

How to Come Out as Heterosexual: A Guide for Anxious Rookies

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How to Come Out as Heterosexual: A Guide for Anxious Rookies

by [pucksandpower](#)

Summary

Shane and Ilya take their rookie to Kingfisher for some post-game celebration. It's supposed to be a fun night out — just drinks, darts, and team bonding.

Instead, Noah spends the entire evening having an existential crisis that culminates in him nervously showing up at their hotel room at 1 AM because he has something important to tell them. Something he's been anxious about all night. Something that requires courage to say out loud.

He's straight.

(Or the most supportive hockey husbands in the league accidentally become hockey dads to a terminally anxious rookie who thinks “coming out as straight” is a thing he needs to do.)

The bus ride back to the hotel feels like a victory lap, even though they're just crawling through Manhattan traffic at eleven PM on a Saturday night.

Ilya's sprawled across two seats near the back, his legs extending into the aisle because he's never learned how to sit like a normal person. Shane's next to him, scrolling through his phone with that little smile he gets when he's reading congratulatory texts from his family. Three rows up, Noah Blanchard sits alone, staring out the window at the lit-up city like he's never seen buildings before.

"Hey," Ilya calls out, loud enough that half the bus turns to look. "Baby Blanchard."

Noah's ears go red — they always do — but he twists around in his seat. "Yeah?"

"You come out with us tonight."

It's not a question. Ilya doesn't really do questions when he's decided something.

Shane looks up from his phone, eyebrows raised. "We're going out?"

"Of course we go out. We win. We are in New York. We go to Kingfisher." Ilya says this like it's the most obvious thing in the world, like they didn't just play nearly twenty-three minutes each and it isn't creeping toward midnight.

"I'm not twenty-one yet," Noah says, and his voice does that thing where it cracks a little at the end. He's twenty, but sometimes he sounds about fifteen.

"Is okay," Ilya waves his hand dismissively. "You are with NHL team. Is fine."

"That's not how the law works," Shane says, but he's already got that look on his face that means he's going to give in. He's always been soft when it comes to their teammates, and especially soft when it comes to Noah, who showed up to training camp in September looking like a scared puppy and hasn't quite shaken the expression.

"Scott will let him in," Ilya insists. "He knows us. He knows Noah is good kid."

"Scott's probably pretty pissed at us right now," Shane points out. "We just beat them four to two."

Ilya grins, all teeth. "Exactly. So we go rub it in his face."

Shane sighs, but he's smiling. He turns in his seat to look back at Noah properly. "You want to come? You don't have to. No pressure."

Noah looks between them, his Adam's apple bobbing as he swallows. "I mean ... yeah. Yeah, okay. If you think it's cool."

"Is very cool," Ilya says firmly. "You are Centaur now. You come out with Centaurs."

“Most of the team’s probably just gonna crash,” Shane says, glancing around the bus. Half the guys look like they’re already asleep, slumped against windows or each other. “But we usually hit up Kingfisher when we’re in New York. It’s ... well, you’ll see.”

Noah nods, even though he looks a little uncertain. He’s got that wide-eyed expression he wears a lot, like the world is happening to him faster than he can process it.

“Text your parents or whatever,” Shane adds. “Let them know you’ll be out a bit longer.”

“Shane,” Ilya says, his voice dripping with amusement. “He is not baby.”

“He’s our rookie,” Shane counters. “And his mom follows me on Instagram. I’m not dealing with an angry mom in my DMs.”

Ilya laughs at that, loud and bright, the kind of laugh that makes other people want to laugh too. “Okay, okay. Yes, Noah, text your mama. Tell her your hockey dads are taking good care of you.”

“Please don’t call yourselves that,” Noah mutters, but he’s pulling out his phone, so he’s clearly going to do it anyway.

The bus pulls up to their hotel, and there’s the usual chaos of everyone gathering their stuff and stumbling out into the cold night air. Shane grabs both his and Ilya’s bags because Ilya’s already halfway to the sidewalk, turning back to yell at Noah to hurry up.

“We meet in lobby in twenty minutes,” Ilya announces. “You change, we change, then we go.”

“Do I need to dress nice?” Noah asks, hovering near the bus doors.

Shane considers this. “It’s a bar. Just wear ... I don’t know, not your team hoodie?”

“Wear something tight,” Ilya suggests with a wicked grin. “Show off that rookie body.”

“Ilya,” Shane says, in that warning tone he’s perfected over the years.

“What? I am just saying he should look good. We all should look good.” Ilya gestures at himself like he’s exhibit A, which, to be fair, he usually is.

They scatter to their rooms — Noah’s somewhere on the fourth floor, while Shane and Ilya have a suite on the seventh because Ilya always upgrades them when they’re on the road. “Is investment in our happiness,” he always says, and Shane stopped arguing about it years ago.

Shane showers quickly, because Ilya takes forever and they’re never going to make twenty minutes otherwise. When he comes out, toweling his hair dry, Ilya’s standing in front of the closet in just his briefs, scowling at his options like they’ve personally offended him.

“It’s a bar, not a fashion show,” Shane says.

“Is always fashion show when I go out,” Ilya replies without missing a beat. He pulls out a black henley that Shane knows costs more than most people’s rent and holds it up. “This one?”

“Sure.”

“You don’t even look.”

“Because you look good in everything, and you know it.”

Ilya’s scowl transforms into a smirk. “This is true.” He pulls the henley on, then adds jeans that are probably painted on, and Shane tries very hard not to stare at his husband’s ass in the mirror.

“You’re going to give Noah a crisis,” Shane says, pulling on his own shirt — just a blue button-down, nothing fancy.

“Noah will be fine. He is tough. He plays hockey.” Ilya sits on the edge of the bed to pull on boots. “Besides, is good for him to see queer people living normal lives, you know? Going to bars, being happy, being boring married couple.”

“We’re not boring,” Shane protests.

Ilya looks at him with such fond amusement that Shane wants to kiss him and also throw a pillow at his face. “Shane. We are very boring. Is wonderful.”

They make it down to the lobby in twenty-five minutes, which is practically on time by Ilya’s standards. Noah’s already waiting, wearing dark jeans and a flannel shirt that makes him look like he’s about to go chop wood in rural Canada, which, given that he’s from northern Quebec, might actually be his default look.

“Good,” Ilya says, looking him up and down appraisingly. “You look like lumberjack. Very Canadian. The gays will love it.”

Noah’s face goes through several expressions in rapid succession — confusion, understanding, then that particular shade of red that’s becoming his signature color. “Oh. Um. Is it ... is it that kind of bar?”

“Is gay bar, yes,” Ilya says cheerfully. “Is that okay?”

“Yeah! Yeah, of course. I just didn’t—I mean, that’s cool. That’s totally fine.” Noah’s doing that thing where he talks too fast, words tripping over each other. “I’ve never been to a gay bar before. Well, I’ve never been to any bar before in the US, but, like, I’ve been to bars in Montreal, but not gay ones, not that there’s anything wrong with-”

“Noah,” Shane interrupts gently. “Breathe.”

Noah sucks in air like he’s been underwater. “Sorry.”

“Is no problem,” Ilya says, already heading toward the doors. “Is just bar. Happens to be gay bar. Very good bar. Scott owns it.”

“Scott Hunter?” Noah jogs to catch up. “The guy we just played against?”

“That’s the one,” Shane confirms. They push out into the New York night, and the cold air hits like a slap. It’s early December, and the city’s already draped in Christmas lights, everything glittering and excessive the way only New York can pull off.

Ilya’s already got his phone out, summoning an Uber with the kind of efficiency that comes from years of practice. “Scott will probably be there. He always goes to his bar after home games.”

“Even when he loses?” Noah asks.

“Especially when he loses,” Shane says. “Though Ilya’s probably going to make that worse.”

“I am delight,” Ilya protests. “I am ray of sunshine in Scott’s boring life.”

The Uber arrives — a black SUV that actually has enough legroom for three hockey players — and they pile in. Ilya calls shotgun even though shotgun isn’t really a thing in Ubers, and Noah and Shane end up in the back.

“So,” Noah says quietly, while Ilya’s busy telling the driver about the game in his most animated fashion. “Is this bar, like, where you guys go? Like, regularly?”

Shane knows what he’s really asking. “When we’re in New York, yeah. It’s a good place. Safe.”

Noah nods slowly. “Cool. That’s ... that’s really cool.”

He’s fidgeting with his phone case, flipping it over and over in his hands, and Shane recognizes the nervous energy. He remembers being twenty and terrified and not even knowing what he was terrified of yet.

“You’re gonna be fine,” Shane says, quiet enough that Ilya won’t hear. “Promise.”

Noah looks up at him, and there’s something vulnerable in his expression that makes Shane’s chest ache. “Thanks. For inviting me, I mean. You guys didn’t have to.”

“We wanted to,” Shane says simply, and it’s true. There’s something about Noah that makes both him and Ilya want to wrap him up and protect him from the world, even though the kid’s six-foot-two and can throw down with the best of them on the ice.

The drive takes fifteen minutes, winding through Manhattan’s grid until they’re in the Village, where the streets get narrower and the buildings lean in close like they’re sharing secrets. The Uber drops them off outside a brick building with a simple sign: Kingfisher. The windows are frosted, glowing warm from inside, and there’s a small line of people waiting at the door.

Ilya walks past the line like he owns the place, which, in a way, he kind of does. The bouncer — a massive guy with a beard and kind eyes — grins when he sees them.

“Hollander, Rozanov. Haven’t seen you in a while.”

“Hi, John,” Shane says. “Busy night?”

“Always busy on Saturday. Who’s the kid?”

“Our rookie,” Ilya says, slinging an arm around Noah’s shoulders. Noah looks like he’s trying to decide if he’s thrilled or terrified. “Noah Blanchard. He is very good. You let him in, yes?”

John looks Noah up and down, taking in the obvious deer-in-headlights expression. “He legal?”

“Not in US,” Ilya admits cheerfully. “But he is with us, and he is professional hockey player, and he is very responsible. He will drink one beer, maximum. Maybe two.”

“Ilya,” Shane says.

“One beer,” Ilya amends. “One very small beer.”

John sighs, but he’s smiling. “Scott know you’re bringing in minors?”

“Scott will be fine with it,” Shane assures him. “I’ll take full responsibility.”

“Yeah, yeah.” John waves them through. “Go on. But kid-” He points at Noah. “I catch you trying to order more than two drinks, you’re out. Got it?”

“Yes, sir,” Noah says quickly. “Thank you. I won’t—I’ll be good. I mean, responsible. I’ll be responsible.”

Ilya’s already pulling the door open, and suddenly they’re hit with warmth and noise and the low thrum of music. Kingfisher is packed, bodies pressed close at the bar and scattered around high-top tables. The décor is all dark wood and brass fixtures, trying for English pub and mostly succeeding. Rainbow flags hang alongside Union Jacks, and there’s a dartboard in the corner that’s currently hosting what looks like a very intense competition.

“There,” Ilya says, pointing toward the bar. “I see him.”

Scott Hunter is exactly where Ilya said he’d be, leaning against the bar with a beer in hand, talking to the bartender. He’s in jeans and a tight black t-shirt, looking annoyingly good for someone who just lost a hockey game. When he sees them approaching, his expression shifts from relaxed to exasperated in about half a second.

“Oh no,” Scott says. “Not you two.”

“Hello, old man!” Ilya announces, loud enough that several people turn to look. “We are here to celebrate our victory over your sad, losing team!”

“We lost by two goals,” Scott says. “And I’m thirty-six, not old.”

“Is ancient,” Ilya says solemnly. “You are like dinosaur. Fossil. Should be in museum.”

Shane elbows Ilya in the ribs. “Sorry about him. He gets cocky when we win.”

“He gets cocky when he breathes,” Scott mutters, but he’s smiling a little. His eyes land on Noah, who’s hovering behind them like he’s trying to be invisible. “Who’s this?”

“Noah Blanchard,” Shane says. “Our rookie. Noah, this is Scott Hunter. He owns this place.”

“Hi,” Noah says, offering his hand for a shake like they’re at a business meeting. “Nice to meet you. Sorry we beat you. I mean, not sorry, but, like, you played really well. That block in the second period was-”

“He talks a lot when he is nervous,” Ilya interrupts. “Is cute. We are keeping him.”

Scott shakes Noah’s hand, looking amused. “How old are you, kid?”

“Twenty. Almost twenty-one. My birthday’s in March.”

“So not legal in the US,” Scott says, shooting Shane and Ilya a look.

“John already cleared it,” Shane says quickly. “And he’s just having one beer. Maybe two.”

“One beer,” Ilya says firmly.

“I can just have water,” Noah offers.

“No, no, you have beer,” Ilya insists. “Is fine. Scott will allow it because Scott is good person, even if his team is terrible.”

“We’re third in the division,” Scott says.

“Is very sad division,” Ilya replies sweetly.

Scott looks at Shane. “How do you live with him?”

“Lots of patience,” Shane says. “And the sex is good.”

Noah makes a strangled sound behind them.

Scott laughs and pushes off the bar. “Alright, fine. One beer for the baby. What are you two having?”

“Vodka,” Ilya says immediately. “The good kind. Not the shit you serve to tourists.”

“I’ll have a Moscow Mule,” Shane says. “Extra ginger ale.”

“Of course you will,” Scott says, already moving behind the bar. The bartender — a guy with dark hair and washboard abs that his skintight shirt is doing absolutely nothing to hide —

grins and steps aside to let Scott work. “And you, kid? What kind of beer?”

Noah looks panicked. “Um. Whatever’s fine? I don’t really—I’m not picky?”

“He will have Molson,” Ilya decides. “Is Canadian. Is appropriate.”

Scott pours their drinks with practiced efficiency, and Shane watches Noah watch the crowd, his eyes going wide as he takes in the scene. Two guys are making out near the jukebox. A group of women are laughing loudly in the corner booth, one of them with her hand on another’s thigh. It’s not explicitly sexual or anything, just openly affectionate in a way that the straight bars they usually go to aren’t.

“Here,” Scott says, sliding their drinks across the bar. He’s put the vodka in a rocks glass with one large ice cube, Shane’s cocktail in a copper mug, and Noah’s beer in a pint glass. “First round’s on the house, since you’re celebrating.”

“Is because you feel bad about losing,” Ilya says, but he’s grinning as he picks up his drink.

“It’s because I’m a good host,” Scott counters. “Now get out of my bar area. You’re scaring the customers.”

“We are delight,” Ilya protests, but he’s already turning away, vodka in hand. “Come, we find table.”

They end up in a booth near the back, tucked into a corner where they can see the whole bar but aren’t right in the middle of everything. It’s a good spot — private enough for conversation but still part of the energy. Ilya slides in first, then Shane, then Noah on the end, looking like he’s not sure if he’s allowed to relax yet.

“So,” Ilya says, raising his glass. “To victory. To beating Scott’s boring team. To Noah’s first time in American gay bar.”

“To not getting carded,” Shane adds, clinking his mug against Ilya’s glass.

Noah lifts his beer carefully, like it might explode. “To, um, being here. With you guys. Thanks for bringing me.”

They drink — Ilya knocks back half his vodka in one go, Shane sips his Moscow Mule and savors the ginger burn, and Noah takes the world’s most careful sip of beer like he’s never had alcohol before in his life.

“Is good, yes?” Ilya asks, gesturing around the bar. “Is better than hotel room.”

“It’s great,” Noah says, and he sounds like he means it, even though his eyes keep darting around like he’s trying to catalog everything at once. “I’ve never been anywhere like this.”

“Quebec has gay bars,” Shane points out.

“Yeah, but I never-” Noah stops, his ears going red again. “I mean, I just never had a reason to go to one. You know?”

Ilya and Shane exchange a glance, one of those wordless conversations they've perfected over years of being together. Shane can read the question in Ilya's eyes: Should we say something? He gives a tiny shake of his head: Let him come to it on his own.

"Well," Shane says easily, "now you have a reason. Team bonding."

"Plus, drinks are stronger here than at straight bars," Ilya adds. "Scott is generous with his pours."

"I thought you said he was boring," Noah says.

Ilya grins. "He is very boring. But he makes good drinks. These things can both be true."

They settle into easy conversation — replaying the game, chirping each other about missed passes and botched plays, the kind of comfortable shit-talking that comes from spending half your life with the same group of people. Noah starts to relax, his shoulders coming down from around his ears, and by the time he's halfway through his beer, he's actually laughing at Ilya's stories.

"And then," Ilya's saying, gesturing wildly with his glass, "Shane falls directly on his ass. Right in front of the bench. On national television."

"It was a bad call," Shane protests. "That should've been a penalty."

"You dive like soccer player," Ilya teases. "Very dramatic. Very pathetic."

"You're the worst husband in the world," Shane says, but he's smiling, and when Ilya leans over to kiss his cheek, he doesn't pull away.

Noah's watching them with this expression Shane can't quite read — something soft and a little wistful. "How long have you guys been married?" he asks.

"Three years," Shane says. "But we've been together for—what, Ilya? Like fourteen years total?"

"On and off," Ilya clarifies. "Was complicated for long time. But then we get smart, we get married, we live happily ever after like Disney movie." He pauses. "Very queer Disney movie."

"The queerest," Shane agrees.

Noah takes another sip of his beer. "That's ... that's really cool. I mean, that you can just be open about it. Like, with the team and everyone."

"Is 2024," Ilya says with a shrug. "Almost 2025. World is different now. Not perfect, but different."

"Most of the league's gotten better about it now," Shane adds. "We've been lucky."

“And if someone is not good about it,” Ilya says, his voice taking on a sharp edge, “they can fuck off.”

“What he said,” Shane murmurs.

They’re interrupted by Scott appearing at their table, sliding into the booth next to Noah without asking. “You guys good? Need another round?”

“I will take another vodka,” Ilya says immediately. “Shane?”

“I’m good for now.” Shane’s still got half his Moscow Mule left.

“I’m okay too,” Noah says quickly. “Still working on this one.”

Scott nods and steals Noah’s beer, taking a long drink before handing it back. Noah looks confused. “Um.”

“Making sure it’s good,” Scott says. “Quality control.”

“You own the bar,” Ilya points out. “You should know if your beer is good.”

“Maybe I forget.” Scott leans back, stretching his arm along the top of the booth. He looks tired, Shane realizes, the kind of bone-deep exhaustion that comes from a long season and longer nights. “So, Blanchard. How’s your first season going? These two treating you alright?”

“Yeah, they’re great,” Noah says, and he sounds genuinely enthusiastic. “They’ve been really helpful. Shane’s been working with me on my defensive positioning, and Ilya’s been-” He pauses. “What have you been doing, exactly?”

“I am teaching you how to be Russian,” Ilya says seriously. “Is very important skill.”

“I’m Canadian.”

“Is why you need lessons.” Ilya drains the rest of his vodka and stands. “I go get another drink. Scott, you come help me. We must discuss how badly your team is playing.”

“We’re third in the division,” Scott repeats, but he’s already standing up.

“Is sympathy ranking,” Ilya says, steering Scott toward the bar. “League feels bad for you.”

Their voices fade into the noise of the bar, and Shane finds himself alone with Noah, who’s peeling the label off his beer bottle with intense concentration.

“You doing okay?” Shane asks quietly.

Noah looks up, startled. “Yeah. Yeah, I’m good. This is fun.”

“But?”

“No buts. I’m having a good time. I swear.”

Shane waits. It's a trick he learned from his mom — sometimes people just need silence to fill.

Sure enough, after a moment, Noah says, "Is it weird that I feel kind of ... out of place? Like everyone here just seems so comfortable and I'm just—" He gestures vaguely at himself. "I don't know. Never mind. That's stupid."

"It's not stupid," Shane says. "First time in a place like this can be a lot. Even if you're—" He pauses, choosing his words carefully. "Even if you're comfortable with yourself, you know? It's just different."

"Yeah," Noah says, looking relieved. "Yeah, exactly. It's not bad different. Just different different."

"That's normal," Shane assures him. "When Ilya and I first started going to places like this, I felt like everyone could tell I didn't belong. Like I had 'straight guy in a gay bar' written on my forehead."

Noah laughs at that. "But you're not straight."

"I know that. But I didn't always feel gay enough, you know? Like there was some club I wasn't part of." Shane takes a sip of his drink. "Took me a while to realize that there's no one way to be gay. You just ... are."

"That makes sense," Noah says slowly. He's quiet for a moment, then adds, "Can I ask you something?"

"Sure."

"When did you know? Like, for sure?"

Shane considers this. It's a question he's been asked a lot over the years, and his answer has changed as he's gotten older, gotten more comfortable in his own skin. "I think I always kind of knew. But I didn't let myself know, you know? It wasn't until I met Ilya that I couldn't ignore it anymore."

"Was it scary?"

"Terrifying," Shane admits. "But also ... a relief? Like I'd been holding my breath for years and finally let it out."

Noah nods, processing this. He looks like he wants to ask something else, but before he can, Ilya's back, carrying a fresh vodka and another Moscow Mule.

"For you," he says, putting the mule in front of Shane. "Kip says he makes it with extra ginger ale, exactly how you like. He is trying to make me jealous."

"Is it working?" Shane asks.

"Little bit." Ilya slides back into the booth. "Where is Scott?"

“Some customer needed him,” Shane says. “Something about the jukebox.”

“Jukebox is stupid,” Ilya declares. “Should have DJ. Should have dancing.”

“There’s not enough room for dancing,” Shane points out.

“Is always room for dancing.” Ilya takes a drink, then grins at Noah. “You have partner, Noah?”

Noah nearly chokes on his beer. “What?”

“Girlfriend. Boyfriend. Person you are dating.”

“Oh. Um. No. Not right now.”

“Why not? You are handsome. You are professional hockey player. Should have many people interested.”

“Ilya,” Shane says warningly.

“What? I am just asking question. Is normal question.”

Noah’s face is red again, but he’s smiling a little. “I guess I’ve just been focused on hockey. Making the team and everything.”

“Is good answer,” Ilya approves. “Hockey first, romance second. This is smart.”

“Says the guy who almost tanked his career for love,” Shane mutters.

“I did not tank anything. I just took scenic route.” Ilya leans into Shane’s shoulder. “But was worth it.”

They’re being disgustingly cute, Shane realizes, and maybe that’s not fair to Noah, who’s sitting there watching them with that same unreadable expression from earlier. But before he can say anything, a guy appears at their table — tall, Black, with a gorgeous smile and confidence that radiates off him like heat.

“Hey,” the guy says, looking directly at Noah. “I’m Michael. I saw you come in earlier and I just wanted to say hi.”

Noah looks like a rabbit caught in headlights. “Oh. Um. Hi?”

“You’re here with Hollander and Rozanov, right? You play for Ottawa too?”

“Yeah, I’m Noah. Blanchard. My name’s Noah Blanchard.” Noah’s words are tumbling over each other again, and Shane has to bite the inside of his cheek to keep from smiling.

“Cool,” Michael says easily. “You guys sticking around for a while? Maybe I could buy you a drink later?”

Every single molecule of Noah's body radiates panic. "I, uh, I'm actually—I can't really—I'm not—"

"He has early curfew," Ilya interrupts smoothly. "Coach is very strict. Sorry."

Michael looks disappointed but not offended. "No worries. Maybe another time." He flashes that smile again and disappears back into the crowd.

Noah looks like he might pass out. "Oh my god."

"Breathe," Shane instructs.

"Did that guy just—was he hitting on me?"

"Yes," Ilya says. "Was very obvious. You did not notice?"

"I—no. I mean, maybe? I don't know!" Noah puts his head in his hands. "Oh my god."

"Is fine," Ilya says, patting Noah's shoulder. "You handle it very well."

"I barely said anything!"

"Exactly. Was perfect. You do not lead him on, you do not hurt his feelings. Was very polite panic."

Shane's trying not to laugh, but it's a losing battle. Noah looks up at them, his expression somewhere between mortified and amused. "Is this what it's like here? People just come up and talk to you?"

"Sometimes," Shane says. "That's kind of how bars work."

"But he thought I was—he was—" Noah makes a vague gesture.

"He thought you were gay," Ilya supplies helpfully. "Because you are in gay bar. Is logical conclusion."

"But I'm not—" Noah stops himself, his eyes going wide. "I mean, not that there's anything wrong with liking men. Obviously. You guys do and you're great. I just meant—"

"Noah," Shane says gently. "Relax. We know what you meant."

Noah takes a long drink of his beer, then another. He's already almost finished it, and Shane makes a mental note to slow him down before he ends up drunk and panicking in the middle of a gay bar.

"Is okay if you are not gay," Ilya says, his voice surprisingly soft. "No one here will be mad at you for being straight. You are allowed to be here. You are with us."

"I know," Noah says. "I know that. I just feel kind of like an imposter or something."

“You are not imposter. You are just Noah. Is enough.” Ilya finishes his second vodka and sets the glass down with a decisive clink. “Now, we change subject. Shane, tell Noah about the time you throw up on me after too much tequila.”

“That was one time,” Shane protests. “And you’re the one who kept making me do shots.”

“You have no self-control.”

“You literally just ordered your second vodka in half an hour.”

“Is different. I am Russian. I have tolerance.”

They fall back into easier conversation, and gradually, Noah’s shoulders loosen again. He nurses the rest of his beer slowly, and when Ilya suggests they play darts, he agrees without hesitation. They spend the next hour throwing darts with varying degrees of success — Ilya’s surprisingly good, Shane’s mediocre, and Noah hits the wall more often than the board.

By the time they leave, it’s past one in the morning. Noah’s yawning every thirty seconds, and Shane’s feeling the pleasant warmth that comes from good drinks and better company. Ilya’s the most sober of all of them, having switched to water after his second vodka, and he herds them out the door with the efficiency of a border collie.

“Thank Scott for us,” Shane calls back as they leave, and Kip waves from behind the bar.

The cold air is a shock after the warmth of the bar, and Noah hunches into his jacket. “That was fun,” he says, and he sounds surprised by how much he means it.

“See?” Ilya says. “I am always right. Going out is good idea.”

“You’re never humble, are you?” Shane asks.

“Why would I be humble when I am this good at everything?”

They get another Uber — this one slightly smaller, which means they’re all crammed in the back seat together. Noah’s in the middle, and he keeps his elbows tucked in tight like he’s trying not to take up space.

“You can relax,” Shane tells him. “We don’t bite.”

“I bite sometimes,” Ilya says thoughtfully. “But only Shane.”

“Please stop talking,” Noah says, but he’s laughing.

The hotel lobby is empty when they arrive, just a bored-looking desk clerk and the hum of the vending machines. They pile into the elevator, and Shane hits the button for seven while Noah hits four.

“You did good tonight, kid,” Shane says as they ride up.

“I didn’t really do anything,” Noah points out.

“You came out with us. You tried something new. That’s good.” Shane’s not sure why he feels so protective of this kid, but he does. Maybe it’s because Noah reminds him of himself at that age — uncertain, trying so hard to fit in, not quite comfortable in his own skin yet.

The elevator dings at four. Noah steps out, then turns back. “Hey, um, can I—could I talk to you guys? For a minute?”

Ilya and Shane exchange a glance. “Of course,” Shane says. “You want to come up to our room?”

Noah nods, looking relieved. “Yeah. If that’s okay. It won’t take long.”

“Is fine,” Ilya says, holding the elevator door. “Come.”

Noah steps back in, and they ride up three more floors in silence. Shane’s mind is racing through possibilities — is Noah hurt? Having problems with the team? Homesick? He seems fine, but Shane’s learned that fine can mean a lot of things.

Their suite is a mess of suitcases and discarded clothes, because Ilya is never particularly tidy when they’re on the road despite Shane’s best efforts. Shane clears some space on the couch while Ilya flops onto the bed, propping himself up on his elbows.

“Sit,” Shane instructs, gesturing to the couch. Noah sits on the very edge, like he might need to run at any moment. “What’s going on? Everything okay?”

“Yeah, everything’s fine. I just-” Noah takes a deep breath. His hands are shaking a little, Shane notices. “I wanted to tell you guys something.”

“Okay,” Shane says carefully. He sits down next to Noah, leaving a respectful distance between them. “We’re listening.”

Noah opens his mouth, closes it, opens it again. His face is doing something complicated, somewhere between terrified and determined. Finally, the words come out in a rush, so fast that they blur together into one long incomprehensible string. “I’mnotgay.”

Shane blinks. “What?”

“Say again,” Ilya says from the bed. “Slower.”

Noah takes another breath, his whole body visibly tense. “I’m not gay.”

There’s a beat of silence. Then another. Then Ilya starts laughing — not a mean laugh, but a genuine, delighted laugh that fills the whole room. Shane feels his own lips twitching, fighting against a smile because Noah looks so serious, so anxious, and it’s not funny, except it kind of is.

“Oh my god,” Ilya gasps, sitting up. “Oh my god, Noah.”

Noah’s face cycles through emotions — confusion, then something that might be offense. “What? Why are you laughing?”

Shane can't hold it back anymore. He starts laughing too, pressing his hand against his mouth to try to muffle it. "Sorry. Sorry, we're not—we're not laughing at you."

"Seems like you are," Noah mutters, but he doesn't sound angry, just confused.

Ilya wipes at his eyes, still chuckling. "Noah. Baby Blanchard. We know you are not gay."

"You what?"

"Of course we know," Ilya says, like this is the most obvious thing in the world. "Only straight man could sit next to me all night and not once look at my ass."

Shane reaches over and smacks Ilya upside the head. "Don't be a dick."

"Ow! Is true though!" Ilya rubs his head, grinning. "I am very attractive. Gay men notice. You did not notice. Therefore, you are not gay. Is simple logic."

"You're such a cocky asshole," Shane says, but there's affection in his voice.

Ilya just shrugs, completely unrepentant. "Is not cocky if is true."

Noah's looking between them like he's not sure if he should be offended or relieved. "So you ... you knew? The whole time?"

"We didn't know for certain," Shane clarifies, shooting Ilya a look that says shut up and let me handle this. "But we never assumed anything about your sexuality either. That's not—that's not something we would do."

"Then why did you bring me to a gay bar?" Noah asks, and now he sounds genuinely confused.

"Because is good bar," Ilya says simply. "Because we like it there. Because we want you to know that we are gay, and we are your teammates, and this is part of our lives. Not because we think you are gay."

Shane leans forward, trying to catch Noah's eye. "Did you think we were trying to, what, figure out if you were gay? Or make some kind of statement?"

"I don't know," Noah admits. He's still perched on the edge of the couch, wound tight as a spring. "I just—tonight was great, it really was. But that guy came up to me, and everyone there was so comfortable and open, and I just kept thinking that maybe you guys thought I was—that I was like you. And I'm not. And I didn't want you to think I was lying to you or hiding something or—"

"Hey," Shane interrupts gently. "Breathe. You're spiraling."

Noah stops, sucks in air. "Sorry."

"Don't apologize." Shane shifts a little closer, close enough that Noah can't avoid looking at him. "Listen to me. We never made any assumptions about who you are or who you're

attracted to. That's not our business unless you want to make it our business. Okay?"

"Okay," Noah says quietly.

"We brought you tonight because you're our teammate and our friend," Shane continues. "Because we go to Kingfisher when we're in New York, and we wanted you to come with us. That's it. There's no hidden agenda."

"Also because you are good kid and we like you," Ilya adds. "And because we want you to know that we are here for you, no matter what. If you are gay, if you are straight, if you are bi, if you are something else — does not matter. You are still our Noah."

Noah's eyes are suspiciously shiny. "You guys are really nice."

"We are not nice," Ilya protests. "We are tough hockey players. Very masculine. Very scary."

"You literally just called him 'our Noah,'" Shane points out.

"Can be scary and affectionate. Is Russian way."

Noah lets out a laugh that's half sob. "I'm sorry. I feel really stupid right now."

"Don't," Shane says firmly. "You don't have anything to feel stupid about. You were brave enough to tell us something that was clearly stressing you out. That takes guts."

"I just kept thinking about it the whole night," Noah admits. "Like, what if you guys thought I was gay and I wasn't saying anything, and you'd think I was, like, a coward or in denial or something. And then I thought maybe you were trying to create some kind of safe space for me to come out, and I was ruining it by not coming out because I don't have anything to come out about, and—" He stops himself. "I'm doing the spiral thing again, aren't I?"

"Little bit," Shane says, smiling.

Ilya's still on the bed, propped up on his elbows, watching them with that expression he gets sometimes — the soft one that he usually reserves for Shane, the one that says he cares more than he wants to admit. "Noah. Can I tell you something?"

"Sure," Noah says, turning to look at him.

"When I was young — younger than you, even — I know I like boys *and* girls. But I tell no one. Not my family, not my friends, not my teammates. Not for many years." Ilya's voice has gone quiet, serious in a way it rarely is. "And I know Shane has different story, but is also hard for him. We both spend long time hiding, pretending, being afraid."

Shane feels his throat tighten. They don't talk about this much anymore — not because it doesn't matter, but because they've moved past it. But hearing Ilya bring it up now, for Noah's sake, makes Shane fall in love with his husband all over again.

"So when we see you," Ilya continues, "we want you to know that if you are hiding something, you don't have to. Not with us. But also—" He pauses, seeming to search for the

right words. “Also, we don’t want you to think you have to be something you are not. If you are straight, you are straight. Is okay. Is good. We don’t need you to like men to care about you.”

Noah’s definitely crying now, just a little, tears slipping down his cheeks that he wipes away quickly. “Thanks. That means a lot. Both of you — you’ve been really great to me since I got called up. I know I’m kind of a mess sometimes.”

“You are not mess,” Ilya says. “You are twenty years old and playing in best hockey league in world. Is normal to be nervous. Is normal to not know everything yet.”

“Besides,” Shane adds, “we like having you around. You keep us young.”

“You are not old,” Noah says.

“We are ancient,” Ilya says dramatically. “We are basically dead. You are our youth serum.”

That gets a real laugh out of Noah, and the tension in the room finally breaks. He slumps back into the couch, looking exhausted but relieved. “I really thought you guys were going to be mad.”

“Why would we be mad?” Shane asks.

“I don’t know. For wasting your time? For making you explain that I’m straight when you probably already knew?”

“Was not waste of time,” Ilya says firmly. “Was important to you, so was important to us. This is what teammates do. What friends do.”

“What dads do,” Shane adds, then immediately regrets it when both Ilya and Noah whip around to stare at him. “I’m joking. Obviously. Kind of.”

“You are not joking,” Ilya says, looking delighted. “You want to be hockey dad.”

“I didn’t say that.”

“You literally just said so.”

“I was speaking metaphorically.”

“Sure you were.”

Noah’s watching this exchange with something like wonder on his face. “You guys really do this all the time? Just, like, bicker about nothing?”

“Is how we show love,” Ilya explains. “Shane says something, I disagree, we argue, we kiss, we move on.”

“Please don’t kiss right now,” Noah says quickly. “I’m still recovering from the emotional whiplash.”

Shane laughs. “Fair enough.” He stands up, stretching. His back pops in three places, which is what happens when you’re thirty-three and play professional hockey. “You should get some sleep, kid. We’ve got practice tomorrow afternoon.”

“Yeah.” Noah stands too, but he hesitates. “Can I just—can I ask you guys one more thing?”

“Of course,” Shane says.

“That guy. Michael. Who came up to me.” Noah’s ears are red again. “Was he really—I mean, did he actually think—”

“He was absolutely hitting on you,” Shane confirms. “You’re his type, apparently.”

“How do you know what his type is?”

“Because you are everyone’s type,” Ilya says matter-of-factly. “You are tall, you are handsome, you have very good jaw. Also you look like lost puppy, which many people find attractive.”

“I don’t look like a lost puppy,” Noah protests.

“You absolutely do,” Shane says. “It’s part of your charm.”

Noah groans, covering his face with his hands. “This is mortifying.”

“Is not mortifying,” Ilya says. “Is compliment. You should be flattered. Not many people get hit on by handsome man in bar.”

“I’m straight,” Noah reminds him.

“Yes, we know. We cover this already.” Ilya waves his hand dismissively. “But you can still appreciate compliment. Someone thinks you are attractive enough to approach. Is nice.”

“I guess,” Noah says dubiously. He drops his hands, looking between them. “So it doesn’t weird you out? That I’m straight and I was at your bar?”

“Is not our bar,” Shane says. “Is Scott’s bar. And no, it doesn’t weird us out. Lots of straight people go to gay bars. Allies exist.”

“Plus,” Ilya adds, “if we only spend time with gay people, our lives would be very boring. Many of our friends are straight. Most of our teammates are straight. Is fine. We like you anyway.”

“Wow, thanks,” Noah says, but he’s smiling.

They walk him to the door, and Shane feels that protective instinct surge again as he watches Noah step into the hallway. He looks so young in the fluorescent lights, still a kid despite being over six feet tall and built like a defenseman.

“Hey, Noah?” Shane calls out before he can reach the elevator.

Noah turns back. “Yeah?”

“You did good tonight. Coming to us, being honest about what was bothering you — that took courage. Don’t forget that.”

Noah’s smile is genuine, reaching his eyes. “Thanks, Holly. Thanks, Rozy. For everything.”

“Anytime,” Ilya says. “Literally anytime. We are always here. Even at three in morning if you need us.”

“Hopefully not at three in the morning,” Shane mutters.

“You never know,” Ilya says philosophically. “Life is unpredictable.”

They watch Noah get in the elevator and disappear, then close the door and look at each other. For a moment, neither of them speaks. Then Ilya starts laughing again, that same delighted sound from before.

“I cannot believe,” he gasps, “that our rookie thought he had to come out as straight.”

Shane’s trying not to laugh, but it’s impossible. “He was so serious about it too.”

“He was terrified! Like we would — what? Kick him off team for liking women?” Ilya shakes his head, still grinning. “Is the most ridiculous thing I ever hear.”

“It’s not ridiculous,” Shane says, even though he’s smiling. “He was scared. He didn’t want to disappoint us or make us feel like he was lying.”

“But why would he think-” Ilya stops, his expression shifting to something more thoughtful. “Oh. Because he cares what we think. Because we matter to him.”

“Yeah,” Shane says softly. “We do.”

Ilya’s quiet for a moment, processing this. Then he says, “We really are his hockey dads, aren’t we?”

“I think we might be.”

“Is strange. We are not that much older than him.”

“We’re thirteen years older than him,” Shane points out. “That’s a lot.”

“When did we become so old?”

“Around the same time you started calling Scott old, probably.”

Ilya flops back onto the bed with a dramatic sigh. “Time is cruel mistress. Yesterday I am young hotshot rookie, today I am hockey dad to baby Blanchard.”

Shane sits on the edge of the bed, pulling off his shoes. “You’re a good hockey dad, though.”

“Of course I am. I am good at everything.”

“There’s that humility again.”

Ilya reaches out and tugs Shane down beside him. “Come here, hockey dad number two.”

Shane goes willingly, settling into the familiar warmth of Ilya’s side. They lie there for a while, just breathing, the adrenaline of the night slowly fading into comfortable exhaustion.

“Do you think he’s okay?” Shane asks quietly. “Really okay?”

“I think so,” Ilya says. “I think he just needed to say it out loud. Sometimes you need to say things out loud, even if they are obvious, you know?”

“Yeah,” Shane says. “I know.”

He thinks about all the things he’s had to say out loud over the years. I’m gay. I love you. I’m scared. I want this. Each one feeling impossible until the moment he actually spoke the words, and then suddenly they were just ... true. Just part of the air between him and whoever he was talking to.

“We should make sure he knows he can talk to us,” Shane says. “About anything. Not just gay stuff. Just life stuff.”

“We will,” Ilya promises. “We will be very good hockey dads. The best hockey dads. Other rookies will be jealous.”

“We’re not calling ourselves hockey dads.”

“Too late. Is already decided. We are hockey dads now.” Ilya turns his head to look at Shane, his eyes warm in the dim light from the window. “Is not so bad, though. Being someone’s safe person.”

“No,” Shane agrees. “It’s not bad at all.”

They’re quiet again, and Shane can feel himself starting to drift, exhaustion pulling at his edges. But then Ilya speaks again, his voice soft.

“Shane?”

“Mm?”

“I am glad we are who we are now. Not who we were when we were Noah’s age.”

Shane knows what he means. When they were twenty, they were both disasters in completely different ways — Ilya all sharp edges and bravado, hiding his fear behind cockiness; Shane so deep in denial he couldn’t even admit to himself what he wanted. It took years, and pain, and nearly losing each other before they figured out how to be honest. How to be whole.

“Me too,” Shane says. “We’re better now.”

“Much better,” Ilya agrees. “Very boring and married and old, but better.”

“We’re not old.”

“Tell that to my knees.”

“Your knees are fine.”

“They crack when I stand up.”

“Everyone’s knees crack when they stand up.”

“Not twenty-year-old knees,” Ilya says mournfully. “Twenty-year-old knees are silent and perfect.”

Shane’s laughing again, because this is his life now — lying in a hotel bed in New York at two in the morning, arguing with his husband about their knees while their rookie probably lies awake four floors down, processing his emotional revelation that he’s straight.

It’s absurd. It’s perfect. It’s theirs.

“We should sleep,” Shane says eventually. “Practice tomorrow.”

“Five more minutes,” Ilya mumbles, already half asleep.

“You always say five more minutes.”

“Because five minutes is perfect amount of time.”

Shane doesn’t argue. He just closes his eyes and lets himself sink into the mattress, into the warmth of Ilya beside him, into the strange and wonderful reality of being thirty-three and married and accidentally becoming a father figure to a confused rookie who felt the need to come out as straight.

His last thought before sleep takes him is that Noah’s going to be okay. They’ll make sure of it.

The next morning comes too early, sunlight streaming through the gaps in the curtains and stabbing directly into Shane’s eyes. He groans and rolls over, burying his face in Ilya’s shoulder.

“Too bright,” he mumbles.

“Is morning,” Ilya says. He sounds disgustingly awake. “Morning is bright. Is how morning works.”

“I hate you.”

“No you don’t.” Ilya’s already moving, extracting himself from Shane’s grip with practiced ease. “Come on. We have breakfast in thirty minutes, then practice.”

Shane forces himself upright, squinting against the light. His mouth tastes like ginger ale and regret, and his back has that special stiffness that comes from being a professional athlete over thirty. “What time is it?”

“Nine thirty.”

“That’s not morning. That’s the middle of the night.”

“You are so dramatic.” Ilya’s already in the bathroom, and Shane hears the shower start. “Come shower. Will wake you up.”

Shane drags himself out of bed and follows, because a shower does sound good, and because showering with Ilya is always better than showering alone. The hot water helps, and by the time they’re dressed and heading down to breakfast, he feels almost human.

The hotel restaurant is one of those generic continental breakfast situations — mediocre coffee, industrial scrambled eggs, bagels that might be from yesterday. Most of the team is already there, scattered around tables in various states of consciousness. Shane spots Noah immediately, sitting alone in the corner with a plate of eggs and toast, staring at his phone.

“There is our baby,” Ilya announces, loud enough that several heads turn.

Noah looks up, his face immediately going red. “Please don’t call me that in public.”

“Why not? Is term of endearment.” Ilya slides into the booth across from him, and Shane follows, setting down his coffee and plate of questionable eggs.

“Because the guys will never let me live it down,” Noah says, but he’s smiling a little.

“The guys already call you worse things,” Shane points out. “Blanch, Rookie, Kid, Fresh Meat ...”

“Okay, fair point.” Noah takes a bite of toast, then adds quietly, “Thanks for last night. Both of you. I feel a lot better.”

“Good,” Shane says simply. “That’s what we wanted.”

They eat in comfortable silence for a few minutes, the low chatter of the team washing over them. A couple of guys come over to chirp Ilya about something that happened in the game, and he gives it right back, grinning and gesturing with his fork. Noah watches the interaction with that same observant look he always has, like he’s cataloging everything for future reference.

“You nervous about morning skate?” Shane asks him.

Noah shrugs. “A little. Coach has been on me about my gap control lately.”

“Your gap control is fine,” Ilya says, rejoining the conversation. “Coach just likes to find things to criticize. Is his job.”

“If my gap control was fine, he wouldn’t keep mentioning it,” Noah points out.

“Then we work on it in practice,” Shane says. “I’ll skate with you, we’ll run some drills. It’s fixable.”

Noah looks relieved. “Yeah? You don’t mind?”

“That’s literally what we’re here for,” Shane says. “To help you get better. That’s the whole point of having veterans on the team.”

“Plus,” Ilya adds, “if you get better, team gets better, we win more games, everyone is happy. Is selfish motivation.”

“I’ll take it,” Noah says.

They finish breakfast and head back to their rooms to grab their gear. Their next game is against the Brooklyn Scouts and the arena is only a few train stops from the hotel, close enough that they can walk to the station, and the cold air feels good after the stuffiness of the restaurant. Noah walks between them, his gear bag slung over his shoulder, looking more relaxed than Shane’s seen him in weeks.

“So,” Ilya says as they wait at a crosswalk. “You feel better today? About last night?”

Noah nods. “Yeah. I do. I think I was just in my head about it, you know? Building it up to be this huge thing when it really wasn’t.”

“Is good that you tell us, though,” Ilya says seriously. “Better to say something than to worry about it alone.”

“That’s what my mom said when I called her this morning,” Noah admits. “She thought the whole thing was pretty funny.”

“Your mom is smart woman,” Ilya approves.

“She also said to thank you guys for looking out for me,” Noah continues. “She worries about me being away from home.”

Shane feels that protective surge again. “You can tell her we’ve got you covered.”

“She knows. She follows both of you on Instagram and sees all the team stuff.” Noah hesitates, then adds, “She thinks it’s really cool that you guys are so open about being married. She said it probably would’ve been different if players like you had been around when she was growing up.”

Ilya looks touched by this, which is rare enough that Shane makes note of it. “Tell her thank you,” he says. “And tell her that her son is very good player and very good kid, and we are lucky to have him.”

“I will,” Noah promises, his ears pink.

Morning skate is hard but good — two hours of drills and scrimmaging that leave them all sweating and exhausted. Shane works with Noah on his gap control like he promised, running the same scenario over and over until Noah starts to anticipate when to close the distance and when to give space. By the end, Noah’s moving with more confidence, reading the play better.

“See?” Shane says, skating up beside him during a water break. “You’ve got this. You just needed the reps.”

“Thanks for doing this,” Noah says, panting. “I know you didn’t have to.”

“Stop thanking us for doing basic decent human things,” Shane says, but he’s smiling. “This is what teammates do.”

After morning skate, they shower and change, and by the time they’re back at the hotel, it’s mid-afternoon. They’ve got the evening off — no game, no obligations — and Shane’s looking forward to ordering room service and watching terrible TV with Ilya until they pass out.

But as they’re heading toward the elevators, Noah catches up with them, looking hesitant.

“Hey, can I ask you guys something?”

“Always,” Ilya says.

“That bar last night — Kingfisher. Is that, like, a regular thing for you? Going to gay bars?”

Shane exchanges a glance with Ilya. “Yeah,” he says carefully. “Not every night or anything, but when we’re in cities that have good ones, we like to go. Why?”

“I was just thinking,” Noah says slowly, “that it’s probably nice to have places where you can just be yourselves. Without worrying about what people think.”

“Is very nice,” Ilya confirms. “Is why we like Kingfisher so much. Scott makes it safe place. No cameras, no journalists, no fans who want autographs. Just normal bar where we can be normal people.”

“That makes sense,” Noah says. He’s quiet for a moment, then adds, “My uncle’s gay. I don’t see him much because he lives in Vancouver, but he’s cool. He and his husband have been together for, like, thirty years.”

“That’s great,” Shane says, meaning it.

“Yeah. I called him this morning too, after I talked to my mom. Told him about last night and about my whole existential crisis about being straight.” Noah laughs a little. “He thought it was hilarious. He said most people have the opposite problem.”

“He is not wrong,” Ilya says.

“Anyway,” Noah continues, “he said I should tell you guys that you’re doing a good thing. Being visible and out and all that. He said it matters more than you probably realize.”

Shane feels his throat tighten unexpectedly. They don’t talk about this much — the impact of being openly queer men in professional sports, the weight of representation, all of it. It’s too big, too heavy to think about most days. They just live their lives and try to be honest and hope that’s enough.

“Thank your uncle for us,” Shane manages.

“I will.” Noah shifts his gear bag to his other shoulder. “Okay, I’m gonna go pass out for three hours. See you guys at dinner?”

“See you,” Shane says.

They watch him head toward the stairs — Noah always takes the stairs, some kind of extra conditioning thing he’s convinced himself he needs — and then they’re alone in the lobby.

“He is good kid,” Ilya says softly.

“Yeah,” Shane agrees. “He really is.”

They ride the elevator up in silence, and Shane leans into Ilya’s side, feeling the solid warmth of him. When they get to their room, Ilya immediately sprawls on the bed, and Shane joins him, both of them still in their suits from practice, too tired to care.

“You know what I think?” Shane says after a while.

“What?”

“I think Noah is going to be more than fine. I think he is going to be great.”

Ilya smiles. “Yeah. I think so too.”

“And I think,” Shane continues, rolling onto his side to face Ilya, “that we’re not so bad at this whole mentor thing.”

“Hockey dads,” Ilya corrects, grinning.

“I am still not calling us that.”

“Too late. Noah’s probably already telling the team.”

Shane groans. “We’ll never live this down.”

“Nope,” Ilya says cheerfully. “We are hockey dads now. Should embrace it.”

“Fine. But I’m the responsible one who makes sure you do your homework and get enough sleep.”

“And I am cool hockey dad. The one who lets you stay up late and eat junk food. We are very good team,” Ilya says, and there’s something in his voice that makes Shane look at him more closely.

“What?”

“Nothing. Just ...” Ilya reaches out, tracing his fingers along Shane’s jaw. “Just thinking about how lucky I am. To have this. You. This life. All of it.”

Shane catches Ilya’s hand, pressing a kiss to his palm. “I’m the lucky one.”

“We are both lucky,” Ilya decides. “Is best option.”

They lie there for a while, the afternoon light slanting through the windows, the sounds of the city filtering up from below. Shane thinks about Noah, about the fear in his eyes last night and the relief when he finally got the words out. He thinks about all the times he’s had to say hard things, tell difficult truths, risk rejection for the sake of honesty.

He thinks about how far they’ve all come.

“Hey, Ilya?” He says quietly.

“Mm?”

“I’m glad Noah has us. I’m glad we can be the people he comes to when he’s scared.”

“Me too,” Ilya murmurs. He’s starting to drift off, his breathing evening out. “Me too, Shane.”

Shane closes his eyes and lets himself relax, safe in the knowledge that they’re exactly where they’re supposed to be — together, happy, and apparently serving as hockey dads to a straight rookie who was worried they thought he was gay.

It’s ridiculous. It’s perfect. It’s their life.

And Shane wouldn’t change a single thing.

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