pain he was feeling.

“People experience Braxton Hicks differently, but they can be brought on by dehydration,” Lisa explained.

“Water is helping,” Shane said softly. He had definitely not been drinking enough water today.

“It can also help to take a warm bath or change position,” Lisa said.

“I’ll keep that in mind.” Shane would do anything to make the pain go away and stay away.

“Also, Shane, I meant to tell you something. A small news outlet is doing a story about the gene that allows men to become pregnant. I was interviewed because of my knowledge of the subject, but I didn’t mention you or any of my other patients. I only spoke about how the gene works. I don’t know how much attention the story is going to get, but I wanted to give you a heads-up.”

Regardless of how much attention the story would attract, Shane knew deep down that he had no desire for the public to know he was carrying the baby he and Ilya were expecting, and he was determined to keep it that way.

But did Lisa say other patients? Shane didn’t know there were others in the same situation as him close enough to have Lisa as a doctor.

After the events, Shane was totally drained. “Do you mind if I take a bath?” Shane asked Hayden, who didn’t look very bright-eyed himself.

“Yeah, yeah. I’m just going to…” Hayden limped to the sofa and lay down. “Please don’t do that again. That was fucking scary.”

Shane went to the bathroom and filled up the tub. He lowered himself into the warm water, placing a towel behind his neck to rest against the edge.

He put a hand on the side of his stomach, where he could feel and see the baby moving beneath. “You’re okay… we’re okay,” he whispered softly.

The baby moved around, but more calmly than he had all day. Shane appreciated that he seemed to be relaxing, giving his dad some much-needed rest.

Shane let himself soak for a good thirty minutes. As he stepped out of the bathroom, he saw Hayden fast asleep on one side of the sofa.

Still tired, Shane lay down on the other end of the sofa and quickly fell asleep too.

When Shane woke a couple of hours later, he had a strange feeling that he had forgotten something.

Fuck… Ilya!

Shane rolled off the sofa, and with great effort, managed to get himself upright.

When he got to his phone, there were over ten missed calls from Ilya.

Shane tried calling, but it went straight to voicemail. He assumed Ilya was still with the team after the game, and that his phone had died from all the attempts to reach him, so he sent a text instead.

Hey, I know Hayden called you. I hope you’re not too worried. I talked to Lisa, and we’re both fine.

Does it snow as much in Toronto as it does here?

Shane still hadn't gotten any food and was starving.

Just then, Jackie and the kids stepped through the door. They had brought poke bowls for everyone as an early dinner.

Jackie handed Shane one with grilled chicken. He had never needed it more than he did right now.

After dinner, they all watched a movie before the kids were put to bed.

They all sat on the sofa when there was a hard knock on the door.

"As the only one capable, I'll answer the door," Jackie teased as she stood up and opened it.

"Shane!" a voice shouted, echoing through the house.

Shane turned toward the sound. "Ilya?"

Ilya and the rest of the team entered the locker room after one of their best performances of the season so far. They had beaten Toronto 6–1, and the room was ecstatic.

The fact that it was Troy's and Wyatt's old team made the win feel even sweeter.

Ilya wanted to make a video of their celebration to send to Harris, who had chosen to sit this road trip out.

When he looked at his phone, he saw a missed call from Hayden and a voicemail. Ilya wondered what Hayden might want. They never spoke on the phone.

He joined a celebratory howl and lifted the phone to his ear, listening to the message.

As Hayden's panicked voice started, Ilya froze.

Ilya had no idea how serious Shane's situation was. Maybe it was nothing. He tried calling Hayden back, but it rang out. Then he tried Shane twice. Same thing.

He put his phone down and immediately started fumbling with his gear. He needed it off now.

Troy, who stood beside Ilya, could clearly see he was upset. "Ilya? What's happening?"

"Something is wrong with Shane." Ilya was desperate. "Does anyone know when the next flight to Montreal leaves?" he yelled into the room.

"All flights to Montreal have been cancelled for the rest of the day. Too much snow," Luca yelled back.

Fuck. What was he supposed to do? A car. He needed a car.

“Does anyone have a car I can borrow?” Ilya asked again.

The room went quiet.

“It’s Shane,” Ilya said, tearing up. “I need to get to him.”

Wyatt stepped forward. “My sister lives here in Toronto. She drove here to watch the game. I think she’s in the parking lot waiting for me, but...”

Ilya cut him off. “Do you think I can borrow her car?”

“Probably, but Ilya, the car is...”

That was all he needed to hear.

Ilya had already changed and strongly gestured to Wyatt, that he needed to get to the car, now.

Outside, Wyatt quickly located his sister and the car.

Ilya stared at it. It was a rusty, old red Toyota Corolla. He gave Wyatt a displeased look.

“I was trying to tell you. At least it’s got winter tires on,” Wyatt said with a crooked smile.

Ilya got in and started driving toward Montreal, fully focused on getting to Shane as fast as possible.

For the first two hours, he repeatedly tried calling Hayden and Shane, until he noticed his phone battery was getting low.

Phone charger... fuck. It was in his bag, which he had left in the dressing room.

As he tried calling Shane one more time, the phone died.

When Ilya reached their house in Ottawa, he went inside, got a charger, and switched to his Mercedes SUV.

The phone made a notification sound the second it turned on.

Ilya breathed a sigh of relief. Shane and the baby were both okay.

Still, only two hours away, Ilya decided to continue driving to Montreal anyway.

With the heavy snowfall, he came close to getting stuck a few times, but eventually parked outside the Pikes’ house just before 9 p.m.

He knocked firmly on the door, and Jackie opened it.

“Ilya, what are you...?” Jackie didn’t get to finish before Ilya moved past her and called out Shane’s name.

“Ilya?” Shane turned his head and saw him.

Ilya grabbed Shane’s face and kissed him fiercely, tangling their legs together and pushing Shane down into the sofa cushions.

“Fuck, I was so worried.” He then pulled Shane tightly into his arms.

“But you’re in Toronto,” Shane said, confused but relieved. After the day he’d had, it felt good to have him there.

Ilya looked at Hayden, who sat on the other end of the sofa with his leg on a pillow. “You didn’t answer your phone? After a message like that!”

“Well, hello to you too,” Hayden said sarcastically.

Jackie walked in. “So, I guess we have two overnight guests then?”

Ilya felt bad about ignoring Jackie at the door. “That would be nice, thank you. And... sorry.”

Shane and Ilya sat facing each other on a queen-size bed in the Pike guest room.

“Braxton Hicks?” Ilya asked, confused.

“Yeah. Apparently, that’s still a thing, even though the baby has to be born by C-section,” Shane said, resting a hand low on his abdomen and exhaling deeply.

“You’re afraid?” Ilya asked.

Shane knew a C-section wasn’t a minor operation, and recovery would be long. But at least he wouldn’t experience labor pains, which should be far worse than what he had felt today.

“No, not really. I know I have all the support I need afterwards.” He kissed Ilya softly but hesitantly, looking down afterwards.

Ilya could sense, that Shane knew something he hadn’t told him. “Anything I need to know?”

Shane took a deep breath and locked eyes with Ilya.

“Lisa told me she got interviewed for a story about men carrying the same gene as me,” Shane said, angst in his voice. “I really hope the story doesn’t blow up. We’re so close, and I just want to enjoy the time left without the media or fans starting a new wave of theories about me.”

Ilya took Shane’s hands. “Remember what we agreed? Fuck their theories. If they start with the personal questions again, just keep reminding them you’re there to support the team. You don’t owe them anything.”

Shane had been to a couple of home games since the one, where Troy had had to rescue him from the reporters, sticking to the plan, and only answering questions about the team, with

good results. At the time, it seemed the reporters had moved on to bigger stories now that he wasn't MIA anymore. He was just a suspended player watching his team play from time to time.

Shane nodded and lay down.

Ilya positioned himself behind Shane, wrapping one arm across his torso. He wished he had been there today. He comforted himself with the fact that Shane hadn't been alone, but he should have been there for him. He felt as if he had failed him.

How many more times would he have to endure this feeling? And should he even have to?

"Are you staying?" Shane asked quietly.

Ilya could stay for the night, but he needed to leave early in the morning to make his way to Buffalo for the next game in two days.

He couldn't bring himself to say it out loud. Instead, he pulled Shane even closer, holding him tightly before moving a hand to Shane's belly, rubbing it gently.

Ilya's silence sent a clear message.

Shane knew he had to leave, but he didn't want him to. Every time he left, it seemed a little harder than the last.

Chapter 22: We're not alone

Chapter Notes

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

When Ilya entered the visitors' locker room in Buffalo, he was taken aside by Coach Wiebe before he had a chance to talk to any of his teammates.

He stepped into a back room, where Wiebe handed him the bag he had left behind in Toronto.

“Thank you”, Ilya said in a monotone voice. He could tell Wiebe wasn't finished with him yet.

“Ilya. I can tell your mind is focused on something other than the game at the moment. I completely understand your concern for Shane and the baby, but we both have a team we need to prioritize.”

Ilya completely understood and remained silent.

“You're our captain, and I don't want to have to take that away from you.” Wiebe gave Ilya a serious look. “I'm willing to give you some time off if that's what you need, and if you think that's what's best for the team.”

As captain, Ilya often discussed important decisions regarding the team with Wiebe, and he understood why his coach had to be firm with him.

“It's only a problem during road games, when I know I'm far away from him and wouldn't be able to be there if something happened,” Ilya said honestly.

He knew he was one of the team's best players and a major reason for their success so far this season. He wasn't about to let the team down by taking leave. He felt a strong sense of responsibility and was determined to find a way to support both Shane and the team.

“The baby will be here in early December. I could keep playing the home games until then and sit out the road-trips?” Ilya felt it would be a good compromise.

Wiebe could see the advantages of Ilya's plan. He also felt relieved, as he would have hated it if Ilya had chosen to take leave as well, since it would have been difficult to justify keeping him on as captain. There was only two road-trips with four away games left before early December, something he believed the team could handle without him.

Wiebe held out a hand to Ilya as a sign of agreement. Ilya shook it firmly, while a grateful smile spreading across his face.

As Ilya re-entered the locker room, all of his teammates turned toward him, waiting for news about Shane and his conversation with Wiebe.

“Shane is fine”, Ilya began.

Much of the tension in the room disappeared, though everyone was still eager to hear the outcome of his conversation with their coach.

“Wiebe and I have agreed that this will be my last road-trip until the baby is born. But I'm still your captain. I'm not going anywhere. I'll be right there with you every time we hit home ice.”

“O Captain! My Captain!” Wyatt shouted across the room.

Though not everyone understood the reference, they all understood the message, as the entire team surrounded Ilya and pulled him into a tight group hug.

After beating Buffalo 4–2, the team went out to celebrate. They had a late morning flight the next day, but during the season they rarely drank more than a beer or two after a game.

Halfway through his first beer, Ilya looked across the room and noticed Troy sitting alone at the bar, while he himself was surrounded by around ten teammates at a large table.

Ilya walked over and stood beside him. “What are you doing all by yourself?”

“I needed some time to think”, Troy sighed, taking a sip from his beer. “I know the story about the gene is coming out soon. I'm nervous about how people will react to it, and what it'll mean for everyone involved.”

Ilya had only found out about the upcoming story from Shane the day before. How did Troy already know about it? He thought it was considerate of Troy to worry about him and Shane, but he hadn't expected it to bother him so much, that he needed to isolate himself from the team to think it through.

Ilya wrapped an arm around Troy's shoulder. “No reason to worry just yet. Relax. Come join the rest of us.”

He gestured for Troy to follow him back to the table.

Troy stood up, but then stopped. “Actually... I've been meaning to ask you something.”

Ilya turned to look at him. “Okay?”

“Harris and I were wondering if you and Shane would like to come over for dinner on Saturday?” Troy considered Ilya his best friend on the team, and they often shared a room on road-trips, but this somehow felt more official, with both of their partners involved.

It would be the first time Shane and Ilya were having dinner with another couple from the team, and Ilya quickly found himself getting excited.

"Sounds great! I'll check with Shane, but I'm pretty sure he'll be happy to come too."

The following Saturday, Ilya and Shane drove into the courtyard of Troy and Harris's house,

where they were greeted by hundreds of lights strung along the gables of the entire house. More lights were wrapped around the large apple tree in the center of the yard. On either side of the entrance stood a small Christmas tree, each fully decorated with red bows and ornaments.

Back home, they hadn't put up a single Christmas decoration yet, partly because Christmas didn't mean much to Ilya, and partly because they had been busy making the final preparations for the baby's imminent arrival.

Though it was a bit much, they both enjoyed the festive atmosphere that radiated from Troy and Harris's home.

Troy opened the door and greeted both Shane and Ilya with a light hug.

Inside, the house was filled with Christmas decorations. Stars and ornaments hung from doorways and ceilings, while shelves were lined with various gnomes, nutcrackers, and clearly handmade decorations that gave the home a warm, personal charm.

Farther inside the house, Harris was sitting with Chiron, holding him back from enthusiastically charging toward the guests.

Ilya knelt and opened his arms. "Chiron! Come here, I missed you so much!"

Harris let go of Chiron, who rushed into Ilya's arms and eagerly accepted plenty of scratches.

Meanwhile, Shane was still taking in the overwhelming amount of Christmas spirit surrounding him when he looked at Troy. "I honestly didn't think you were someone who cared this much about Christmas."

"Oh, no. This is all Harris." Troy rubbed the back of his neck and smiled. "I'm not complaining, though."

In the combined dining room and kitchen, Harris handed Ilya and Shane each a mug of warm cider. "Don't worry, it's alcohol-free, but it still tastes amazing. My sister is a genius."

Harris's eyes unconsciously lingered on Shane's round belly for a moment before he caught himself.

"Sorry. It's so great that you both could come." Harris felt a little awkward as he snapped out of it. "I hope you're feeling okay now that you're getting so close to the end?"

"Mostly, I just feel huge," Shane said as he lowered himself into a dining chair with a quiet groan.

"There's a certain someone who really likes the cider."

Shane rested a hand on his stomach and slowly rubbed it as he exhaled sharply, trying to calm the baby, who was actively moving around inside him.

Ilya let go of Chiron, stepped in front of Shane, and placed his hand beside Shane's on his stomach.

“Give your dad a break,” he said in a deep, calm voice before continuing to speak to the baby in Russian.

Shane visibly relaxed as the baby settled down. He looked over at Troy and Harris, who had quietly been watching them.

“Sometimes Ilya's the only one who can calm him down. It was kind of annoying when he had to leave for days at a time.”

“I'm here for you, now.” Ilya leaned down and kissed Shane on the forehead.

“Aww! You guys are just the sweetest.” Harris couldn't contain his enthusiasm after witnessing the moment between Shane and Ilya. He had only really seen them together at the Halloween party, where they hadn't been nearly this openly affectionate with each other, probably because the whole team had been there.

Shane smiled at Harris. Ilya had described Harris as an incredibly positive person, someone whose optimism naturally rubbed off on the people around him. Shane could clearly see what Ilya had meant.

Harris and Ilya sat down at the dinner table as Troy went to get a platter of homemade cookies and other sweet treats.

As soon as the platter hit the table, Harris grabbed a cookie and immediately devoured it.

Realizing he'd been rude to his guests, he swallowed quickly and pushed the plate toward Shane.

“Oh, sorry. I just can't get enough of these,” he said with a light giggle.

“I know the feeling,” Shane smiled. “Cravings are a powerful thing.”

Harris let out a shaky laugh. “Yeah... they really are.”

“I'm just glad our honeymoon in Spain put a stop to that disgusting sauerkraut obsession of yours.” Ilya grimaced at Shane.

“Sauerkraut? Really? That sounds so bad,” Harris exclaimed, sympathizing with Ilya.

“Worse than you can imagine,” Ilya said, dramatically exaggerating.

“Don't be such a baby. It wasn't that bad,” Shane protested.

They all laughed as the plate was passed around the table.

“Has anything else surprised you during your pregnancy?” Troy asked.

Shane sighed as he considered the question. “How much I've had to adapt. That's probably what hit me the hardest.”

He shifted slightly in his chair.

“First, I had to accept that my body wasn't just mine anymore. During the first few months, I was constantly sick, and once I started showing, everything became harder, not just physically, but mentally too, because he started to feel more real. On top of that, there was the challenge of keeping it private from the public while also telling friends and family.”

Troy looked at Shane seriously. “That sounds really tough.”

“It has been. It still is.” Shane rested his hand on the table, palm up, and met Ilya's eyes. Ilya immediately reached over and took his hand.

“But I know it'll all be worth it.”

Harris sat with tears in his eyes, visibly moved by Shane's answer. “I'm just so happy for you. This baby is so lucky.”

“Has all the secrecy affected you in any way?” Harris then asked.

Ilya answered before Shane could. “I could tell Shane became more and more relaxed as we told more people.”

He was beginning to suspect where the conversation was heading.

“For sure. I was a mess before I told Ilya. And I kept expecting a negative reaction from everyone before I told them, but it never came,” Shane agreed. Shane wasn't used to anyone besides Ilya taking such an interest in him, but he didn't think much of it.

“That's so nice.” Harris wiped his eyes.

“Anyone getting hungry for some real food?” Troy asked.

Both Troy and Harris got up and walked into the kitchen. As Troy prepared the food and Harris gathered plates and cutlery, Ilya could hear them talking quietly.

A few moments later, they returned, serving baked salmon with stewed cauliflower and green beans.

“Please dig in! We've got cookie dough ice cream for dessert,” Harris said, clearly excited.

As Ilya passed the stewed cauliflower to Harris, he barely held onto it before setting it back down on the table.

“Sorry, I need to...” Harris stood up from his chair and hurried out of the room.

Shane and Ilya looked to Troy for a reaction, but he simply smiled and continued passing the food around.

Ilya gave a small shake of his head and let out a quiet sigh, while Shane reached for the green beans Troy handed him.

Seeing Ilya's reaction, Troy excused himself from the table and headed in the same direction Harris had gone.

“What?” Shane whispered.

Ilya knew Shane wouldn't be able to keep a straight face when Troy and Harris returned if he shared his theory, so he decided to keep it to himself. “Nothing. Eat.”

Five minutes later, Troy and Harris returned, but instead of sitting down, they remained standing at the end of the table.

Harris took a deep breath. “You may have noticed I've been acting a bit strange today.”

“And we both asked a lot of questions earlier,” Troy added.

Troy could tell Ilya already knew what they were about to say, which made the moment a little less nerve-racking.

“Recently, I found out that I'm also carrying the gene and... I'm pregnant.” Harris let out a relieved sigh.

At the same time, a broad smile spread across his face, and Troy was smiling just as widely.

Even though they seemed happy, Ilya knew they were probably just as overwhelmed as he and Shane had been when they first found out.

On top of that, he was worried because he knew Harris had a medical condition, and he had no idea how it might interact with the pregnancy.

Shane was caught off guard, suddenly finding himself on the receiving end of someone else's pregnancy announcement. He searched for the right words when he felt Ilya behind him.

Ilya gently pulled back Shane's chair, giving him enough room to stand, then took his hand and helped him to his feet.

Together, they walked over to congratulate Troy and Harris, wrapping them both in warm hugs.

Chiron ran excited circles around them, barking as if he could sense the excitement filling the room.

When Shane pulled away from Harris, he looked at him with concern. “How are you feeling?”

“Like absolute shit. I'm so nauseous all the time,” Harris admitted with a grin.

Shane had never seen anyone look so happy while describing how awful they felt, but it said everything about Harris.

Ilya was genuinely happy for both of them, but it felt special knowing he could now share this experience with his best friend on the team.

He wrapped an arm around Troy's shoulder and gave him a small shake as they both looked at their pregnant partners carrying their babies.

Neither of them had ever felt prouder.

Later that evening, back home, Shane and Ilya sat beside each other on the sofa.

“You knew?” Shane asked.

“No. I just had a very strong feeling because of the signs. I can't believe you had no idea at all”, Ilya replied.

“What signs?” He was annoyed that he might have been too self-centered to notice.

“How pale Harris looked at the Halloween party. How he skipped several road-trips and the post-victory celebrations. And tonight, it was almost too obvious. He was doing so many of the same things you did early in your pregnancy. I missed those signs with you. This time, I knew what to look for.”

“I wasn't even there for half of those. You couldn't have given me a heads-up?” Shane tried to sound annoyed, but it had a very different effect on Ilya.

Ilya gave Shane a tender look, positioned himself between he's legs, and placed his hands on Shane's knees.

“I love that you actually think you could've kept a straight face if I had.”

“Oh? You don't think I could have?” Shane watched as Ilya pulled off his shirt and immediately realized he was no longer interested in continuing the conversation.

Ilya began kissing Shane's neck and jaw while encouraging him to lift his arms so he could remove his shirt as well. Shane happily obliged.

As soon as the shirt was off, Ilya softly pressed his lips against Shane's, let his hands glide down his chest, and continued along his sides until they reached the waistband of Shane's pants.

“I'm not going to be much help. I've gotten so heavy. It's not very sexy, I know,” Shane murmured.

“Let me be the judge of that.” Ilya strongly disagreed. “You just relax.”

Shane lifted himself off the sofa just long enough for Ilya to slide his pants down.

Ilya gently started kissing the inside of Shane's thighs, before moving on.

Shane tilted his head back, completely lost in the sensations Ilya was sending through him.

It wasn't long before they were both lying stretched out across the sofa, breathing heavily.

“Don’t ever talk yourself down like that. I will never not find you sexy.” Ilya took Shane’s hand and kissed his knuckles.

“Not even if...” Shane began, but Ilya silenced him with two gentle kisses, as if reassuring him.

“Always,” Ilya whispered, before pressing his lips back on Shane’s for a longer, deeper kiss.

Chapter End Notes

I'm thinking about writing a Troy/Harris fanfic and intertwining it with this story. I'll probably take a break over the summer before I start, since I've been writing this fic almost nonstop since March.

And don't worry, of course I'll finish this one first 😊

Chapter 23: The day before the day

Ilya returned from practice to find Shane standing on a chair, with his hand at the back of a kitchen cabinet.

He dropped everything he had in his hands, rushed over to Shane, and grabbed him by the hips.

“What are you doing?!” Ilya exclaimed.

“Cleaning,” Shane said firmly, hyperfixated on his task.

“No, you're trying to give me a heart attack. Come down,” Ilya urged.

“When I'm finished. It needs to be clean before the baby comes,” Shane argued.

Ilya could clearly sense this was not about the baby, who wouldn't be able to reach that high for years, so something else had to be the cause of Shane's stress cleaning.

Ilya made the decision to lift Shane off the chair.

Shane was swept off the chair in one smooth motion and ended up in Ilya's arms, which at first made him pretty mad.

“Hey, you can't just do that. Put...”

It was only then that he actually looked at Ilya.

Ilya looked worried, almost scared.

Shane realized he was the cause of Ilya's distress and maintained eye contact as Ilya gently placed him back on his feet.

“Oh, Ilya, I... I...” Shane placed a hand on Ilya's cheek and wiped away a tear that was sliding down the side of it.

Shane loved him so much that he couldn't bear the sight of him like this.

“...I shouldn't take my frustration out on you. I'm sorry,” Shane sincerely apologized.

Ilya leaned into Shane's touch and kissed the palm of his hand. “What made you so upset that you felt the need to do that?”

“After you left for practice, I turned on the news. The story about *the male pregnancy gene* is everywhere.” Shane took a couple of steps away from Ilya, still frustrated. “Some men have even come forward and said they have carried their own children. On the fucking news!?”

“Do you want to tell everyone about our baby on the news?” Ilya knew that wasn't the case, but he wasn't quite sure why Shane was upset.

Shane started pacing. "Fuck no. I don't want to be known as *one of the pregnant men*. I want to be known for my hockey career. I've worked my whole life for that. I'm terrified that people won't see me as the star player I've spent years becoming, if it ever got out."

Shane stopped and looked at Ilya. "It's not that I'm ashamed or embarrassed about carrying our baby, I just don't want it to define me."

Ilya closed the space between them, wrapping Shane in a tight hug from behind. "Do I have to drag you to the trophy room and remind you again?"

"That was how we ended up in this situation, remember?" Shane grinned.

Ilya smiled. "It's different this time. This time it's not just your trophy room, it's ours. Like this is ours."

Ilya rested a hand on Shane's stomach before slowly running it down his side, clearly feeling the baby's movements beneath his hand.

"I can't wait to meet him."

Later that evening, Shane had fallen asleep on the sofa while he and Ilya were watching a movie. Ilya got up and covered him with a blanket.

He then put on a coat and went out through the kitchen door to sit on the terrace.

A layer of frost covered the entire garden, making it look like it was covered in snow.

Ilya took out a pack of cigarettes and a lighter. He had promised Shane he'd quit for good, but every now and then he still had one, just to reminisce about the old days.

Smoking is bad for you. The words echoed clearly in Ilya's mind. He considered them one of the first signs Shane had ever given him, one of the first moments that showed he cared.

Ilya pulled out his phone. He wanted to call Troy and find out how he and Harris were handling the attention the story had received.

Troy answered Ilya's call after just two rings. "Hey, Roz." Troy paused for a moment. "I guess you've heard it too?"

"I have. Apparently, it's everywhere. How are you?" Ilya asked.

"Harris isn't too worried about the story getting attention. He knows exactly how to handle the media. And unlike Shane, nobody really pays attention to, or asks, the director of communications any personal questions, so we're good. But how's Shane taking it?" Troy asked, assuming Shane wasn't handling it as well.

"Shane is handling it in his own way." Ilya decided not to spill all of Shane's worries to Troy.

Troy could tell from Ilya's response that things probably hadn't gone very smoothly. Still, he respected Ilya's decision not to talk more about it.

Ilya then heard a door closing at Troy's end. "Something else you want to talk about?"

"Yeah, sorry. It's just... Harris's mood swings are all over the place. One minute he's optimistic, nearly ecstatic about a post for the team's Instagram. The next, he's sobbing in my arms because of a single negative comment. It's hard to keep up," Troy sighed.

Ilya hadn't really experienced that with Shane. But compared to Harris, Shane also kept his feelings more on the inside. Except for that one time when Shane had ended up sitting on the floor, crying his eyes out because he lost a sock and didn't have another in the same color.

Ilya smiled as he remembered. "We just have to be there for them, even when things get hard."

"I love him too much not to," Troy said calmly.

Me too. Ilya thought to himself.

As Ilya ended the call, he thought about lighting another cigarette, before the door behind him opened.

Shane stood wrapped in the blanket Ilya had covered him with earlier. "It's freezing out here. Get in!" His expression said it all, he knew exactly what Ilya had been doing.

As Ilya stepped inside, he leaned in to tease Shane with a kiss, but Shane turned his head away.

"Don't even think about it. Just the smell from here makes me sick." Shane turned his back to Ilya and walked toward the bedroom.

Ilya leaned against the doorframe as he watched Shane waddle away from him.

"I love you!" Ilya yelled.

Shane raised his middle finger without turning around. "Fuck you!"

The next day was the day before the day.

Ilya woke to find himself alone in bed. He glanced at the crib in the corner of the room. In just a few days, their son would be lying in it. He couldn't wait.

Ilya sat up as he heard something fall to the ground. He quickly got out of bed and rushed out of the room.

Fortunately, Shane was standing firmly on both feet on the ground, but the kitchen counter was covered with baby bottles and baby clothes.

"What are you doing?" Ilya asked.

“I need to check if we got everything ready for when we return with the baby,” Shane said. He had a list in his hand, which he was checking thoroughly.

“Shane, we did this weeks ago,” Ilya said in a calm voice.

“But what if we forgot something?” Shane looked at Ilya. “Fuck. Does the car have enough gas?”

“You know the hospital is like ten minutes away, right?” Ilya couldn’t help but smile. “And we’ve got five cars to choose from.”

“We’re not bringing the baby home in a sports car,” Shane argued.

“No. But only because they don’t have back seats,” Ilya grinned.

“And because they’re predicting about twenty centimeters of snow by tomorrow morning,” Shane added.

“I’ll drag you to the hospital on a sled if I have to,” Ilya joked.

Shane wasn’t in the mood. He had checked everything on the list twice, but he still couldn’t shake the feeling that he’d forgotten something.

Ilya made an even greater effort to calm him. “We’ve got everything ready. And if we somehow forgot something, he’s not going to judge us.”

Ilya rested his hands on either side of Shane’s belly.

“And I already know we’re going to give him the one thing he’ll need most.” He leaned in and kissed Shane softly. “Love.”

Shane teared up as he looked at Ilya. For the first time, he truly believed what everyone had been telling them all along. Their baby was incredibly lucky. He would be surrounded by love, and Shane felt they would become great parents.

Last night, when it was just the two of them, Ilya lay beside Shane’s belly one last time, rubbing it gently.

“Who do you think he’s going to look like the most?” Shane asked, running a hand through Ilya’s long curls.

With Shane’s strong dominant genes in the mix, the baby would probably have black hair and brown eyes just like him.

Though Shane really hoped his eyes would be blue like Ilya’s, as he had never seen anything more beautiful.

All Ilya hoped for were freckles like Shane’s. Then nothing else would matter.

In reality, none of that really mattered as long as he was healthy.

Ilya kissed Shane's belly and whispered, "You're perfect, just the way you are."

The next morning, they sat in silence at the dinner table with each their cup of black coffee. Shane hadn't been eating anything since the night before and wasn't allowed to until the baby had been born.

The atmosphere in the room was a mix of anticipation and nervousness, and a touch of hangriness from Shane's side.

"At this point, I just want him out here with us," Shane sighed. "I wish we could skip the whole surgery part and just magically have him in our arms."

Ilya looked at Shane and could already see panic creeping in.

Shane buried his face in his hands. "Fuck, I'm so scared."

Ilya walked over to Shane and wrapped his arms around him. "And I wish I could do this for you."

Ilya truly meant it. Between the two, he was usually the one best at keeping himself calm in stressful moments.

"We just need to get past the next few hours. I'll be by your side all the way." Ilya tightened his grip and kissed Shane on the side of his forehead.

Ilya knew this part was going to be one of the hardest for him. He wouldn't be able to control anything that happened during the surgery and would have to place his trust in others to take care of Shane and the baby.

The car had been prepared the day before, with a full tank and a baby car seat installed.

Ilya grabbed the baby bag as they went out the door.

Outside, the ground was covered in a thick layer of snow. Ilya paused for a moment.

Symbolic, in a way, he thought, to be born in winter with the ground covered in snow, when you're the child of a half-Canadian and a Russian. He took it as a good sign.

Ilya settled behind the wheel, with Shane already sitting next to him. He reached over and grabbed Shane's hand, which was resting on his thigh, and gave it a tight squeeze.

"You got this." Ilya and Shane shared a long, deep breath and a determined look before Ilya let go of Shane and started the car.

Chapter 24: Now Christmas has meaning again

Chapter Notes

My thoughts on how I wanted to end the story haven't changed much since I first started writing it. I hope you'll enjoyed it!

Thank you so much for following along and reading my story. I really appreciate it ❤️

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

When they arrived at the hospital, Shane and Ilya entered through the same back entrance they always used when coming in for check-ups.

Inside, they were greeted by Lisa, who was waiting to take them to their private room.

“So... are you ready to meet your son today?” she asked cheerfully.

“More than ready.” Shane walked with a hand under his belly, supporting it the best he could. He was also looking forward to getting his body back, and, more urgently, being allowed to eat something.

Ilya was excited to meet his son, but also worried about the imminent surgery, and started asking questions.

Lisa had already explained how everything was going to play out, but she happily did it again to reassure them.

The surgeons were highly skilled and had performed C-sections on other men before Shane.

Lisa would also be in the operating room and had promised to inform them if anything out of the ordinary happened during the procedure, which was a great comfort to both Shane and Ilya.

The private room was big and nicely decorated. It contained two beds, as Ilya had been allowed to stay with Shane and the baby.

Due to the C-section, Shane had to stay for a couple of days after the birth to be monitored.

A set of hospital clothes had been placed on Shane's bed. He went to the bathroom to get changed.

Shane caught a glimpse of himself in the bathroom mirror and ran a hand over his belly.

“I know the world out here might seem scary at first, but there are so many people who are going to love you. Even if something were to happen to me, I promise you that you'll be loved beyond measure.”

Shane wiped his eyes and took a deep breath. He didn't want to dwell on what might happen. Instead, he chose to focus on getting his son safely delivered and looked forward to finally meeting him.

A third bed had been rolled into the room, ready to transport Shane to the operating room.

Shane lay down on the bed, and Ilya immediately took his hand as it was rolled toward an elevator that would take them to the operating floor.

As they exited the elevator, Ilya was asked to follow a nurse to a back room to get properly dressed before entering the operating room.

Ilya looked at Shane and kissed his knuckles before letting go of his hand.

"See you on the other side." Shane forced a smile, trying to calm them both.

Inside the operating room, the preparations went incredibly fast. Shane got an IV drip in his hand for fluids and pain medication, and was then instructed to lie on his side.

Ilya entered the room just in time to be there for Shane as a needle was inserted into his lower back to administer the anesthetic.

Within minutes, Shane could no longer feel his legs or lower body.

A large screen was set up across Shane's upper body before the surgeons proceeded.

"Everything is going right according to plan," Lisa reassured them. She stood where she could both observe the operation and keep an eye on Shane and Ilya at the same time.

Shane didn't feel any pain, only the sensation of the surgeons tugging and pulling as they worked.

Not long after, a loud cry filled the room.

Ilya briefly saw the baby as a nurse took him to a table to be checked over and cleaned up a bit.

He brushed a hand through Shane's hair. "He's here. You did it."

Ilya and Shane both teared up as they looked at each other. Ilya leaned in and gave Shane a light kiss on the forehead.

"Ilya, someone wants to say hello." After the baby had been given the all-clear, Lisa had wrapped him in a blanket, picked him up, and was now handing him to Ilya.

Ilya took him into his arms. He looked so small and delicate. A wave of joy and pride washed over Ilya.

"You're the most precious thing I have ever seen," Ilya whispered in Russian and pressed their foreheads together for a brief moment.

The baby had stopped crying and only made a few soft whimpers as Ilya held him next to Shane.

Shane kissed the baby on the cheek and looked at him. He had a full head of black hair, and yes, a faint dusting of freckles across his nose and cheeks.

His eye color was still a mystery. It could take some time before they were able to catch a glimpse of them, as he was still adjusting to the brightness of the outside world.

Ilya stayed beside Shane with their son in his arms as Shane got stitched up.

Afterward, Ilya followed as Shane was rolled back to their private room.

On the way back, the baby started crying again. This time, Ilya was unable to soothe him.

Back in the room, Lisa opened Shane's shirt, gently took the baby from Ilya, placed him on Shane's bare chest, and covered them both with a blanket.

The baby quickly settled because of the warmth and the sound of Shane's heartbeat.

Shane looked up at Ilya, and then at the baby. "It's hard to describe how much I love him."

Ilya leaned in and gently placed a hand on the baby's back. "I know. I feel the same way."

Later that day, there was a light knock on the door.

Shane sat eating his long-awaited dinner on a tray in the bed, while Ilya sat shirtless in a chair next to him, holding the baby with a duvet wrapped around them.

Shane's parents stepped through the door.

Yuna covered her mouth as she walked toward them. She reached for Shane's hand and gave it a tight squeeze. She then bent down and gave him a quick kiss on the cheek before focusing on the baby.

"Oh, Shane, I'm so proud of you." Yuna gently stroked the baby's head and turned to look at Ilya. "Both of you. You did so well."

Ilya stood up and handed his newborn to Yuna, tightly wrapped in the duvet. He remained calm.

David walked over to Ilya, shook his hand, and gave him a big hug. "Nicely done," he said quietly.

He then turned to Shane and held his hand. Shane was getting some painkillers through his IV, but still felt some pain from the incision.

David noticed and placed a firm hand on his shoulder instead of initiating a hug.

“Just rest. I bet you had a rough day bringing this little guy into the world.” David smiled first at Shane, then at Yuna holding the baby.

“So... does he have a name?” Yuna asked.

Shane nodded at Ilya, giving him the honor of revealing the name.

“His name is Alexander. Xander for short.” Ilya went over and let his son grab onto his finger. “Xander Rozanov Hollander.”

The next day, as Shane was giving Xander a bottle, he noticed that he was slowly opening his eyes. As they opened completely, Shane looked at him, unable to speak for a moment.

“Ilya, you need to see this,” Shane exclaimed.

Ilya, who was sleeping on the bed next to him, woke up and turned toward Shane, confused. “What is it?”

“His eyes. Look.” Shane turned Xander, whose eyes were still wide open, so Ilya could see.

Ilya was amazed by the sight. One bright blue and one dark hazel brown eye.

“He has heterochromia,” Shane said and smiled.

Ilya looked at him, even more confused. *Of course, he knew what it was called*, Ilya thought to himself.

“He is okay, yes?” Ilya just wanted to be sure.

“He’s fine, but it’s not very common.” Shane looked at Xander and nuzzled him with his nose.

Later the same day, the Pikes decided to visit. All the children had been thoroughly instructed that they needed to stay quiet and remain calm when visiting the baby.

As they entered the room, it quickly became obvious that the children were more excited to see Ilya than the baby, and they forgot all about the quiet part.

After a lengthy greeting that involved hugs and a bit of playful wrestling with the kids, Ilya wanted them to meet the baby.

“Aren’t you going to say hello to your new cousin? His name is Xander,” Ilya encouraged.

Shane already considered Hayden to be the closest thing he had to a brother, and Ilya had grown to love the family. Well, tolerate Hayden and love the others. Therefore, it felt completely natural for them to address the Pike children as their child’s cousins.

Unbothered by the loud laughter during the greeting, Xander was resting peacefully.

“Is he wearing a mini hockey jersey?” Emma asked her father, who was holding Xander.

“Yes, it’s the one we gave Shane for his baby shower, remember?”

Hayden cleared his throat and started to use his “reporter voice.” “Number 84, Xander Hollander, a strong upcoming player.”

“Hayd...” Shane sent Hayden a disapproving look and nodded toward Ilya.

“Xander R. Hollander then.” That was as far as Hayden was willing to push it.

Two weeks later, Troy and Harris had come to meet the baby.

Shane had been allowed to leave the hospital three days after the birth, so they were starting to get into a routine with the baby at home.

Ilya had been on a road-trip with the team just after they got home from the hospital, but Shane’s parents had stepped in to help while he was gone.

Today, all three were home, since the Christmas break had just begun.

Ilya greeted Troy and Harris with a hug as they entered.

As they walked further into the house, Ilya noticed that Harris looked a little stunned.

“You decorated the whole house for Halloween, but nothing for Christmas?!” Harris made it sound like a crime.

True. There was not a single Christmas decoration in their home. But they were celebrating Christmas at Shane’s parents, like they used to, and had been busy with the baby.

Troy placed a hand on Harris’s back. “Not everyone is as excited about Christmas as you.” He gave Harris a light kiss on the cheek.

As they took off their coats, Ilya noticed Harris looked a bit different.

“Harris, you’re starting to show!” Ilya nodded toward Harris’s midsection.

Harris ran a hand down his stomach and blushed. “Well, it’s barely anything. Probably just too many cookies.”

Harris was stocky and not an athlete like the rest of them, but he certainly wasn’t overweight. Ilya didn’t buy the cookie excuse and remained convinced that he was starting to show.

Ilya smiled as he turned around. “Come meet Xander. He’s with Shane in the living room.”

Shane had just finished burping Xander after his bottle.

Xander was now lying in Shane’s arms with his eyes wide open, looking perfectly content as Troy and Harris approached.

“Wow, he is so beautiful. Look at those eyes!” Harris exclaimed.

“Do you want to hold him?” Shane asked.

Harris nodded and gently took Xander from Shane.

“He is so cute! I can’t believe we’re having one of our own soon.” Harris looked lovingly at Troy.

“Ilya couldn’t stop talking about Xander on our trip. I’ve probably seen every picture ever taken of him,” Troy joked.

“But he sure is much cuter in real life.”

Ilya nudged Troy and laughed. “Ahh, no more than 80%.”

“We brought a small gift for Xander, which may also serve as your ONLY Christmas decoration,” Harris said in a sarcastic but still bubbly voice.

Troy ran back to their coats and returned with a small package, which he handed to Shane.

Inside was a stuffed reindeer. It didn’t scream Christmas by any means, but simply by being a reindeer, it was indeed the most Christmassy thing in the house.

Ilya and Shane were once again invited for Christmas at Shane’s parents’ house.

The house was already filled with almost as much baby stuff as they had at home, which made it easy to bring Xander along.

Before dinner, they were all sitting on the sofa in the living room. Yuna had challenged everyone to a game of Yatzy.

As expected, it got a little too competitive, but Ilya loved it.

He looked at Shane, who was holding Xander, with his parents on either side of him. They were laughing, talking, and completely present in the moment despite the fierce competition.

To Ilya, Christmas, after so many years, finally felt meaningful again. He truly felt that his new family was complete and had never felt more loved or accepted in his life.

Although Ilya ended up beating everyone else by a wide margin, and the "love" was briefly replaced by "hate", all he felt was a deep, genuine love for these four people.

Shane and Ilya had decided to stay the night so they wouldn’t have to drive home in the dark, snowy weather.

Xander was lying in the middle of the guest bed and let out a big yawn. Shane and Ilya were lying on either side of him.

“Oh, you’re getting so tired,” Shane said quietly and stroked Xander on the head. “I still can’t believe we made an actual human being.”

“I’m so grateful you did this for us. I love you.”

Ilya leaned in and gave Shane a soft kiss, running his hand from Shane’s shoulder down to his hand.

All Shane wanted was to curl up against Ilya.

He gently picked up Xander, who had already fallen asleep, and placed him in the crib beside the bed.

“Just so you know, you’re carrying the next one,” Shane teased, grinning at Ilya.

“But you are the one with the gene Hollander,” Ilya said confidently.

Shane returned to the bed, leaned in, and tenderly kissed Ilya. He then locked eyes with him as a crooked smile spread across his face.

“Who knows? Maybe you’ve got it too? We haven’t done it the other way around many times, and it’s been a while.”

Chapter End Notes

Update: I have now started writing and posting part 2 of this series, following Troy and Harris.

The story is called "A branch of our own".

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!