

Just A Baby Girl And Her Very Best Friend

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](https://archiveofourown.org/works/81397876) at <https://archiveofourown.org/works/81397876>.

Rating:	Not Rated
Archive Warning:	Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings
Category:	M/M
Fandom:	Heated Rivalry (TV)
Relationships:	Shane Hollander/Ilya Rozanov , David Hollander & Yuna Hollander & Ilya Rozanov , David Hollander & Shane Hollander & Yuna Hollander
Characters:	Shane Hollander , Original Children of Shane Hollander and Ilya Rozanov , Ilya Rozanov , Rose Landry , Svetlana Vetrova , Hayden Pike , Jackie Pike , Yuna Hollander , David Hollander , Luca Haas , Troy Barrett , Cliff Marlow Cliff Marleau , Original Characters , Anya the dog
Additional Tags:	Mpreg Male Pregnancy , Past Mpreg Male Pregnancy , Childbirth , Family Fluff , Family Feels , Unplanned Pregnancy , Pregnancy , Graphic Description , Happy , Love , Married Shane Hollander/Ilya Rozanov , Pregnant Shane Hollander
Language:	English
Stats:	Published: 2026-03-16 Words: 15,291 Chapters: 1/1

Just A Baby Girl And Her Very Best Friend

by [JustMeAndLife \(CaramelCreamCoffee\)](#)

Summary

Shane looked down at Anya. She was very still. Very calm. Just resting her head there. Like she belonged there. Like she was guarding something. Something important. A tiny, fragile realization settled into Shane's mind. "She knows," he murmured.

Ilya frowned. "What?"

Shane swallowed. "I think she knows."

Ilya stepped closer, confusion giving way to curiosity. "Knows what?"

Shane hesitated before placing one hand lightly over the spot where Anya's head rested. Over his stomach. Over the place where— Something. Someone. Was beginning. His voice softened.

"I think she can tell there's a baby."

Or Anya is Shane's Rock throughout his pregnancy and absolutely adores their baby once she arrives.

Notes

Soooo Hazelluvbooks tweeted a photo of a baby hugging a dog and said that's what Anya would be like with Hollanovs baby and I just couldn't let this idea run away from me! You lot can thank her for the inspo! I have spent two whole days of my annual leave working on this to get it out there asap! Love you all :))

Ps: I have to admit I couldn't remember what kind of dog Anya is.. sooo I went with German shepherd because why not?

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

The bathroom was too small for the kind of moment Shane was having.

He sat on the cool tile floor with his back pressed against the side of the bathtub, one knee pulled to his chest, the other stretched out awkwardly in front of him. The bright white lights over the mirror were far too harsh, making everything feel sharper, louder, more real than he wanted it to be.

The pregnancy test sat on the counter. Two pink lines. Shane stared at them like if he blinked hard enough they might rearrange themselves into something else.

Negative.

A mistake.

Anything but what they were. "Six weeks," he whispered hoarsely.

His voice sounded strange in the small room.

Across from him, Ilya stood by the sink with both hands gripping the edge of the counter. His knuckles were white. His reflection in the mirror looked pale, eyes wide, dark blonde hair a mess from where he'd been dragging his hands through it for the last ten minutes.

Neither of them had moved much since the test finished. Since the lines appeared. Six weeks.

That meant—

"Before the wedding," Shane said weakly.

Ilya exhaled a shaky breath. "Yes. Before."

Silence fell again.

Their plan had been simple. They had talked about it endlessly during the months leading up to the wedding—sometimes seriously, sometimes jokingly during late-night phone calls or lazy mornings when Shane was visiting. Marriage first. A few seasons focused entirely on hockey. Then maybe kids.

Maybe.

Someday.

When things were stable. When Shane was closer to retirement. When their lives weren't so chaotic.

They had a timeline. A structure. A plan. And now—

"I'm pregnant," Shane said, the words sounding unreal even as they left his mouth. His throat tightened. "Ilya... Fuck. I'm pregnant."

The reality of it crashed into him all at once. His chest hitched. Then another breath. Then suddenly he couldn't breathe at all. "Oh—shit—"

The tears came fast and hard, blurring his vision as he buried his face in his hands. His shoulders started shaking before he could stop them. "I can't— Ilya I can't—" He didn't even know what he couldn't do. He just knew everything felt too big. Too fast. Their careers. The travel. The media. Their families. The fact that their relationship had only just become public after years of secrecy and tension and long-distance stolen moments.

They had just gotten married. Six weeks ago. Six weeks. How could everything change so quickly?

A soft whine broke through the sound of his breathing. Shane lowered his hands. Anya stood in the doorway of the bathroom, her ears tilted back, brown eyes wide with concern. She must have followed them when they rushed in earlier.

"Hey, girl," Shane croaked.

Her nails clicked against the tile as she padded over to him. She didn't hesitate. The big shepherd mix pressed right up against his side and shoved her nose under his arm until Shane automatically wrapped both arms around her neck. That was all it took. The tears came harder.

Shane buried his face in her fur, sobbing. "I don't know what we're going to do," he whispered into her coat.

Anya made a soft rumbling sound in her chest, licking at his cheek where tears had spilled down. Her tongue was warm and persistent, determined to clean his face. "I know," Shane sniffed, scratching weakly behind her ear. "I know, I'm being dramatic."

Across the room, Ilya still hadn't moved. Shane could feel his gaze. Heavy. Stunned.

"Ilya?" Shane said quietly.

"I am here," Ilya replied immediately, voice rough.

But he still didn't step closer. Shane understood why. This was terrifying. For both of them. Sure Shane had the whole Autism thing making the news feel extra loud. But Ilya's feelings mattered too. He felt just as much.

Anya shifted in his arms again, nudging insistently against him until Shane leaned back against the tub. She climbed halfway into his lap—something she hadn't done since she was a puppy—and settled her weight there. Her head rested across his stomach. The contact was warm and solid. Comforting. Shane froze. His hand stilled in her fur. Anya went quiet too. Just breathing slowly against him. Her head pressed gently against his abdomen.

Shane's heart skipped.

A strange, soft warmth spread through his chest.

"...Ilya," he said slowly.

Ilya finally moved, stepping away from the sink. "Yes?"

Shane looked down at Anya. She was very still. Very calm. Just resting her head there. Like she belonged there. Like she was guarding something.

Something important. A tiny, fragile realization settled into Shane's mind. "She knows," he murmured.

Ilya frowned. "What?"

Shane swallowed. "I think she knows."

Ilya stepped closer, confusion giving way to curiosity. "Knows what?"

Shane hesitated before placing one hand lightly over the spot where Anya's head rested. Over his stomach. Over the place where— Something. Someone. Was beginning. His voice softened.

"I think she can tell there's a baby."

The word hung in the air.

Baby.

Ilya went completely still. For a long moment neither of them spoke. Then Ilya slowly lowered himself to the floor in front of Shane. He reached out hesitantly, resting his hand beside Anya's head, fingers brushing Shane's shirt.

"Hello," Ilya said very quietly to Shane's stomach.

Shane laughed weakly through his tears. "You're talking to it already? It's literally a bunch of cells you know that right?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

Ilya looked up at him. His eyes were still frightened. But there was something else there now too. Something softer.

"Because it is our bunch of cells. Ours," he said.

Shane's throat tightened again. Anya huffed softly and shifted a little closer, as if agreeing.

Shane looked down at the dog. Then at Ilya. Then at the test on the counter. Their entire life had just tilted sideways. Their plan was gone. Everything was uncertain. But somehow...

With Ilya sitting there on the bathroom floor. With Anya curled protectively against him. With the faintest, wildest idea that there was a tiny new life starting inside him— The panic eased just a little.

Shane took a shaky breath.

"Ilya?"

"Yes?"

"I think..." Shane paused, gathering courage. "I think we can do this."

Ilya's eyebrows lifted. "Really?"

Shane nodded slowly. "We just... need a new plan."

Ilya stared at him for a moment.

Then something in his expression broke open—relief and disbelief and fierce affection all tangled together. "Yes," he said softly. "A new plan."

He leaned forward and pressed a careful kiss to Shane's stomach, right above where Anya's head rested. Shane laughed quietly, running his fingers through Ilya's hair.

"Okay," he whispered. "Okay. We've got this."

The tenth week of Shane's pregnancy was easily the worst yet. Morning sickness had been creeping up on him since he took that test on week six, slowly getting worse with every passing day. At first it had just been nausea in the mornings, something manageable with crackers and ginger tea.

Now it was constant.

Relentless.

Exhausting.

The doctor who confirmed his pregnancy had given it a name that sounded far too clinical for how miserable it felt: Hyperemesis gravidarum. Severe pregnancy sickness. Persistent nausea. Frequent vomiting. Dehydration.

Shane called it hell.

They were still two weeks away from their first ultrasound appointment, and the wait felt endless. Shane desperately wanted that moment—needed it—to make everything feel real in a way that justified how awful his body currently felt.

Instead, he was curled up on the bathroom floor again. The tile was cool against his cheek. It helped. Everything helped except food.

He'd thrown up three times already that morning despite the anti-nausea medication the doctor had prescribed. The pills dulled the worst of it, but they didn't stop the waves completely. Shane lay half-curved beside the toilet, one arm tucked under his head like a makeshift pillow. His stomach churned constantly. His throat burned. His entire body felt weak and shaky.

A soft whine sounded from beside him. "Hey, Anya," he murmured hoarsely. Their dog had barely left his side all week.

She hovered near him constantly, watching him with worried brown eyes like she was personally offended that something dared make her human feel this bad. Shane managed a tired scratch behind her ear. "You're doing great emotional support work, you know that?"

Anya thumped her tail once. From somewhere down the hallway, Shane heard Ilya moving around the kitchen. Cabinets opening. The coffee machine running. The low murmur of a phone call.

Ilya had practice this morning. Normally Shane would be there too. Instead he was currently camped out next to the toilet.

"Yeah," Shane muttered weakly to the ceiling. "This is a great start to the day."

A few minutes later Ilya appeared in the doorway.

He looked ready for practice—training clothes on, hockey bag slung over one shoulder—but the determined set of his jaw made it clear he didn't actually want to leave. His eyes softened the moment he saw Shane. "You are still here."

Shane lifted two fingers in a halfhearted salute. "Floor's comfy."

Ilya sighed and crouched beside him. "You should be in bed. I do not like this Solnyshko. You need to move."

Shane groaned. "No movement. Movement bad."

"I worry about you."

"I know."

Ilya brushed a hand gently through Shane's messy hair. The tenderness in the gesture made Shane's chest ache. "You cannot keep food down again?"

Shane shook his head weakly. "Crackers lasted about ten minutes."

Ilya frowned. The diagnosis of Hyperemesis gravidarum had scared him more than he admitted out loud. He had spent half the night reading medical articles about it, learning how serious severe pregnancy sickness could become if not managed carefully. He hated leaving Shane alone like this. Which was why, after a long moment of hesitation, he said quietly:

"I asked someone to come help today."

Shane blinked. "Help?"

"Yes."

A knock sounded at the front door. Right on cue.

Shane squinted at him. "...You called my mother."

Ilya lifted his shoulders slightly. "She likes helping."

Shane sighed dramatically but didn't actually protest. "Fine. But if she tries to make me eat soup I'm filing a complaint."

Ilya chuckled softly before getting up to answer the door. Minutes later the sound of the front door closing echoed through the house. Then, warm, familiar footsteps approached. "Shane?" Yuna's voice was gentle but concerned.

She stopped in the doorway. "Oh honey..."

Shane managed a tired smile. "Hi Mom."

She took in the scene quickly: her son sprawled on the bathroom floor, pale and exhausted, the toilet within arm's reach, Ilya had been right to be worried. Her son looked weaker than she had ever seen him before. It was a scary sight.

"Oh sweetheart," she said again, kneeling beside him. "You're staying down here?"

Shane nodded weakly. "Tile's cold."

"I'm not moving," he added quickly when she opened her mouth. Yuna closed it again. Fair enough.

Before she could say anything else, a scratching noise sounded down the hallway. Anya had disappeared earlier without Shane noticing.

Now she came trotting back into the bathroom—

Dragging something behind her. A soft blue throw blanket trailed from her mouth.

Shane blinked. "Is that—" It was his favourite blanket. The one that usually lived on the couch.

Anya carefully maneuvered into the bathroom, dropped the blanket across Shane's legs, and nudged it into place with surprising determination.

Shane stared at her "...Did you just tuck me in?"

The dog tilted her head.

His hand lifted shakily to pet her head. "Good girl," he whispered. Anya wagged her tail proudly.

Then she did something even more surprising.

She turned around and laid down directly in front of Shane. Perfectly positioned. Like a living pillow.

Shane laughed weakly. "Oh." Understanding dawned. "You're offering services now?"

He carefully shifted, lowering his head until it rested against Anya's side. The dog stayed perfectly still. Warm. Solid. Comforting.

Shane sighed in relief. "That's actually really nice."

Yuna stood quietly nearby. Her hand covered her mouth. Because the sight in front of her was almost too sweet. Her grown son—professional hockey player, newly married, currently battling severe pregnancy sickness—curled up on the bathroom floor with his dog acting as both blanket-delivery service and pillow.

Anya's ears twitched as Shane murmured softly to her. Shane's hand rested loosely against his stomach. The blanket draped across his legs. The moment was so gentle. So tender.

Yuna's eyes watered.

Without disturbing them, she quietly pulled out her phone.

Click.

The picture captured everything perfectly. Shane half-asleep. Anya protecting him like a loyal guardian. Yuna stepped into the hallway and sent the photo immediately to Ilya. He would see it when he arrived at practice.

—

Across town, Ilya had just finished tying his skates when he caved and finally reached for his phone.

He glanced down. A message from Yuna. He opened the photo. And instantly froze.

For a moment he didn't breathe.

Shane lay curled on the bathroom floor, wrapped in his favorite blanket. Anya lay proudly in front of him, serving as both pillow and bodyguard.

Shane's face looked peaceful for the first time all morning. Something about the image hit Ilya directly in the chest. His eyes burned. "Oh my God," he whispered.

Troy Barrett glanced over. "You okay, man?"

Ilya turned the phone around, showing them the picture.

"Da , just Shane," he said thickly. "And our dog."

Several players leaned closer. A chorus of amused reactions followed.

"That's adorable."

"Dude your dog brought him a blanket?"

"She's guarding him like a baby."

Ilya nodded, his voice soft. "She already loves the baby. She's a good girl."

He stared at the photo again. His husband. His dog. Their tiny growing family.

And despite everything—the sickness, the fear, the uncertainty—Ilya felt something warm bloom in his chest.

They were going to be okay.

The next two weeks passed by slowly. Very slowly.

For Shane, the days blurred together in a cycle of nausea medication, short naps, small sips of electrolyte drinks, and trying—often unsuccessfully—to keep food down.

The diagnosis of Hyperemesis gravidarum still made the whole pregnancy feel more fragile than either he or Ilya liked to admit out loud. But today was different. Today was their first ultrasound. Shane sat in the passenger seat of the car outside the clinic, gripping the strap of his bag so tightly his knuckles were pale. "I feel like I'm about to throw up again," he muttered.

Ilya glanced over immediately, concern flickering across his face. "From sickness or nerves?"

Shane considered that. "Both."

Ilya reached over and squeezed his hand. "It will be okay."

Shane nodded, though his stomach twisted.

Until now the pregnancy had been... theoretical. Yes, the test was positive. Yes, his body felt very pregnant. Yes a doctor had confirmed it.

But they hadn't seen the baby yet.

That made the fear louder. What if something was wrong? What if the sickness meant complications?

What if—

"Hey." Ilya squeezed his hand again. "Come. Let us meet our baby."

Shane exhaled slowly. "Okay."

—

The clinic was quiet and warm inside. Soft lighting.

Neutral colors. Calming music that Shane suspected was supposed to lower blood pressure.

A nurse led them into an exam room where an ultrasound machine sat beside a padded exam table. Moments later, the door opened again.

A woman in her mid-50s stepped inside with a warm smile.

"Good morning, Shane, Ilya."

"Hi," Shane said nervously.

"I'm Dr. Eleanor Milton," she said, offering a handshake. "It's very nice to meet both of you."

Her voice was calm and reassuring in a way that immediately eased some of Shane's nerves.

"I've reviewed the referral notes from your primary physician," Dr. Milton continued, glancing at her tablet. "I see you've been having quite severe pregnancy sickness."

Shane groaned softly. "That's one way to describe it."

Dr. Milton nodded sympathetically. "The diagnosis of Hyperemesis gravidarum can be incredibly challenging during the first trimester. Persistent nausea, vomiting, and dehydration are unfortunately common symptoms."

She looked up again with a reassuring smile.

"The good news is that many patients start to see improvement around weeks twelve to sixteen as hormone levels stabilize."

"Please let it be twelve," Shane muttered.

Ilya chuckled quietly beside him.

Dr. Milton continued explaining the appointment.

"Today's scan will be a first-trimester ultrasound. At around twelve weeks we're looking for several key markers." She gestured to the machine.

"We'll confirm gestational age, check the baby's size, evaluate development of the head and spine, and most importantly, confirm a strong heartbeat."

Shane swallowed. Heartbeat. The word alone made his chest tighten.

Ilya raised a careful hand.

"Yes?" Dr. Milton smiled at him. "Questions are encouraged , don't be afraid to ask."

Ilya hesitated slightly. "Is the severe sickness... dangerous for the baby?"

Dr. Milton shook her head gently. "In most cases, no. While Hyperemesis gravidarum is very uncomfortable and requires monitoring for hydration and nutrition, it does not usually harm fetal development."

Ilya visibly relaxed. "And the medication?" he asked.

"The anti-nausea medication prescribed is widely considered safe during pregnancy. We monitor dosage carefully, but you should not worry about it affecting the baby."

Shane squeezed Ilya's hand. "Good."

"Alright," Dr. Milton said kindly. "Let's take a look."

Shane climbed onto the exam table and lifted his shirt slightly as instructed. The ultrasound gel was cold when it touched his stomach.

He flinched.

"Sorry," Dr. Milton said with a smile. "I promise it warms up quickly."

The wand moved slowly across his abdomen. The machine hummed quietly. Shane stared at the ceiling. He wasn't sure he was ready to look yet.

The room fell silent except for the soft tapping of keys as Dr. Milton adjusted settings.

Ilya leaned forward anxiously. "Do you see—"

"Yes," Dr. Milton said gently. Her voice softened.

"I see something very important." She turned the monitor toward them. "There we are."

Shane looked.

And everything inside him stopped.

On the screen was a small, grainy shape.

Curled slightly. Tiny. But unmistakable.

A baby.

"Oh my God," Shane whispered. His hand flew to his mouth.

Ilya leaned closer to the screen, eyes wide with awe. "It has arms."

"Very small ones," Dr. Milton said warmly.

She pointed carefully. "Here is the head... here is the developing spine... and here are the little limbs beginning to form."

Shane's vision blurred. "I can't believe that's actually inside me."

Dr. Milton adjusted the machine again.

"Now, the best part."

A soft, rapid rhythm suddenly filled the room.

Thump-thump-thump-thump-thump. Fast.

Strong. Alive.

The baby's heartbeat.

Shane broke instantly. Tears streamed down his face as he clutched Ilya's hand. "Oh my God..."

All the fear.

All the nausea.

All the weeks of uncertainty.

They melted away in the sound of that tiny heart beating.

"That's our baby," Shane whispered.

Beside him, Ilya wiped at his own eyes. "Yes." His voice cracked. "Our baby."

Dr. Milton smiled gently. "Everything looks very healthy. You're doing very well , Shane."

Shane laughed weakly through his tears.

"Best news I've heard in months."

Later that afternoon they returned home with several ultrasound photos. Grainy little black-and-white pictures. But to Shane and Ilya, they were the most beautiful images in the world.

The front door had barely closed before Anya came trotting over excitedly. Her tail wagged rapidly.

She bounced up on her back legs, trying to investigate the papers Shane was holding.

"Hey, hey," Shane laughed. "You're curious, huh?"

He crouched down slightly. "Well, come look."

He held the ultrasound photo out toward her.

"See? That's the baby."

He fully expected her to sniff it and lose interest.

Instead— Anya leaned forward and licked directly across the tiny blurry shape.

Shane burst out laughing. "Oh my God. You're one clever dog, y'know that?"

Ilya crouched beside him, grinning. "She approves."

Shane wiped the photo carefully. "You just kissed the baby."

Anya wagged her tail proudly. Shane scratched her ears fondly. "That's your little brother or sister," he told her softly. "They're very healthy. That's what the doctor said anyway."

Ilya wrapped an arm around Shane's shoulders.

"And someday," he added, smiling at the dog, "you will be best friends."

Anya barked once happily.

Shane looked down at the tiny picture again. His heart overflowed.

Their baby.

Their family.

Despite the lingering nausea, for the first time in weeks he felt at ease.

By sixteen weeks, everything felt... different.

Not easy—Shane still had rough days—but better.

The worst of the Hyperemesis gravidarum had finally begun to ease. He could keep most meals down now, and while nausea still lingered, it no longer controlled every second of his day. More importantly—

He was starting to show.

It wasn't obvious to strangers yet, but to the people who knew him? The small, soft curve of his stomach was unmistakable. And today, that tiny bump was the center of everything.

Their backyard was full. Laughter drifted through the warm afternoon air, mixing with the smell of food and the low hum of overlapping conversations. Shane stood near the patio table with Ilya beside him, one hand unconsciously resting on his stomach as he smiled at the group gathered around them.

"Sixteen weeks," Hayden said, shaking his head. "That's wild, man. Feels like only yesterday you were calling to say the test was positive."

Beside him, Jackie beamed. "We're so excited for you both. You're going to be the best days."

At their feet, their twin daughters Ruby, Jade—and there other two children Arthur and Amber—were far more interested in Anya, who happily accepted their attention while still keeping herself firmly within a two-foot radius of Shane.

"She hasn't left your side once," Rose observed with a grin.

From beside her, Svetlana laughed. "Ilyunchik," she called teasingly, "you have competition."

Ilya glanced down at Anya, who immediately pressed herself against Shane's leg as if proving the point. He sighed dramatically. "Yes. I have been replaced."

Shane snorted. "You're still my favorite. Don't worry."

"I do not believe you," Ilya replied, but he was smiling.

Across the yard, more familiar faces filled the space—teammates from the Ottawa Senators, including Coach Wiebe, Troy Barrett and Luca Haas. Hell even Cliff, Marleau had made an appearance, all of them happily gathered together to celebrate. It was nice.

Near the garden, Shane's parents stood together—David Hollander and Yuna Hollander—both radiating quiet pride. The same pride they'd been watching him with since he first stepped on the ice at three years old.

Yuna caught Shane's eye and smiled warmly. Shane felt his chest tighten with emotion.

Sixteen weeks ago, this had all felt impossible. Now?

It felt real.

It felt right.

—

Hours passed in a blur of conversation, food, and laughter. Stories were shared. Advice was offered (some of it questionable).

And through it all, Anya remained glued to Shane's side, occasionally resting her head against his stomach like she had since the very beginning.

Finally, as the sun dipped lower in the sky,

Ilya clapped his hands once. "Alright," he announced. "It is time."

A ripple of excitement moved through the group.

Shane's heart immediately started racing. Oh God," he muttered.

Ilya squeezed his hand. "You wanted this."

"I know but now I'm scared."

"Of what?"

"I don't know, just—everything."

Ilya kissed his temple softly. " Hollander, you are having panic attack. Is just a baby's gender. It will be perfect."

Shane rolled his eyes fondly, standing to follow his husband, his cling along coming with to of course.

—

They moved into position in the yard.

Shane and Ilya stood side by side with their backs turned to everyone else. Shane's fingers laced tightly with Ilya's. Behind them, Yuna held a small folded piece of paper.

The envelope from the doctor.

The secret.

At her feet, Anya sat patiently, tail wagging.

Beside her lay two small teddy bears. One pink.

One blue. Yuna took a breath and opened the paper. There was a pause.

Then—

A soft, emotional gasp. "Oh..."

Shane's stomach flipped. "What?!" he called, half-laughing, half-panicking. Why did she sound so surprised?!

Around them, the group erupted into coos and murmurs. "Oh my God—" "That's so sweet—" "I knew it—" "Shhh!" someone whispered.

Shane tightened his grip on Ilya's hand. "I'm going to pass out."

"No you are not," Ilya said firmly, though his own voice trembled.

Behind them, Yuna crouched down and gently handed one of the teddy bears to Anya. "Go on, sweet girl," she whispered. Anya took it carefully in her mouth.

A moment later— Shane felt a soft nudge against the back of his legs. His breath caught.

Ilya squeezed his hand. "Ready?"

Shane nodded shakily. Why was he so nervous?. "Okay."

They turned. And there she was. Anya stood proudly in front of them—

A pink teddy hanging from her mouth by its ear.

For a split second, Shane just stared. Then it hit him. "Oh—" His voice broke.

"She's—" Tears flooded his eyes instantly. "She's a girl."

A sob escaped him before he could stop it.

Ilya pulled him close immediately, wrapping both arms around him as Shane buried his face against his shoulder.

"A girl," Ilya repeated softly, emotion thick in his voice. "We are having a daughter."

Shane laughed through his tears. "A daughter... A little girl Ilya."

Anya barked excitedly, dropping the teddy and bouncing up toward Shane. Careful—but thrilled.

Her paws pressed gently against his small bump as she nuzzled her nose against it, tail wagging furiously.

"Good girl! Yaya Yes!" Shane laughed, crying. "You did so good!"

Ilya rested a hand over Shane's stomach, over Anya's paws. "Our little girl," he whispered.

Around them, the group erupted into cheers and applause. David stood off to the side, capturing the moment on his camera—Shane crying, Ilya holding him, Anya bouncing between them with uncontainable joy.

It was perfect.

—

Later that evening, long after everyone had gone home, Shane sat curled up on the couch.

Anya lay beside him, her head once again resting protectively against his stomach. Ilya leaned over his shoulder as Shane scrolled through the photos David had sent.

One in particular made him pause. Shane mid-laugh, tears still on his cheeks. Ilya holding him close. Anya's paws against his bump. The pink teddy lying at their feet. Shane smiled softly.

"This one," he said.

Ilya nodded. "Da , That one is perfect."

Shane opened his social media. Hovered for a second. Then started typing.

We had a plan... and then life surprised us in the best way ..

16 weeks, a whole lot of love, and one very excited big sister 🐾

Our baby girl is already so loved. Daddy and Papa can't wait to meet you 💕

He hit post. Then leaned back into Ilya, hand resting over his stomach. Anya huffed softly, pressing closer. The moment tender and peaceful despite the noise rising outside of their little bubble.

"Now they know." Ilya breathed. "No longer our little secret."

Shane grinned. "No, just our little girl."

At twenty weeks, Shane finally felt like himself again. Well at least mostly like himself again.

The nausea had faded into the background, his energy had started to come back, and his appetite—thank God—had returned. But pregnancy had traded one challenge for another.

Sleep.

Or more specifically... the lack of it. Because their daughter had apparently decided nighttime was the perfect opportunity to practice kickboxing.

Shane groaned softly as he shifted on the couch, tugging the blanket higher over his legs. "I swear," he muttered, one hand resting over the curve of his small rounded stomach, "she's training for the NHL already."

Anya, stretched out beside him, lifted her head slightly at the sound of his voice.

"You hear that?" Shane said, glancing down at her. "Your little sister's violent."

Anya huffed, unimpressed, and rested her chin back down—directly against Shane's bump, as usual. She had developed a habit over the past few weeks. If Shane sat, she leaned against him. If he lay down, she curled into him. If there was access to his stomach at all? That's where she was.

Always.

Today was a quiet day. Ilya was away with the team in Tampa for an away game, which meant it was just Shane and Anya at home. The house felt a little emptier without him. Quieter. But not exactly peaceful.

Because— "Oh!"

Shane's eyes widened as a sudden, firm kick landed low in his abdomen. "Okay, that one was new."

Anya's head snapped up instantly. Her ears perked. Her entire body went still. Then—
Another kick. Right under where her head had been resting.

Anya jerked backward like she'd been poked.

Shane burst out laughing. "Oh my God—did you feel that?!"

Anya stared at him. Then at his stomach. Then back at him. Her head tilted sharply to the left.
Then the right. Then left again.

Shane wheezed. "Oh my poor girl, You look so confused."

Anya took a cautious step closer again, sniffing at his stomach like it had personally betrayed her.

"Go on," Shane encouraged, still grinning. "Lay down." She hesitated. Then, slowly, she settled back into her usual position, pressing lightly against his bump. For a moment, everything was still. But of course, this child was half Rozanov.

Thump.

Anya jolted again. This time she actually hopped backward, eyes wide.

Shane laughed so hard his stomach hurt. "I'm so sorry," he gasped. "She's just saying hi! She wants you to know she's there that's all!"

Anya barked once in protest. Then—apparently deciding she was not going to be outdone—she leaned forward and tapped her nose gently against Shane's stomach. A soft boop.

Shane froze. "...Did you just—" Another kick.

Anya immediately tapped back again.

Boop.

Kick.

Boop.

Kick.

Shane stared at her. Then absolutely lost it. "No way. No way this is happening."

Anya was fully engaged now, focused intensely on Shane's stomach like she had discovered a new and very important game. Every time the baby moved, she responded with a careful nose tap. Shane wiped tears from his eyes. "This is ridiculous."

Then he paused. A slow grin spread across his face.

"...Wait." He shifted upright, grabbing a pen from the coffee table. "What if we make this little game of yours official huh?"

Anya tilted her head again. Shane lifted his shirt just enough to expose his stomach. "Alright," he said, trying (and failing) to sound serious. "We're playing noughts and crosses."

He gently drew a small grid across the side of his bump. "There." He tapped the top square. "Anya, you're X." He pointed at his stomach. "And baby girl, you're O."

Anya wagged her tail.

"I'll take that as agreement." He quickly grabbed his phone and propped it up to record.
"Okay, game on girlies."

Another kick landed. Shane laughed and marked an O. Anya immediately nudged a different square with her nose. Shane marked an X. "Oh my God, there is no way you're actually playing."

The game continued like that—chaotic, uneven, completely nonsensical— And absolutely perfect.

Shane was still laughing by the time he stopped recording. "I cannot believe I just played a toned down version of tic-tac-toe with my unborn child and my dog." Anya licked his hand proudly.

"You're very smart," he told her.

Then, still smiling, he opened his phone and sent the video to their group chat.

Family 🐾❤️

— Ilya (Lily 😊)

— Momager

— Dad Hollander

Shane:

You guys are not going to believe this 🤔

Video sent

He barely had time to set his phone down before it buzzed.

Momager :

OH MY HEART 😭 Shane that is the cutest thing I have EVER seen!

Dad Hollander :

I'm not convinced that dog isn't a genius

Also I think the baby is winning 🙌

Shane snorted. "Traitor," he muttered fondly.

Another notification.

Ilya (Lily 😊) :

I am in the locker room and I just made a noise I cannot explain. Everyone is looking at me!

Shane grinned.

A second message came immediately after.

Ilya (Lily 😊) :

This is the best thing I have ever seen

I miss you

I miss both of you

Shane's expression softened. He rested his hand over his stomach as another small movement fluttered beneath his skin. "We miss you too," he murmured. It was always hard having Ilya away without him. But it was especially hard now. All he could think about was how much Ilya was missing.

Anya shifted closer again, settling her head carefully against his bump—much more cautiously this time. Shane smiled, running his fingers through her fur. "Don't worry," he told her softly.

"You and her are going to be best friends."

Anya huffed contentedly. And for a long, quiet moment—

It was just the three of them.

Soon they would be a house of four and Shane couldn't wait for that day to arrive.

At thirty-two weeks, Shane woke to something he didn't recognize.

It wasn't pain—not exactly. But it wasn't comfortable either. A tightness pulled across his abdomen, slow and deliberate, like something inside him was pressing outward and holding there. Shane's eyes snapped open.

"...what the hell?"

The room was dark. The clock on the nightstand read 2:03 AM. Beside him, Ilya slept soundly, one arm thrown loosely across the mattress where Shane had been moments before. Another wave came. Tight. Firm. Then it eased.

Shane pushed himself up slowly, heart beginning to race. "Okay... okay..." His mind immediately jumped to the worst conclusion.

Labor.

"No—no, it's too early," he whispered to himself.

Thirty-two weeks. That was too early. His breathing picked up as he sat there, one hand pressed to his stomach. His mind scrambling for a hold on what to do next.

"Do I wake Ilya?" No. He couldn't do that. Not until he knew for sure what was happening.

He glanced over. Ilya hadn't stirred.

Another tightening rolled through him.

Shane inhaled sharply— Then paused. His brain finally coming online and zoning in on all of the pregnancy information he'd forced himself to read over the past seven months.

Wait.

Dr. Milton had talked about this. False labor. Practice contractions. His brain scrambled to remember the name.

Right— Braxton Hicks contractions. Irregular. Not consistent. Not progressively stronger.

He swallowed, forcing himself to think.

"Okay... okay, don't panic." He shifted slightly, waiting. Another tightening came. Then nothing.

No pattern. No rhythm. "So... It might not be labor ," he murmured, exhaling shakily.

Relief washed through him, though it didn't fully settle his nerves. He glanced at Ilya again. Still asleep. Shane hesitated. He could wake him. Ilya would want to know.

But...

"It's fine," Shane whispered. "It's just practice."

Instead, he carefully slipped out of bed.

—

The kitchen light was softer. Quieter. Shane grabbed a bottle of water from the fridge and leaned against the counter for a moment as another contraction rolled through him.

He winced. "Okay... that may be fake, still not fun though."

He had remembered something else on his waddle down from the bedroom . Hydration and Positioning. He moved to the couch, lowering himself carefully onto his side and tucking a cushion behind his back. The next contraction came. Still irregular. Still manageable. Shane unscrewed the bottle and added a straw, taking slow sips. "Okay," he murmured. "We can do this."

A few minutes passed. Then— Soft padding rushing down the hallway.

Anya.

Of course.

She appeared in the doorway, ears slightly back, scanning the room until her eyes landed on him.

Immediately, she trotted over. Shane smiled tiredly. "Hey, squidgy girl."

Anya let out a soft whine, nudging her nose into his side like she was checking for damage.

"I'm okay," he assured her gently. Another tightening hit. Shane exhaled slowly through it. Anya stiffened. Her attention snapped instantly to his stomach.

"Oh, you felt that one, huh?" Shane said weakly.

She leaned closer, sniffing at his hoodie-covered bump. Then, very carefully, she started licking at the fabric. Soft. Repeated. Like she was trying to soothe whatever was happening underneath.

Shane's chest tightened—not from the contractions this time, but from how sweet she was being.

"Hey... that's actually kind of helping."

Anya wagged her tail faintly and continued.

Shane rested his hand on her head. "Good girl."

Another contraction came and went. Then a longer pause. Then another. Still irregular. Still not labor.

Just his body... practicing.

"Guess we're getting closer," he murmured.

Anya shifted, curling herself against his stomach like she always did, her warmth grounding him.

Shane relaxed into her, one arm draped over her back as he continued sipping water. The contractions didn't stop entirely. But they softened.

Spaced out. Manageable.

Eventually, exhaustion caught up with him.

And somewhere between one practice contraction and the next— Shane fell asleep. Curled on the couch. With Anya pressed protectively against him.

A few hours later, soft footsteps echoed down the hallway. "Shane?" Ilya's voice was rough with sleep. He stepped into the living room— And stopped.

Shane lay curled on his side, blanket half-draped over him, one hand resting on his stomach. Anya was glued to him, her head tucked firmly against his bump. Both of them asleep.

Ilya's chest tightened. He moved closer quietly.

"Hey..."

Shane stirred. "Mmm..." His eyes blinked open slowly. "Oh... hey."

Ilya crouched beside him, concern immediately taking over. "Why are you here? Are you okay?"

Shane pushed himself up slightly, wincing.

"Yeah. I'm fine."

"What happened?"

Shane hesitated. Then said casually: "I had some Braxton Hicks contractions."

Ilya froze. "You had what?"

"They're not real contractions," Shane added quickly. "Just practice ones. You remember Dr Milton warned us about them?"

Ilya's expression did not relax. "You did not wake me."

"I didn't want to freak you out."

"You should wake me," Ilya said firmly. "Always."

Shane softened. "I know. But you're so tired baby. You've been back and forth to that airport a lot. The jet lag was killing you. I just wanted you to rest." He reached for Ilya's hand. "I'm okay, though. They stopped."

Ilya studied him carefully. Then nodded slowly. "Okay." A pause. "Are you hungry?"

Shane blinked. "....actually, yeah."

Ilya smiled faintly. "Good. I will make breakfast. Makes up for not holding you last night."

"That was my choice Ilya."

"Hush now Hollander. Let me spoil my pregnant husband da?"

"Yeah, okay."

—

A little while later, the kitchen filled with the smell of toast and eggs. Shane sat at the table, wrapped in a hoodie, one hand absentmindedly rubbing his stomach while Anya lay at his feet.

"I talked to Dr Milton again yesterday," Shane said suddenly.

Ilya glanced over from the stove. "Ah, about the practice contractions, Yes?"

Shane hesitated. "N-not exactly, I've- erm. I've been thinking about... labor."

Ilya turned fully toward him. "Okay."

"I don't think I want to be in a hospital."

Ilya didn't interrupt. Just listened.

"I know it's safer in some ways," Shane continued, words starting to tumble out, "but the idea of the noise and the lights and... everything—it just feels like too much. And with my sensory stuff and everything that's already been hard this pregnancy—" He exhaled. "I- just- Ilya I don't think I'd cope well."

Ilya nodded slowly. "That makes sense."

Shane looked at him, relief flickering across his face. "Dr. Milton said it could be an option. A home birth. With the right support." He reached for his phone. "She sent me a list of local midwives. And she suggested a birthing pool, because it can help with pain management and... reduce sensory triggers." He looked back up, suddenly anxious.

"I know it's not what we originally planned, and if you're not comfortable—"

"Shane." Ilya stepped closer. Hand reaching out to hold onto Shane's own. "You do not need to convince me."

Shane blinked.

"This is your body," Ilya continued gently. "Your labor. Your experience." He placed his other hand over Shane's bump. "You decide how you want this to happen."

Shane's throat tightened. "I just don't want to make the wrong choice."

"There is no perfect choice," Ilya said softly. "Only the one that feels right for you." He leaned down, pressing a kiss to Shane's temple. "I will support you in whatever you choose."

Shane let out a breath he didn't realize he'd been holding. "Okay."

Anya huffed softly from the floor, as if in agreement. Shane smiled. "Looks like we're all on the same page."

Ilya chuckled. "Yes. Even her."

Shane rested his hand on his stomach again, feeling a small movement beneath his palm. Thirty-two weeks. Getting closer. And for the very first time since seeing that positive pregnancy test.

He felt ready.

At thirty-eight weeks, Anya had officially decided that Shane was not allowed out of her sight. Not for a second. Not for a step. Not even for a bathroom break without supervision.

"She's glued to you," Ilya said for what felt like the tenth time that day, watching as Anya followed Shane so closely her nose practically brushed the back of his legs.

Shane snorted, shifting slightly as he adjusted the waistband of his sweatpants over his very prominent bump. "She's always like this."

"No," Ilya said firmly. "This is different."

As if proving his point, Anya immediately flopped down across Shane's feet when he stopped moving—dead weight, impossible to budge.

"Anya..." Shane laughed, trying (and failing) to nudge her aside with his foot. "You're a tripping hazard." Anya did not move. Instead, she huffed and pressed herself more firmly against him.

From the couch, Ilya gestured. "See? She knows."

"Knows what?" Shane asked, amused.

"That labor is coming."

Shane rolled his eyes. "You're being dramatic."

"She is preparing," Ilya insisted. "She is guarding you."

"We still have over two weeks," Shane shot back. "She's not psychic."

Ilya raised an eyebrow but didn't argue further.

He didn't need to.

Because he wasn't the only one who thought so.

—

That evening, the house was filled again—this time with a quieter, more purposeful energy. Dinner simmered in the kitchen while the spare room slowly transformed into a birthing space. Shane stood in the doorway, hands on his hips, surveying everything.

The inflatable birthing pool sat ready in the center of the room. An inflatable mattress was set up nearby. A birthing ball rested in the corner.

Soft, electric candles lined the shelves, ready to replace harsh overhead lighting. It felt calm. Safe.

Exactly what Shane had hoped for.

Behind him, Yuna sat as she adjusted one of the folded towels while David quickly checked the air pump.

"It looks good," David said.

"Really good," Yuna added warmly.

Ilya stepped up beside Shane, resting a hand lightly on his lower back. "You did well."

Shane smiled faintly. "Thanks. I couldn't have done it without you all. It's exactly how I wanted it."

Anya, of course, was right there too—curled at Shane's feet like a guard dog assigned to a single, very important mission.

"She hasn't left you all day," Yuna observed.

"Tell me about it," Shane said.

Ilya crossed his arms. "I still say she knows."

"Oh my God," Shane groaned. "Not this again."

Yuna laughed softly. "He's not wrong."

"Yes he is."

"Sweetheart," she said gently, "you're thirty-eight weeks pregnant."

"And?"

"And," David chimed in, "things can happen anytime now."

Shane opened his mouth to argue— Then froze.

Because Yuna gave him a look. "You also lost your mucus plug a few days ago. Remember? You called me panicking over why it had blood in it."

Shane's entire face flushed red. "Mom."

Ilya blinked. "You did not tell me this."

"I didn't think it was a big deal!" Shane protested.

"It is somewhat a big deal," Ilya said. "You called mom."

"It doesn't mean labor is starting immediately," Shane shot back, flustered. "It can still be days. Or weeks."

Yuna smiled knowingly. "Or sooner. I'm gonna go with sooner."

Shane threw his hands up. "You're all impossible."

Anya huffed in agreement—or maybe just because Shane had moved.

"Okay," Shane said, grabbing his hoodie. "I need air."

"You are going for a walk?" Ilya asked immediately.

"Yes."

"I will come with you."

Shane shook his head. "No. I- sorry I just want... like thirty minutes to myself."

Ilya paused. Then nodded without hesitation. "Okay."

No offense taken. Just quiet understanding. The perfect husband as always. He reached for Anya's lead. "At least take your bodyguard."

"Obviously," Shane said.

Anya perked up instantly.

—

The evening air was cool and calm. The kind of quiet that only came just before night fully settled in. Shane walked slowly down the street, one hand resting under his bump for support as Anya paced beside him. For once, she wasn't pulling ahead. She stayed right at his side. Close. Attentive. Almost... watchful. Shane exhaled.

"Everyone thinks today's the day," he muttered.

Anya flicked an ear.

"They're being ridiculous, right?" She glanced up at him. Shane smiled faintly. "Yeah. Exactly."

They walked in comfortable silence for a few minutes. Then— A familiar tightening.

Low.

Deep.

Stronger than before.

Shane slowed. "Oh...okay. T-that's slightly new."

He paused, hand pressing into his stomach. It passed. Not pleasant. But not overwhelming.

"Probably just Braxton Hicks contractions," he said aloud. Anya stopped too, watching him closely.

"I'm fine," he assured her.

They started walking again. Twenty minutes later—

It happened again. This time, it was sharper. More defined. Shane stopped completely. "...okay, that one..." He swallowed. That one felt completely different. Anya immediately pressed closer to his side. No hesitation. No confusion. Just quiet, steady presence. Shane looked down at her.

"...you might actually be right," he admitted softly.

Another pause. Another breath. "Hey," he said, voice gentler now. "This might be it."

Anya's tail gave a small wag. "You might meet her today." A small, disbelieving laugh escaped him.

"Papa, Grandpa, and Nana are going to be so smug." Anya barked once. Shane smiled. "Yeah, yeah. Don't encourage them."

He turned back toward the house.

"Let's go home."

—

They made it back just in time. Shane had barely stepped through the front door when another contraction hit. Stronger. Enough to make him brace against the wall.

"Shane?" Yuna was there instantly.

She crossed the room in seconds, reaching for him.

"Hey, hey—breathe."

Shane nodded, gripping her hand tightly as the contraction built.

In.

Out.

In.

Out.

Anya whimpered at his feet, pacing anxiously.

"It's okay," Shane managed through clenched teeth. The tension peaked. Then slowly—
Released.

Shane sagged slightly, catching his breath.

Yuna steadied him. "There you go."

Shane lifted his head.

Across the room, Ilya stood frozen. Watching. Waiting. Hope and nerves written all over his face.

Shane met his eyes. For a moment, neither of them spoke. Then Shane let out a breathless,disbelieving laugh. "...you might want to make the call."

Ilya blinked. "The call?"

Shane nodded, one hand still on his stomach. "I think... we might be having a baby today."

Ilya didn't hesitate. He was already reaching for his phone.

A few hours later, the house had shifted into something quieter. Focused. Intentional. Labor had settled in. Shane sat astride the birthing ball in the softly lit spare room, his body swaying gently in slow, practiced motions. The electric candles cast a warm glow across the walls, keeping everything dim and calm—exactly how he needed it.

His hoodie was long gone, replaced with a loose tank top that clung slightly to his skin. One hand braced against his thigh. The other rested protectively over the underside of his bump. Another contraction built slowly. Not sudden. Not sharp. But deep. Strong.

Shane exhaled through it, shoulders tightening as the pressure wrapped around his abdomen and lower back. Behind him, Ilya stayed close—anchored. Seated on the edge of the mattress, his hands moved steadily over Shane's back, pressing firm circles into the muscles that kept tensing with each wave. "I've got you," he murmured softly. "You got this."

Shane nodded, eyes closed. "Yeah... okay..." The contraction peaked. Then eased. Shane sagged forward slightly, catching his breath. "...still okay, they're not that bad yet." he whispered.

Ilya pressed a kiss to his shoulder. "You are doing so well." On the floor in front of him, Anya lay stretched out—but alert. Always alert. Her head rested near Shane's knees, eyes tracking every movement, every breath, every subtle shift in his posture.

Across the room, their midwife stood quietly, observing.

Jess Carter kept her voice low when she spoke, careful not to disturb the rhythm Shane had found.

"Contractions are about ten minutes apart still," she noted gently. "That's good. Your body's working steadily."

Shane gave a small nod. "Feels... like it."

Jess smiled reassuringly. "When I last checked you, you were at five centimeters dilated. That means your cervix has thinned and opened halfway to full dilation." She gestured slightly, explaining as she went. "In active labor, we expect the cervix to dilate from about four to ten centimeters. You're well into that phase now—it's just progressing gradually."

"Slow and steady," Shane murmured. "Always wins the race right?"

"Exactly."

In the doorway, David had hovered briefly before stepping back again, giving space. Behind him, Yuna patiently waited her turn, both of them careful not to overwhelm him.

The room remained calm. Grounded. Safe.

Exactly as he had planned for it to be.

Another contraction began. This one hit differently. Faster. Stronger. Shane's breath hitched. "Oh—shit —okay."

His hands tightened on his thighs as the pressure surged, wrapping around his abdomen and pulling downward. This one demanded more.

"Breathe," Ilya whispered, hands firm against his back. "In... and out..."

Shane tried. He did. But the intensity climbed quickly, sharper than before. A soft, involuntary whimper slipped from his throat.

Anya reacted instantly. She shot up from the floor, whining anxiously as she pressed herself against his legs, nudging at him like she could physically take the pain away.

"Hey—hey—it's okay," Shane panted, reaching down to touch her. "I'm okay, sweet girl..." Anya wasn't convinced. She whined again, nuzzling harder.

Ilya smiled faintly despite the tension, one hand briefly dropping to stroke her head. "Все хорошо," he murmured in Russian. "Малыш скоро придет... папа будет в порядке." (It's okay. The baby is coming soon... daddy will be alright.)

Anya huffed softly but stayed pressed close.

The contraction peaked. Held. Then finally—

Released. Shane slumped forward, breathing hard. Okay... that one was... yeah."

"Stronger," Jess acknowledged calmly. "That's a good sign. Your labor is progressing."

Shane nodded weakly.

"Great... love that... for me."

—

Time blurred. Minutes stretched. Contractions came and went. Gradually closer. Gradually stronger. Until—

"Seven minutes," Jess said quietly, checking the timing. She stepped closer. "I'd like to do another cervical check, if that's okay."

Shane swallowed. "Yeah... okay, we can do that."

Ilya helped him carefully off the birthing ball and onto the mattress, supporting his weight as Shane lowered himself onto his side. Immediately, Anya climbed into position. Right where she always had been. Right in front of him. Shane let out a soft, emotional laugh as he rested his head against her.

"You again, huh?"

Anya stayed perfectly still, offering her side like a practiced routine. The familiarity of it—the same position from months ago, when he'd been sick and exhausted on the bathroom floor—It hit him all at once. His eyes filled.

"Hey..." Ilya said softly, brushing his hair back. "What is it?"

Shane shook his head, voice thick. "Nothing... just..." He pressed his face lightly into Anya's fur. "She's been here for everything. She's been my rock, I- just, I never thought she'd be like this."

Ilya's expression softened. "Yes. She has."

Jess knelt beside them, her tone gentle but clinical as she prepared. "Alright, Shane. I'm going to check your cervix now. You'll feel some pressure."

Shane nodded, focusing on his breathing. The examination was brief but precise. Jess assessed dilation, effacement (how thin the cervix had become), and the baby's station—how far down she had moved into the pelvis.

"Okay..." Jess said after a moment, withdrawing.

She smiled. "You've made good progress."

Shane lifted his head slightly. "How good?" Expecting to hear six at the highest.

"Seven centimeters."

Shane blinked. "Wait—really?"

Jess nodded. "Yes. Your cervix is now about seven centimeters dilated, almost fully effaced, and baby is moving down nicely." She met his eyes. "You're approaching transition."

The word hung in the air. Transition. The most intense phase of labor. The final stretch before pushing. Shane exhaled slowly.

"Okay..."

Ilya squeezed his hand. "You are close."

Shane nodded, resting back against Anya again.

"Yeah..." He closed his eyes briefly. "Okay. I can do this. I have to do this."

Anya huffed softly beneath him. And this time—

He believed it was for his benefit alone.

The shift into transition wasn't subtle. It didn't creep in. It took over. By the time Shane was settled in the birthing pool, the room had changed again—quieter in some ways, but heavier. Focused down to a single, undeniable truth: This was it.

He was deep in labor now.

The warm water surrounded him, buoyant and soothing against the constant tension in his body. It helped—took the edge off the pressure in his hips and lower back—but it didn't touch the intensity building inside him.

Shane leaned back against Ilya's chest, his head resting against his shoulder, one of Ilya's arms wrapped firmly around his middle. "I've got you," Ilya murmured, lips brushing his damp hair.

Shane nodded weakly. Another contraction rose. This one came faster than the last. Stronger. It didn't build slowly anymore—it surged. His breath hitched sharply as the tightening gripped his entire abdomen, radiating down into his pelvis with crushing force. "Oh—Fuck —" His hands clenched in the water.

"Breathe, Shane," Jess's voice came from somewhere nearby, calm and steady. "In through your nose... out through your mouth."

Shane tried. He really did. But the pain was pulling his focus away, dragging him under. A low moan slipped out before he could stop it. Then another.

Ilya tightened his hold slightly, grounding him.

"You're doing so well," he whispered. "You're almost there." Anya stood at the edge of the pool, front paws braced carefully on the side, her head hovering just within reach. Her eyes never left Shane. Every sound he made, every shift in his breathing—she reacted to all of it.

When another contraction hit, sharper than before, Shane let out a strained cry. Anya immediately leaned forward, licking at his temple in quick, frantic motions.

"It's okay..." Shane gasped, one hand lifting weakly to touch her. "I'm okay..." But his voice shook. Because this— this was different. This was overwhelming. Transition had begun. He knew it. He could feel it in the tremble deep within his muscles. This was it now.

—

Jess watched carefully, her clinical calm never wavering. "Your contractions are about five minutes apart now," she said. "They're stronger, longer. That's exactly what we expect in transition." She glanced at Ilya. Taking notice of the question behind his gaze. "This is the most intense phase. The cervix is finishing dilation from around seven to ten centimeters. It can feel sudden, overwhelming—but it means we're close."

Close didn't feel comforting right now.

It felt terrifying.

Another contraction slammed into Shane. Hard.

His back arched against Ilya as a broken sound tore from his throat. "I can't—"

"Yes, you can," Ilya said immediately, voice firm but gentle. "You are doing it."

The contraction peaked. Held. Shane's breathing fractured into short, uneven gasps. Then finally—

Released. He slumped, trembling.

"Ilya..." he whispered.

"I'm here."

Shane shook his head weakly. "I don't—I don't think I can—"

"You can," Jess said softly but firmly. "Your body knows what it's doing. You're not fighting this—you're working with it."

Shane squeezed his eyes shut. Another contraction started before he had fully recovered. His composure cracked. "I want my mom," he choked out suddenly. "Please—get my mom—"

Jess didn't hesitate. "Of course." She moved quickly out of the room.

Seconds later, footsteps approached again.

Yuna Hollander, mother and manager in one entered, her face already tight with emotion. "Oh, sweetheart..."

Shane reached for her instinctively. "Mom—"

She moved to his side immediately, taking his hand, brushing damp hair away from his forehead.

"I'm here. I'm right here."

Another contraction hit. Shane cried out, gripping her hand tightly as his body tensed again, the pressure now unmistakably lower—deep in his pelvis.

Yuna's eyes filled with tears, but her voice stayed steady. "You're doing so well," she whispered. "I'm so proud of you."

Behind them, Anya remained on high alert, her head still resting over the edge of the pool, licking at Shane's temple whenever she could reach him.

During a brief lull, Ilya reached out to stroke her ears. "You are so good, Yaya," he murmured softly in Russian again. "Such a good girl... taking care of him." Anya huffed quietly but didn't move. She wouldn't.

Not now.

Time stretched. Seven hours of labor had worn Shane down. His energy was fading. His focus slipping. Another contraction came—stronger, closer. He broke. “I can't do this!” he cried, voice raw with exhaustion and pain. “I can't—” It felt like he was repeating himself, he probably was.

Yuna squeezed his hand. “Yes, you can.”

“No—no, I can't—”

Jess knelt beside the pool again, her voice calm but firm. “Shane, listen to me.”

He forced his eyes open.

“You are doing it,” she said. “Every contraction is bringing your baby closer. Your cervix is opening, your baby is moving down. This pain has a purpose.”

Shane shook his head, tears spilling freely. “It hurts so bad—”

“I know,” she said gently. “But you are not alone in this. Your body is strong. It knows exactly what to do.”

Another contraction hit. Stronger. Closer. Shane cried out again, clutching Ilya's arm. “Ilya —”

“I've got you,” Ilya whispered urgently. “Hold onto me.”

—

An hour later, just like clockwork, everything intensified again. The breaks between contractions shrank. Five minutes. Then four. Then—

Two.

Barely any rest at all.

Shane's breathing became frantic. His body tensed almost constantly now, the waves of contraction overlapping, leaving him no time to fully recover.

"I can't—I can't—I can't—" he sobbed, borderline hysterical.

"You can," Ilya insisted, holding him tightly. "You are so close now Lyubimiy."

On the floor nearby, Anya began pacing, whining anxiously as Shane's distress escalated.

David quickly stepped forward, gently reaching for her collar. "Come on, girl—let's give them some space—"

Anya resisted immediately. Whining louder. Pulling back. Shane saw. His heart clenched. "No—dad, wait—" His voice cracked. "Don't take her—please— I want her here. She has to be here."

David hesitated.

Jess looked up from her position. "It's okay," she said calmly. "She can stay."

David blinked. He was almost certain most medical professionals would refuse an animal being apart of such an invasive situation.

"As long as she stays up near his head," Jess continued, "and out of my working space, it's fine."

Relief flooded Shane's face. "Please..."

David eventually nodded, releasing her. "Alright."

Together, the two of them guided Anya gently back to the head of the pool next to Yuna, where she immediately settled again—close enough to touch Shane, but out of the way. She pressed her head against the edge, watching him intently.

—

Jess moved into position again. "Shane, I need to check you one more time. I'm almost certain this'll be it okay?"

He nodded weakly. "Okay..."

The cervical check was quick but thorough. Jess assessed dilation, effacement, and fetal descent. Then she smiled. "Okay.. there we go honey."

Shane looked at her, exhausted. "Tell me something good." He begged.

She met his eyes. "You're fully dilated."

He blinked in shock. "What?"

"Ten centimeters," she confirmed. "Your cervix is completely open, fully effaced. Baby girl is low, well-engaged in the pelvis." A pause. Then— "It's time for you to push."

The room went still. Shane's breath caught. Ilya tightened his hold on him. Yuna squeezed his hand. Anya huffed softly, pressing closer. Shane closed his eyes for a moment. Then nodded.

"...okay."

It was time.

It was as though the moment Jess said it's time for him to push, everything changed all over again. Like his body had been waiting for permission.

There was no more drifting between contractions. No more soft space in between. Now there was only effort. Only pressure. Only the overwhelming, instinctive urge to bear down.

Shane barely had time to process it before the next contraction hit—and this one was different. It wasn't just pain. It was force. A deep, involuntary pressure low in his body, like everything inside him was being pushed downward whether he was ready or not.

"Holy—God— ah, I'm pushing what—" Shane panicked, voice cracking as he struggled to fight off the urge.

"That's it," Jess said calmly but firmly. "Your body is telling you to push. Go with it. Don't fight it okay?"

Shane nodded weakly, gripping the sides of the pool. "Okay—okay—"

"Take a breath," Ilya murmured behind him. "And push when that pain comes."

The contraction surged. Shane cried out as he bore down, every muscle in his body tightening with the effort. It felt wrong. Too much. Too intense.

"I can't—I don't know how—"

"You're doing it," Jess reassured him. "Just like that. Hold it—hold it—good—now breathe."

The contraction faded. Shane collapsed back against Ilya, panting. "That didn't feel right," he whimpered.

"It's okay," Jess said. "We'll adjust. We will find what works best for you."

—

They tried on his back first. Ilya supporting him, Yuna at his side, Jess guiding. But the position didn't work. Shane couldn't focus the pressure. Couldn't direct it. "It's not doing anything," he cried in frustration.

"That's alright," Jess said immediately. "Let's try something else." They shifted him carefully. Onto his knees in the water. Leaning forward over the edge of the pool.

"Try here," Jess encouraged. Another contraction hit. Shane pushed again—hard, desperate—but the angle still wasn't right. It felt scattered. Unfocused.

Frustrating.

"I can't do it," he sobbed. "I can't—"

"You can," Ilya insisted, voice tight but steady. "We just need the right position."

Jess nodded. "Let's try side-lying, you found that easiest during cervical checks. Maybe that's your position honey."

—

It took effort to reposition him. Shane was exhausted already, his limbs heavy, his body trembling from the intensity. But once he was on his side— Everything changed.

He leaned back against Ilya's chest, supported fully. Ilya's arm wrapped around him, holding him steady. His other hand gripped Shane's left leg, lifting it back and up, opening his hips. Yuna stayed close, brushing hair from his face, murmuring encouragement.

Jess moved into position. "Okay, Shane," she said gently. "This is good. This gives baby the most room to come down. Nice big push for me on the next one alright?"

Shane nodded weakly, tears slipping down his temples. "I'm so tired..."

"I know," Ilya whispered into his hair. "But you're so close."

Another contraction built. Stronger. Deeper.

"Push into it," Jess guided.

Shane cried out as he bore down, this time the pressure aligning— Focused. Productive.

"YES—that's it," Jess said immediately. "That's exactly what we want."

Shane sobbed through the effort, gripping Ilya's arm as he pushed again. And again. And again.

Time lost meaning. Minutes blurred into something heavier. Longer. Harder. Each contraction demanded everything he had left. And still— It took time. Nearly two hours of pushing. Two hours of effort, of strain, of exhaustion so deep it made his vision blur.

"I can't—I can't do this anymore—" Shane cried, voice breaking. "You- you don't understand!"

"You are doing it," Yuna said firmly, though her own voice shook. "You're bringing her here."

"I'm scared—" he sobbed. "What if she's not okay—?"

Jess reached for the Doppler. "Shane focus! Let me show you something." She placed it gently against Shane's stomach. A moment later— The fast, steady rhythm filled the room.

Strong.

Clear.

Alive.

"There," Jess said softly. "That's your baby. Her heartbeat is perfect."

Shane broke again—but this time from relief. "She's okay... I'm not hurting her."

"She's perfect," Ilya whispered, pressing his forehead to Shane's.

"Okay," Shane breathed. "Okay..."

Another contraction hit. And he pushed again.

"Shane," Jess said after a moment, her tone shifting a pitch. "I can see her head."

Everything stopped.

"What?" Shane gasped.

"She's right there," Jess confirmed. "You're doing it."

A broken sob left him. "Oh my God—"

Encouragement filled the room.

"You're so close—" Ilya cooed, lips pressed firmly to his head. "Just a little more—" he choked.

"You've got this—"

—

The final phase of pushing came fast. And brutal. The baby began to crown. The pressure became something else entirely. A stretching. A burning.

An intensity that stole the air from Shane's lungs.

He screamed. Full body screamed. Not the hoarse moans and whimpers like before. No, this was raw and broken. Aching will pain and desperation.

"I CAN'T—IT BURNS—"

"I know," Jess said firmly. "Shane calm down and listen to me! That's the head stretching the tissues. You need to slow down now."

Anya, at the edge of the pool, began panting anxiously, whining at the sound of Shane's pain.

David gently held her collar. "It's okay, girl... he's okay..."

Yuna moved closer, pressing a firm kiss to Shane's head. "Breathe, sweetheart. Come on now. Pant for me."

Shane sobbed, trying to follow instructions. Short, shallow breaths. Panting. He'd read about this. Trying not to push too hard. Trying not to rush.

"Good," Jess encouraged. "Control it. Let your body stretch." She glanced up, smiling.

"I can see the top of her head clearly now—she has a full head of brown hair. Light by the looks of it."

Ilya froze. His breath caught. "...my hair," he whispered, voice breaking.

Shane let out a shaky, exhausted laugh.

"Of course she does—you and your Russian genes." Another wave of burning pain tore through him. He cried out again, nails digging into his own thigh as he pulled his leg back further, desperate to make space. "Please—please—just get her out—"

"You're almost there," Jess said firmly. "One more firm push when the next contraction comes."

Shane nodded frantically. "Okay—okay—"

The contraction came. Hard. Relentless.

"Now, come on Shane. Come on," Jess said.

Shane screamed as he pushed with everything he had left. Every ounce of strength. Every breath. Every bit of determination. And suddenly—

Release.

"Her head is out!" Jess announced.

Ilya's eyes widened, panic flashing in his eyes as he saw the blood in the water. "Oh God— is he—"

"It's normal," Jess said immediately. "He's okay. A little blood is completely normal."

Yuna nodded reassuringly. "Everything's fine, Ilya."

Shane barely heard them. He was crying softly, dazed, overwhelmed. "Is she okay...?"

"She's perfect," Jess said. "Just one more push for the shoulders."

"I can't—" Shane whispered weakly.

Yuna pressed another kiss to his head. "You can. You're right there. You're at the finish line now sweetheart."

The next contraction didn't wait. It surged through him suddenly, powerfully.

Shane gasped as his body took over. He bore down instinctively— And then a sudden rush. His daughter deciding that enough was enough. She was coming out with this final push.

A release. A startled yelp ripping from his chest.

“Ah!”

"Holy—She's out!" Jess gasped. “Shane you’ve done it!”

Time stopped.

Ilya felt as though he couldn’t breathe.

Jess carefully guided the baby up from the water, supporting her small body as she emerged fully into the world.

Shane collapsed back against Ilya, trembling, arms reaching out blindly as he turned fully onto his back. “My baby—”

Jess moved quickly, bringing her forward. “Here—take her— you’ve got her.”

She placed the tiny, wet, perfect baby onto Shane's heavy chest. His shaking arms winding around her , hands immediately rubbing her back gently.

For a moment— Nothing.

Then— A sputter. A cough.

And finally—

A strong, clear cry filled the room.

Shane broke completely. “Oh my God—hi—hi— hi my baby. Oh I’ve got you. Daddy’s got you, shhh.”

Tears streamed down his face as he held her close, pressing trembling kisses to her damp head.

Ilya wrapped his arms around both of them, crying openly now, his voice soft and emotional as he murmured in Russian. “Моя девочка... моя любовь... вы оба... я так вас люблю...” (My little girl... my love... both of you... I love you so much...)

Anya broke free from David's hold. She rushed to the edge of the pool, immediately licking at Shane's face, tail wagging wildly. Shane laughed weakly through his tears. “Hey—hey—crazy girl.”

Her excitement was unstoppable. Her joy overwhelming. She licked his cheek again and again, as if she understood exactly what had just happened. As if she was proud.

And honestly? She was.

Because curled in Shane's arms— Crying, alive, perfect— Was their daughter. Her sister.

She was here and she was utterly perfect.

The room settles into a quiet, almost sacred calm as the first rush of adrenaline fades. The tiny sounds of their daughter—soft breaths, the occasional sleepy twitch—fill the space in a way that makes everything else feel distant.

For a while, neither Shane nor Ilya says much. They just look. At her curls, still slightly damp , yet already hinting at their shape. At the delicate curve of her nose. At the tiny constellation of moles that make Shane laugh softly through exhaustion.

“Went through all that,” he murmurs, voice hoarse but warm, “just for her to come out your double.”

Ilya huffs a quiet laugh, though his hand never leaves their daughter. “She’s perfect,” he whispers, like saying it any louder might somehow disturb the moment.

Too soon, reality gently nudges its way back in. The contractions that started up within his pelvis a clear sign. Shane knows what has to happen next.

There’s a pause—longer than necessary—as he steadies himself. His arms tighten ever so slightly around the baby before he exhales, clearly reluctant. “We... we need to—uh—cut the cord.”

His voice wavers, just a little.

Jess gives him a soft, understanding look but says nothing, allowing him the time he needs. Because this part... this part is harder than he expected. He knew it was coming. The second he decided on a water birth he had known. In order for him to be checked over he had to get out. That meant handing his baby over for a few minutes.

Just a few minutes that was all.

Shane glances toward David and Yuna, his expression apologetic before he even speaks. “I—I just... need a minute. It’s not that I don’t trust you, I just...” He swallows, shaking his head slightly. “Give me a second, yeah?”

Yuna smiles immediately, gentle and knowing. “Hey,” she says softly, stepping a little closer but not too close. “I was exactly the same when you were born. Wouldn’t let anyone take you at first.” Her eyes warm. “Take your time.”

That helps.

It takes a few more breaths before Shane nods, finally able to loosen his hold just enough to sit forward. When he looks up again, his gaze finds David. “Dad... do you want to cut it?”

For a moment, David just blinks—caught completely off guard. “Me?”

Shane gives a small, tired smile. “Yeah. Thought you might like the honour.”

Emotion hits instantly. David steps forward, hands already a little unsteady as he takes the scissors Jess offers him. He tries to compose himself, but it’s obvious—his eyes glisten, his throat tight.

“I—yeah. Yeah, I’d be honoured.”

The snip is small, almost insignificant in sound... but it carries weight. A quiet, irreversible shift.

A new beginning.

Once it’s done, there’s another pause. Then, carefully—so carefully it almost hurts—Shane finally hands his daughter over to Yuna.

Yuna receives her like something priceless, her movements slow and reverent. She cradles the baby close, wrapping her in a towel, murmuring softly as she adjusts her hold. Before she steps away, she leans just slightly toward Ilya.

Giving him the space.

Ilya doesn’t hesitate. He leans forward, pressing the gentlest kiss to their daughter’s forehead, lingering there for just a second longer than necessary. His hand brushes her cheek, like he’s memorising the feel of her. Because he still hasn’t held her properly.

Not yet.

Yuna gives him a soft smile before stepping back, giving Shane the room he now needs.

The shift back to the practical is less gentle.

Shane is helped onto the inflatable mattress, every movement slow and careful. The adrenaline has worn thin now, leaving behind the tremble of exhaustion. Anya immediately moves with him, settling close the moment he's down, pressing herself against his side like she's been doing all along. He doesn't even think about it—just lets his head fall against her, using her as his anchor.

Jess works calmly, efficiently. "There's a small tear," she explains gently, already preparing what she needs. "Nothing unexpected, especially with how quickly she came once her head was out. I'll just need to place a few stitches."

Shane nods weakly, too tired to argue, though his grip tightens slightly in Anya's fur.

The process is careful and clinical—cleaning, checking, then stitching with precise, practiced movements. Jess talks him through it in a low, steady voice, explaining just enough to reassure without overwhelming. Anya doesn't move. Not once. She stays exactly where she is, solid and warm, occasionally shifting just enough to nudge him when his breathing falters. Shane's hand remains tangled in her fur the entire time, grounding himself in her presence.

"You're doing great," Jess murmurs at one point.

Shane lets out a shaky breath. "Yeah... yeah, I know," he whispers, though his voice cracks slightly. It doesn't take forever. But it feels like it.

When it's finally done, Jess gives a small nod of satisfaction. "All sorted. You did really well."

Shane doesn't respond right away—just closes his eyes for a moment, relief washing over him in quiet waves. He did it. His baby is here. She's here and she's safe. It feels like he can finally breathe again.

A few hours later, everything feels... peaceful.

Softer.

Calmer.

The spare room has been cleared, David and Yuna quietly taking care of everything left behind, giving the new little family the space they need.

Now, it's just the three of them.

Well— Four.

Back in their bedroom, the lighting is low, the atmosphere tranquil in a way that feels almost unreal after everything that came before.

Shane sits propped up carefully, exhaustion still etched into every movement, but there's something else there now too—something brighter.

Ilya is beside him, close enough that their shoulders touch. Between them, held in the crook of Ilya's arm.

Is Emi.

Tiny. Swaddled. Perfect.

And at their side, as always— Anya. For a moment, it's like she doesn't quite understand. She watches, head tilted, ears flicking slightly as she takes in this new little human. Then, slowly, cautiously, she leans forward. A soft sniff. Another.

Her nose brushes the baby's tiny toes, and she freezes for a second—processing—before giving the gentlest little lick to one foot. It's so delicate. So careful.

Ilya lets out a quiet laugh under his breath. "I think she approves."

Shane doesn't laugh. He's crying. Not loudly. Not dramatically. Just soft tears slipping down his cheeks as he watches the two most important parts of his world meet properly for the first time.

His hand finds Anya's fur again, stroking her slowly. "Thank you," he whispers, voice thick with emotion. "For staying... for all of it. You're such a good girl Yaya." Anya glances up at him briefly, as if she understands far more than she should.

Then Shane looks back down at their daughter. There's a pause. A breath. And then, softly—like he's sharing a secret meant only for this moment—he speaks.

"Her name is Emiko."

He swallows, voice trembling just slightly. "Emiko Lily Jane Hollander-Rozanov."

The room seems to hold that name, wrapping around it gently. Shane smiles through the tears, brushing his thumb lightly over her cheek.

"Emi," he whispers. "Our perfect angel girl."

And somehow, it fits perfectly.

Six weeks changes everything.

The adrenaline is gone. The visitors have slowed. The world has gone back to moving at its normal pace— but Shane’s world is still entirely wrapped around one tiny human. And right now... it hurts.

Mastitis had crept in quietly at first. A little tenderness. A bit of pressure. Something he thought he could just push through. He was wrong.

Now it’s agony. Every time Emiko latches, it feels like fire under his skin—sharp, throbbing, relentless. The blocked duct makes everything tight, swollen, unbearable. But he still tries. Because she’s hungry. Because she needs him.

Because he wants to be enough.

Ilya’s back at training, and Shane doesn’t resent it—not even a little. He’s proud of him. Of their team. Always will be. And truthfully, he loves this time too—just him and Emi, their quiet little bubble. But some days... Some days are heavier.

Today is one of them.

Emi fusses, rooting instinctively, and Shane adjusts her with shaky hands, guiding her gently. “I’ve got you, baby... I’ve got you,” he murmurs, voice already strained.

She latches. And the pain hits instantly.

Shane gasps, his whole body tensing as tears spring to his eyes. “God—okay—okay...” he breathes through it, trying to steady himself, trying to ride it out like he’s been told to. But it doesn’t ease. It builds.

Emi feeds eagerly, unaware of the storm it’s causing, and Shane’s grip tightens around her blanket as his breathing becomes uneven. The room feels too loud, too bright, too much all at once—the sensation, the sound of her swallowing, the ache in his body, the exhaustion sitting deep in his bones. The tiny baby grunting as he flinches away instinctively.

“I know, I know, daddy’s sorry sweetheart...” he whispers, voice cracking. “Just—just a bit longer, yeah? We’re doing so well. You’re good at this.”

But he isn’t. And eventually— It’s too much.

With a soft, broken sound, Shane gently but quickly pulls her away, wincing as the latch breaks.

Emiko immediately protests, her face scrunching before the cries come—loud, desperate, confused.

“I’m sorry—oh God, I’m sorry,” Shane rushes out, tears slipping freely now. “I’m sorry, baby, I’m sorry. I can’t— I just—” She cries harder. And it shatters him. “I’ll get your bottle, okay? I promise, I promise, I’ve got milk for you—just—just give me a second—” His hands shake as he places her carefully into the bouncer, making sure she’s secure even as she wails. He lingers for half a second, brushing her cheek, guilt written all over his face. “I’m coming right back. I love you. I love you so much...”

Then he forces himself away.

The kitchen feels miles away. Shane moves quickly—too quickly for a body that’s still healing. The ache in his hips flares with every step, but he ignores it, going straight for the fridge.

“Okay, okay...” he mutters under his breath, pulling out a pouch of expressed milk. “We’ve got this. We’ve got this.”

Emi’s cries carry through the house—sharp, desperate, constant. Each one hits like a punch to his chest. “I hear you, Emi, I hear you,” he calls back, voice raised, breath uneven as he fumbles through cupboards. “Just a second, baby, I’m right here—”

Where’s the steriliser? He knows it’s here. It has to be. Drawers open too fast. Things clatter. His hands won’t cooperate. “Come on, come on—” And then— Silence.

It's sudden. Total. Wrong.

Shane freezes. Every instinct in his body spikes at once. "Emi?"

No answer. Of course there's no answer! She's a newborn for gods sake.

Panic hits hard and fast, flooding his system as he drops everything and bolts back toward the living room, ignoring the pain, ignoring the dizziness, ignoring everything.

"Emi?!" He skids to a stop in the doorway—

—and just... stares. Because what he sees— It doesn't make sense at first.

Anya is there.

Positioned right beside the bouncer, her body calm, focused in that way she gets. One paw rests gently against the side of it, nudging it in slow, careful movements. Rocking. Steady. Intentional.

And somehow—somehow—she's dragged Emi's tiny blanket over her legs, tucking it in clumsily but effectively.

Emi... Is quiet. Not just quiet—settled. Little hiccuping breaths, eyes half-lidded, the beginnings of sleep pulling her under.

Shane's chest rises and falls rapidly as the panic drains out of him, replaced by something softer. Warmer. Disbelief. "...Anya?" he breathes.

The dog glances up at him briefly, like she's just checking in, before returning her attention to the baby—nudging the bouncer again with gentle precision.

Shane lets out a shaky laugh, one hand coming up to cover his mouth as tears blur his vision again—but this time, they’re different. “Are you kidding me…” he whispers.

His heart feels like it might burst. Slowly, carefully, he pulls out his phone—hands still trembling—and snaps a photo. It’s perfect in the most unplanned way: Anya, focused and protective… Emi, soothed and safe.

He sends it straight to Ilya. ‘We have the smartest dog in the world.’

Then he lowers himself down onto the sofa with a soft exhale, wincing slightly but not taking his eyes off them. “You’re unbelievable,” he murmurs to Anya, voice thick with emotion. Another gentle nudge. Another tiny, sleepy sigh from Emi.

Shane wipes at his cheeks, smiling now despite everything—the pain, the exhaustion, the overwhelm still lingering at the edges. Because somehow… He’s not doing this alone.

Not really.

By four months, the house feels alive in a completely different way.

Not just with routines and quiet moments—but with personality. Emiko isn’t just a sleepy little bundle anymore. She’s expressive. Curious. Noisy in the best way. Every coo, every kick, every wide-eyed stare feels like she’s slowly introducing herself to the world. And right now— She’s in the middle of it all.

Spread out on her cushioned play mat, surrounded by soft teddies and brightly coloured teething toys, Emi squirms happily on her back, little fists waving as she lets out a string of determined babbles.

Ilya is lying beside her, propped on one elbow, completely engrossed. “Is that so?” he says seriously, nodding along like she’s telling him something very important. “Go on then, tell me more.”

Emi responds with an enthusiastic squeal.

“Ahhh, I see. Very interesting point.”

Shane, sitting nearby, snorts softly. “You’ve got full conversations with her now, yeah?”

“She’s got opinions,” Ilya replies without missing a beat.

Watching all of it— Anya. Positioned like a guard at the edge of the mat, alert but calm, her eyes track every tiny movement Emi makes. Every so often, she’ll get up, wander off, and return dragging something in her mouth—a toy, a blanket, another teddy—dropping it carefully within Emi’s reach before resuming her post. It’s methodical. Intentional. Protective.

Across the room, Hayden, Jackie, and the Pike kids watch the scene unfold with varying levels of amusement. “I swear,” Hayden says, shaking his head, “her whole ‘protect Shane at all costs’ thing has just transferred straight onto Emi.”

“Not entirely,” Shane mutters under his breath, though there’s a smile tugging at his lips.

“Yeah?” Hayden grins, stepping closer. “We’ll test that.” Before anyone can stop him, he reaches out toward Shane, hand raised. “C’mon, man—high five for that bed head comment about him—”

A low growl cuts through the room. Immediate. Sharp. Everyone freezes.

Anya is on her feet in an instant, body tense, eyes locked on Hayden’s raised hand.

Ilya straightens slightly. “Anya,” he warns, firm but calm.

Shane winces. “Sorry—she’s just—”

“It’s alright,” Hayden says quickly, lowering his hand, his tone softening as he crouches slightly. “Hey, hey... it’s okay.” He reaches out slowly—not toward Shane this time, but toward Anya—letting her see every movement. “I’m not a threat, yeah? Promise. You know me girl. I’m just teasing you.” He gives her a gentle stroke.

Anya doesn’t snap. Doesn’t move away. But she is thoroughly unimpressed. She huffs. Actually huffs—turning her head slightly like she’s offended by the entire situation.

Jackie bursts out laughing. “Oh my God—she just judged you.”

“I’ve never felt more disrespected by a dog,” Hayden mutters. And then— Another sound joins the room.

Soft.

Unexpected.

Bright.

Everyone turns.

Emi is still on her mat, little legs kicking—but now her face has completely changed. Her eyes sparkle, her mouth open in a wide, gummy grin— And she giggles. A real giggle. Light. Bubbly. Completely unfiltered joy.

For a second, no one moves.

Shane's breath catches. "Wait—" She does it again.

Another tiny burst of laughter, her whole body wiggling with it.

"Oh my God," Shane breathes, already halfway off the sofa. "Ilya—did you—"

"I heard it," Ilya says, already beside her, eyes wide. "She's—she's laughing—"

Their voices overlap, both of them reaching her at the same time. "Hi, baby—hi—what's so funny, huh?" Emi kicks harder, delighted by the sudden attention.

Anya, sensing the shift, steps in closer again—and, as if she's part of the joke, gently licks at Emi's tiny feet. Emi erupts. Full giggles now—louder, more frequent, pure happiness spilling out of her in waves.

Shane actually laughs through the tears forming in his eyes. "That's it—that's it—Anya, do it again—"

Anya obliges, another soft lick. More giggles.

Ilya presses a quick kiss to Emi's head, completely overwhelmed. "That's your first laugh," he murmurs, voice thick with emotion. "That's your first one..."

Shane nods, wiping at his cheeks but grinning like he can't stop. "Yeah... yeah, it is."

Behind them, the room feels warmer somehow—full of quiet smiles, soft laughter, and the kind of moment everyone knows they'll remember.

And at the centre of it all— Emi. Laughing.

While Anya, still very much on duty, makes absolutely sure she has every reason to keep going.

Ten months in, Emiko is no longer just discovering the world— she’s interacting with it. Loudly. Happily. Constantly. The rink is alive with the sharp sounds of skates cutting across ice, pucks clattering against boards, and distant shouts echoing through the cold air.

Bundled up in the stands, Emi is completely unfazed. If anything— she’s thriving.

Sat securely beside Yuna, she claps her tiny mittened hands together, babbling away in her own little language, like she’s contributing to practice. Her light brown curls are gathered into two tiny bunches, each held with little bow clips that somehow stay in place despite all her movement.

She looks ridiculously adorable in her snowsuit and tiny Ugg boots, kicking her feet with excitement every time someone skates past.

Beside her, Anya is just as engaged.

Her ears perk and twitch, head turning sharply as players glide by. She watches every movement like it’s her job—which, in her mind, it absolutely is.

“Yeah, you’re both very invested in this, aren’t you?” Yuna chuckles, sipping her drink. A player skates close to the boards— tap, tap.

Troy grins, pressing his glove lightly against the glass and giving a small wave. Emi gasps like she’s just met a celebrity. Then immediately claps again, babbling louder. “Da! Ba! Ta!”

“Big fan,” Yuna says dryly.

Practice wraps up not long after. The noise softens, players filtering off the ice, and within minutes—

there they are. Shane and Ilya, freshly showered, hair still slightly damp, both scanning the stands with identical expressions— until they see her.

And just like that, everything else disappears.

“There she is,” Shane breathes, already smiling.

Ilya doesn’t say anything—he’s already moving.

By the time they reach the seats, Emi is bouncing in place, her whole body lighting up as she recognises them.

“Hi, baby,” Ilya murmurs, scooping her up carefully, pressing a kiss to her cheek despite the cold. “Did you watch practice, da?”

“Ba! Ba! Ba!” she replies enthusiastically, grabbing at his hoodie strings.

Shane laughs, leaning in to kiss the top of her head. “Course she did. Future coach, this one.”

Yuna stands, stretching slightly. “She didn’t take her eyes off the ice. Neither did Anya.”

That’s when they notice— Anya is no longer at her post. Instead, she’s across the way, tail wagging steadily as she leans into a very familiar figure.

Luca Haas.

“Oi,” Shane mutters, narrowing his eyes slightly. “Unbelievable.”

Luca crouches, laughing softly as he scratches behind Anya's ears. "What? She came to me!"

"Traitor," Shane calls out. Anya, for her part, does not care. She's thriving.

"His car's still out," Ilya says, glancing at Shane. "We said we'd give him a lift, yeah?"

"Yeah, yeah," Shane nods, though his eyes flick back to Anya. "Clearly she's already made herself comfortable."

In Ilya's arms, Emi has gone very still. Her gaze locks onto Anya. Not beside Yuna anymore. Not where she's supposed to be. But over there. With Luca. Her little brows knit together. A small, frustrated sound escapes her. "Mm—!" She leans forward, arms stretching out, mittened hands grabbing at the air.

"I think she wants you, dude," Shane says, nodding toward Luca.

"Yeah?" Ilya smiles, shifting her slightly. "You want to come to Uncle Luca?"

Ilya steps over and gently passes her across.

Luca beams. "Hey, you—" But the second Emi is in his arms— She twists. Immediate. Determined.

Her eyes go straight past him. Locked on one thing.

"Uh..." Luca glances between her and the dog. "I don't think she—"

"Mm! Mm!" Emi insists, wriggling harder. And then— clear as day. Excited. Certain.

“Yaya!”

Everything stops.

Shane blinks. “...What?”

Ilya freezes. “Did she just—”

“Yaya!” Emi squeals again, bouncing in Luca’s hold, reaching past him toward Anya. There’s no confusion this time. No coincidence. She knows exactly what she’s saying. And exactly who she wants.

Anya.

For a second— just a second— Shane and Ilya are completely speechless. Then it hits.

“Oh my God—” Shane laughs, the sound bursting out of him as he runs a hand through his hair. “That’s her first word—”

Ilya is still staring, stunned. “She—she said it twice—”

“Yaya!” Emi repeats, even louder this time, as if to really drive the point home. Anya’s ears perk instantly. She turns, spots Emi— and is moving before anyone can stop her.

Luca carefully lowers Emi just enough for Anya to get close, and the second she does, Emi lights up, grabbing clumsily at her fur. Anya accepts it without hesitation, tail wagging as she nudges gently into her. Like that’s exactly where she’s meant to be.

Shane exhales a laugh, shaking his head in disbelief. “I mean... we really shouldn’t be surprised.”

Ilya huffs out a breath, still smiling, still a little stunned. “No, we shouldn’t.”

Shane gestures toward the scene in front of them—baby and dog, completely obsessed with each other. “She’s her favourite,” he says simply.

Emi giggles, burying her face into Anya’s fur.

“Yaya,” she mumbles again, softer this time.

And honestly— there was never really any competition.

From the second Shane took that pregnancy test, Anya was completely head over heels for their girl. She knew her heartbeat long before they did.

It was a bond like no other.

Just a baby girl and her very best friend.

End Notes

Don't forget to comment and leave kudos! I love reading through all of your feedback!
Means the world :)

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