

What We Keep

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What We Keep

by [Odinsmom12](#)

Summary

Ilya Rozanov hadn't planned on getting a dog. It was the offseason, his life was already complicated, and the universe — according to his mother — was definitely keeping score.

Shane Hollander definitely hadn't planned on it either. He liked structure. Predictability. Things that didn't bark, shed, or sprint toward chaos without warning.

Or: Hollanov getting a dog!

Notes

This is my first Heated Rivalry fic and I'm super excited to share it! I hope you enjoy reading :)

Sidenote: This fic is set during the gap between Heated Rivalry and The Long Game, when Shane and Ilya are still keeping their relationship (mostly) private. (I wrote this story BEFORE I actually read TLG so I didn't know about Ilya&Anya :))

Chapter 1: I'm in serious shit

Ilya hadn't planned on getting a dog that day. It was summer, the hockey season long over, and the offseason stretched ahead like empty ice: long, quiet, and full of possibilities. For that day, he had originally planned to kiss Shane at least fifty times and fuck him until they were both sore.

But he also wanted to accumulate good karma. His mother had always said the universe keeps score, her voice soft but firm, the kind of certainty only she could carry. “Делай добро, Илья, и помни: вселенная считает,” she'd told him when he was a boy, brushing snow off his shoulders after a long morning of training. “You give and you take, Ilya. The universe notices, and it remembers.”

Her words had stuck with him, even after she was gone — or perhaps because she was gone. They weren't just advice, they were more like a tether to a world that had made sense when she was in it. And every time he worried he had failed somehow, the idea of doing something quietly good, something that mattered in small, almost invisible ways grounded him.

So today, this was what he was doing: a good deed. Not for recognition, not even for Shane — though Shane mattered more than he could ever put into words — but because the idea of it made the echo of his mother's voice feel closer somehow. Like she was somewhere just out of reach, with her arms crossed, her head tilted, watching him carefully and deciding whether he was doing enough to balance the scales.

The season in Ottawa had been bad. Not catastrophic, not humiliating — just wrong in all the ways that mattered. And Ilya was frustrated. There had been too many games where nothing clicked, where he skated hard and still felt like he was letting something slip through his fingers. He hated that feeling more than losing. Hated carrying it home, hated how it lingered in his chest even when the ice was gone.

This — standing here, doing something uncomplicated and kind — felt like a small correction. And maybe, he thought, the universe noticed things like this. *Maybe his mother did too.*

And if nothing else, it still felt good to try.

The shelter was Shane's idea of hell. It was loud and chaotic and smelled like abandonment, sadness and cleaning chemicals. Shane's jaw had tightened the moment they walked in, which Ilya noticed immediately, because Shane always pretended he was fine when he absolutely was not.

“Relax,” Ilya said, nudging Shane lightly with his shoulder like he often did. “They're just dogs. Not journalists with cameras.”

“I know that,” Shane said, too fast, his tone slightly annoyed.

Yes. He was very relaxed.

The dogs in the kennels barked like they had opinions about everything. One even launched itself at the bars like it wanted to fight Ilya personally.

“Is okay,” Ilya told it. “I do not want your job.”

Shane snorted before he could stop himself. Ilya caught the faintest twitch of a smile and elbowed him lightly. They walked down the row. Ilya crouched at each kennel, because it was polite, and also because it made Shane sigh quietly every time. Shane’s gaze kept flicking to him, a little softening behind the professional mask he always wore.

“You don’t have to say hi to all of them,” he muttered, rolling his eyes.

“They will remember,” Ilya said seriously. “Dogs are vindictive, yes?”

Shane rolled his eyes again but didn’t pull away when Ilya brushed his hand against Shane’s while leaning toward a kennel.

They reached the end of the row, the last kennel. This particular dog did not bark. He just sat there, very straight. Like he was waiting for instructions that never came. Ilya stopped walking and looked at the small, brown dog. Then he crouched in front of the kennel and froze. The dog sitting there was... precise. Not in posture alone, though his spine was impossibly straight, his ears alert — well, one ear alert, one ear floppy in charming defiance — but in the way he carried himself, as if he were already judging the room, judging Ilya, judging the chaos with quiet authority.

Ilya liked it.

His fur was a rich brown with a splash of white on his chest that looked deliberate, like someone had painted it there to mark him as distinguished. His eyes were sharp, dark, and intelligent, tracking every movement with careful calculation. Even the way his tail thumped once against the floor was measured, almost ceremonious, like he was announcing, *‘Hey! I am here. You may proceed carefully.’*

Ilya loved it.

Shane said nothing, which was how Ilya knew this was already a problem.

“This one,” he finally said, a little breathless and a little too excited.

“We’re just looking,” Shane said, immediately, predictably.

“Yes,” Ilya agreed. “I am also looking. At him.”

The dog stood, walked closer and pressed his wet nose to the bars. Then, he sniffed Ilya like this was serious business. Ilya leaned forward, his own nose close to the bars now. “Privet,” he said softly, his Russian warm and rhythmical. “Ty ochen’ khoroshiy.”

“You’re good, you’re okay.”

The dog sniffed him, tilting his head like he was considering this declaration, his tail thumped once, still careful.

Shane slowly exhaled like he was counting to ten. “Ilya.”

“I know,” Ilya said, brushing Shane’s sleeve lightly as he crouched next to him. “We cannot. Is summer. Is travel. Is no routine. Is secrets.”

Shane froze, because *yes*, that was the correct list.

The dog licked Ilya’s fingers through the bars, then immediately looked embarrassed about it. Ilya smiled. He could not help it. He reached for Shane’s hand, letting their fingers brush lightly in a quiet, grounding gesture. And Shane didn’t pull away. In fact, his fingers curved just enough to meet Ilya’s.

“Look. He waits,” Ilya said. “He does not scream. He just... waits.”

“That doesn’t mean anything,” Shane said, but his voice was weaker now.

“It means everything,” Ilya said cheerfully. “Also he likes me. This is important.”

Shane’s gaze flicked between Ilya and the dog, a small smile tugging at the corner of his mouth.

A volunteer appeared, smiling like she knew exactly how this would end. “That’s Milo,” she said. “He’s been here a while.”

“Milo,” Ilya repeated. He considered the dog. “Hmm.”

Shane narrowed his eyes. “Don’t.”

“What?”

“You’re thinking.”

Ilya grinned. “Always.” Then, he added quieter: “And maybe imagining life a little differently.”

Shane glanced at him. There was something in Ilya’s eyes — a combination of mischief and warmth — that made him want to roll his eyes and smile at the same time.

The way he loved that man scared him sometimes.

Of course, they took Milo outside to get to know him better, and the dog walked between them like he was unsure which one was boss and had decided to supervise both.

But when another dog barked, Milo startled and pressed into Ilya’s leg and Ilya planted his feet without thinking. The leash stayed loose and the dog immediately relaxed.

Shane noticed. *Of course he did.* Shane noticed everything. And for a moment, he felt a small thrill of comfort at how instinctively Ilya moved to protect both him and the dog.

They sat on a bench in a nearby park and Milo lay down directly on Ilya's feet, because according to Ilya 'he had excellent taste'.

"You know, this is how people ruin their lives," Shane said.

"Yes," Ilya agreed. "But in small, fluffy way." He reached out and gave Shane a gentle nudge with his shoulder.

Shane glared at him. "This isn't funny."

"Is a little funny," Ilya said, smirking.

"This is permanent, Ilya."

Ilya looked down at the dog. Then back at Shane. "Yes," he said, softer now. Permanent was exactly what he wanted. He brushed Shane's hand lightly with his own again and Shane rubbed his face.

"We can't just — I mean, what if things change?"

Ilya shrugged. "Things always change, Hollander."

"That's not very reassuring."

"No," Ilya agreed. "But dog is still dog."

Shane stared at Milo. Milo stared back, unblinking, like he was daring Shane to abandon him. Shane exhaled slowly, feeling a weight settle.

And of course, because Shane could never really say no to Ilya, they went inside to adopt Milo thirty minutes later. The volunteer from before moved around with a clipboard and a cheerful smile, handing them a stack of forms before Shane could even brace himself.

Even though Ilya was the one who wanted the dog and had been the one drawn to him the moment he saw him in the kennel, it was Shane who had to fill out the paperwork. Adoption forms, ID verification, and legal ownership were tricky for someone like Ilya, who wasn't a Canadian citizen. Shane had the right documents, a local address, and the stability the shelter required.

He carefully set his bag down and began filling out the first page, meticulous as always. He wrote his name with deliberate fingers and exact spacing. Then he paused, the pen hovering over the line below — labeled "Co-Owner." His eyes flicked toward Ilya, who was crouched beside him, casually observing, one eyebrow raised as if to say, 'Go on, *you know what to do.*'

Shane's chest tightened. He wasn't used to this kind of visibility, this kind of declaration. And yet, the truth was already in his heart. And had been for a very long time. So, with a

small exhale, he wrote Ilya's name in the line below, in smaller letters, tucked just beneath his own, almost like a secret only he and Ilya would notice.

Ilya leaned closer, brushing a stray strand of Shane's slightly longer offseason hair behind his ear, murmuring softly in that warm, teasing tone Shane knew too well: "Ah... very clever, Hollander. Small letters but big meaning, yes?"

Shane's lips twitched. "It's just paperwork, Rozanov," he muttered, though his throat felt tight.

"Just paperwork?" Ilya repeated, his voice low, brushing his hand against Shane's as it rested on the form. "No. Is declaration. Is... trust. Very important."

Shane swallowed, the weight of the simple gesture settling comfortably in his chest. He let his hand linger near Ilya's, sharing the warmth without speaking, while the dog — already sensing the quiet approval between them — circled their feet and pressed a tentative nose against Shane's leg.

"Good boy," Shane whispered, allowing himself a small, rare smile. Ilya mirrored it instantly, his eyes soft, proud, like they'd just shared a secret the rest of the world wasn't allowed to know.

And in a way, they had.

Filling out the rest of the forms became almost pleasant after that. Shane answered all the questions with precision while Ilya added little comments in Russian and the dog occasionally nudged their hands or sniffed the pens.

By the time the last page was signed, Shane realized he wasn't just agreeing to adopt a dog. He was staking a small, personal claim in a way that felt terrifyingly permanent — and entirely right.

In the 'stupid, boring car', like Ilya liked to call Shane's Land Rover, Milo hopped into the back seat like he had done this his whole life.

"So," Ilya said. "We have dog now."

Shane gripped the steering wheel. "We have a problem."

"Yes," Ilya said brightly. "His name."

Shane closed his eyes. "No."

"He cannot be Milo," Ilya continued. "Is wrong vibe."

"It's literally his name."

"Temporary name," Ilya said. "I'm thinking... Misha."

“No.” Shane shook his head exaggeratedly.

“Why not?”

“Because you’re not naming our dog something that sounds like a Russian mob boss.”

Ilya gasped. “Misha is beautiful name.”

“No. Try again.” Shane demanded.

Ilya considered the dog, who yawned and immediately fell asleep. He nudged Shane lightly with his elbow. “See? He approves too.”

Shane shook his head again and started the car without arguing, which for Ilya felt like agreement settling into place. And in the back seat, Milo (for now) shifted and sighed, already acting like he belonged there.

Ilya was excited. He looked out the window, sunlight catching on the glass and his mind already running ahead — vet appointments, training classes, the precise ways this dog would disrupt their routines and make everything better anyway. He reached over and squeezed Shane’s hand, brief but sure. *He was happy.*

Shane squeezed back without looking at him.

Shane had prepared for this as well as he could. Not emotionally but logistically.

There was a note on his phone titled DOG — DAY ONE, created in the car and edited twice during the drive home. It included feeding times, portion sizes based on projected adult weight, recommended leash lengths, and a reminder to buy enzymatic cleaner because statistically there would be an accident, and refusing to plan for it did not prevent urine on a rug or a couch.

They were in Shane’s house in Montreal, and Ilya was sitting on the living room floor, cross-legged, allowing the dog to sniff his hands like he was being evaluated for a security clearance. He was calm in a way Shane recognized from the ice — alert but unhurried, present without pressure.

Shane loved this version of Ilya because it wasn’t the Ilya who dominated a room with sheer force of personality, the Ilya who calculated every move and reaction like a chess game. This Ilya was patient, quiet, grounded, fully in the moment. The tiny, subtle gestures — the way he tilted his head to watch Milo, the soft hum of contentment in his throat, the slow, deliberate way he breathed — made Shane’s chest tighten in a way that had nothing to do with hockey or control.

It was vulnerable without being weak, attentive without being demanding. Shane felt like he could exhale whenever he was with Ilya, like he could exist in the same space without performing or defending, and Ilya’s calm acceptance made him want to be better — not for anyone else, not for the world, but just to deserve being near him.

And of course, Shane loved the way Ilya's warmth always seemed to radiate outward — how it immediately reached Kova, how it had reached him from day one.

"Milo," he said carefully, testing the sound again.

But the dog ignored him completely and continued his inspection.

"He is busy," Ilya said. "Important investigation going on."

Shane exhaled through his nose and carried the water bowl into the kitchen. It was stainless steel, non-porous, and heavy enough not to tip. He set it down exactly where he planned: three feet from the wall, aligned with the edge of the rug, clear of foot traffic.

The dog trotted over, drank enthusiastically, and immediately splashed half the water onto the tile.

Dammit!

Shane's body reacted before his brain finished categorizing it. He stepped back, his jaw tightening, his mind racing through wet socks, slipping risks, towels, because paper towels were inefficient...

"I got it, I got it," Ilya said instantly, disrupting his thoughts. And Ilya was already up, already grabbing the towel from the drawer Shane would have chosen. Shane caught his eye, and they shared a quiet smile before he knelt to clean the mess.

"Thank you," Shane said, carefully neutral.

Ilya knelt, wiped up the water, then paused, watching the dog with narrowed eyes. "Milo," he said again, more thoughtful.

The dog glanced at him.

"No. I still don't like it," Ilya decided.

Shane straightened. "We already went over this."

"Yes," Ilya agreed. "Misha was vetoed. Strongly. With reasons."

"Valid reasons," Shane said.

"Very," Ilya said, smiling faintly. "But Milo is still very... American."

"It's a normal name."

"Yes. That is the problem." Ilya gestured at the dog. "He is... international."

Shane considered this despite himself. He didn't like changing variables once they'd been introduced, but he also didn't like inefficiency, and the dog still wasn't responding consistently.

“If we do this,” Shane said slowly, “it has to be final. Consistent. Like two syllables and clear consonants.”

Ilya’s expression brightened. “You are making rules, Hollander.”

“I always make rules.”

They sat on the floor, parallel but not touching. The dog wandered over and settled directly between them, his spine pressed lightly against Shane’s ankle.

“Not a Russian name,” Shane added. “Not hockey-related. And definitely not a human name.”

“International,” Ilya repeated his suggestion from before. “Like us.” He leaned slightly toward Shane, so their shoulders brushed just enough to feel shared warmth.

Shane looked down at the dog. Brown fur. White blaze. One ear upright, the other undecided. Patient. Watchful.

“Kova,” he said suddenly, not really knowing where that name had come from.

Ilya turned. “Kova?”

“Yeah, it’s short and neutral. Plus, it works in more than one language, right?” Shane paused. “And it’s phonetically simple, so you can yell it if necessary.”

Ilya chuckled, then tested it. “Kova.”

The dog’s tail thumped once.

Shane swallowed and tried it himself. “Kova.”

The dog looked directly at him and held eye contact. That made something in Shane’s chest tighten, precise and unexpected. He glanced at Ilya, whose soft smile said everything Shane couldn’t put into words at that moment.

“Okay. This is good name,” Ilya said, softly, almost whispering.

Shane nodded. “Okay.”

They moved through the evening with a quiet rhythm. Dinner was at six-thirty sharp, of course. Shane carefully measured Kova’s kibble, level scoop by level scoop, lining it up like a scientific experiment. Ilya, meanwhile, leaned against the counter with his arms crossed and his head tilted, watching with that faintly amused expression he always wore when Shane took things a little too seriously.

“Not too much,” Shane muttered, more to himself than anyone else, adjusting the bowl’s angle so it sat perfectly centered on the rug.

“Or too little,” Ilya added lightly. He reached over and tapped the bowl with a finger, just enough to nudge it slightly closer to Kova.

Shane glanced at him but said nothing. It was easier to let Ilya play his little games rather than start a debate over proportions and angles.

Kova dove in immediately, nosing and crunching with all the enthusiasm of a creature who suspected his food might disappear if he dared look away for a second. Shane muttered under his breath, “Slow feeder,” though it was clear he was mostly impressed with how efficient Kova was being.

When the bowl was empty, Kova sat perfectly still, his tail thumping softly against the rug, eyes fixed intently on Shane and Ilya like he was awaiting further instructions. Not begging. Not pacing. Just... waiting.

Shane frowned slightly, cataloging the behavior. Calm. Focused. No whining. He raised an eyebrow. “For what?” he asked quietly, uncertain whether the dog was expecting a treat, praise, or some step he’d forgotten on his mental checklist.

Ilya glanced down, then smiled — small, pleased, and unmistakably smug. He shrugged with an elegance that felt unfair in gray sweatpants, tapping Shane’s arm lightly with a fingertip, just enough for Shane to feel it, just enough for the contact to linger a fraction longer than necessary.

“Existence reward,” Ilya said, like this was the most obvious thing in the world.

Shane blinked.

He looked at Kova. Sitting patiently, his ears alert. Then back at Ilya, who was watching him now instead of the dog, his eyes bright and warm and far too confident.

“Really?” Shane asked, his voice low, something like disbelief threading through it.

“Yes,” Ilya said simply. “You feed. You measure. You give water. You pet. You exist.” His mouth twitched. “Reward is due.”

Shane let out a soft laugh before he could stop himself, heat creeping up his neck. He shook his head, rubbing a hand over his face. “You’re so fucking ridiculous.”

“Mm,” Ilya agreed cheerfully. “You love it.” He smiled, dragging the word out in that unmistakable Ilya way, smug and pleased with himself.

But Shane was still watching him, still processing. He hadn’t expected this — hadn’t expected Ilya to be so intuitive, so gentle without being precious about it. He hadn’t expected the easy authority, the calm certainty, the way Kova already watched Ilya like he was something steady and safe. Shane had planned for chaos. For trial and error. For lists and schedules and problem-solving.

He hadn’t planned for Ilya to slide into this role like he’d been waiting for it.

“I didn’t know you’d be... good at this,” Shane admitted quietly, his eyes still on Kova.

Ilya tilted his head. “At what?”

Shane hesitated, then gestured vaguely between the dog and the two of them. “At... this.”

Something softened in Ilya’s expression — surprise, maybe, or pride, or something deeper. He reached out and rested his hand briefly over Shane’s knee, “I pay attention,” Ilya said simply. “Dogs like that.”

So do you, Shane thought, and startled himself with how quickly the idea surfaced, how true it felt.

Kova chose that moment to scoot closer and sit between them, pressing his side against Shane’s leg and leaning just slightly into Ilya’s shin, as if confirming the arrangement.

Shane’s chest tightened in a way that felt unfamiliar and overwhelming and strangely perfect.

He exhaled slowly, letting the moment settle. “Okay,” he murmured. “Existence reward.”

Ilya smiled like he’d won something.

And Shane, watching them both, realized he was more in love with Ilya and now Kova than he’d thought — and that maybe, just maybe, that wasn’t a bad thing at all.

They took Kova outside while the sky was still bright enough, the summer light lingering longer than Shane preferred. The dog hesitated at the threshold, his nails clicking on the patio floor.

“Hm... New textures,” Shane murmured, mostly to himself.

Ilya heard him anyway. He waited and didn’t pull.

Finally, after a long, deliberate pause, Kova lifted a paw. Then another. And then he stepped out fully, into the brightness of the summer evening. Shane let out a quiet, almost imperceptible sigh of relief, and without thinking, glanced at Ilya. Ilya’s eyes met his, just slightly, and Shane felt the tension in his chest ease a little.

Kova trotted a few steps ahead, then turned back to check them both, his floppy ear flopping in the late sunlight. Shane tightened his grip on the leash just a fraction, and Ilya leaned in, brushing a hand lightly against Shane’s arm.

Kova then trotted beside them through the garden, his tail wagging lazily, his ears alert but unhurried, mirroring Ilya’s calm confidence. Shane’s eyes followed Ilya, noticing the way his shoulders moved with ease, how the light caught the strands of hair at his temple. Shane reached for him and pressed a quick kiss to his temple, feeling the soft warmth of their connection settle over him like sunlight.

Shane loved Ilya in a thousand quiet ways he rarely admitted even to himself. He loved the calm steadiness Ilya carried, how he moved through the world without panic, without pretending. He loved the way Ilya's hands could be firm or gentle, decisive or playful, and somehow always exactly right.

He loved the small, instinctive ways Ilya reached for him: the brush of a hand across Shane's knee, the lean of his shoulder against Shane's arm, the soft murmur of Russian words Shane didn't need to fully understand to feel their warmth. He loved the way Ilya could make chaos feel safe, how his laughter could tether Shane when the world felt too loud, too fast.

"You know," Ilya said casually, watching the dog investigate a dandelion, "it is very small garden. In the middle of the city. He cannot disappear into forest."

Shane didn't look at him. His grip on the leash tightened a fraction. "He could jump," he said. "Or dig. Or find the one weak spot we didn't notice."

Ilya hummed. "You think he is criminal mastermind?"

"I think he's fast," Shane replied. "And everything is new for him, he's probably unfamiliar with boundaries."

Kova chose that moment to do a small, enthusiastic hop toward a butterfly. The leash went taut and immediately, Shane's shoulders jumped.

"See?" Shane said immediately. "That's what I mean."

Ilya smiled, soft but unmistakably amused about his boyfriend. He stepped closer, nudging Shane's elbow with his own. "He hops," he said. "This is not escape. This is just... enthusiasm."

Shane exhaled through his nose. "Yeah, well, enthusiasm leads to chaos."

"But chaos is not always bad," Ilya said. He crouched and scratched Kova behind the ears. "Sometimes it is just... life."

Shane watched them, his jaw tight. "And if he gets out, it's my fault."

Ilya straightened and finally looked at him properly. "No," he said gently. "If he gets out, we get him back."

Shane swallowed. "You say that like it's simple."

"It is simple," Ilya said. "Not easy. Simple." He reached for the leash — not to take it, just to rest his fingers lightly over Shane's knuckles. "You can hold," he said. "I will not tease."

Shane shot him a look. "Fuck you. You were absolutely going to tease."

"Only little," Ilya admitted. "Because you are very serious dog father."

Shane huffed, then — surprisingly — relaxed his grip a notch. "I just... want him safe."

“I know,” Ilya said quietly. “That is why you are good at this.”

Shane glanced at him then, something soft flickering across his face. “You really think so?”

Ilya smiled, warm and sure. “Yes. And when you are ready, we try without leash. Not today. But soon?”

Shane nodded slowly. “Okay. Soon.”

Kova leaned into Shane’s shin like he was satisfied. The leash stayed on. The world didn’t end. He felt unbelievably happy at that moment. And it wasn’t just because Kova had brought them even closer — it was that Shane could feel that they were a family now.

But back inside the house, in the closed space, it suddenly felt different for Shane. The space was suddenly smaller, louder and somehow less predictable. He could feel the shift like pressure against his skin, the disruption of a system he’d spent years refining.

Suddenly, there were three of them.

“This is a lot,” he said finally, sinking onto the couch, his hands clasped so tightly his fingers ached, the tension in his shoulders stubbornly refusing to leave. He glanced down at Kova, who sniffed the air and then wagged his tail, utterly unconcerned with the undercurrents of human worry.

“Yes,” Ilya agreed softly, settling beside him. “But is good lot.” His hand brushed against Shane’s knee, light, casual, and somehow enough to make Shane’s chest tighten in a way that was almost dizzying.

The *Ilya-effect* was what Shane called this in his mind.

Kova circled the room once, twice, then flopped down between them, his warm body pressing against Shane’s ankle, as if claiming his place in their little orbit. Shane reached out instinctively, resting a hand on Kova’s head, feeling the soft fur, the steady warmth, and the heartbeat beneath it.

Ilya’s hand lingered on Shane’s knee, grounding him. Shane felt the simple weight of it — the reassurance, the connection, the quiet claim that said without words, *we’re here. Together.* His eyes flicked up to meet Ilya’s, catching the soft curve of a smile, the calm certainty in his gaze, and something inside him unclenched.

He exhaled fully for the first time that day, letting the tension fall away as Ilya leaned a little closer, and Shane tilted his head to meet him halfway for a long, passionate kiss. *It was a lot, yes — but it was theirs.*

Later, the lights were dimmed and Kova was settled on a blanket on the floor — temporarily, of course, until the crate arrived, which Shane had already ordered with expedited shipping.

Shane lay awake, cataloging sounds: refrigerator hum, distant traffic, Kova’s breathing.

Then, Kova whined once.

And before Shane could even move, Ilya was already there, crouching beside the dog, murmuring low nonsense in Russian. The sound was soft and rhythmic.

The Ilya-effect.

The whining immediately stopped and Shane let out a breath he hadn't realized he was holding.

In the dark, Ilya whispered, "See? Kova is good. We're good." He caressed Shane's cheek with his knuckles as he got back into bed.

Shane stared at the ceiling, counting his breaths until the room settled back into something manageable. "Hey," he said quietly. "I'm glad we did this."

There was a small pause. Then Ilya replied, just as quietly, "me too."

Kova snored softly, and Shane finally closed his eyes, somehow every sense still alert despite the quiet. He knew — more than he liked to admit — that this little dog was probably about to change everything. And yet, against all his instincts, a small, steady part of him felt certain he could handle it.

Chapter 2: When they stop and stare

Chapter Notes

Hope you enjoy chapter two! It's getting domestic 🥰

Ilya had never spent any time around veterinarians before. He'd never had a pet growing up, so he wasn't sure what he expected — but probably something stressful, loud, and chaotic.

So for him it was slightly inconvenient and very surprising that he... liked them. They were calm, the kind of calm that didn't make him flinch in any way or brace for impact. They spoke slowly and clearly, like he was five years old without being condescending. They were patient enough that he didn't have to guess what they meant or read between the lines. They didn't shout orders in rapid Russian from across the room while everyone else moved in a chaotic blur. And Ilya appreciated that.

Kova on the other hand liked the vet in the room with them less. He trembled on the metal table like it had personally offended him, his ears doing that thing where one committed and the other refused. Ilya kept one hand on his chest with steady pressure, like Svetlana had taught him when he was younger and afraid of storms. He hoped it would work on dogs, too.

"Is okay," he murmured, rubbing Kova's chest in slow, steady circles. "Just... routine visit. Very boring. No one is stealing your blood." He paused, his eyes flicking to the tray. "... Probably." He winced, then lowered his voice. "Okay, maybe small stealing. But for science."

Kova whimpered and Ilya immediately leaned closer. "Hey. I am here. I would not let them take all of it."

The vet smiled, glancing briefly at Ilya as he spoke. "He's anxious, but very sweet." Shane's stomach tightened. Did the vet mean Kova... or Ilya? His jaw set without him realizing it, a quiet, protective possessiveness rising. No one was allowed to get any ideas — *they were his. Both of them.*

And for the millionth time since their relationship had reached boyfriend status — or even before that — Shane hated that he couldn't lay claim to Ilya publicly, couldn't show the world that Ilya belonged to him. *And only him.*

"Yes," Ilya said proudly. "Excellent personality. Like me."

Shane couldn't help the noise that escaped him from the corner, a cough? A protest? He didn't care. He gripped the folder with Kova's records, his spine straight, his shoulders squared, and his eyes methodically scanning every page as if the information might

misbehave if he looked away. He told himself it was just checking for errors. Date of birth, weight, vaccination schedule. Normal things.

But his gaze kept catching on one line.

Owner names: Shane Hollander. Ilya Rozanov.

Listed together.

Shane swallowed. His heart gave a small, sharp skip — surprising in its intensity, embarrassing in how much it mattered. It was just paperwork. Administrative. Temporary, even. And yet the sight of their names side by side, equal and official, settled something in his chest that had been humming all day.

Ilya noticed. Of course he did. *He always did.* He loved this side of Shane — the careful focus, the quiet seriousness, the way he took responsibility like it was instinct instead of effort. And if he was being honest with himself, he kind of envied Shane for it.

He also loved that Shane never let him get away with his bullshit, that he met Ilya's teasing with dry disbelief instead of indulgence. Ilya felt like it kept him honest and grounded.

The vet continued talking, mostly to Ilya about the vaccination schedule, the perfect diet, and training recommendations.

Shane nodded at all the correct places but Ilya didn't really listen. He watched Shane instead. He knew by now that Shane settled when he had information — facts, dates, something solid he could anchor himself to. It was like watching tension drain out of him in real time, his shoulders easing, his breathing evening out. Ilya had learned quickly that knowledge smoothed Shane's edges somehow, making the world click back into alignment for him, if only a little. And Ilya really liked being close enough to notice when it happened.

Kova seemed to relax once the stethoscope was gone, his tail thumping against Ilya's wrist.

"See?" Ilya said, his focus now on the dog as he was leaning down to scratch Kova behind the ears. "You survived... the Canadian vet-in-arian bureaucracy." He pronounced each syllable with exaggerated care, like it was some magic spell.

Or a word he had actually never used before.

Shane blinked, then his expression softened, a smile breaking through like he couldn't quite stop it. "You mean... *veterinarian*?" he said gently.

Ilya scoffed. "Yes. That. Vetr—veter—" He waved a hand, defeated. "Dog doctor."

Shane huffed a quiet laugh, warmth spreading through his chest. He loved Ilya's accent, loved the way words bent around him, familiar and unmistakable. It wasn't just endearing — it actually did something to Shane, somehow sparked that low, steady pull he'd learned not to overanalyze. The cadence, the confidence, the way Ilya never bothered to apologize for how he sounded. Shane found it ridiculously sexy, even now, even in a vet's office with a nervous dog and a clipboard full of paperwork.

“Yeah,” he said, still smiling, his voice even softer now. “That’s the one.”

Ilya grinned like he knew exactly what effect he was having on his boyfriend. Then, he waved a hand dismissively, his grin spreading wider. “Big words... scare dogs. Is important, he survived, yes?”

Shane couldn’t help the laugh that escaped him. “I guess he did... thanks to you.”

Ilya still grinned, mischievously now. “Of course. I am always excellent at survival... and training... dogs and... humans.” He winked, deliberately slow, letting Shane figure out exactly what he meant.

Of course, it was a sex innuendo.

The thing was, Shane didn’t just love his accent, he also loved Ilya’s flirtatious, horny side. *Especially his horny side.* Shane loved how Ilya’s experience had taught him so many things without ever making him feel small for not knowing them already, for not having as much experience. Ilya was confident, unembarrassed, and very generous in the bedroom, and he never treated desire like something dangerous or shameful. With Ilya, Shane didn’t have to guess or apologize for wanting what he wanted. He could simply tell Ilya and he could learn things about his own sexuality without being rushed, he could be open without being exposed.

Still, right now, being in public and all, he rolled his eyes at Ilya’s attempt to flirt with him in front of the vet while Kova barked, his tail thumping.

Ilya cockily smirked at Shane. “See? Even he agrees. You are very good human today.” he winked again.

That was when the vet cleared his throat. Once. Then again, a little louder this time, as if to say, *‘I’m still here, and I am watching’*. He had gone very still, the small clipboard tucked a little too tightly against his chest, his eyes fixed firmly on Kova as if the dog might suddenly start speaking and rescue him.

“Well,” the vet said, with the strained cheer of someone pretending not to notice anything at all, “I’m just going to — uh — give you guys a moment.” He gestured vaguely toward the hallway. “I need to... check something. In the back.”

He left quickly. Almost impressively so, Shane noted as the door clicked shut.

Then he glanced at Ilya. “You didn’t have to flirt with me in front of him.”

Ilya blinked, innocent. “There was no flirting.”

Shane lifted an eyebrow.

“Okay,” Ilya amended. “Maybe little.”

Shane shook his head, smiling despite himself. “You’re impossible.”

Ilya leaned in, his shoulder now brushing Shane's, warm and familiar. "Yes," he said proudly. "But you love this."

Shane didn't even bother denying it.

They were leaving the vet clinic when Shane's phone buzzed. Shane glanced at the screen and sighed. "It's Hayden."

Ilya brightened. "Ah. Excellent. And what does Hayden want?"

Shane gave him a look. "Don't start. He wants to meet for coffee."

"I will be polite," Ilya promised. *This was a lie.*

They met Hayden at a coffee place two blocks from the clinic with outdoor seating, because Kova was still learning how to be indoors without assuming everything was his. The moment Hayden saw them, his eyes dropped to the leash. Then the dog. Then back to Ilya.

"Oh," Hayden said. "You got a dog."

"Yes," Ilya affirmed. "We got dog."

Shane opened his mouth to say something.

Hayden smirked. "You got *a* dog." He loved to correct Ilya's grammar.

Shane closed it again. *These two were like fire and ice.*

Kova sat politely at Shane's feet, like he understood whose approval mattered most.

And Hayden crouched to pet him. "Hey, buddy." Kova sniffed him and apparently decided he was acceptable, his tail wagging.

"Traitor," Ilya told the dog, nudging Shane's hand gently with his own in a playful squeeze. Shane looked at him and smiled, just slightly, trying to stay calm.

Hayden scratched behind Kova's ear. "What's his name?"

"Kova," Shane said immediately.

Hayden nodded. "Huh. Not bad."

Ilya narrowed his eyes. "You sound surprised."

"I am," Hayden said easily. "I assumed you'd name him something terrifying."

"Like what?" Ilya asked, arching one brow challenging.

"Like... Vlad."

“Vlad is strong name.”

“Yeah, for a war criminal,” Hayden huffed.

Shane snorted into his coffee before he could stop himself. Ilya accepted the point with grace and a glare, and then reached over to brush Shane’s hair back from his forehead — a tiny, intimate yet possessive motion that made Shane’s chest warm.

They sat down, Hayden sipped his drink and looked between them with the sharp, annoying perception of someone who had known Shane for a very long time.

“So,” Hayden said. “A dog, huh?”

“Yes,” Shane said. “We discussed this.”

“I’m sure you did.” Hayden’s eyes flicked to Ilya. “Extensively.”

Ilya smiled sweetly. “He made list.”

Hayden perked up. “Of course he did.”

“It is very good list,” Ilya added. “Many bullet points.”

Shane’s ears went red. “Hey, you said you wouldn’t tell anyone.”

“I am not telling,” Ilya said. “I am bragging.” He wiggled his eyebrows.

Hayden laughed. “Wow. You’re really leaning into this whole... domestic thing.”

Shane stiffened. And Ilya felt it immediately, like a change in air pressure. So, he slid his hand over Shane’s briefly, their fingers brushing in a quiet, grounding connection.

Shane didn’t pull away. “It’s practical,” he said carefully. “He needed a home.”

Hayden raised his eyebrows. “Uh-huh.”

Ilya kicked Hayden lightly under the table. “Do not look at him like that.”

“Like what?”

“Like you are imagining future.”

Hayden grinned. “Oh, I absolutely am.”

Kova chose this moment to climb halfway into Shane’s lap, his front paws resting lightly on Shane’s thighs, his little chin nudging against Shane’s chest as if it were the most natural thing in the world. Shane froze for a heartbeat, then just as slowly, without thinking, wrapped an arm around the dog. He was surprised how effortless, almost automatic it was — just like the way he and Ilya moved around each other after years of knowing every little thing about each other. *Well, almost.*

Hayden watched the scene in front of him for a long moment and his teasing softened, just a fraction. “I think he’s good for you,” he said finally, quieter now, nodding at Kova — though Shane knew he wasn’t really talking about the dog.

Shane nodded once. “He is.”

Hayden looked back at Ilya, pointing a finger at the other man’s chest. “You mess this up, Rozanov, I will steal the fucking dog.”

Ilya gasped. “You cannot threaten me with custody battle, Pike.”

“I can and I will.”

Kova yawned, his eyes already half-lidded, apparently deciding that Hayden and Ilya’s ongoing contest of egos was not worth staying awake for.

Ilya leaned back in his chair, the sunlight warm on his shoulders, the leash looped loosely around his wrist. “You know,” he said casually, “you do not have to like me.”

Hayden snorted. “Oh, I know.”

“But you trust me,” Ilya continued. “With him.” He looked at Shane, then the dog. Shane’s hand squeezed his briefly under the table.

Hayden held his gaze for a long moment, then let out a defeated sigh, “yeah,” he admitted. “I do.”

Ilya smiled, small and real and Shane let out a soft exhale and pressed a quick kiss to Ilya’s hand, hidden beneath the leash. Kova used the moment to sneeze, as if reminding everyone that no matter how serious the human drama got, he was very clearly in charge of the timing. Shane smiled down at her, his heart swelling in a way that made it undeniable — he was already so in love with this dog, this little whirlwind of fur, who somehow already felt like their kid. “Bless you,” he said immediately, and Kova’s tail thumped in what felt like agreement.

Hayden chuckled at him. “God, dude, you’re doomed.”

The thing was, Shane hadn’t even wanted a puppy. He most definitely hadn’t wanted to attend a training class. Ilya, however, had strong opinions, a lot of energy, and a completely unfair way of making his case — mostly with his body: strong arms that held Shane in place while his lips kissed him into oblivion. So, naturally, Shane never stood a chance.

So, here Shane was, sitting on a folding chair in a brightly lit community center, the smell of wet fur in the air, holding a leash that was clearly too long and could double as a whip in a pinch.

Kova sat obediently beside him — mostly. One ear twitched, one eye followed the other dogs. Shane noticed everything, patterns mattered to him. He liked predictability. And Kova,

of course, brought a gentle kind of chaos. Still... Shane felt himself opening up to the idea that mild chaos might not be so bad after all.

Ilya was crouched on the floor in front of Kova, whispering encouragement in rapid Russian, and laughing every time Kova sneezed with excitement.

Shane couldn't help but notice the way Ilya's eyes crinkled when he smiled at their dog, the way his hand occasionally brushed Shane's ankle as he leaned closer. Being with Kova was still new, and somehow seeing Ilya with him revealed sides of him Shane hadn't cataloged yet. It was new information, and Shane filed it for later use.

That was when Hayden's voice echoed in Shane's head: *"Dude, you're doomed."*

Shane grimaced. He could still hear it. And he knew it was true. He was doomed — not in the way he usually worried about, but doomed to fall even harder for Ilya, to let himself be pulled into the chaos and warmth and softness that came with this little life they were building. Doomed to care so much about a dog that it could unravel him if he let it. And he did let it. He had already let it.

Yep. Totally fucking doomed.

The trainer, a cheerful woman with a voice that somehow commanded obedience without yelling — a quality Shane and Ilya both appreciated, especially since during the season they were still yelled at constantly on the ice — demonstrated "sit" once more.

Kova complied, his tail wagging like he had figured out the universe's rules somehow.

Ilya laughed, and the sound was light and teasing, because Kova's earnest little tail wag was ridiculously over-the-top and utterly adorable.

"Ilya," Shane muttered, "stop laughing and focus."

He didn't mean it, not really. Ilya's laugh was warm and unguarded, loud enough to turn a few heads, and Shane felt it land somewhere just behind his ribs. He loved watching it happen — the way Ilya tipped his head back slightly, the way the sound seemed to come from his whole body instead of just his mouth. To Shane, it was the best sound in the world, and he had to remind himself that this was a training class for Kova and not the time to just stand there swooning over his hot Russian boyfriend.

"I am focused," Ilya said, dragging out the word. "This is... *ve-ry* serious." The "ve" was clipped, the "ry" rolling just a little, like he was enjoying how ridiculous he sounded — and Shane couldn't help grinning.

Kova tilted his head, apparently somehow sensing some human tension. He sat anyway. Shane couldn't help but notice — dogs really were better at compromise than people. His eyes drifted to Ilya, who gave him a small, teasing wink, and Shane felt that familiar warmth bloom in his chest. In that moment, he loved Ilya more than he could have ever anticipated — how effortlessly he could read Shane, how quietly he could steady him, how even a tiny gesture could make Shane's world feel a little lighter every day.

Halfway through the class, the sliding doors at the back opened and immediately a flash of light hit Shane's eyes.

Fucking paparazzi.

"Do not fucking move," he thought frantically, but it was already too late. The cameras clicked relentlessly, the sound echoing through the community center. The media had arrived, and they were taking photos — of him, of Ilya, of Kova. The dog was on a leash, looking completely calm, unaware of the chaos around him. But Shane's chest tightened as he realized how easily the scene could be interpreted: a domestic moment laid bare, intimate and private, now captured for anyone to see and probably all over the internet in an hour.

He felt a flicker of panic, imagining the headlines, the whispers, the inevitable commentary. All the careful control he prided himself on felt suddenly irrelevant, swept away by the relentless flash of lights.

Fuck!

Shane froze and Kova licked his hand. Ilya whispered softly: "Relax. They are just... photographers."

How could Ilya be this calm in all of this?

Shane exhaled slowly, counting each breath: one... two... three... He cataloged everything in his head: exposure risk, camera angles, who had line of sight, potential optics, what needed verbal clarification — and how quickly. His muscles tensed, then relaxed fractionally as he ran the checklist, the familiar mental framework grounding him amidst the chaos in his head.

Ilya tilted his head at him. "We are very cute in picture, yes?"

Shane scowled. "Not fucking relevant right now."

The flash went off again and Kova yipped at the light and sat on Shane's foot. Shane made a note: future sunglasses for dogs.

Hayden's words popped into his head again: "*You're doomed.*"

Well, Shane felt pretty damn doomed right now. In a bad way.

"Why is the dog so small?" a photographer called through the door.

Ilya crouched, scratching Kova behind the ears. "Not small. Efficient." He said more to himself than anyone else.

Shane silently counted syllables in his head to cope. He noticed the brush of Ilya's hand on his shoulder, and it immediately steadied him.

The class continued, Kova dutifully following instructions — or at least trying to — while the flashing lights of the cameras persisted whenever the sliding door opened. The trainer moved through the room with a serene, professional air, completely unfazed. She explained,

almost conversationally, that she'd seen far worse: two cats on agility courses, a Great Dane that had eaten its own leash, and a chihuahua that refused to leave its human's lap for an entire lesson.

Meanwhile, the other dog parents tried their best to act as if nothing had happened, casually tossing commands to their pets and chatting quietly, though Shane caught the occasional flicker of recognition in their eyes. Some glanced at him and Ilya with barely concealed curiosity, their smiles a little too tight, their body language subtly stiff — the room was professional, but the subtext was undeniable: almost everyone knew exactly who they were.

Shane watched the dog trainer with a mix of awe and envy. *How could someone stay this calm when chaos literally surrounded them?*

Afterward, outside in the bright sun, Hayden appeared, almost like he had been waiting there forever, leaning casually against the curb, with his phone in hand, and his eyes scanning for them. He'd texted Shane earlier, knowing the training class schedule, and had casually mentioned he might "drop by to make sure no one got eaten by a dog." Of course, Shane knew better: Hayden had the uncanny ability to appear at the exact moment when chaos was at its peak, with that perfect "I told you so" expression already in place.

"You survived," Hayden said, a smirk tugging at the corner of his mouth. "Barely." He let his eyes roam over Shane, taking in the slightly frazzled hair, the tense shoulders, the way Shane's hands still clutched Kova's leash like it was a lifeline. "Didn't think you had it in you."

"I am alive," Shane said flatly. "And so is Kova."

Hayden smirked. "And apparently he's also a celebrity now. How does it feel to have the press know about your puppy?"

Shane didn't answer. He focused on Kova, who wagged his tail and licked Shane's hand. Shane noted: bonding successful, optics... well, kind of catastrophic.

Ilya jumped in, laughing. "See? Everyone is happy. Even dog." He leaned slightly into Shane as they walked, brushing his fingers briefly against Shane's. Shane allowed the touch, because Hayden knew about them anyway and his heart was unexpectedly lighter.

Hayden crouched to pet Kova, grinning. "And I get to be your moral support, right? The guy who keeps Shane alive."

Shane scowled. "You're not helping, Hayd."

"You're welcome," Hayden said, standing up. "Also, Kova likes me more."

"Impossible," Shane said, his jaw tightening a little.

He didn't like the tension between Ilya and Hayden. Every time Hayden smirked cockily or made one of his teasing comments, Shane felt that small, tight knot of unease in his chest, not

just because of what Hayden said, but because he could see how it affected Ilya sometimes. He hated that anyone could rattle Ilya, that the easy confidence and warmth he carried so naturally could be met with sharp, pointed words instead of the respect Shane knew he deserved.

Even if it was mostly playful teasing, Shane wished — sometimes desperately — that they could get along better, that Hayden could see what Shane already knew: Ilya was sensitive, brilliant, loyal, and far more perceptive than most people gave him credit for. Shane wanted those two to understand each other, or at least tolerate each other, so he didn't have to be the buffer every single time. It was exhausting, managing the tensions between his boyfriend and his best friend.

Ilya, seemingly undisturbed by Hayden, whispered to Kova, “Ssshh, do not fight, Вот мой мальчик. Let small human feel good. He has no dog.”

Shane swallowed when he heard Ilya call Kova 'his boy'. And he immediately felt that familiar mix of exasperation and quiet admiration that always accompanied Ilya's effortless clarity and strength. He didn't want to admit it — he rarely did — but Ilya was right. Hayden, for all his teasing and smirks, was mostly harmless. And somehow, just hearing Ilya's calm voice made the tension in Shane's chest loosen, reminding him that he didn't always have to shoulder everything alone.

They walked home as Shane spotted a few media vans parked a block away and he immediately counted their movements: six photographers, three videographers, one drone.

Ilya hummed softly in Russian and Kova trotted beside them. Shane's muscles finally started to relax, just a fraction.

The angst was there. Yes, it almost always was, Shane knew it. He always felt the pressure of the outside world pressing in, shining lights on something he thought could stay private forever. But right then and there, Kova was healthy and happy. Ilya was laughing quietly about the dog's “dramatic sneeze.” And Hayden was, as always, impossibly annoying and unavoidably present.

Shane was confident he could handle this. He had lists. He had rules. He had Kova. And most importantly, he had Ilya.

As they continued walking and he watched Ilya crouch beside Kova, laughing softly at some little thing the dog did, Shane felt it settle in his chest: The chaos of their lives, the constant flashing of cameras, the teasing of friends, none of it mattered here. Because somehow, against all odds, he had this little family that made everything else feel secondary.

And in that moment, Shane realized he wasn't at all doomed — he was thriving.

And he was, without a doubt, the luckiest dude alive.

Chapter 3: Want to fly to a place

Chapter Notes

Happy New Year, everyone! I spent most of the night editing this chapter because I was too excited not to share it. I really hope you enjoy it!

Tiny trigger warning: there's a brief description of an accident involving Kova.

Ilya had not anticipated this. And by *this*, he meant Kova — completely and enthusiastically coated in mud from Shane's backyard — blasting through the living room in frantic circles like a small, brown, furry hurricane with no regard for furniture, physics, or sanity.

Ilya was used to getting hot, heavy, and filthy on the ice. Sweat, blood, snow, bruises — they were all fine in his book.

Mud, however, was a different story.

It streaked across the hardwood in damp paw prints, sprayed off Kova's legs as he skidded around the coffee table.

Ilya tracked it all automatically, but not because it bothered him.

But because he knew it would bother Shane.

He could already hear it, Shane's careful, controlled voice cataloging the damage: "That's the rug. That's the couch leg. That's the corner where dirt shouldn't be."

The thought made something twist in Ilya's chest — not irritation, not guilt exactly, but awareness. Mud wasn't just mess. Mud was disruption. It was chaos brought inside, uninvited, into a space Shane worked very hard to keep orderly and safe.

He exhaled slowly.

Yes. Mud was different.

Not because Ilya couldn't handle it — but because Shane shouldn't have to.

Meanwhile, Shane sat perfectly still at one end of the couch, a blanket draped neatly over his knees like a defensive barrier, his eyes locked on his phone with the kind of focus usually reserved for game tape and tax documents. His mouth moved faintly as he read, numbers and instructions muttered under his breath, as if concentration alone might impose order on the situation.

Kova thundered past again, his tail a blur, his nails clicking wildly. Ilya watched him launch off the rug and thought, with mild awe, *I have fought grown men in skates. This is worse.*

He glanced at Shane, surprise flickering across his face. “You’re... not reacting,” he said, though it came out more like a question than a statement.

“Oh, I’m reacting,” Shane said without looking up. “Internally.”

Kova chose that moment to actually leap onto the couch, his muddy paws inches from Shane’s very deliberate safe zone.

Shane inhaled sharply.

Ilya lunged. “No—!”

But it was too late. Mud met blanket. And blanket met disaster.

Shane slowly closed his eyes like a man accepting his fate.

Ilya surveyed the mess, then looked back at his boyfriend, and felt something warm and deeply stupid bloom in his chest. Hockey had trained him well for chaos. This barely registered.

Kova barked once, loud and triumphant, like he personally took credit for the destruction and then he jumped off the couch.

Ilya sighed. “Okay,” he said, already rolling up his sleeves. “Great. Love this for us. Now we panic.”

Shane, meanwhile, was still muttering numbers under his breath. Ilya couldn’t tell what they were, only that the rhythm was unsettlingly precise. And very Shane.

“What are you even doing, Hollander?” Ilya asked, watching Kova Tokyo-drift past the coffee table again and somehow not die.

Shane didn’t look up. “I’m reading about paw pad infections,” he said, as if that explained everything. “And proper post-bath drying techniques. Apparently moisture between the toes is a risk factor.”

Ilya stared at him. “This is what you do,” he said slowly, incredulous. “Dog becomes monster and you read fucking textbook.”

“It’s a blog,” Shane corrected. “With citations.”

“Worse,” Ilya decided with a groan and an eye roll.

Kova, realizing both his humans were distracted, launched himself onto the couch again, shaking mud everywhere.

“Stop,” Shane said sharply. “Oh my God, he — he can’t — he’s tracking dirt — everywhere!”

Kova paused just long enough to sniff Shane’s feet. Then he launched himself off the couch and disappeared headfirst into the pile of laundry Ilya had thoughtfully abandoned on the floor.

“Ah—!” Ilya lunged, snatching a sock mid-air. “You are menace. Absolute criminal.”

Shane sat very still, arms crossed tight over his chest. “I cannot believe you let him—”

“Relax,” Ilya cut in easily. “We are learning patience. Very good lesson for humans, yes?”

Shane shot him a look. And this time, it actually landed. Because Ilya’s stomach flipped. He immediately crouched and buried his face against Kova’s mud-streaked ear, pretending to inspect nothing in particular.

“Hey,” he then said carefully, his voice light as he scratched behind Kova’s ear, “did you notice how your heart beats faster when he misbehaves?” He glanced up, casual on purpose. “Interesting, yes?”

Shane froze mid-breath, and some of the rigidity was gone, replaced with something bare and very, very human. “I... maybe,” he admitted quietly, clearly knowing that Ilya was trying to distract him, ground him.

Something twisted pleasantly in Ilya’s chest. He cleared his throat. “Is okay. We are same,” he said, a little too quickly. “He makes everyone nervous. Very normal. Scientific, probably.”

Kova wagged his tail, entirely unrepentant.

Shane looked at him. Really looked. And for a fraction of a second, Ilya thought he saw... something. Something softer than usual. Something less guarded which was rare when it came to his boyfriend.

Then, suddenly, Hayden burst through the door like he owned the place, interrupting the moment.

“Wow,” he said, stopping just inside the entryway as Kova tore past him in a streak of brown and mud. “This feels like... a trap.”

Shane blinked. He always forgot that Hayden still had a key. Not because Hayden lived there — he very much did not — but because Shane had given him one *back then*, during a few rough weeks when things with Jackie had been bad and Hayden had needed somewhere to crash. At the time, it had felt practical. Necessary. Emergency-adjacent.

And once Hayden had a key, taking it back would have required a conversation. Possibly two.

So the key stayed. Officially for emergencies, unofficially because Shane hated administrative confrontation and because, on some level, he trusted Hayden not to abuse it.

Which, technically, Hayden wasn't doing right now.

"Uhm— I texted," Hayden said, glancing down at his phone. "You didn't answer. That's emergency-adjacent." He smiled, apologetically.

"I was busy," Shane said automatically.

Hayden looked at the mud. Then at the dog. And then at Ilya, crouched mid-rescue with a towel. "Clearly."

Ilya rolled his eyes dramatically. "You arrive at very exciting moment."

Hayden snorted. "I always do."

Ilya laughed, unbothered. "Do not worry. Is good." He gestured toward the mess on the floor and the couch. "Cleaning practice for Shane." He winked.

Shane groaned, dragging a hand down his face. "Uhh, you're impossible."

"Yes," Ilya agreed cheerfully, starting to brush the worst of the mud off Kova's side, but his eyes stayed on Shane, bright and amused and far too attentive.

"Stop looking at me like that," Shane muttered, quieter now, his gaze fixed very deliberately on the opposite wall instead of the muddy chaos at his feet.

Ilya paused, straightening slowly. "Like what?"

Shane hesitated and felt his shoulders tightening the way they always did when his brain started cataloguing everything that was wrong — the streaks on the floor, the uneven paw prints on the couch, the way the rug was definitely ruined now. He shrugged, his ears warming despite himself. "Like... you're noticing."

Ilya softened. *Of course he was noticing.* He always noticed — the way Shane's eyes tracked mess before people, the way his jaw set when something was out of place, the way his hands curled like he was holding himself back from fixing it immediately. Ilya had learned those tells years ago.

What Ilya didn't do was care in the way Shane expected.

The mud didn't bother him. Shane's spiraling focus didn't scare him. And none of it changed the way he looked at him. He stood and stepped closer, easy and unhurried, and brushed his thumb once over Shane's wrist — grounding, casual, like it was the most normal thing in the world.

Because it was.

"I notice," Ilya said simply. "I always do." Then, he added lighter, almost teasing: "But floor survives. Dog is happy. You are still you."

Shane swallowed, the tightness in his chest easing just a fraction. He knew by now that Ilya wasn't watching to judge or correct him. He was watching because he cared — and because he wasn't going anywhere, muddy floors and all.

Before he could say anything else — or make it worse — Kova sneezed.

Kova and her almost supernatural talent for cutting through tension.

Ilya laughed automatically. “Будь здоров”, “*bless you.*”

And the tension broke, just a little, the way it always seemed to when Kova decided enough was enough.

Shane blinked, looked away, and muttered something under his breath about “impossible coordination,” which could have meant the dog, or Ilya, or both.

Hayden watched the whole exchange with open satisfaction, his arms crossed, a smirk firmly in place. “Ah,” he said. “Young love.”

Ilya startled slightly, like he'd genuinely forgotten there was a third person in the room. He shot Hayden a look — unimpressed, territorial, and just a little annoyed. He didn't *like* Hayden. Not really. Hayden talked too much, pushed too hard, and had a habit of seeing straight through him in ways Ilya didn't always appreciate.

But... Hayden was Shane's person. The one who had known him before fame had really hit, before the media pressure had gotten insane, *before Ilya*. He was the one who still showed up uninvited, with a key and opinions and the kind of concern that didn't ask permission.

Ilya respected that, even if he didn't always like it.

So instead of snapping, he just tilted his head and said dryly, “You are very observant.”

Hayden's smirk widened then he cleared his throat. “So are you two done foreplaying now or are you gonna be ripping your clothes off in a sec? Wait— is this a new *training* technique?” He added, teasingly.

Ilya fake-smirked. “Hayden, you are so...what is the word? Persistent.”

Hayden laughed. “Shit, I mean, somebody has to keep Shane from turning into a neurotic dog owner hermit.”

Shane groaned again. *These two were impossible.*

Ilya still watched his boyfriend, endlessly curious in the way he always was with Shane. Shane's irritation was real — sharp and somehow precise, like everything Shane felt. So was the concern flickering just beneath it, something Ilya knew he tried and failed to hide. And underneath all of that, familiar and unmistakable, was the quiet pull between them, that constant, low hum that never quite went away no matter how domestic or chaotic things got.

Hayden raised an eyebrow, watching them for a beat too long. “Yeah,” he finally said, like he had just made the observation of a lifetime, “you two are definitely on your own level.”

Ilya glanced at Shane, then back at Hayden. “Is called chemistry,” he smiled, “you should try it one day.”

They decided to walk Kova after Hayden finally left, a duffel slung over his shoulder and a parting look that promised commentary later. He’d apparently stopped by to collect the clothes he’d gradually left behind — spare running shoes by the door and a toothbrush that had quietly migrated into Shane’s bathroom. And Shane couldn’t help but notice that the apartment felt a little more orderly after he was gone.

Shane hadn’t wanted to go outside that day. He’d wanted to stay on the couch instead — clean, dry, and predictable — especially after they’d just finished scrubbing mud off the floors and lint-rolling dog hair off everything Kova had touched.

Outside was the opposite of that.

The sun was too bright, the kind of brightness that pressed against his eyes and made him squint even behind sunglasses. The grass still smelled like wet earth and dog paws, sharp and lingering from the morning rain, and Shane could already imagine the grit clinging to his shoes, the muddy prints tracking back inside, the mess he’d have to deal with again later. It all felt like an unnecessary variable in a day he’d been carefully managing.

But Kova had sat by the door, leash in his mouth, his tail wagging in careful, hopeful beats, like he was trying not to ask for too much.

So Shane had sighed, long and resigned, and reached for his keys.

Outside, the air was warm and buzzing. *The perfect offseason day.* Cicadas hummed somewhere in the trees. Kova trotted ahead, his nose pressed down, investigating every inch of sidewalk like it contained vital information Shane didn’t have clearance for.

Ilya walked just slightly ahead of them, sunlight catching in the loose curls at the back of his neck, his shoulders easy, unguarded. The light hit him in a way that felt unfair, like someone had adjusted it on purpose. And for a moment, Shane had the strange, unhelpful thought that Ilya looked like something finished — like a painting you weren’t supposed to touch, or question, or wonder how it ended up in the real world at all.

He looked entirely at home out here, like the day had been built around him. The air, the pace, the space of it. Nothing about him felt forced. Nothing felt like a performance.

Shane watched without meaning to. Noticing the way Ilya eased his stride without being asked, matching Shane’s pace as naturally as breathing. The way he glanced back every few steps, not hovering, not checking — just making sure Shane was still there, still with him.

It made something in Shane's chest tighten, sharp and quiet all at once. The idea that someone like Ilya could move through the world like this — unselfconscious, attentive, real — and choose, again and again, to look back for him.

"You are doing very brave thing," Ilya said lightly, not teasing, just stating it like a simple observation, cutting clean through Shane's unintentional spiral of admiration.

Shane huffed, adjusting his grip on the leash. "It's a walk. I'm not storming a beach."

"Still," Ilya said, smiling in that easy way of his. "I know you didn't want to go."

Shane hesitated, then shrugged. "Didn't want to deal with it," he corrected. "The noise... People."

Ilya nodded like that tracked. "But you came anyway."

"Because Kova needed it," Shane said, glancing down at Kova, who was busy investigating a particularly interesting patch of grass. "And because you were already putting on your shoes."

Ilya laughed quietly. "That too."

They walked on for a few steps, the rhythm settling again. Ilya didn't reach for Shane's hand, didn't crowd him. He just stayed close enough to be felt.

"But that still counts," Ilya added after a moment. "Doing something even when your brain is telling you no."

Shane exhaled through his nose. "You make it sound like a motivational poster."

Ilya grinned. "I am very inspiring."

Shane shot him a look, then softened. "Don't get used to it."

Ilya only smiled wider, like he already had.

Shane had to admit, the walk had been pretty calm... up until this moment. Shane had even loosened Kova's leash in the park, thinking a few steps beyond the fenced area would be safe to do so. Kova sniffed at the grass, his tail wagging in that ridiculously confident way he always seemed to do when he was excited.

Shane still couldn't help but catalogue everything: distance, surroundings, the behavior of nearby dogs. Everything was predictable.

Too predictable.

The feeling of not wanting to go for a walk had been sitting under his ribs all afternoon, low and persistent, the quiet certainty that something was off even if he couldn't justify it with

facts. The light was somehow too bright. The street was too open. There were too many variables he couldn't account for.

He had told himself that wasn't how probability worked. Yet, his heartbeat quickened.

And then, without warning — no sound he could track, no buildup he could prepare for — a squirrel appeared.

Small. Gray. And impossibly fast. It darted out from between two parked cars like it had been waiting for exactly this moment, like it had been written into the day from the start.

Shane's stomach dropped.

And for a split second, the world narrowed to details he couldn't stop noticing: the way Kova's ears snapped upright, the sudden stillness in his body, the tension winding tight beneath his fur like a spring pulled too far back.

Shane inhaled sharply, already reaching. *Already too late.*

I knew it, his brain screamed uselessly, the thought arriving fully formed and cruelly vindicated.

And then everything happened at once.

"Kova! No!" Shane shouted, lunging, but the second the words left his mouth, the leash slipped from his fingers. His legs moved in slow motion, his chest tightening as panic screamed in his ears.

There was nothing holding Kova back as he bolted across the grass and onto the street. Shane's stomach dropped, his heart suddenly in his throat. And then to his absolute horror — a screech of tires, metal on pavement, and a thud that vibrated through Shane's chest.

"Ilya!" Shane's scream ripped through the air.

Ilya was already sprinting, cursing in Russian, landing at Kova's side as he flopped, trembling but alive. Shane skidded to a halt beside them, his stomach twisting with panic and relief. Kova whimpered, looking between them, his tail tucked low, both of his ears flattened.

To make this nightmare even worse, phones were raised all around them. Shane's teeth clenched. "No. Stop. Get away," he muttered, eyes burning as he waved at the people recording. He didn't care about embarrassment. He didn't care about cameras.

None of it mattered now. Kova was all that mattered.

"Shh, baby, is okay," Ilya murmured, gently and carefully brushing his hands over Kova's back, murmuring softly in Russian. "Ты мой малыш," he murmured, his voice full of affection and worry. Shane's chest tightened — he had never heard Ilya say "*my baby*" quite like that and in that tone, and the way Kova's ears tried to move up at the words made Shane's heart ache.

Shane could feel the tension in Ilya's shoulders, the tight precision in his movements — the same steady calm Shane had always loved watching on the ice, now narrowed entirely onto their dog. It was focused, deliberate, and unmistakably serious.

There wasn't much discussion after that. They got Kova into a taxi in a rush, movements clipped and efficient, and headed straight for the vet clinic. Shane's hands shook the entire ride. Ilya stayed crouched beside him in the back seat, one hand firm on Shane's knee, murmuring reassurances that Shane wanted to believe but couldn't quite absorb. His thoughts were spinning too fast — fear, guilt, adrenaline crashing into each other — leaving him braced and breathless until the car finally slowed.

A few long minutes later, the fluorescent lights of the clinic buzzed overhead, sharp and unyielding, while the air smelled of antiseptic. Shane's throat tightened as he clutched the blanket someone had handed them on the street, wrapping it carefully around Kova to cushion him in his arms, wishing it could somehow shield him from the world too.

The dog's small body trembled in his arms, and every shallow breath made Shane's chest constrict.

Ilya knelt beside him, his fingers lightly brushing Shane's knee, grounding himself as much as Shane, though his jaw was tight and his eyes dark with worry. "Мой малыш..." he murmured, his voice low, and Shane thought it sounded almost a prayer. *'My baby.'*

He swallowed hard, the words setting off an immediate surge of protectiveness. "He's ours," Shane said, his voice low, clipped, almost a growl. "Ours."

The vet approached cautiously, his easy charm now replaced by professional concern, though Shane could feel the flicker of recognition in his eyes. It was the same man from Kova's earlier routine checkup.

"I... I see we have a very serious patient today," the man said, his hands raised slightly, carefully. "What happened?"

Shane's hands tightened around the blanket. "He bolted after a squirrel and got hit by a car," he said, his voice tight, almost too tight to even speak. The words felt inadequate as the memory replayed in his mind: Kova, his small legs pumping like crazy, then the sudden impact, the screech of tires, the phones and faces capturing everything from outside.

Ilya's hand found Shane's again, this time gripping it briefly, grounding them both. "We need... immediate attention," he said, his voice firm, low, controlled despite the fear coiling through him. His eyes never left Kova, scanning him for any sign of movement or pain.

The vet nodded, stepping back and motioning them toward an examination table. "Okay. There's no blood, which is a good thing. So we'll get him onto the table, take vitals, X-rays if necessary. Just try to keep him calm."

Shane's jaw was tight as he lifted Kova carefully, feeling the tiny, trembling weight of him in his arms. Every second felt endless and every small whimper from Kova sliced through him

like a knife. He hated that he couldn't show it to the world — that the amount of panic and love and possessiveness he felt for both Kova and Ilya had to stay private.

Ilya, always attuned to Shane's moods, leaned close and whispered, “Я с тобой. Мы с тобой.” *I'm with you. We're with you*. Shane felt the heat of his boyfriend's words seep into him, grounding him, but it wasn't enough to calm the absolute terror curling in his chest.

As the vet prepared his instruments, he glanced briefly at Ilya. There was that familiar flicker of recognition again, and Shane felt the possessive spark flare in him. “*Keep your fucking hands to yourself*,” he wanted to say, though he didn't. He couldn't. And so, he stayed silent. Which was probably better because right now, he didn't trust himself to speak without the words catching in his throat.

Of course, Ilya caught the flicker, catching Shane's gaze with a light squeeze of his hand. He didn't comment, didn't try to smile. Instead, he focused on Kova, murmuring in soft Russian, “Мой малыш, мы поможем тебе,” *My baby, we will help you.*

Shane let out a long, shuddering breath, allowing himself to wrap an arm more tightly around Kova. He didn't care who saw, who judged, who whispered behind phone cameras. Right now, it was just them. Ilya. Kova. And the shared panic that made every small movement feel amplified, every shallow breath a heartbeat that connected them tighter than ever.

The vet's voice broke through, calm but professional. “We're going to get him settled and are going to take the x-rays now. I need you both to stay here.”

Shane's stomach dropped, and Ilya's hand tightened over his. “We're not leaving,” Shane said immediately. His voice was firm, unyielding. “He's ours.” He repeated his words from earlier.

Ilya's dark eyes met his, full of the same intensity and possessiveness. “Всегда,” he murmured. *Always*.

And in that sterile, bright, antiseptic room, surrounded by unknown machines and the hum of fluorescent lights, Shane realized that nothing — not fear, not panic, not even the world — could separate them from this small, fragile, furry heartbeat that had stolen all their attention — and both of their hearts.

“He's going to be okay,” Ilya said, voice steady but low, his thumb gently brushing Shane's hand. Shane wanted to believe him, desperately, but the fear in his chest made it impossible to relax entirely.

When the vet returned twenty minutes later, the X-rays confirmed nothing was broken — and that Kova just had a mild concussion, a bruised rib and a bruised paw.

Shane exhaled so sharply he felt it in his chest. Relief washed over him, but the tight coil of fear, adrenaline, and protectiveness didn't completely unwind.

As they left the clinic, Shane carried Kova in a carrier the clinic had given them, Ilya walking close beside him, his hand brushing Shane's whenever he could.

The street outside seemed brighter, normal, yet Shane remained hyper-aware of every passerby, every car. "Do not... touch him," Shane muttered when a curious stranger peered in the carrier.

Ilya laughed softly. "Hey, hey, he is fine. But yes, better be careful with our boy," he said, brushing Shane's forearm with his fingers. Shane felt heat rise to his cheeks. He couldn't help it — he loved how Ilya noticed everything, always, even in the smallest, sweetest ways.

Back home, Shane set Kova down gently. The dog limped slightly but wagged his tail at their familiar surroundings. Shane crouched beside him, brushing his fur, whispering reassurances. Ilya sank onto the couch next to Shane, his arms draping around him, a quiet warmth in their little corner of the world.

Shane rested his forehead against Ilya's shoulder and pressed a gentle kiss onto it. "I hate that we can't just... claim it," he murmured. "All of it. Him. You. Everyone seeing we're... just us."

Ilya pressed a kiss to the top of Shane's head, soft and as usual very grounding. "We are ours, Hollander," he whispered. "No matter what anyone sees."

Shane exhaled, finally letting the tension of the day bleed out, letting himself fully lean into Ilya.

The first few days after the accident were tense. Shane hovered over Kova constantly, a blanket tucked around the dog, checking every twitch, every labored breath. Ilya stayed just as close, though he tried to keep his worry in check, speaking softly to Kova in Russian.

"Shane," he murmured one evening, brushing a stray strand of hair from Shane's forehead as he settled onto the couch, "he is strong. Like you. He recovers."

Shane blinked at him, feeling something in his chest loosen slightly. He had spent so many years keeping emotions under strict control, cataloging and measuring them, that just hearing Ilya's quiet confidence made the tension in his shoulders fade.

Kova, for his part, seemed to understand that his humans were fragile. He spent most of the first week curled in Shane's lap, his paw occasionally brushing Ilya's side as if to remind them both that he was okay.

By the second week, Kova had grown impatient with routine. He had learned that whining near the fridge could speed up breakfast. Shane, a cup of coffee in hand, muttered, "He's doing it again. This is manipulation, pure and simple."

Ilya crouched beside him, laughter in his voice. "Manipulation is... human word. He is... persuasive baby."

Shane glared. “He’s our baby,” he muttered, though a small grin tugged at his lips.

Ilya leaned closer, brushing Shane’s arm with a fingertip — easy, familiar. “Yes,” he said softly. “Our baby. Both of you.”

Shane felt his chest tighten. He should’ve pushed back, made a joke, said *don’t call me that*. He opened his mouth, already half-smiling despite himself — but then Ilya kissed him.

Not rushed. Not dramatic. Just very Ilya.

He kissed Shane like he already knew the answer, like he wasn’t asking for anything but offering himself exactly where he was. There was a steadiness to it, a quiet confidence that said *I’m here*, that Shane felt all the way through his chest. Ilya’s hand came up, warm at Shane’s side, grounding him without pinning him down.

It was the kind of kiss that made the rest of the room fall away — the noise, the mess, the day they’d had. The kind that didn’t demand anything more than presence. Ilya kissed him like there was nowhere else he needed to be, like this moment was enough, like Shane was enough.

And Shane let himself believe it. *He always did*.

Shane leaned in without thinking, his hand sliding into the front of Ilya’s shirt, his fingers curling there like it was second nature. It hit him, briefly and clearly, how safe he felt. How easy it was to let go with Ilya.

They broke apart only when Kova huffed impatiently at their feet, his tail thumping against the floor.

Shane laughed quietly, his forehead resting against Ilya’s. “You know,” he murmured, “I was gonna argue with you.”

Ilya smiled. “I know.”

Shane didn’t.

Both Ilya and Shane knew from their countless hockey injuries that recovery required patience, and Kova was apparently in no hurry to be obedient.

One night, Ilya held a treat above Kova’s head. “Sit!” he commanded, and Kova plopped down... mostly, one paw still in the air.

Shane, suppressing a laugh, muttered, “Almost... almost perfect.”

Ilya winked. “Almost is... still success. He is learning.”

Shane shook his head, feeling a grin spreading over his face. “I swear, you’re as big a dork as he is.”

Ilya leaned in close, voice soft and teasing. “And you... love it.”

Shane’s chest tightened, and he could only nod. *Yes, he did. More than he ever expected.*

By the third week, recovery had slowed. Kova could walk more confidently, though he still favored his injured leg. Shane sat on the couch, a blanket draped around his knees, Kova curled on his lap. Ilya lay beside them, reading a book, his fingers brushing Shane’s casually.

“You are... so calm,” Shane murmured, voice soft, “even with all this chaos.”

Ilya stretched, smirking. “Chaos is... normal. We make it manageable.”

Shane smiled. “You make it manageable.”

Ilya’s hand found Shane’s, lacing their fingers together. “Yes,” he said simply, “together.”

Recovery also wasn’t linear. Some days Kova was slow and stubborn. Some days he raced across the living room, eager for a sniff or chase. Each small milestone — walking without limping, sitting on command, even just eating with enthusiasm — felt like a celebration. Shane recorded notes, but he didn’t care about the structure so much anymore. The joy of seeing Kova thrive and Ilya leaning into him, laughing quietly at the dog’s antics, was enough.

By the time Kova was back on his feet, Shane noticed something he hadn’t really anticipated.

The relief he felt wasn’t just about Kova.

It was about Ilya. About the fact that he was still there.

He hadn’t announced it. He hadn’t asked. He still had his own apartments, places he could’ve gone back to at any point. But somewhere along the line, he’d started sleeping on Shane’s side of the bed more often than not. His shoes were by the door. His jacket was on the back of a chair. It had happened gradually enough that Shane hadn’t clocked it as a decision.

They were in the kitchen later, Kova asleep at their feet, when Shane finally said, “You know you don’t... have to stay here the whole time.”

Ilya glanced up from the counter. “I know.”

There was a pause. The kind that could go either way.

“You still have your places,” Shane added, like he was clarifying a logistical point instead of admitting anything.

“I do,” Ilya said. He considered him for a second. “But this one has you. And dog.”

Shane huffed despite himself. “That’s not a compelling argument.”

“It is to me,” Ilya replied, soft and unapologetic.

“But you know the season starts again soon.”

Ilya looked up from the counter. “I know.”

“You’ll be in Ottawa,” Shane continued. It wasn’t a question.

“Yeah. I live there during the season.” Ilya said sarcastically. *As if Shane didn’t know.*

Shane still nodded, like he was confirming a detail when in reality he was processing. “So this,” he gestured vaguely around the room, the kitchen, “is temporary.”

Ilya leaned back against the counter. “Doesn’t feel that way, Hollander.”

Shane exhaled. “That’s not what I mean. I’m talking about... logistics.”

“Okay,” Ilya said. “Logistically, I’ll be in Ottawa most of the time, yes? I’ll come back when I can. Off days. Breaks. Is only two hour drive, not far.” He paused. “I’m definitely not moving out.” He wiggled his eyebrows flirtatiously.

Shane frowned. “You were never officially moved in.”

“True,” Ilya agreed, rolling the *r* in a way that always made Shane’s heart stutter. “But I’m here.”

That earned him a genuine smile from his boyfriend.

“Listen. I still have my apartment in Ottawa, yes?” Ilya went on. “That doesn’t mean this isn’t my place too.”

Shane crossed his arms, trying to hide his growing smirk. “You can’t just claim shared residence by leaving a jacket and a toothbrush.”

“You could be my landlord.” Ilya whispered, leaning closer, ignoring Shane’s remark.

Shane almost chuckled this time but caught himself because he wanted this to be a serious conversation about their future. “I don’t want to do something that only works when your schedule lines up.”

“I don’t either,” Ilya said, his tone serious enough. “But I’m not planning on disappearing for six months. It’s Ottawa, Hollander, not another continent.”

Shane nodded once. “And you’ll take Kova with you.”

“Sometimes.”

“And sometimes he stays here.”

“Obviously.”

There was a pause. It wasn’t heavy, just thoughtful.

“So,” Shane said finally, “you’re saying this continues during the season. Just... with driving.”

Ilya shrugged. “More or less. Like we did first season, yes?”

Shane considered that, then said, “You should probably leave more clothes here. If you’re going to keep stealing mine.”

Ilya smiled, easy and relieved. “Deal.”

Nothing was settled exactly. They hadn’t put dates to anything, hadn’t set timelines or rules they’d only have to renegotiate once the season got messy. For now, the plan was simple in the way complicated things sometimes were: Ilya would live in Ottawa during the season, Shane would stay in Montreal, and they’d drive back and forth when schedules allowed — sharing custody of Kova, who already seemed to know exactly how to get the best of both of them.

Ilya reached for Shane’s mug again without thinking — the plain one with the chipped rim that Shane always used because it held exactly the right amount of coffee. Ilya claimed it every morning anyway. Said it kept the heat better. Said the handle fit his hand. Neither of those things were true, but it had become routine, like leaving his shoes by the door or setting his phone down on the same spot of the counter.

Shane noticed, as he always did. He opened his mouth to comment, then closed it. Let Ilya take the mug. Let the small, familiar theft stand.

He told himself it was temporary. That they’d figure it out as they went. But as Ilya leaned against the counter, the mug in hand, entirely at ease in a space that hadn’t been his to begin with, Shane felt the tension ease just a little.

Some things didn’t need to be defined yet.

Some things were already happening, whether he named them or not.

Chapter 4: Feeling cornered and rushed

Chapter Notes

Here it is—the penultimate chapter! I edited this until 3 a.m. and I’m so excited to finally share it. Hope you enjoy! I promise the fluff is fluffing again after a tiny speck of angst.

Ilya decided the evening was good. *Very good.*

The day had been full in all the right ways — they had slow coffee in the morning that turned into a second and in Ilya’s case a third cup, a walk around the neighborhood that stretched longer than planned, because Kova had needed to sniff everything, leaving him happy and satisfied. Then, they’d grilled something in the backyard that came out slightly overdone, ate it anyway, and argued lazily about music.

Ilya had looked at Shane’s phone for exactly two seconds. Then he shook his head. “Uhhh, no.”

“No what?” Shane asked.

“No to whatever this is.” Ilya clarified, still shaking his head.

“It’s music.”

Ilya glanced at him. Flat and unmoved. “Barely.” He said, the *l* was rounded, like he’d rolled the judgment around his mouth before letting it go

Shane scoffed. “It’s for relaxing.”

Ilya looked like he considered that for a moment, his eyes narrowing, then he said, “no. I do not trust music that does not demand anything from me.”

Shane raised an eyebrow. “Demand *what*, exactly, Ilya?”

“Attention. Emotion. Thought. Music that only exists to soothe is... useless.” He waved his hands dramatically.

Shane rolled his eyes, a smirk tugging at the corner of his mouth. “Oh my god, that sentence alone is insane.”

Ilya took the phone. And immediately, the backyard exploded into fast, relentless Russian techno.

Shane froze, then slowly turned his head. “Oh, no. You did not.”

“I did,” Ilya said calmly, a sly smirk forming on his face.

“But you’re not even listening to it.”

“I am listening to *you*,” Ilya replied, watching Shane with open interest.

Shane groaned and dropped back against the chair with a groan. “You did this just to get a reaction.”

Ilya leaned over the table, smiling like he’d won something. “And I got one.”

It had been one of those offseason summer days where they had also let the afternoon blur into evening without checking the time once. So now, Shane’s place was quiet in a way that felt earned, not empty. Kova was stretched out on the floor like he had personally claimed the space. Shane was on the couch, relaxed enough to lean back, one ankle hooked over the other, his attention split between the dog and whatever he was pretending not to overthink.

Ilya watched him for a moment longer than necessary.

Shane looked so good like this — soft, unaware, a little undone — and Ilya felt the familiar, dangerous urge to comment on it.

He smiled to himself.

Yes. Very good evening.

He leaned back against the arm of the couch and let his gaze linger openly now. “You know,” he said casually, like he wasn’t about to ruin Shane’s concentration on purpose, “you look very hot when you pretend you are not thinking about fifty things at once, Hollander.”

Shane didn’t look at him. “Fuck off! I’m not pretending.”

Ilya smiled. “Liar.”

That earned him a huff and a side-eye. Shane shifted, reaching down to scratch behind Kova’s ear, grounding himself before looking back up. “Leave me alone, Rozanov,” he muttered. “You’re distracting.”

“No, I won’t,” Ilya said immediately, unapologetically himself. “And this is my natural state.”

Shane’s mouth twitched despite himself. “Well, you could at least *try* being quiet.”

Instead of doing that, Ilya leaned in, close enough that Shane could feel the warmth of him. One hand slid to Shane’s knee, his thumb brushing there like it belonged. “Why would I do that,” Ilya murmured seductively, “when this is *clearly* working?”

Shane rolled his eyes, but his shoulder tipped toward Ilya anyway, and the movement was almost automatic. Familiar. He didn't pull away when Ilya's fingers traced idle patterns against his leg.

"Uhh, you're insufferable," Shane sighed, but there was no heat in it.

Ilya smiled like he'd won something.

And Shane shook his head, but there was warmth in it now, the kind that lingered, the kind that let Ilya know that his boyfriend would definitely let him fuck him on the couch tonight.

But Ilya, being the patient man he was, didn't rush him. He stretched out beside Shane instead, one arm draped lazily along the backrest, the other brushing the tip of Kova's ear as the dog jumped up on the couch and settled against Shane's side.

"Look at him," Ilya pointed at the dog, watching the slow rise and fall of Kova's chest. "So... sleepy. Perfect little baby." Then he glanced at Shane, that familiar grin tugging at his mouth. "Just like someone else I know."

Shane's lips twitched, but the smile didn't fully land. The quiet inside him left too much room for his thoughts to wander, and worry slipped in the way it always did — small at first, then sharper.

How long could things stay this easy? What happened when the world caught up to them? When someone noticed, when the season began and schedules shifted, when reality pressed in too hard?

"Careful," Shane said at last, nudging Ilya's shoulder in an attempt to rid himself of the intrusive thoughts. "You keep talking like that and I'll start thinking you mean me."

Ilya's grin softened. He caught the hesitation in Shane's voice immediately, the way he always did. His hand brushed Shane's knee, "maybe I do," he said quietly. "Maybe I like knowing you're safe. Even when you don't believe it yourself."

Shane's chest constricted. He loved that Ilya noticed him, all the little tics and the careful habits, the ways Shane tried to keep himself under control. But right now, with Kova between them and the sun dipping low, Shane felt exposed. The security he felt in Ilya's presence was comforting — and also terrifying all at once.

"All this... because of a dog," Shane muttered, half-laughing, half-sighing. "Sometimes I'm not sure if I should be grateful or... or fucking scared."

"Grateful," Ilya said, but there was a quiet edge in his voice, like he understood the undercurrent of Shane's fear. "Is much better. And I know you love it, secretly."

Shane looked down at Kova, then back at Ilya. He wanted to argue, to deny it — but he couldn't. The little whirlwind of a dog had forced them into this rhythm, into this fragile closeness during the offseason.

“You’re lucky,” Shane said quietly, brushing his hand down Kova’s back. “You’re... unfairly hot.” He huffed a breath, then hesitated, words catching. “I... I’ve never met anyone who could... fit so easily into my life. And maybe mess it up too, just by being himself.”

Ilya’s fingers brushed Shane’s arm, a comforting touch. “Mess up? I think you mean... improve, yes?”

Shane laughed under his breath, the sound thin and unfinished. “Yeah. Improve... maybe.” He hesitated, fingers absently tracing the edge of the couch. “But what if it doesn’t stay like this?”

Ilya went still. Not stiff — just quieter, more careful. Something serious passed over his face, a flicker Shane caught immediately because he knew it so well. “Then we don’t let it slip,” Ilya said after a moment. “We hold on. To him. To us.” His voice stayed steady, but there was a strain beneath it, the same unease tightening Shane’s chest — the unspoken awareness of what waited for them once the season started again and the rest of the world came crashing back in.

So, the silence that followed wasn’t empty. It settled around them, dense with everything they weren’t ready to say yet.

Shane bent to kiss the top of Kova’s head, then looked back at Ilya. “You’re really something,” he finally muttered, the words fond but edged with nerves.

Ilya shifted closer, close enough that Shane could feel his warmth, his presence unavoidable. “Yeah?” he murmured. “And you still love me anyway.”

Shane swallowed, the truth sitting thick in his throat. “So much,” he said quietly. “I just... care even more than I’m used to. And that part’s scary.”

Ilya’s eyes softened, but there was a glint of determination in them, of promise, that made Shane’s chest ache. “Then we keep it,” Ilya finally said. “All of it.”

As if it was that simple.

Kova thumped his tail like he always did, blissfully unaware of human anxieties, and Shane let himself cling to that small comfort. But even in that peace, a flicker of fear lingered — the fear that the world outside their little bubble would try to take it away.

The next evening was quieter than Shane liked, because it left too much room for thoughts. The sun was already slipping lower, throwing long shadows across the grass, and Kova padded along the edge of the yard on a long leash, with his nose down and his tail loose, moving through the world with the easy confidence of a creature who had no concept of consequences.

Shane envied him.

He watched Kova a second longer than he meant to, that familiar tightness creeping into his chest. The dog didn't hesitate or second-guess. He just kept moving, trusting the ground to be where it had always been. Trusting that it wouldn't suddenly disappear from under him.

Shane's brain, unhelpfully, filled in the rest like it always did.

One wrong moment. One thing taken away. One situation turning public, ugly, uncontrollable. He swallowed because his jaw was tightening, and his thoughts spiraled faster than he could rein them in.

Then he saw it out of the corner of his eyes — Ilya's fingers sliding along Kova's long leash, already starting to loosen it — and Shane reacted before the fear even finished forming.

"Ilya. Wait." The words came out sharp and fast, half breath, half reflex, the way you stopped someone from stepping into the street without looking. His hand hovered near the leash, muscle memory screaming at him to grab it, to fix it, to *do something* before this became another thing he should've prevented.

"He shouldn't be off-leash," Shane said, trying for steady and missing because his voice came out tight anyway. "What if—"

"What if nothing happens?" Ilya cut in, sharper than Shane expected. His eyes flashed, not angry yet, but definitely defensive. "He's fine. He listens. We have trained him, Hollander."

Shane exhaled through his nose, frustration burning hot behind his ribs. It wasn't that Ilya didn't get it. That almost made it worse. Ilya *did* get him — knew how his brain worked, knew how fast fear could hook him and drag him under — and still trusted the world enough to let go. Shane wished he could do that. Wished it didn't feel like tempting fate.

His jaw tightened. "I know," he said, too quickly. "I know you're careful. I'm not saying you aren't. I just—" He swallowed. His stomach twisted, familiar and unpleasant. "We've trained him *some*, Ilya. This is still dangerous. Cars, other dogs, squirrels—" His voice caught despite himself. "You know what happened last time."

The words hung there, heavy with memory, with the kind of fear that didn't fade just because time passed.

Ilya raised an eyebrow, tilting his head. "He knows this yard," he said, light but not dismissive. "He knows when things are dangerous, yes?" A half-smile tugged at his mouth, though the tension beneath it was obvious. "You worry too much. Always too much. This is your backyard. Kova is careful. I am careful. You are careful." He shook his head slightly. "Stop looking at him like he will die if you blink, Hollander."

Shane's jaw tightened even more, pressure building behind his eyes, his chest. He hated how calm Ilya looked. Hated it in the way people hated a mirror that showed them exactly what they weren't. Because the fact of the matter was, that steady confidence, that trust in the ground beneath his feet — it was the thing Shane loved most about Ilya.

And right now, it felt fucking unbearable.

“It’s not about you,” Shane snapped, the words coming out harsher than he meant. “It’s about everything else. You act like nothing ever goes wrong. Like the world doesn’t just—” He broke off, his hand flexing uselessly at his side. “I don’t get to ignore that.”

Ilya’s grin slipped. He stepped closer, lowering his voice, trying to keep it even, like he always did. “Shane... you cannot control everything.” His gaze softened. “I am here. Kova is here. We are together. Why not trust?”

The question hit too close, because somehow the answer would feel too honest.

“I don’t know... because trust doesn’t magically fix things,” Shane shot back, the frustration spilling over before he could catch it. His heart was racing now, words tripping over each other. “You just — you act like it’s all fine, and it’s not. Things go wrong. Dogs get hurt. People get careless.”

The second the words were out, Shane wished he could drag them back. They landed wrong and they were definitely way too sharp. Too unfair. He hadn’t meant to raise his voice at Ilya when his boyfriend had been nothing but supportive; he’d just felt it slip past the point of control, that awful moment where fear turned into searing heat and went looking for somewhere to go.

And it chose Ilya.

Shane swallowed, his chest tight, his hands now curling into fists he didn’t realize he’d made. He hated that he’d aimed it there — at the calm, perfect, beautiful man he loved more than anything or anyone else in the world, the steadiness he leaned on when everything else felt like it was about to give way.

Ilya’s expression hardened, a rare flash of irritation cutting through his calm. “And yelling at me,” he said tightly, “like I am irresponsible one — that helps?” He took a breath, clearly forcing himself to slow down. “Shane, you are having panic attack. Panic will not protect Kova.”

Silence fell between them, thick and uncomfortable. And Shane’s chest ached — worry tangled with anger, threaded through with the helpless want for Ilya to *understand* that this wasn’t about control. It was about care. About loving something enough to be afraid of losing it.

He hated this feeling. Hated this kind of sudden distance between them.

Finally, Ilya exhaled, some of the edge leaving him. “Fuck, Hollander. You are... intense sometimes,” he said quietly, not unkind. “But I see it. You love him. You love me.” His voice softened. “Fear just... cannot be the only thing guiding us.”

Shane swallowed, the tension still coiled tight in his stomach. “I know,” he said. “I just— I’m scared, okay?”

That somehow landed exactly where it needed to and Ilya’s posture eased immediately. He stepped closer, brushing his thumb along Shane’s knuckles, grounding and familiar. “I know,”

he murmured. “And I am scared too.” He met Shane’s eyes. “But you love me, yes?”

“Of course I do, more than anything” Shane said, without hesitation.

Ilya let a small, almost smug smile tug at his lips, as if Shane had just confessed the world’s greatest secret. “Good.” He said softly, leaning in, brushing Shane’s temple with his own.

“And I love you.” Then he planted a gentle kiss on Shane’s forehead for reassurance.

Shane exhaled slowly, letting the tight knot in his chest loosen, just a little. Kova nudged his leg, oblivious to the human tension, and Shane bent down to scratch behind his ears. Somehow, the small, warm weight of the dog always grounded him.

Ilya leaned in again, whispering against Shane’s shoulder, “Fear is part of love, yes? But we are more than fear. Always more.”

Shane nodded, closed his eyes briefly, letting the words sink in. His chest was still tight, but the tension in his shoulders finally started to ease and he let himself lean into Ilya, resting his forehead against his shoulder, and for a second, the world outside the backyard didn’t exist. When Ilya’s hand came up to tangle in Shane’s hair, his thumb brushing along his scalp in that slow, infuriatingly deliberate way he knew would make Shane melt, Shane knew somewhere deep down inside he would always be okay as long as he had Ilya by his side.

Later, everything settled into that quiet it only got at night — the kind where even the city noise felt far away. Shane sank deeper into the couch cushions, Ilya curled into his side without thinking about it, their legs tangled in a way that suggested this had happened a million times already. Their hands kept finding each other unintentionally— a brush, a squeeze, fingers hooking together and letting go.

Kova sprawled across their laps like he’d claimed them both, warm and heavy and snoring softly. Shane’s notebook lay forgotten on the floor, half-open, abandoned where it had slipped from his hand.

“Ilya?” Shane said quietly.

“Yes?”

“Thanks. For today. For not... getting mad,” he swallowed, “when I freak out.”

Ilya smiled, nudging his nose against Shane’s cheek. “You are welcome,” he said. “You need someone to keep you from being boring.”

Shane scoffed, but his chest did that stupid, warm thing that it only did for Ilya. He reached up and pushed Ilya’s hair back, his fingers lingering in his boyfriend’s curls. “I’m not boring.”

“You are,” Ilya said easily. “But you know I like your kind of boring.”

They sat like that for a moment and Shane stared at the far wall, his heart starting to pick up speed for no good reason. His mouth opened before his brain caught up.

“I just—” He stopped, then took a breath like he was getting ready to say something very important. “I want this. Like. Always.”

Ilya shifted slightly, his attention sharpening. “This?”

“Yeah,” Shane said too fast. “This. You. The couch. The dog. The arguing and then... not arguing.” His hand tightened unconsciously in Ilya’s shirt. “I want you to— to keep doing this with me. Forever.” He laughed, sharp and nervous. “Which sounds kinda insane when I say it out loud.”

Ilya didn’t interrupt him and that somehow made it worse.

“And I don’t mean like—” Shane rushed on, words tripping. “I mean, I *do* mean— not right now. Not pressure. Not—” He gestured vaguely. “I’m not proposing. I’m just— God.” He buried his face briefly against Kova’s fur, mortified. “Ignore me. I’m tired. I say dumb things when I’m tired.”

Ilya was very quiet for a long second. Then he reached out, steady and deliberate, and tipped Shane’s chin up so he had to look at him. “You are not dumb,” he said softly. “You are just... very bad at easing into things.”

Shane grimaced. “I warned you.”

Ilya smiled — it was small, but warm and real. “And for the record,” his thumb brushed along Shane’s jaw, “you did not scare me.”

Shane blinked. “I didn’t?”

“No.” Ilya leaned in, his forehead resting against Shane’s. “You surprised me. There is difference.”

Shane exhaled slowly, his heart still racing but lighter somehow. “Okay,” he muttered. “Good. Because I’m never saying that first part again.”

Ilya huffed a laugh. “We will see.”

They smiled at each other lovingly, their eyes sparkling with just how lucky they were to have this. Shane felt the soft warmth of Kova resting against his leg, and the steady presence of Ilya close enough that he could feel his pulse through the thin fabric of his shirt. This was what happiness looked like, he thought.

“I think he really likes us,” Ilya murmured, nodding at the dog, though his eyes never left Shane.

Shane let out a small laugh. “Oh, he definitely likes me, he’s just tolerating you.”

“Details,” Ilya said with a wink, sliding an arm lightly around Shane’s shoulders. “The important part is... we are together.”

Shane leaned into him, resting his head against Ilya’s chest for a moment. “Yeah,” he said quietly. “Together.”

Kova let out a contented sigh, his tail thumping lazily, as if he was confirming their little domestic victory. Shane’s fingers found Ilya’s, lacing through them without thought. And in that moment, Shane realized that chaos, unpredictability, and a small, muddy dog were exactly what he hadn’t known he needed.

Shane didn’t like leaving his house with Ilya when people *might* see them. He liked it even less when he knew they definitely would.

He hated hiding his relationship with Ilya. Every stolen glance, every quiet laugh, every small touch carried a weight Shane wasn’t supposed to acknowledge in public. But seeing his boyfriend like this — relaxed, carefree, his laughter soft and genuine as Kova spun around in endless circles — made Shane’s chest ache.

It wasn’t just that Ilya looked happy. It was that no one else could see it. No one could see that this flawless, infuriating, utterly magnetic man belonged to him, and him alone.

Especially not the hockey world, with its endless opinions, ready-made headlines, and rumors that could spiral in seconds. Shane could almost hear the whispers forming before they even existed: *Hollander caught with Rozanov! Hockey scandal! Rivals turned Lovers!* The thought tightened around his ribs, sharp and possessive.

He glanced at Ilya again, at the way sunlight caught the faint gold in his hair, the easy tilt of his shoulder as he laughed, and felt something stubborn and fierce bloom in his chest. He wanted the world to know, wanted to shove every headline aside and claim this moment — Ilya, Kova, quiet sunlight — for himself.

But he couldn’t. Not yet.

Shane’s chest tightened. The world outside was unpredictable. People were unpredictable.

And fucking cruel sometimes.

Kova stopped suddenly to sniff a patch of grass near the curb. Shane froze. He counted: the distance to the street, the speed of passing cars, the leash length, Kova’s focus on squirrel smells, the social exposure.

Ilya crouched beside him, whispering softly in Russian. Shane didn’t understand every word, but he understood the *tone*. It was very Ilya. Calm, gentle and encouraging. Trustworthy. Shane’s pulse slowed slightly.

“You are nervous again,” Ilya said, looking up, brushing a hand over Shane’s wrist.

“No. I’m... just cautious,” Shane replied, his teeth clenched and his eyes scanning the street.

“Same thing,” Ilya said, smiling in typical Ilya fashion. “Look at him.” He gestured at Kova, who was now spinning happily in a small circle, clearly unaware of human anxiety. “Happy dog.”

Shane exhaled. “Yes. Happy dog.”

But, as so often happened, the media was already there.

Two photographers leaned against a lamppost, cameras poised, discreet flashes punctuating the golden afternoon. Shane’s eyes flicked to them, counting lenses, angles, reflected sunlight — cataloging risks like a defensive reflex: the angle that would catch Ilya’s face, the distance from Kova to the closest lens, the way a single misstep could become tomorrow’s headline.

He barely noticed Ilya step closer until his hand brushed Shane’s, his thumb pressing lightly into his palm. Shane blinked, his heartbeat spiking in a way that had nothing to do with the cameras. He tried to focus on Kova, who had decided that rolling in a patch of dirt was the perfect use of his time, but all Shane could feel was the small, steady pressure of Ilya’s thumb, the warmth of him so close, and the ache of knowing the world shouldn’t see this.

And yet, even with the lenses pointed at them, Shane felt a tiny, reckless spark of defiance: this — the small intimacy, the touch, the quiet laugh only Kova seemed to understand — was *his*.

“You’re not helping, Ilya,” Shane muttered under his breath.

“I am helping,” Ilya said softly. “Control chaos.”

Shane wanted to argue. He wanted to calculate a 20-step mitigation plan. He wanted to panic. And somehow, none of that mattered as much because Ilya was here, calm, grounding, warm.

Shane exhaled. “Fuck. How do you always do this? You make everything seem... easier.”

Ilya smiled, brushing mud off Kova’s ear. “Yes. That is my superpower.”

They reached the small park across the street. Of course, Kova ran ahead, sniffing, chasing, rolling in the grass, oblivious. Shane followed, keeping careful track. Ilya’s hand brushed his briefly as they passed a bench. Shane did not move it. Did not pull away.

It felt good to be claimed by Ilya in these small ways in public, even if it freaked him out, too. The brush of Ilya’s hand along his back as they walked, the way he slid slightly closer on the bench so Shane was partially pressed against him, the tiny pressure of his fingers brushing Shane’s when they adjusted Kova’s leash — all of it whispered ownership without words.

And Shane’s chest tightened every time. Part of him panicked at how obvious it was, how unguarded he felt under Ilya’s quiet insistence. Yet another part of him — much louder in the

background — thrived on it. It was warm, grounding, and thrilling all at once. Being noticed like this, acknowledged like this, in a world that constantly demanded he be careful and measured, felt like... freedom.

And then the freedom broke.

Movement at the edge of the park caught Shane's eye first. Two reporters had been following them and were creeping closer, their cameras raised, their voices carrying over the soft shuffle of Kova's paws.

"Mr. Hollander! Mr. Rozanov! Can we ask you about your... relationship?" One shouted, stepping forward.

Shane froze, the leash immediately tightening in his grip, Kova's sniffing suddenly irrelevant. "No. No, no, no," he muttered, panic threading through his voice. "Ilya, we can't—Fuck! This is too much—"

Ilya's calm cracked just enough to show a flash of fire. He stepped closer to Shane, his hand brushing his, his thumb pressing against Shane's palm.

"Shit! What are we—" Shane tried to repeat, his voice rising, sounding almost shrill.

"Don't ignore them," Ilya said, his teeth barely showing, his jaw tight. "Don't let them imply things about Kova or about us. We handle this *our way*." His eyes, sharp and furious, flicked to the reporters. "Step back, Hollander."

Shane's stomach knotted, every instinct was screaming to run, to hide, to curl up on the grass.

The reporters hesitated at the edge of Ilya's stance, the cameras still up, but the air had shifted. Shane exhaled shakily, gripping the leash a little tighter, trying to keep Kova from noticing the tension, trying to keep himself from melting entirely under Ilya's controlled fury.

The reporters didn't back off. "Mr. Hollander! Are you and Mr. Rozanov a couple?" one yelled, camera clicking rapidly. Another chimed in, "Is Kova a gift from Mr. Rozanov? Are you two living together?"

Shane's stomach lurched. "No! We're not—stop—what?!" He yanked the leash instinctively, and Kova barked, clearly confused.

Ilya stepped forward, moving to shield Shane without breaking stride. One hand hovered near Shane's back, almost like a protective wall, the other rested lightly on Kova's head.

"Enough," he said, his voice low but sharp, ice under calm. "Step back. You're making assumptions. Stop."

Shane's brain scrambled. *Oh god, oh god, oh god*, he thought, his knees suddenly too weak. "Ilya, maybe we — maybe we can just—"

"No," Ilya snapped, a sharp edge that made Shane's chest jump. His thumb brushed Shane's hand, grounding, but the rest of him was all fire. "We do not run from questions. We do not

let them manipulate this. You stay with me, and Kova stays safe. Okay?”

Shane swallowed hard, blinking. “Yes. Yeah, of course.”

The reporters edged closer anyway, their cameras snapping relentlessly. Shane felt sweat prickling at his hairline, his fingers tightening on Kova’s leash as his mind scrambled for a plan. “Ilya,” he hissed, his voice tight, “they’re not leaving — what do we do?”

Ilya leaned closer, voice lower, a teasing bite now layered with warning. “Now we move. Step by step. You follow me, baby.”

Shane’s chest fluttered — part fear, part *oh god he said baby* — but he nodded, trusting Ilya knew what he was doing. Instead of letting the panic take over even more, he focused on the warmth of Ilya’s hand brushing his, the soft weight of Kova nudging his leg, and the rhythm of their steps together.

With Ilya leading, they moved forward, slow but deliberate, a small wall of calm cutting through Shane’s spiraling panic. The reporters still shouted questions and clicks followed them, but Shane found himself tuning it out, just enough to notice that Ilya’s hand never left his, never wavered, and Kova — oblivious to chaos — trotted proudly between them.

Shane let out a shaky laugh, half in relief, half in disbelief. “God, I hate this,” he muttered.

Ilya’s grin touched his lips. “And yet, here you are. Still holding the leash like a brave man.”

Shane groaned, muttering under his breath: “Brave? More like terrified with muddy shoes and a paparazzi escort.”

Ilya chuckled softly.

They collapsed onto the grass after a few more laps around the park, finally putting enough distance between themselves and the lingering paparazzi to breathe without thinking about flashing cameras. Kova zigzagged through the patch of green on a long leash, sniffing, rolling, and occasionally spinning in circles like he owned the place, completely unbothered by the world.

Ilya sat next to Shane, bent forward with his hands on his knees, his breath coming fast and uneven. His hair was a mess, small curls had fallen loose from wherever he’d tried to tame them and sweat darkened the collar of his shirt. He laughed once, short and breathless, like he couldn’t quite believe they’d made it.

Shane watched him without really meaning to, his own chest still humming from adrenaline.

God, he wanted to marry that man.

Not in a vague, someday, abstract way but in a painfully specific, terrifyingly concrete one. Shane could suddenly see it too clearly: shared mornings that started too early, Ilya stealing his coffee mug and pretending it was an accident, Kova wedged between them like he’d always been there. He wanted arguments that ended on the couch or in the bed. He wanted

seasons and schedules and the long drives between Montreal and Ottawa to be something they planned around, not something that pulled them apart.

And God, he hated that he couldn't do it right then and there.

Hated that his brain immediately followed the thought with a list of reasons why it was impractical, premature, risky. *Media. Hockey. Timing. Russia.* Everything that had always told him to slow down, to wait, to be careful. He wanted to be brave enough to say it out loud without softening it this time, without wrapping it in jokes or qualifiers or logic.

But he wasn't there yet.

So instead — because this was safer, because it was still true, because it didn't require him to leap off the cliff — he swallowed and said, quietly, “you know how much I love you?”

Ilya blinked. “That was not a question.”

Shane frowned slightly. “No, it was. I think.”

Ilya's smile was already amused. “Are you asking if I know, or are you telling me?”

“I'm just checking,” Shane said, earnest enough to make it worse. “For accuracy.”

Ilya laughed softly and leaned in, resting his forehead against Shane's temple. “Yes,” he said. “I know.”

Shane nodded, relief softening his features. “Good. Because sometimes I feel like I don't say it often enough.”

“Oh, you say it constantly,” Ilya replied. “You just don't use words.” A sly smile was spreading on his face.

Right then, Kova — who had clearly decided he was done with the zooming — flopped down beside them and rolled onto his back, paws in the air, entirely pleased with himself.

Shane let out a quiet laugh. “See?” he said. “Even he knows.”

Ilya's laughter followed, warm and close. He bumped his shoulder lightly against Shane's. “*Hard* not to notice, yes?” he said, and Shane couldn't help but grin — his attention catching on the soft, unmistakably Russian *h* in the word rather than the innuendo. It was such a small thing, but he loved it anyway, the way Ilya never quite lost the edges of his accent, no matter how long he'd been away from Russia.

His eyes flicked across the clearing. There were no flashes, no sneaky lenses, no reporters. Just a few joggers far away, who wouldn't care about them.

So he leaned in and their lips met in a slow, deliberate kiss. Shane's hands found Ilya's waist while his hands started wandering, the world outside chaotic but muted instantly. Their fingers intertwined, their bodies pressed together lightly but intentionally, Shane felt it — Ilya

claiming him, gently, completely, in a way that needed no words and in a way that only he could.

When they pulled back, the warmth lingered. Shane pressed his forehead against Ilya's, counting nothing, cataloging nothing. And for once, he didn't feel like he had to.

The Ilya-effect.

Kova yipped softly, his tail now wagging like a metronome, and Shane laughed, breathless. Ilya laughed quietly in response, brushing a hand across Shane's arm.

“Ты мой,” Ilya whispered. “And I am yours. Always.”

Shane exhaled slowly, letting himself believe it. Kova sprawled triumphantly at their feet. Shane wasn't delusional. He knew that the world remained messy, unpredictable and loud — but here, right now, he was grounded. He was safe.

And he was claimed.

By Ilya.

Chapter 5: Could I ever believe such a perfect surprise?

Chapter Notes

This is the last chapter, it's a bit longer but I still felt like keeping it all together. I really hope you enjoy! Thank you so much for reading! I didn't have a beta for this, so forgive me if there are still any typos left :) I tried my best.

Shane woke to the vibration of his phone skittering against the nightstand, the sound too sharp in the quiet of the room. Even before he looked, his chest sank.

Hayden.

Shane didn't need to open the message to feel the tension. His thumb hesitated over the screen, dreading what he already feared was coming. After the encounter at the park — after seeing how many pictures the paparazzi had probably taken of them — it had been only a matter of time.

"Shane... you need to see this. Now." The message read and beneath it was a link.

Shane swallowed hard and tapped it. The page loaded to a local news outlet — and the first image made his stomach drop.

It was the park. The familiar path, the one crooked lamppost. And there they were: him, Ilya, and Kova. The photo had been snapped from a distance, but the angle was unmistakable. Shane had been caught mid-step, Ilya beside him, smiling softly at him, Kova bounding ahead.

Shane scrolled. There was another image and another. Each one froze ordinary moments he had wished could stay private forever, but were now exposed on a public page. Shane had feared this exact moment, and the inevitability of it made his chest tighten.

One photo caught Shane's hand brushing Ilya's, another froze the faint brush of a kiss against Shane's temple. *He knew this would happen.* He had known the risk — every time they went out, every time they got careless, he'd warned himself. And now... here it was.

Of course, the comments were already piling up.

"NO WAY. Tell me this is fake."

"I've BEEN saying something was off with them."

"WTF? Look at his hand. That's not accidental."

“Y’all are reaching. Friends touch each other, relax.”

“Why does he look so comfortable though 🙄”

“PR stunt. Calling it now.”

“Am I the only one freaking out???”

“They’ve always had tension, don’t lie.”

“This is exactly how rumors start 😬”

“Someone zoomed in and enhanced it—just saying.”

“If this is real...like wtf”

“Adopted the dog together but sure, just ‘friends.’”

There were rumors, assumptions, speculations. Shane’s chest tightened, sweat prickling at his hairline. His fingers hovered over the screen, trembling.

No. No, no, no.

He slammed the phone down and ran a hand through his hair. *He should have known better. He should have been smarter. He should have kept them hidden.*

Careful not to wake Ilya, Shane swung his legs over the side of the bed. Ilya stirred softly, mumbling in his sleep, and Shane froze for a heartbeat before slipping quietly toward the door. He crept down the hall, then closed himself in the bathroom, the small room suddenly feeling like a safe bubble.

He leaned against the wall, phone trembling slightly in his hands, and read the second message from Hayden:

“I’m here for you, buddy. Whatever you need.”

A soft knock came at the bathroom door before Shane could even process everything, quiet but insistent.

“Shane?” Ilya’s voice was cautious, gentle, still thick with sleep.

Shane pressed his back against the cool tile, the phone trembling in his hand. He didn’t answer at first. He couldn’t. The photos. The paparazzi. The way their private moments — their life — were suddenly exposed. He hated that he had to hide.

The knock came again, firmer this time. Shane ran a hand through his hair, his heart pounding. *He hated this. He hated everything.*

“I... Fuck, Ilya,” he said finally, his voice tight. “You... you need to see this.”

There was a pause on the other side. “What? Shane, what the fuck happened?”

Shane took a shaky breath and opened the door just enough to slip out, holding the phone toward Ilya. The light from the screen cast harsh shadows on his face.

“Look,” he said, his voice low but sharp.

Ilya’s eyes followed the screen, scanning the photos. The park. The path. The crooked lamppost. Shane and Ilya frozen mid-step, Kova bounding ahead. Private moments now captured and exposed for anyone to see.

Shane felt like there was a fist squeezing his chest, keeping him from breathing properly, frustration coiling in his stomach.

Eventually, he couldn’t hold it in anymore, so he snapped. “Fuck! I’m so sick of this!” he shouted, his voice cracking with anger. “I’m sick of hiding! Of pretending like we’re nothing! We can’t go anywhere without worrying someone’s watching us, without people stealing our moments! I’m so fucking tired, Ilya! I’m so tired of this secrecy!”

Ilya flinched, startled. “Shane—”

“No! Don’t. Don’t even try to calm me down right now!” Shane’s voice shook with anger and exhaustion. “I’m not angry at you! I’m angry at all of it! At the paparazzi, at these pictures, at having to pretend like we’re not together!”

Ilya’s brow furrowed as he scrolled through the photos. “They’re just pictures. It’s not—”

“Just pictures?” Shane’s voice cracked, a mix of panic and anger. “Just pictures? *They’re pictures of us! And everyone will have opinions, Ilya! Fucking everyone!*” He ran a hand through his hair again, pacing. “I knew this would happen! I warned myself! And now — now—”

Ilya’s shoulders tensed. “Shane, stop yelling. You’re panicking. We’ll figure this out, okay?”

Shane’s head whipped around, his eyes blazing. “Fuck, Ilya! This is exactly what I was scared of! Every time something like this happens, I lose control. My life gets blown apart. And you... you just stand acting there like it’s nothing!”

Ilya’s hands flexed at his sides, his voice quiet but firm. “I *am* not standing there like it’s nothing. I’m trying to be rational because I know panicking won’t fix anything.”

Shane swallowed, his heart racing, and anger giving way to guilt that only fed the panic. “It feels like you don’t even see it! That you don’t see *me*! You see the pictures, the cameras, the chaos, but not me! You don’t see *how much this terrifies me!*”

Ilya’s chest rose and fell rapidly. He stepped closer, closing the distance Shane had created, his voice trembling. “Shane... I see you. I see how much you care, how much you feel, and yes, I see that it scares you — but I also see us. Kova. Me. You. We’re real, Shane. Not some headline. Not some stupid comment thread.”

Shane's chest heaved. He wanted to throw himself at Ilya, to scream and cry and make the fear stop, but his body felt heavy, caught somewhere between fury and despair.

"I don't want the world to see this," Shane whispered, his voice breaking, "because it's *mine*. You're mine. Kova's mine. And if everyone knows... everything changes."

Ilya exhaled sharply, his jaw tight and his voice low but deliberate. "Shane... nothing changes what we are. Not pictures, not comments, not anyone else's opinion. You think I want the world watching us like this? I don't. But I won't let you fall apart alone, either. You understand?" Ilya's chest rose and fell rapidly.

"I can't — seeing the world looking at you like they own you — like they own me, like we don't even get a choice!" Shane stammered.

Ilya's voice dropped, low and dangerous. "You think I don't care about that too? You think *I'm fine*? You think I like feeling exposed while you... panic like this?" He stepped forward, closing the space between them. "I'm not fine, Shane, and you are not either, but here's the thing — you are *mine*, Kova's mine, and I am yours, and no picture, no headline, no fucker on the internet can take that from us!"

Shane's breath hitched, his pulse spiking. "I... I just..." He looked at Ilya with wide eyes, trembling with frustration and... something hotter. "I hate losing control. And I hate feeling like I can't protect you. And I hate that it fucking makes me want you even more."

Ilya's pupils darkened immediately at Shane's words, his chest pressing forward, his hands brushing Shane's sides. "Oh, this yelling makes you hot? You want me now, do you?" His voice was a rough, low growl, teasing but edged with fire. "Is this turning you on, Hollander?"

Shane's stomach twisted, heat pooling low. He lunged forward, pressing Ilya against the wall, his hands gripping the curve of his waist, pulling him close. "Fuck, I can't even—" He stopped, his lips crashing into Ilya's, messy, desperate, like they'd both been holding in weeks of tension.

Ilya didn't hold back either. He cupped Shane's face, his fingers tangling in his hair, letting the kiss deepen, teeth grazing, tongues sliding, a perfect mix of anger and need. Shane's hands roamed, pressing into every curve he could reach, needing, claiming, releasing all the panic and fear that had been coiling in his chest.

"Ilya... I fucking need you," he breathed against his boyfriend's lips, his voice raw and ragged.

"You have me," Ilya growled, his voice thick with desire and frustration. "All of me."

Shane shuddered against him, his chest pressing into Ilya's, his teeth grazing his jaw. "God, I hate everything else right now," he muttered, his voice rough, "but I love you so fucking much."

Ilya smirked against his temple, low and possessive. “I know. And I love you. Even when you’re losing it, even when the world is crazy and you’re screaming — I’ve got you, Hollander.”

“I’m so scared,” Shane admitted. “I don’t know how to do this publicly. I don’t know how to protect us.”

Ilya brushed his thumb along Shane’s jaw, slow, steady. “We will figure it out. We set boundaries. We screw up. We argue. We yell.” A small smile tugged at his mouth. “Apparently, makes you hot.”

Shane let out a weak, breathless laugh.

“I like it.” Ilya kissed his temple. “I’d rather you explode at me than implode alone.”

Kova padded closer, tail thumping uncertainly, and wedged himself between their legs like he was inserting himself into the argument. Shane snorted and crouched, burying his face in the dog’s fur.

“Oh, man,” Shane muttered. “Even he thinks we’re dramatic.”

Ilya drove the car down the winding road to Shane’s cottage, his hands steady on the wheel. Shane sat in the passenger seat with Kova curled up on his lap, gently stroking the dog’s fur. The ride was mostly quiet, broken only by Kova whining softly at the passing trees or birds, his tail wagging in small bursts of excitement.

The sun hung low over the lake, casting long golden reflections across the windshield. Ilya stole glances at Shane through the rearview mirror — at the way his fingers moved carefully over Kova’s fur, the subtle tension in his shoulders, the way his jaw tightened every so often.

Feeling the tight energy radiating from him, Ilya reached over, letting his hand brush over Shane’s warm arm.

By the time they arrived at the cottage, the lake spread out before them, a perfect mirror of pink and orange streaks from the sunset. Shane carefully lifted Kova, counting his steps to the dock in his mind, then leaned back against the car seat with a long sigh. Ilya stepped out, following him, hand brushing Shane’s back in a quiet, intimate gesture as they paused to take in the view.

“You are... careful,” Ilya teased. “But here, no one can see us, yes?”

Shane’s chest tightened, but he nodded. “Yeah, it is... safer here.”

Inside, the cottage smelled faintly of wood smoke and lake water, a comforting mix that immediately made Shane exhale a little, even if his mind was still tangled in the chaos of the past few days.

Kova, sensing new territory, wasted no time. He darted from corner to corner, sniffing every surface with his nose pressed flat against the furniture. He leapt onto the couch, landing with a little thump, then back down again, squishing his nose against the glass door that led to the backyard and the lake, his tail wagging furiously as though he'd just discovered a whole new world.

Shane groaned, running a hand over his face. "This dog is going to destroy everything in here."

Ilya laughed, shaking his head. He scooped Kova up mid-bounce, holding him against his chest to keep him from knocking over a lamp precariously perched on the side table. "He's excited, Shane. Give him break — he's just happy to be here."

Kova wriggled happily in Ilya's arms, letting out a little bark of protest at being contained, before resting his chin on Ilya's shoulder and giving him a wet, affectionate lick.

"See?" Ilya whispered as he set Kova down gently. "Chaos, yes, but manageable."

Shane relaxed against the counter, finally exhaling. "*You... make chaos... easier,*" he admitted.

Ilya smiled, brushing a thumb along Shane's knuckles. "Of course. You are mine, yes?"

Shane froze for a moment, heat rising in his ears. "You... always say that."

"Because it is true," Ilya replied, leaning closer, pressing a gentle kiss to Shane's temple. Shane's chest tightened, but the tension slowly melted under Ilya's hands, the warmth of his body, and Kova's oblivious mischief.

They settled in the living room, Kova curling up between them on a soft blanket. Shane still kept his notebook nearby, but it remained unopened. Ilya pressed close, shoulder to shoulder, fingers brushing, then gently intertwining.

Ilya whispered softly in Russian, words Shane didn't need to understand fully to feel their meaning: "*trust me.*"

Shane's pulse quickened, then slowed. "I... am trying," he whispered.

"Good," Ilya said, pressing a soft kiss to Shane's cheek. "Is enough."

Kova yipped suddenly, attempting to chase his tail, and ended up flopping across Shane's lap, sending him nearly tumbling sideways.

"You are very... lucky," Ilya said, grinning. "Even with chaos like this."

"I... think I am," Shane admitted, his voice low, warm.

As the evening stretched, they moved to the dock. The lake reflected the moonlight, and the air smelled crisp and clean. Ilya pulled Shane close, wrapping an arm around his waist, and

Shane leaned in instinctively. Their fingers intertwined, and Ilya pressed his forehead against Shane's.

Kova splashed in the shallow water, barking happily. Shane laughed, finally letting go of some of his meticulous control. He leaned further into Ilya, trusting him completely to steady both him and Kova.

"You know," Ilya said softly in that low, teasing tone that always made Shane's chest tighten, "you are my..." He paused, glancing at Shane with a small smirk.

Shane raised an eyebrow, suspicious. "Your what?"

"Мой," Ilya said clearly, rolling the word around his tongue. "...мой человек."

Shane had picked up a few Russian words over the past few years — little fragments, really, mostly from Ilya's casual mutterings, the way he said things when he was happy, teasing, or giving instructions. At first, Shane had repeated them silently, like secret codes, trying to mimic the sounds without stumbling. But over time, he'd started to recognize patterns, meanings, and context. Enough that when Ilya slipped the words "мой человек" into the quiet evening, Shane understood.

He froze. His head tilted slightly, processing the Russian. His pulse stuttered when he realized what Ilya had just said. "Your... person?" he asked, voice unsteady, a mixture of surprise and something far warmer.

Ilya's grin widened. "Yes. *My man*. You are mine. Only mine." He reached out, his fingers brushing against Shane's hand. The touch was light, almost casual, but Shane felt it like a spark.

Shane swallowed, words catching in his throat. "I... yeah," he said finally, his voice quieter than he intended. "I'm yours."

Ilya leaned closer, just slightly, enough that Shane could smell the faint citrus of his shampoo and the sun-warmed scent of him. "Good," Ilya murmured, resting his hand lightly over Shane's. "Потому что я заявляю о своих правах на тебя, Shane Hollander."

"Because I claim you, Shane Hollander."

Shane's breath hitched, and he found himself leaning in without thinking, letting Ilya's hand envelop his.

"You do know," Shane whispered, "that saying it in Russian makes it way more dangerous."

Ilya laughed softly, low and musical. "Da. That is why I say it here, where only lake and dog can witness." He brushed his thumb across the back of Shane's hand, holding the touch just long enough to make Shane's heart beat too fast.

Shane exhaled slowly, leaning into the warmth and closeness, letting the words sink in. "You're so fucking ridiculous," he muttered, but the grin on his face betrayed him.

The fire in the small stone fireplace crackled softly, casting flickering shadows across the cozy living room of Shane's cottage. Kova had fallen asleep at their feet, sprawled out with one paw dangling over the edge of the rug, snoring lightly. Shane and Ilya sat close together on the couch, blankets draped over their laps, the soft scent of lake air drifting through the open window.

Ilya shifted slightly, pressing his shoulder more firmly against Shane's. Shane let out a small sigh, leaning into the warmth and resting his head against Ilya's chest. The steady beat of Ilya's heart was oddly grounding, like an anchor in the middle of the chaos that often seemed to surround them.

"You are very pretty like this," Ilya murmured, brushing a gentle hand through Shane's hair.

Shane's ears flushed pink at the compliment, and he pressed a hand over Ilya's, holding it against his cheek. "I... like being here with you," Shane admitted quietly. "It feels safe."

Ilya's lips curved into a soft, teasing smile. "Safe... yes." He pressed a quick, soft kiss to Shane's forehead, then his temple, lingering just enough to make Shane shiver.

Shane tilted his head up slightly, and Ilya leaned down. Their lips met in a slow, gentle kiss that deepened slightly, careful, warm, and tender. Shane's hands threaded into Ilya's hair, gripping softly, while Ilya wrapped his arms around him, drawing him closer, claiming him gently without words.

In the beginning, their kisses had been urgent, desperate, almost reflexive — quick brushes of lips in hallways, hurried moments in dark hotel room corners, driven by a mix of need and fear of discovery. They were purely physical first, intense, hands gripping, bodies pressing together as if they could make up for all the time they'd spent apart.

Over the years, it had changed. The urgency had softened, replaced by an ease that came from knowing the other person would show up, would be there. Their kisses had grown slower, more deliberate. Shane could rest his hand on Ilya's chest and feel the steady beat beneath it while their lips met. Ilya could brush fingers through Shane's hair, tilt his head just so, and linger, letting Shane set the pace.

What had once been purely physical now carried layers of emotion — trust, comfort, love, the quiet joy of being seen without pretense. Shane no longer counted the seconds until the kiss ended, instead, he lost himself in the warmth, the softness, the unspoken "I'm yours" that no words could really capture. Ilya's kisses, once strictly physical, had become a conversation over time — slow, tender, teasing, full of laughter and whispers, punctuated by the occasional spark of old fire that reminded them how far they'd come.

When they parted, Shane's eyes were wide, his chest rising and falling, his cheeks flushed. Ilya rested his forehead against Shane's, fingers still tangled in his hair.

"Ilya..." Shane breathed, voice low and shaky.

“I love you,” Ilya said softly in Russian: *“Я люблю тебя.”*

Shane leaned forward and kissed Ilya again, this time pressing even closer, his hands exploring the safe warmth of Ilya’s chest and shoulders, feeling the steady rhythm of his heartbeat beneath his palms.

Ilya chuckled softly against Shane’s lips. “You swoon too easily, Hollander,” he teased, nuzzling Shane’s neck. Shane gasped softly, wrapping his arms around Ilya’s waist, pressing close.

“Shut up, Rozanov,” Shane murmured, his voice muffled against Ilya’s shoulder, but his laugh betrayed him. *He loved it.* He loved every teasing word, every gentle kiss, every touch that pressed Ilya closer.

Ilya brushed a hand down Shane’s back, pulling him fully into his lap, so Shane was curled against him, his knees tucked, his arms wrapped around Ilya. Their lips met again, soft and lingering, and Shane pressed against him, letting himself melt completely into Ilya’s warmth.

“Fuck. I could stay like this forever,” Shane whispered, resting his forehead against Ilya’s chest.

“And we will,” Ilya replied softly, kissing the top of Shane’s head. “Always.”

Kova stirred once, whining softly, then rolled over contentedly, his tail thumping against the couch. Shane laughed quietly, pressing another kiss to Ilya’s collarbone. Ilya caught Shane’s lips again, holding him close, murmuring little words in Russian that Shane didn’t fully understand — and didn’t need to.

Kova, of course, had a knack for finding trouble even — or especially — at the cottage. Sometimes it was as small as a paw print across the floorboards, other times, it was nearly catastrophic, like when he tried to chase a squirrel across the deck and ended up tipping over a flowerpot. But Ilya noticed something that Shane hadn’t immediately — Kova wasn’t just chaos, he was more like a bridge.

Every time Kova darted between them, tugged at his leash, or demanded attention, Shane and Ilya had to move together. They had to coordinate — one steadying the dog, one preventing him from knocking something over, one comforting the other after a startled yelp. And each tiny misadventure was a reminder that they weren’t facing the world alone.

Like tonight, after a playful tumble with Kova, Shane had nearly toppled backward off the dock. Ilya caught him instantly, wrapping a protective arm around his waist. Shane’s hands pressed against Ilya’s chest, and for a heartbeat, the world — the paparazzi, the chaos, the anxious calculations — vanished. Kova, oblivious, barked once and rolled over at their feet, his tail thumping.

Shane let out a quiet, almost reluctant laugh, exhaling fully for the first time all day. “I guess... he’s... he’s good for me,” he said, running a hand over Kova’s fur without really thinking.

Ilya’s lips twitched in a smile as he leaned closer, brushing a stray lock of Shane’s hair back. “He is good for both of us,” he said softly. “Teaches patience, coordination... and how to— how to lean on each other.”

Shane blinked, feeling a warmth settle in his chest. It wasn’t just Kova’s energy — it was the way Ilya had instinctively steadied him, the way their hands brushed together so naturally, the way even chaos somehow became... something shared, something safe.

“You’re right,” Shane murmured, tilting slightly into Ilya. “I... I didn’t really let myself notice before, but... he really does.” His voice was quiet, careful, but his fingers lingered on Ilya’s arm.

Ilya leaned down and pressed a quick, deliberate kiss to the top of Shane’s head, warm and grounding in a way that made Shane’s chest tighten. “Da,” he said softly, his voice low but firm, with that tiny smirk tugging at his lips.

Shane’s chest tightened — fluttering, stuttering, the way it always did around Ilya — and he realized it wasn’t just the dog who was important. Kova had a way of pushing them even closer together, forcing them into the small, careful closeness that made everything else feel... softer. Messy, yes. Loud, yes. Chaotic, definitely. But alive. And real. And somehow, Shane thought, this little bundle of fur had made their little world — him, Ilya, Kova — feel like a family, even if the world outside didn’t know it yet.

The cottage was quiet that evening in the way Shane loved most — not silent, just settled and calm with no real room for intrusive thoughts. He was in the kitchen rinsing out a mug when he noticed it. The lights were dimmer than they should’ve been.

“Ilya?” he called, frowning slightly. “Did the power—?”

“Hollander, come here,” Ilya said from the living room.

Understandably suspicious, Shane set the mug down and followed the sound of his voice. He rounded the corner — and stopped dead in his tracks.

Candles.

Not a few. And not decorative. *No, this was intentional.*

They lined the windowsills, clustered on the mantel, dotted the small coffee table and the floor in a careful path that led toward the center of the large living room. The air smelled faintly like wax and pine and the lake breeze drifting in through a cracked window.

Shane's first thought, absurdly, was *what a fucking fire hazard*.

His second was much louder. "What are you doing?" he asked, his voice already unsteady.

Ilya stood in the middle of the room, his hands clasped in front of him like he didn't know what to do with them. He looked... nervous. Not frantic. Not panicked. Just very, very serious.

"I have been trying to do this for three days," Ilya said, exhaling a breath that sounded like relief now that Shane had finally noticed. "Kova keeps stealing things. And you are usually very observant. So it is stressful."

Shane laughed weakly. "Ilya?"

Ilya stepped closer, stopping just short of him. "Shane," he said, equally quiet. He glanced around once, like he was grounding himself in the room, then looked back at him. "Sit. Please."

Shane obeyed without arguing, lowering himself onto the couch. His heart was pounding so hard he could feel it in his throat.

Ilya took a breath. Then another.

Then, very deliberately, he knelt in front of Shane, so they were both on the same height level.

"Oh," Shane whispered, helpless but excited. "Oh—" it was finally dawning on him.

Ilya huffed out a shaky laugh. "Yes. That reaction is correct."

He reached into his pocket, his fingers fumbling just slightly before he stilled them. When he looked up again, his eyes were bright and steady and completely locked on Shane.

"I am not very good at speeches," Ilya said. "So I will not pretend to be."

Shane nodded, already crying. "Okay."

"I know you worry," Ilya continued softly. "About timing. About consequences. About whether the ground will still be there if you step forward." He swallowed. "And I know I am... not careful in same way."

"That's one way to put it," Shane managed, laughing through his tears.

Ilya smiled, fond. "But I have never been unsure about you. Not once. Even when we fight. Even when you spiral."

He opened the small box.

Inside was a simple ring. Nothing flashy, no oversized stones or glittering gold. Just a delicate band of polished silver, smooth and unadorned, catching the candle light in quiet

glints. It was perfect, like it had been made for them, and only them.

“I choose you, Hollander,” Ilya said. “Every version of you. The anxious one. The quiet one. The one who counts everything.” His voice dipped. “I want mornings with you, good and bad days, with chaos, and the dog between us forever. I want to come home to you, always. Я хочу построить свою жизнь с тобой.”

“I want to build a life with you.”

Shane covered his mouth, his shoulders shaking.

“So,” Ilya said, breath hitching just a little now, “Shane Hollander... will you marry me?”

For a second, Shane couldn’t speak.

This was it. The thing he’d wanted so badly he’d been afraid to say it out loud. The future he’d pictured and immediately dismantled in his head a thousand times.

And here it was anyway.

“Yes,” he choked. “Yes. Oh my God, yes.”

Ilya laughed — a full, disbelieving sound — and rose just enough to slide the ring onto Shane’s finger, his hands trembling now that the hardest part was over.

Shane surged forward, wrapping his arms around him, nearly knocking them both over. “You’re fucking insane, Rozanov,” he said into Ilya’s shoulder. “You know that, right?”

Ilya kissed his temple. “Yes. But you love me.”

“I love you,” Shane said fiercely. “I love you so fucking much.”

Shane couldn’t stop looking at the ring on his finger. He kept staring at it like it might disappear if he blinked too long.

They ended up on the couch again without really deciding to — Shane half-collapsed into the cushions, Ilya following, their knees knocking, shoulders pressed together. Kova flopped dramatically at their feet, tail thudding against the rug like he was personally celebrating the engagement.

“You said yes,” Ilya said after a moment, sounding faintly stunned all over again.

Shane laughed quietly, “I did. In case you missed it. Pretty sure the lake heard me too.”

Ilya shook his head, smiling to himself. “I was prepared for many outcomes,” he admitted. “You saying yes was the best one. But I did not expect crying immediately.”

“Hey,” Shane said defensively, wiping at his face. “You got on one knee with candles. I’m not a robot.”

Ilya leaned over and kissed his temple, lingering. “Good,” he murmured. “Because I really did not want to marry robot.”

Shane snorted, then sobered slightly, his eyes drifting back to the window. The sky had gone fully dark now, stars pricking through, the lake reflecting everything back like a second, quieter world. After a beat, he exhaled. “You know it’s not going to be easy.”

Ilya nodded immediately. “Yes.”

“Wow. No hesitation,” Shane noted.

“No hesitation,” Ilya agreed. “The season starts in two weeks. I will be in Ottawa. You will be in Montreal. There will be travel. Schedules. Media.” He grimaced. “Too much media.”

Shane laughed softly. “Fucking understatement of the year.”

“I’m still going to worry, you know?” Shane said. “I’m still going to overthink. I’m going to ask you if you locked the door and then ask again two times.”

“I know,” Ilya said calmly. “You will also text me reminders I do not need.”

“Someone has to keep you alive.”

Ilya smiled. “See? Perfect marriage already.”

Shane glanced down at the ring again, thumb brushing over it. “Fuck, Ilya. We’re really doing this.”

“Yes, Shane,” Ilya said. “We are.”

Kova climbed halfway into Shane’s lap, pawing insistently at his chest like he was demanding attention. Shane laughed and scratched behind his ears.

“Well,” Shane said, “I guess we’re a family now.”

Ilya raised an eyebrow. “I thought we were already.”

Shane tilted his head. “Officially.”

Ilya considered this. “Then yes. We are family. You. Me.” He nodded at Kova. “This menace.” He leaned back, stretching his arm along the back of the couch behind Shane. “You know, Hollander, we will also argue,” he added thoughtfully. “You will panic. I will be stubborn. We will be bad at communicating sometimes.”

“Sometimes?” Shane echoed.

“Okay,” Ilya amended. “Probably often.”

Shane laughed, leaning into him. “But we’ll figure it out.”

“Yes,” Ilya said, like that was the simplest thing in the world. “Because now, we choose each other on purpose.”

That hit Shane square in the chest. He turned, pressing his forehead against Ilya’s. “I love you,” he said quietly. “Even when you steal my fucking mug. Even when you think off-leash is always the answer.”

Ilya smiled. “Oh, especially then.”

Then they kissed, and it was slow, unhurried, and so familiar.

When they finally pulled back, Shane rested his head on Ilya’s shoulder, letting the moment settle. “So,” he said after a while. “We should probably tell people eventually.”

“Yes,” Ilya agreed.

“Not tonight, though.”

“No. Not tonight.”

“Also,” Shane added, “you absolutely cannot tell anyone before I tell Hayden, or he will never let me live it down.”

Ilya laughed. “Deal.”

Kova huffed loudly, rolling onto his back and presenting his stomach like he, too, was part of the agreement.

Shane sighed contentedly, scratching him. “Look at us. Engaged. Fucking domestic.”

Ilya kissed the top of Shane’s head. “You wanted forever, Hollander,” he murmured. “This is how it starts.”

Shane closed his eyes. He knew the season would come. The noise would return. There would be games and headlines and days that felt too big to handle. None of that had changed.

But tonight, at the cottage — with candle wax pooled on the table, and the floor, the ring warm on his finger, and Ilya’s shoulder solid against his — Shane let himself believe something simple and terrifying and true. The world could take its shots. Schedules could stretch them thin and distance could test them.

But this — *this* — was what they kept.

And it would always be enough.

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