

margin for error

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Summary

Shane's eyes burned. "What if I hadn't noticed?"

"But you did."

"But what if I hadn't?"

Ilya pulled Shane against his chest, wrapping his arms around him. "You would have. Because you are Shane Hollander. When Shane Hollander has goal—like goal to keep our baby safe—nothing gets past him." He pressed a kiss to Shane's temple. "Is blessing and curse, yes? But mostly blessing."

Or,

3 times Shane's hypervigilance caught something wrong with their kids before anyone else did, and 1 time Ilya had to confiscate his laptop.

Notes

general disclaimer: this follows the same Hollanov dads universe from my other fics in [Our House](#), but they're all standalones so you definitely don't need to read any of them to read this one!!

this fic will go through different moments in their parenthood journey, and i'll clearly note the kids' ages in each section

thanks for reading, and hope you enjoy!

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

1. Niko, age 5 months

It was probably an old wives' tale that firstborns had to be at least somewhat calm; otherwise, parents would never consider having more kids.

But either way, it was true with Niko.

He was the perfect baby. He slept through the night at eight weeks. He barely cried. He ate when he was supposed to eat, slept when he was supposed to sleep, and smiled at literally everyone who looked at him.

Even now, at five months old, he was hitting every milestone right on schedule. Rolling over. Sitting up with support. Babbling. Reaching for toys. The pediatrician had no concerns whatsoever.

Which was why Shane felt particularly ridiculous about the thing he'd been noticing.

It was probably nothing. It was almost definitely nothing.

But there was something about the way Niko's legs looked when he was lying on his back. Something asymmetrical. One of his thigh creases seemed...deeper than the other? Or maybe there was an extra crease? Shane couldn't quite put his finger on it, but something looked off.

He'd mentioned it to Ilya once, casually, while they were giving Niko a bath.

"Do his legs look weird to you?"

Ilya glanced down at Niko, who was happily splashing in his baby tub, grinning at them with his big, gummy grin.

"No? He has Russian genes and a daddy with thighs size of tree trunks. Of course he will have big, strong legs," he said the last part an octave higher, the way Niko always responds to, and squeezes his chubby thigh until Niko's giggles fill the bathroom.

"I'm not talking about the size," Shane scoffed as he continued running the washcloth over Niko's soft skin. "Look at the creases. On his thighs. Don't they seem uneven?"

Ilya had studied them for a long moment, then shrugged. "Maybe? Babies are lumpy, Shane. Is normal."

And Shane had let it go. Because Ilya was probably right. Babies were lumpy and asymmetrical and weird-looking sometimes. It was fine.

Except he couldn't stop noticing it.

Every diaper change, Shane would find himself studying Niko's legs. The way they folded. The way the creases lined up—or didn't line up. The way one leg seemed to rotate outward slightly more than the other when Niko was lying flat.

And then there was the click.

Shane had been changing Niko's diaper one morning when he'd bent Niko's legs up to clean him, and he'd felt it. A tiny click in Niko's hip. So subtle he almost missed it.

He'd frozen, his hand still on Niko's leg.

Niko had just smiled up at him, blowing spit bubbles.

Shane had carefully bent the leg again, paying attention this time. And there it was. A soft click.

His stomach dropped.

He finished the diaper change on autopilot, his mind already racing. Then he just as quickly prepped Niko's bottle and propped him in his arm while opening his laptop with the other.

Hip click in baby. Uneven leg creases. Asymmetrical thighs.

Every result pointed to the same thing: developmental hip dysplasia.

Shane had spent the next 30 minutes falling down a research rabbit hole. Reading about hip development, about how some babies were born with shallow hip sockets, about how if left untreated it could lead to arthritis and mobility issues and—

He stopped and looked at Niko in his arm, who was now fast asleep after finishing his bottle. Dark lashes fanning his chubby cheeks, a little bit of milk dribbling from the corner of his mouth. Shane wiped it away with his thumb.

"Shane?"

Shane looked up to find Ilya standing in the doorway of the office, concern creasing his forehead. "What are you doing?"

"Research," Shane said quietly.

Ilya walked over and sat down on the couch beside Shane, peering at the laptop screen. His eyebrows furrowed as he scanned the article. Then he looked down at Niko, still sleeping peacefully in Shane's arms.

"You think something is wrong with his hip?" Ilya asked carefully.

"I don't know. Maybe. I felt something. A click." Shane swallowed hard.

Ilya was quiet for a moment. Then he carefully reached out and took Niko from Shane's arms, laying their sleeping son on his back across both their laps. "Show me."

Shane demonstrated, gently bending Niko's leg up, trying not to wake him. "There. Did you feel that?"

Ilya's eyebrows furrowed. He carefully repeated the motion. "Da. I feel it." He looked at Shane. "This is bad?"

"I don't know. It could be nothing. Or it could be—it could mean his hip isn't developing right."

They'd called the pediatrician that afternoon. Got an appointment for the next day. The doctor had examined Niko, did the same leg movements Shane had been doing, and her face had gotten serious.

"I'm going to refer you to an orthopedist," she'd said. "Just to be safe."

Just to be safe.

Those four words that always meant it definitely wasn't safe.

The orthopedist had confirmed it with an ultrasound. Mild hip dysplasia on the left side. The socket was slightly shallow, not quite holding the ball of the hip joint properly.

"It's very common," the doctor had assured them. "And the good news is, we caught it early. At five months, treatment is very straightforward."

Treatment meant a Pavlik harness. A contraption of straps and stirrups that would hold Niko's legs in a specific position to help the hip socket develop properly. He'd need to wear it 23 hours a day for at least six weeks, possibly longer depending on how well the hip responded.

Shane had nodded through the explanation, his hand clutching Ilya's so tight his knuckles were white. But Ilya didn't even wince. Just lifted Shane's hand to his mouth and kissed his knuckles gently.

When they got home, Ilya had taken Niko upstairs for a nap while Shane sat on the couch, staring at the pamphlet the doctor had given them about the harness.

Ilya found him there twenty minutes later, still reading through it. Presumably for the 20th time.

"He's going to have to wear that thing for weeks," Shane said. "Months, maybe. He won't be able to move properly. He won't be able to crawl when he's ready. He could be delayed—"

"He will be fine," Ilya interrupted firmly. "He will wear harness, his hip will fix itself, and then he will crawl and walk and run and play hockey and do everything else. He will be running around so fast that we will miss the days when he couldn't even crawl."

Shane tried to smile at that. He wasn't sure it worked.

Ilya cupped Shane's face and kissed him softly. "He is going to be just fine. You caught it early. Doctor said most parents do not notice until baby is much older. You are such a good dad, *moya lyubov*."

Shane's eyes burned. "What if I hadn't noticed?"

"But you did."

"But what if I hadn't?"

Ilya pulled Shane against his chest, wrapping his arms around him. "You would have. Because you are Shane Hollander. When Shane Hollander has goal—like goal to keep our baby safe—nothing gets past him." He pressed a kiss to Shane's temple. "Is blessing and curse, yes? But mostly blessing."



When the harness arrived a week later, Shane thought he'd be the one crying when they put it on Niko for the first time. But it had been Ilya—who had been trying so hard the past few weeks not to let Shane see how scared he was about this whole thing. Because he knew Shane was already feeling so overwhelmed by it, carrying enough worry for the both of them.

"He's so little," Ilya said thickly as he started putting it on Niko. His hands were shaking slightly as he tried to figure out which strap went where. Niko began crying too, confused and uncomfortable, which only made Ilya's tears spill over more. "I'm sorry, *malyshka*. I'm so sorry."

Shane's eyes were stinging, but he gently rubbed Ilya's back. "Let me do it, sweetheart. It's okay."

"No, I can—"

But Shane was already taking over, his hands steady even though his heart was breaking. He rubbed Niko's stomach, leaning in close and whispering little reassurances to him until his cries dampened to whimpers. Then finished adjusting the harness, making sure each strap was secure but not too tight.

When he was done, Niko's little legs were bent up and out. He looked so small in the contraption, so vulnerable, and Shane had to blink hard to keep his own tears from falling.

"He looks like little frog," Ilya said, his voice wet. Then he let out a shaky laugh. "Cute frog though."

Shane smiled despite himself. "The cutest frog."

Ilya wiped his eyes and took a breath, pulling himself together. He scooped Niko up carefully, bouncing him gently, and started singing to him in Russian under his breath—one of those old lullabies his mother used to sing to him. That's something Shane had learned once they became parents. And it made Shane's chest squeeze every time he heard Ilya murmur.

Shane wished, desperately and often, that Irina could be here. He had always wished that, ever Ilya had first confided in Shane that she was dead. But since having Niko, it's been on Shane's mind a lot more. He wished she could see her son be a father. To see her grandson. To know that all the love she'd given Ilya in the first twelve years of his life—the love that

had been enough to carry him through everything that came after—was now being passed down. Magnified, into their son.

She would have been so proud.

Shane moved closer, wrapping his arm around Ilya's waist and pressing a kiss to his shoulder. Ilya leaned into him, still swaying with Niko, and they stood there like that—the three of them—while Ilya's mother's lullaby filled the quiet room.

Eventually Niko stopped crying, and after a few silly faces from Ilya, he started giggling instead.



The first few days were hard. Niko was fussy, uncomfortable, struggling to sleep in the harness. Shane and Ilya barely slept either, getting up every hour to check on him, to make sure he was okay, to adjust his position.

But Niko adapted. Because babies were resilient like that, they were beginning to learn. By the end of the first week, he'd figured out how to sleep in the harness. By the second week, he'd figured out how to roll over in it. By the third week, it was like he'd forgotten he was even wearing it, happily babbling and playing like nothing was different.

At the six-week follow-up, the ultrasound showed significant improvement. The hip socket was deepening properly, the ball of the joint sitting where it should. They'd need to continue the harness for another couple weeks, but the doctor was optimistic.

"He's going to be perfectly fine," she'd said with a smile. "It'll be as if this never happened."

Two weeks later, when the harness came off for good and Niko's hip was perfectly normal, Ilya had saved it in a box in the closet. Right next to the ultrasound pictures and the hospital bracelets and the little onesie with the tiny hockey pucks that had been Niko's going-home outfit.

"Why are you keeping it?" Shane had asked, watching Ilya carefully fold the straps.

"I don't know," Ilya said quietly. He looked at the harness for a long moment. "Feels important. Like...proof."

"Proof of what?"

Ilya glanced up at him, his eyes soft. "That you pay attention. That you notice things. That you save our babies." He set the harness gently in the box and closed the lid. "That we are good team."

Shane's throat tightened. He pulled Ilya into a kiss, slow and full of everything he couldn't quite put into words.

When they pulled apart, Ilya was smiling against his lips. "Also, maybe someday we show this to Niko. Would make good joke for when he is teenager and thinks he is too cool for us."

His grin widened. "We can remind him of his origin, as a little frog baby."

Shane laughed. "You're already planning our son's embarrassment?"

"Of course. Is parenting."

2. Max, age 5

Max loved doing everything Niko did.

That was just a fact of life in the Hollander-Rozanov household. Had been since Max was old enough to toddle after his older brother with those unsteady toddler steps, arms outstretched.

And because Niko had loved reading, Shane was sure Max would too.

But that wasn't the case.

Max hated it.

Shane and Ilya had tried making it fun for Max. They'd take him to the library, let him explore the children's section with its bright colors and cozy reading nooks. Max loved the library itself—loved the feeling of being there, the ability to choose books that were his own, the special library card with his name on it that he was always so proud to hand to the librarian. He'd spend twenty minutes carefully selecting books, running his fingers over spines, pulling out ones with interesting covers. He'd stack them up in Shane's arms with such ceremony.

But whenever they would try to get him to actually *practice* reading, or even just ask him to sound out some of the words, he'd try for a beat—squinting at the page with his face scrunched up in concentration—then groan or whine or bury his face in Shane's shoulder. Or, more commonly, shove the book away with a light push and say "no" in that small voice that made Shane's stomach twist.

At first, Shane tried to chalk it up to just stubbornness. Max had inherited both his and Ilya's capacity for digging in their heels, after all. Maybe the kid was just exercising his right to be difficult. Even according to Yuna, Shane hadn't exactly been interested in reading when he was young. Not until she'd started buying him nothing but hockey books.

Or maybe Max was just one of those kids who needed more time. Not every child learned at the same pace. Shane knew that. He'd practically memorized the parenting books, highlighted the statistics, and lectured himself daily that comparing siblings was a psychological trap he was too smart to fall into. Niko had picked up books like they were an extension of his own hands. But when Max tried to read, it was like pulling teeth.

But it had been months now. And when getting progress updates from Max's kindergarten teacher, she would tell them he would lose focus during reading time. That she'd love to discuss some strategies to support Max at home.

Shane and Ilya had tried everything to engage him. Different books. Different times of day. Shorter sessions. Rewards charts with stickers and prizes. Games. Nothing seemed to help. If anything, Max seemed to be getting more resistant, not less.

And now Shane found himself here on a Saturday morning, trying again.

Shane was in bed with Max. He was curled into his side, as always, his blonde curls tickling Shane's cheek. Shane had the book Max had chosen open across their laps. Something about a dog who goes on an adventure to the moon. Max had been so excited about it at the library, clutching it to his chest the whole way home.

"Okay, Max," Shane said, keeping his voice light. Patient. The same voice he'd been using for weeks now. "Can you try reading the first sentence, and then I'll read the next?"

Max squirmed against him. He looked up at Shane with those big brown eyes and tipped his head back onto his shoulder. "Daddy, I want *you* to read."

"I know, buddy," Shane said, brushing a curl away from Max's forehead. "But you need to practice too. Can you try for me? Just one sentence."

Max's bottom lip jutted out slightly. But he turned his attention back to the page, his little body going tense with effort.

"The..." he started, his voice small. He squinted at the page, leaning forward slightly. Blinked a few times. His finger traced under the words like Shane and Ilya had shown him. "The...d..."

He stopped. Squinted harder. Brought his face closer to the book.

Then he turned his face into Shane's chest and whined.

"Hey, hey," Shane soothed, rubbing Max's back. "It's okay. You almost had it. Thanks for trying."

Max just kept his face buried there, his little body tense against Shane's side. Shane carded his fingers through his curls and massaged his head gently—the same way he always did with Ilya when Ilya was using Shane as a human pillow after a long day. It relaxed Max just as easily as it relaxed Ilya, his shoulders gradually loosening, his breathing evening out.

When Max finally turned his head a bit so Shane could see him, he started rubbing his eyes with the heels of his hands. Not crying. Just rubbing. Hard.

Shane's hand stilled in Max's hair.

Max had been getting headaches lately. There were many times in the past few months where he or Ilya would give him some Tylenol, where Ilya would sit with him in the dimmed living room as Max pressed an ice pack to his forehead. Shane had thought it was just him going a little too hard that day, maybe not drinking enough water. Or too much screen time, though it was already so limited. Or just inherited, because Shane himself was prone to headaches.

But now, watching Max rub his eyes after squinting at the page, after bringing his face so close to the book that his nose had nearly touched it—

Oh.

"Max," Shane said carefully, his hand resuming its gentle path through Max's curls. "Does your head hurt right now?"

Max's hands dropped from his eyes. He nodded, small and miserable. "A little bit."

"Does it hurt when you try to read?"

Another nod. Small and hesitant.

"Can you show me where?"

Max lifted his hands and pressed his little fingers to his temples, right where his blonde curls met his forehead. The gesture was so automatic, so practiced, that Shane's chest tightened. He had been doing that so much more lately with these headaches that have been popping up.

Shane closed the book and set it aside on the duvet, then gently cupped Max's face in his hands. His thumbs found Max's temples, rubbing soft circles. "Does it hurt like this all the time? Or just when you're reading?"

Max's eyes flickered away. "Um. Mostly reading, I think."

Shane nodded. "And your eyes," he said softly, keeping his voice careful and even. "Do your eyes hurt too? When you're trying to read?"

"I don't know," Max said, his voice going defensive the way it always did when he thought he might be in trouble.

"Hey," Shane said gently, pulling Max closer. "You're not in trouble. I'm not upset with you. I'm just trying to understand, okay? You're doing nothing wrong."

Max snuggled closer to Shane. "My eyes feel weird. And...sleepy. But I'm *not* sleepy."

He emphasized that last part, probably worried Shane would send him to bed if he admitted to being tired.

"I know you're not sleepy, bud," Shane said softly. "Your eyes are sleepy, but you're not. That's different."

Max tilted his head, confused. "Eyes can be sleepy by themselves?"

"Sometimes," Shane said, still rubbing those soft circles at Max's temples. "Sometimes when your eyes have to work really hard to see things, they get tired. Even when the rest of you isn't tired at all."

Max considered this, his little face serious. "Is that bad?"

"No," Shane assured him quickly. "Not bad at all. But I think maybe we need to take you to a special doctor. One who checks eyes."

Max's face fell. "I don't want the doctor."

Shane smiled and kissed Max's cheek. "This is a special doctor. Not the kind with shots. This one just checks to make sure your eyes are working right. And you know how I wear glasses when I read?"

Max nodded, reaching up to touch Shane's face where his glasses usually sat.

"Well, I think maybe you're a little like me. You might need glasses too."

Max scrunched his little freckled nose. "Do I get to pick the color?"

"Of course."

Max beamed at that. "Good. 'Cause yours are kind of boring, Daddy."

Shane laughed, pulling Max into a tight hug. "You really are your papa's kid."



The optometrist confirmed it. Max was farsighted.

Max was thrilled to pick out his frames. He chose blue ones—his favorite color—with flexible hinges that the optometrist promised could withstand "whatever a five-year-old can throw at them." Shane was certain Max would be testing those limits.

When they came in a week later and Max put them on for the first time, his whole face lit up.

"Daddy," he breathed, looking around the optometrist's office like he was seeing it for the first time. He leaned close to a poster on the wall. "The words are...crispy."

Shane couldn't help but laugh. "Oh yeah?"

"They're not fuzzy anymore," Max said, his voice full of wonder. He looked up at Shane, grinning. "Can we go try reading now?"

Before Shane could respond, Ilya appeared beside them, having been at the front desk handling the payment. He stopped mid-step when he saw Max, his face breaking into a grin.

"Look, Papa!" Max said, beaming up at him. "I got glasses like Daddy!"

Ilya crouched down to Max's level, his hand coming up to gently adjust the frames on Max's freckled nose. His thumb lingered there for a moment, tracing the bridge. "You look very handsome, *malysh*," he said, his voice warm. "Very a smart. Like your daddy."

Max's grin got even bigger, if that was possible.

Ilya glanced up at Shane, and there was that look—the one Shane knew well, the one that always appeared when Shane put on his own reading glasses. Soft. Adoring. A little bit helpless about it.

When they got to the car, Ilya kept glancing at Max in the rearview mirror, and Shane caught him smiling to himself more than once.

That night, they tried the dog book again. Max curled up against Shane's side, glasses perched on his nose, and read the sentence when prompted without complaint. Without squinting. Without bringing his face close to the page. Without rubbing his temples.

Ilya had settled on Shane's other side, ostensibly to listen, but Shane could feel him staring.

When Max finished the sentence, he looked up at Shane with the biggest smile. "I did it!"

"You did," Shane said, kissing Max's nose and gently pushing his glasses back up when the kiss nudged them crooked. "You did so good, Maxie."

Max turned to Ilya. "Did you see, Papa?"

"I saw," Ilya said, pulling Max into his lap for a hug. "You are very smart boy. And very, very cute in your glasses."

After they'd put Max to bed—glasses carefully placed in their case on his nightstand—Shane found Ilya still standing in the doorway of Max's room, looking at their sleeping son.

"You okay?" Shane asked softly.

Ilya turned to him, and there was that look again. "He looks like you," he said simply. "With the glasses. He looks so much like you."

Shane felt his chest tighten. "Ilya—"

"I love it," Ilya interrupted, pulling Shane close and wrapping his arms around him. "I love that he needs glasses like you. I love that when I look at him now, I see little version of you." He kissed Shane's temple, lingering there. "Thank you for noticing. For figuring out what was wrong. Now I get two of you. My boys with glasses."

Shane's throat tightened a bit. "You're ridiculous."

"Maybe," Ilya agreed, squeezing him tighter. "But now when Max reads, he looks just like his daddy. I am very lucky man."

Shane smiled and let himself sink a little bit more into Ilya's embrace. Relief was starting to settle into his chest. Tonight was the first time in months that reading with Max hadn't felt like a battle.

Hopefully, the first of many.

3. Mila, newborn

By the time Mila was born, Shane felt closer to mastering parenting than he ever had before.

He knew there was no such thing as truly mastering it. He knew parenting wasn't some linear goal, not something you could study and dedicate your life to and perfect like hockey. He knew, very well, that kids were always finding new ways to make their parents feel like they were falling behind.

But with two healthy boys who were thriving, and now a perfect baby girl as their final addition, it sure did feel like winning.

Both he and Ilya had survived the newborn stages, *twice*. The terrible twos—which really turned out to be the terrible twos, threes, and fours—*twice*. And despite still feeling the crushing weight of his worries and the frantic hum of his anxieties at times, Ilya was always there. Reassuring him. Anchoring him. He told Shane, over and over, until the words started to sink in: he was a not only a good dad, but the best dad.

Ilya looked at Shane like he hung the moon. And to Ilya and the kids, he had. Along with every single star.

So when they were at Mila's six-week checkup and the pediatrician sat them down and said their daughter was on the trajectory to "*failure to thrive*," Shane felt the room cave in on him.

Despite the bright fluorescent lights humming overhead and the cheerful rainbow cartoons plastered across every wall, the air seemed to vanish. His lungs forgot how to work. The pediatrician's mouth kept moving, kept forming words that Shane's brain couldn't quite process.

Failure.

Ilya's hand was cupping the back of Mila's head as Shane held her. He looked at the pediatrician, his eyes wide and desperate. "What do you mean?" Ilya asked. "She is eating. We are feeding her. She is...she is just small."

"Ilya," Shane whispered, but he couldn't even look at his husband. He couldn't look away from Mila.

She was wiggling in his arms, her little fists clenched, her eyes still puffy, leftover from her wails at the indignity of the cold scale. She was wrapped in the tiny fleece robe they always brought to these appointments—a trick they'd learned with Niko nine years ago now, when he was a newborn, to keep them cozy between the weighing and the exam.

It was supposed to make things easier. It was supposed to be a routine checkup. They had packed her in this plush, fuzzy little robe with clouds for a routine checkup, and instead, they were being told their daughter was failing.

As Shane looked down at his daughter, the analytical part of his brain—the part that had been screaming for weeks—finally drowned out the part that had been trying to stay optimistic for

Ilya's sake. They *had* noticed she was on the smaller side. The pediatrician had noted it at her last few wellness visits too, but always with that careful "let's keep an eye on it" tone that was supposed to be reassuring but never actually was. And now Shane saw the way the robe swallowed her tiny frame, how much empty fabric pooled around her body.

"We're doing everything," Shane rasped, his voice trembling. "We're doing everything right."

Ilya moved closer to him on the narrow bench in the office, wrapping his arm around Shane's shoulder and pulling him in tight, anchoring him with the sheer heat of his body. Shane heard Ilya say something. Something tender and soothing, probably trying to reassure him that they would fix it, that she was a fighter.

But Shane couldn't really register anything. He just heard the roar of his own blood rushing through his ears.

The pediatrician had explained the plan. Measuring each ounce she finished, logging every diaper output, weekly weight checks.

Shane had nodded through all of it, not taking his eyes off Mila for a second, but the words still weren't really registering. Ilya was trying to focus for the both of them, one hand running up and down Shane's shoulder, the other still cupping Mila's head.

As soon as the pediatrician had left the room, Shane burst into tears.



By the next day, Shane was still overwhelmed with panic. But he was trying to focus that on something that he could do. Something with purpose.

He was on a mission.

He was measuring how much formula she drank each session, writing everything down in a notebook with timestamps and ounce amounts. Consistently, she would fall asleep after about an ounce. Sometimes less. He didn't remember this happening with the boys. They'd been efficient eaters, draining bottles in ten minutes flat.

And he began hearing the clicks when she drank. Soft clicking sounds coming from her mouth during feeds. He'd read somewhere that clicking could mean something, but what? He couldn't remember. His brain felt like static, constantly, these days.

Not that Ilya wasn't researching too. It was consuming all of his thoughts—Shane could see it in the way Ilya's jaw would tighten when he looked at Mila, in the way he'd pull out his phone during any quiet moment. But Ilya was better able to compartmentalize right now, to help distract the boys, six and nine years old, and put up a face for them to mask the constant nauseating panic Shane and Ilya had both been feeling.

Shane had stayed up until 3 a.m almost every night that week. Reading articles, clicking through forums, watching videos.

And then he saw it. A diagram showing different types of tongue ties. Including posterior tongue ties—the hidden kind, the ones that restricted movement without being obvious.

As soon as Shane read it, he jumped out of bed and had crept into the nursery. He gingerly picked up Mila from her bassinet. She had stirred but didn't fully wake, just smacked her lips a bit. He took her to the bathroom, turned on the light then quickly dimmed it so it wasn't too jarring for her, and carefully lifted her upper lip. Nothing. Then her lower lip. Nothing.

Then he'd tried to look under her tongue.

She'd squirmed immediately, face scrunching, starting to fuss.

"I know, I know, I'm sorry, baby," he murmured, trying to angle the light just right. "Just one second, I promise."

And there it was. A thin membrane of tissue connecting the underside of her tongue to the floor of her mouth, restricting how far her tongue could lift.

His heart had stopped.

He readjusted her against his chest, rhythmically patting her little back as her cries softened and shushing her softly. Then he rushed back into the bedroom, where Ilya was still sleeping.

Shane turned on the nightstand light and nudged Ilya with the hand that wasn't holding Mila. "Ilya," he whispered loudly.

Ilya jerked awake, his body going tense the way it always did when woken suddenly. "Wha—is the baby—"

"She has a tongue tie," Shane said.

Ilya sat up in bed, blinking hard, his hair sticking up in five different directions. "A—what?"

"Posterior tongue tie," Shane said, the words tumbling out fast. "It's hidden under her tongue. That's why nobody noticed it. That's why she can't eat properly. That's why she's not gaining weight."

Ilya was fully awake now, throwing off the covers and standing next to Shane. "You are sure?"

"I saw it. Just now. It's there." Shane was bouncing Mila, unable to stay still. "We need to call the doctor as soon as they open. It needs to get fixed—the procedure is simple, they just clip it, but we need to do it soon so she can start eating properly and gaining weight and—"

"Shane—"

"—Maybe we should go to urgent care now, so we don't have to wait—"

Ilya's hand landed on Shane's shoulder, grounding. "Shane," he said tenderly. "Breathe."

Shane sucked in a breath. Then another. His eyes were burning again.

"You found it," Ilya said softly, looking at Mila in Shane's arms, then back at Shane. "You figured it out."

Shane nodded, not trusting his voice.

Ilya pulled him close, wrapping his arms around both Shane and Mila. "We fix it," he murmured into Shane's hair. "We will call the doctor in the morning. Our girl will be okay."



She got the surgery to fix the tongue tie, and almost instantly, there was improvement.

Over the next few months, she began filling out, just as she should. Her cheeks got chubbier, developing those baby rolls that made Shane want to squeeze her constantly. Every time they'd notice a new crease on her chunky thighs—another line appearing where there had been nothing before—Ilya would make it a whole ordeal and show up at home with enormous cinnamon rolls from the boys' favorite bakery downtown. *Cinnamon rolls to celebrate Mila's new rolls*, he'd say.

Shane was pretty sure he would pick them up even when there weren't *technically* any new rolls.

As Shane was dressing Mila one morning when she was four months old, he was cooing to her like he always did. She was wiggly as always, gnawing contentedly on her fist while her legs kicked in the air.

"Alright, baby girl," Shane murmured softly as he fastened the tabs on her diaper. "Let's get you ready for the day, huh?"

Mila kicked out her foot and gave a breathy little squeak from around her fist, the sound bright and alive in the quiet room. Shane smiled and leaned down to press a kiss to her chubby cheek.

"Yeah," Shane whispered against her skin. "I hear you, big girl."

Though she'd gained steadily over the past two months since the tongue-tie revision, she'd still been measuring small for her age. She'd been fitting comfortably in 2-month clothes for weeks now.

"She is making up for lost time," Ilya told him. "It is, what do they call it—a sprint, not a marathon."

"The saying is 'it's a marathon, not a sprint,'" Shane corrected, but he was smiling. Ilya always seemed to know just what to say to get Shane out of his head. Even if it technically wasn't correct.

Shane pulled out a onesie from the drawer—one of his favorites, soft pink with a little duck embroidered on the front. But that wasn't why it was his favorite. It was his favorite because

this was the first piece of clothing Ilya had bought when they found out they were having a girl. The duck even looked like a loon. He'd cried immediately when Ilya had brought it home. Shane had blamed it on the hormones.

He slipped it over Mila's head easily, worked her arms through the sleeves. Then reached down to pull it over her torso and snap it closed.

The fabric pulled tight across her belly. Too tight.

Shane frowned, tugging it down further, but it barely reached the top of her diaper.

He tried to snap the bottom snaps closed. They didn't reach.

Shane stared at it, confused. He pulled at the fabric again, checking the tag. 2M. It was definitely the right size. The size she'd been consistently been wearing the past few weeks.

He tried again, stretching the material as much as he could, but the snaps still wouldn't connect. His hands were starting to tremble a bit. And suddenly, she was starting to look very, very blurry.

He blinked hard, trying to clear it.

"Ilya!"

Shane heard Ilya's footsteps immediately, running from wherever he'd been in the house.

"What? What's happening?"

Shane just looked at him, unable to form words. He gestured helplessly at Mila, who was still happily gnawing on her fist.

"Shane? What happened?" Ilya sounded genuinely worried now, crossing the room quickly.

Shane tried to inhale, tried to force the words past the lump in his throat to explain, but it came out as a broken sob instead. He pressed a hand over his mouth, his shoulders shaking, while his other hand remained firmly on Mila's chest to keep her steady on the changing table.

Ilya was there in an instant, putting his arms on Shane's shoulders and pulling him close.

"Shane," he said, his own breath hitching. "Is she okay? Are you okay? You're scaring me—"

Shane just shook his head, unable to stop the hot tears from falling down the corners of his eyes. "It doesn't fit," Shane finally managed to choke out, his voice breaking completely on the last word.

Ilya stared at him for a beat, his heart still hammering against his ribs. Then, he looked down at Mila. She was lying there, still drooling on her hand and looking up at them with those big, glassy blue eyes. Ilya's gaze drifted to the onesie, which was riding up high over her belly. The snaps nowhere near meeting.

The terror broke. In an instant, it vanished, replaced by a relief so massive it felt like he could finally draw a full breath for the first time in months. Ilya pulled Shane even closer and let out a shaky, watery laugh.

"Oh, *moya lyubov*," he said, his voice thick. "Look at her."

Shane was, through the tears. Hand still on her warm little belly. Feeling the steady, rhythmic rise and fall of her breath.

Ilya leaned over to scoop Mila up, tucking her into the small, warm space between him and Shane. And although nothing had technically changed from when he picked her up earlier that morning, she suddenly felt so solid.

"She has graduated," Ilya said. He pressed his face hard into the side of Shane's head while Mila reached out, grabbing a fistful of Ilya's shirt. "Our four-month-old now can wear three-month-old clothes. Big, strong girl."

Shane let out a shaky, wet laugh. He reached out to cup the back of her head, his thumb stroking the downy black hair at her nape, and let his forehead drop onto Ilya's shoulder. The crushing weight that had been sitting on his chest for months finally started to splinter. "She's really growing," he whispered, mostly to himself.

Ilya smiled, leaning down to press a lingering kiss to Mila's forehead, breathing her in for a long moment before straightening and kissing Shane properly. When he pulled back, his eyes were wet too, but he was grinning.

"Of course she is growing. Do you know how many cinnamon rolls I have bought recently? We are practically 90% cinnamon roll by now as a family unit." He leaned in and kissed Shane again. "All thanks to her daddy."

Shane let out a shaky breath, smoothing over the snaps that would no longer close.

Proof. Not a failure.

+1

Shane knew in the back of his mind that he was being a little fucking crazy.

That he was going down a rabbit hole.

But here he was, in bed after 4-year-old Niko and 15-month-old Max were asleep, scrolling an article on his laptop aptly titled *Signs Your Child Is A Sociopath*.

The moments Shane had been noticing weren't even that serious, if he was being honest with himself. Which he wasn't.

There was the moment yesterday. Shane had given Niko a handful of blueberries as a snack. Niko had taken them, looked down at the berries in his palm, and then—while maintaining

direct eye contact with Shane—slowly closed his fist around them. Squeezed. Until the juice ran between his fingers and dripped onto the floor.

Just...staring at Shane the whole time.

No expression.

Shane had frozen. "Niko. Why did you do that?"

Niko had looked down at his purple-stained hand, then back up. "I don't know."

Or the pacifier incident from this morning.

Max had been contentedly sucking on his pacifier, playing with his shape sorters on the living room floor. Completely absorbed in trying to fit the triangle through the square hole, the way he always did, determined to make it work through sheer toddler willpower.

Niko had walked over, crouched down beside his baby brother, and plucked the pacifier right out of Max's mouth. Just reached up and took it.

Max had immediately started crying.

Shane had immediately stepped in, scooping Max up and bouncing him against his hip. Niko was just standing there, furrowed eyebrows, clutching the pacifier and looking at it like he was trying to figure out what it was for.

When Shane had asked him why he did that, Niko had shrugged. "Max doesn't need it."

"That's not your decision to make, Niko," Shane had said, trying to keep his voice patient even as Max sobbed into his shoulder.

"Okay," Niko had replied. And that was it. No sorry. No remorse flickering across his face. No guilt. Just *okay*, like Shane had told him the weather forecast. Then he'd handed the pacifier back and wandered off to play with his trucks.

Ilya yawned as he practically body-slammed himself into bed beside Shane. Shane tried to switch tabs as Ilya settled beside him, fingers fumbling over the keyboard, but he was a second too short.

Ilya's eyebrows furrowed as he caught sight of the screen. Then he looked at Shane, his eyes widening slowly. "Shane. You think—"

"I can explain."

"You think our perfect little boy, who just told his baby brother he *loves him more than Papa's butter noodles*, is a sociopath?"

"Antisocial Personality Disorder."

Ilya blinked. "What?"

"That's what they call it," Shane said, bristling slightly. "Antisocial Personality Disorder."

"Shane," Ilya said slowly. "That sounds *worse* than sociopath."

"It's the same thing," Shane insisted. "Just the proper diagnosis. And I know how it sounds, but—"

"But you have done research?"

"Yes. I've done research—"

"From your friend Dr. Google?"

"It's not *just* Google—"

Ilya reached over and closed Shane's laptop. Gently, but firmly.

"Hey—"

"No." Ilya took the laptop and set it on his nightstand, well out of Shane's reach. "You are banned. No more screen time for you," he said, like Shane was one of their kids who'd lost their already limited TV privileges for the day. "No more Google. No more articles. You are spiraling."

"I'm not spiraling—"

"Shane." Ilya turned to face him fully, propping himself up on one elbow. "What did Niko do? Tell me specifically."

Shane's jaw tightened. "He crushed berries in his hand while staring at me."

Ilya waited, his expression expectant.

"And he took Max's pacifier out of his mouth. Made Max cry. And then didn't even apologize when I told him it wasn't okay."

Still waiting.

"And..." Shane trailed off. Because when he said it out loud like this, listed it out in the quiet of their bedroom, it sounded...less concerning. Less like warning signs and more like...a typical Tuesday.

"And?" Ilya prompted.

"That's it," Shane admitted quietly.

"He crushed berries and took a pacifier."

"While making eye contact," Shane added, like that made it more damning. "It was creepy, Ilya."

"He's four," Ilya said flatly. "Four-year-olds are creepy sometimes." Then his face softened slightly, a hint of a grin. "Just last week you thought Niko had attention deficit because he couldn't sit still during dinner."

"He was bouncing off the walls—"

"Because he had eaten entire chocolate bar," Ilya said pointedly. "He had sugar rush."

Shane's eyes narrowed. "You gave him the *whole* chocolate bar?"

"We are getting off topic," Ilya said quickly. "Point is, you do this. Sometimes you channel your *burn-the-world-for-our-kids* energy into very productive outcomes. Little detective. Very sexy," he added with a grin. "And other times, you...maybe miss the mark."

Shane scoffed, but a smile was creeping onto his lips despite himself. "The berry thing *was* really weird, though."

"Da, it was weird. But weird is not same as disorder. Weird is just Niko being four."

Shane was quiet for a moment, turning onto his side and pressing his ear against Ilya's chest, listening to his heartbeat. "You think I'm being ridiculous."

"I think you love our children so much that you fix everything that could possibly be wrong," Ilya said gently, his hand coming up to card through Shane's hair. "Which is not ridiculous. Just...exhausting. For you. And for me, when I have to come to bed and see you diagnosing our son with Anti Personality."

"Antisocial Personality Disorder."

"That is what I said," Ilya insisted, though his lips twitched.

Shane tilted his head back to look at Ilya, at the face he'd loved for so many years now. "I love you."

"I love you too," Ilya said, leaning down to kiss his forehead. "Even when you are being an insane person who thinks our precious baby is a serial killer."

"I never said *serial killer*—"

"Shh." Ilya pulled him closer, wrapping both arms around Shane and tucking him against his chest. "No more talking. We are sleeping now. And tomorrow, you will wake up and see Niko be completely normal child doing completely normal weird four-year-old things, and you will feel silly, and life will go on."

Shane let out a long breath and closed his eyes, letting himself sink into Ilya's warmth.

He'd let himself believe it. For tonight, at least.

End Notes

like shane, i also consulted dr. google for some of these medical terms and diagnoses so i apologize if anything's inaccurate hahaha

thank you so much for reading!! xx

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