

and they called it puppy love

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by [viviano](#)

Summary

“I can bring her in, yes. As many times as necessary. I am very responsible.”

Shane gives him an odd look and double-checks his chart. “I will hold you to that, Mr Rozanov. It’s a commitment. She’ll be a handful.”

Ilya doesn’t flinch. “I have hands.”

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Shane thinks one of his clients is just very committed, and slightly hypochondriac, about the care of his dog. Ilya is running out of excuses to see the hot vet.

Notes

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

Despite what his occupation may entail, Shane would not own a pet.

He likes animals, don't get him wrong. Loves them, even. But he loves them in small, measured doses. Even if animals usually do not like him in response — probably because he's trying to inject them with a needle or they've just been conditioned to hate even the sight of the vet clinic. And, all in all, animals are gross. Even pets, which he deals with most commonly on a day to day basis, are extremely unhygienic. Slobber everywhere, contaminated food and surfaces, not to mention the bodily waste. He's seen enough vomiting cats to last him a lifetime.

Despite all of this, Shane's life has an unfortunate habit of contradicting him.

And in many cases, contradicting him very violently.

He's just in his office, writing out a prescription of meloxicam for a dog with arthritis, when he hears a sudden *slam* from down the hall, followed by a large commotion. Shane spins in his chair and gets up, peeking out of his office and down the corridor to the waiting room.

There, the receptionist, a lovely man named Kip, is trying to talk down a tall, broad-shouldered man between the tacky plastic chairs. He has dark blond hair, mussed by the wind and adrenaline.

In his arms is a dog.

Bundled in a leather jacket, it's a fairly large creature. Mud-caked, ribs faintly visible beneath its patchy fur and shivering quite aggressively in the stranger's arms, muzzle propped up against his shoulder.

"I found her on side of road," the man is saying to Kip, who has his hands up and is trying to calm him down. His accent is thick in his panic, but his voice is low and velvety. Shane comes fully out of his office. "Please, can you do something?"

Shane's crossing the hall-way before he's registered it. He pulls a pair of blue nitrile gloves out of his back pocket and snaps them on. "Kip," he calls, and both men's heads turn in unison. He gives a little nod. "I got it."

The man looks at him like Shane has just offered salvation. Relief flashes briefly across his face before it's buried beneath tension again. Up close, Shane can see the details: dirt on his boots, the tense coil of his arms, the way his grip tightens when the animal shifts. Territorial, almost. Dangerous in a very specific way.

"Here, Mr..."

"Rozanov," he finishes.

"Mr Rozanov, please bring her this way."

The man hesitates for half a second, then follows without argument. The waiting room buzz fades behind them as Shane pushes through the swinging door, the clinical smell of antiseptic snapping into place like a familiar shield. He gestures toward the steel exam table. “Set her down gently.”

The leather jacket comes off with visible reluctance. The dog whines when the warmth is stripped away, claws scrabbling weakly against the metal as she’s laid out. Shane notes the injuries immediately—abrasions along the flank, a limp favoring the rear leg, shallow but ugly laceration near the shoulder.

He catalogues the injuries. Shock, most likely. Hypothermia, definitely.

“She wouldn’t move,” the man says, voice rougher now. He’s standing too close, hands hovering uselessly in the air. “Cars kept passing. I thought—” He stops, jaw flexing. When he speaks next, it is dark and furiously clipped, “what kind of asshole hits dog with car?”

“Terrible ones.” Shane doesn’t look at him yet. He presses gently against her ribs, checking for swelling or tenderness or anything ragged under the surface. He takes out his penlight and checks her pupil sensitivity. Calm slides over him like a second skin. This is where he functions best.

“You did the right thing,” he says absently, then glances up. “Any idea how long she was out there?”

“Not long,” the man answers immediately, still hovering beside the table. “Couldn’t have been. She was still warm when I found her.”

Good. Shane nods once. “I’m going to need you to step back while I work.”

The man bristles—actually bristles—eyeing Shane up for a moment, but he does as asked, taking one step, then another, until his back hits the counter. His eyes never leave the dog. Shane registers the reaction without comment.

He reaches for a thermometer, then pauses. “Hey, Rose!” he calls over his shoulder. “Get me warm fluids, a crash kit, and notify Dr. Price that I may need radiographs.”

“On it,” Rose replies instantly from her office, followed by the slap of her crocs down the hall.

Shane finally looks up at the stranger. Their eyes meet.

The man’s are a startling blue, sharp and bright even through the exhaustion. There’s something coiled there—violence barely banked, adrenaline still humming under the skin. Shane feels, irrationally, like he’s just stepped into the path of something dangerous and alive.

“Did she have a collar?”

Mr Rozanov shakes his head. “I don’t know. She didn’t have a collar.”

Shane hums softly. “All right,” he says. “I’m Shane. She’s alive. That’s a good start.”

Mr Rozanov exhales like he's been holding his breath since the road. The dog stirs as Shane injects warmed saline, tail giving the faintest thump against the table. Ilya's head snaps up.

"She moved," he says, hope cracking through his voice.

"Yes," Shane replies, unable to stop the corner of his mouth from lifting. "She did."

Against all his better judgment—against everything he claims to believe—Shane feels the familiar shift. The pull. The inevitable contradiction settling in. His life, it seems, has kicked the door down yet again.

The dog reaches out and gives Shane's dark green scrubs a tentative sniff. He reaches with his free hand and pats her flank, his fingers warm against her cold mud-slick fur. Poor thing.

Rose makes a similar remark as she comes in. "Oh, what a sweet thing," she coos, offering out Shane's equipment to him and slinging her hair up. She crouches by the dog's head and cards her hands through her thick neck fur. "Siberian husky, I think. Maybe six months old?"

"Closer to a year, I think," says Shane. "She's just small."

He straightens and moves with practiced efficiency. A thermometer next—low, but climbing with the warmed fluids. He adjusts the rate on the IV pump, then gently palpates the injured shoulder again, watching her face for signs of pain. She flinches, barely, and Shane exhales through his nose.

"Soft tissue trauma," he says aloud, for both Rose's benefit, and Mr Rozanov's, who is still standing at the edge of the table like a helicopter parent. "Possibly a hairline fracture, but she's stable enough to wait on X-rays." He reaches for a towel from the warmer and drapes it over her, tucking it in like a nest. "Hypothermic, dehydrated. She's probably in shock, but she's a fighter."

Mr Rozanov's hands curl against the edge of the counter. "She's tough."

"She has to be," Shane agrees. He cleans the laceration carefully, saline flushing grit and blood away before he applies antiseptic. The dog growls weakly, then stops when Shane's hand settles, firm and calm, on her chest.

"You're okay," he tells her quietly. "I've got you."

Rose steps back and pulls off one glove, reaching for the handheld scanner mounted on the wall.

"What's that?" Mr Rozanov asks guardedly as she takes the scanner.

Rose turns to him. "Next step—we check for a microchip. Unless she's yours?"

Mr Rozanov relaxes ever so slightly. "No, go ahead."

Rose runs the scanner slowly along the dog's neck and shoulders, then down her back, methodical. A beat passes, then it beeps. Rose pauses, runs it again. Another beep, clearer

this time.

“Okay,” Shane says. “She’s chipped.”

Mr Rozanov’s shoulders uncoil slightly, relief and something more complicated flickering across his face. “That’s good, right?”

“It can be,” Rose replies evenly. “Means she belonged to someone at some point. I’ll have Kip pull the registration and see if the information is current.” She gives Shane another nod before disappearing out of the office.

Shane meets Mr Rozanov’s eyes again. “Until we know more, she’s legally a stray found injured. We’ll keep her here tonight for observation. Pain management, fluids, diagnostics in the morning.”

Ilya hesitates. “And after?”

There it is. Shane had been waiting for the question. “That depends,” Shane says. “If we contact an owner, they’ll be notified. If not, she’ll go through the standard stray hold before being released to animal services or a rescue.”

He watches Mr Rozanov carefully as he asks, casually, “What were you planning to do with her?”

Mr Rozanov frowns, and doesn’t answer right away. His gaze drifts back to the dog, to the slow rise and fall of her chest, the way her tail gives a faint, unconscious twitch when Shane adjusts the blanket. “I wasn’t planning,” he admits finally. “I just... couldn’t leave her there.”

Shane nods once. “Fair.” After a moment, he adds, “If she’s unclaimed, there are options. Foster. Adoption.” A pause. “But we don’t decide anything tonight.

“If she continues to stabilize, we can do radiographs first thing in the morning. Bloodwork tonight to check organ function. If everything looks clean and her pain is controlled, discharge could be tomorrow afternoon.”

Mr Rozanov eyes him. “And she will be okay here?”

“Mr Rozanov—”

“Ilya.”

“Pardon?”

“My name is Ilya.”

Shane blinks, his cheeks warming. “Okay. Ilya, then. I can promise you she is in the safest hands here, and we will do everything we can to make sure she’s comfortable.”

He’s nodding. “Okay, okay. I come back. When?”

Shane checks his watch. He's off shift at six tonight, and back in for half-past seven tomorrow morning. "After we attempt to contact the owners and report to the authorities... and ensure she's stabilised.. maybe two?"

"Two," Ilya repeats, alarmingly intense. He takes Shane up and down with his eyes, then nods. "Okay. I come back at two."

The next morning, the smell of antiseptic and anxiety is the same, but the energy in the clinic has shifted. The husky is awake and alert. Her eyes, a pale, intelligent blue, track Shane's every move from the padded recovery kennel. The IV is out, the mud is gone from her coat, and while she appears still sore, the tail thumps steadily against the plastic bedding when Shane approaches.

The microchip, however, has cast a long shadow.

"Number's disconnected," Kip says, handing Shane a printout at the front desk. His voice is low. "Address is an old apartment building over on Fourth. I called the management company. The tenant listed moved out over a year ago, left no forwarding. Animal licensing has no current registration for that chip number."

Shane scans the page. A dead end is common, but it always leaves a bitter taste. "You reported it to the city?"

"Filed the found report first thing," Kip confirms. "Standard 72-hour stray hold starts now. If no one claims her by Friday afternoon..." He shrugs, his meaning clear. They'd both seen how potently Ilya had reacted to the dog.

Shane's gaze drifts to the recovery room. Ilya Rozanov is already there, having arrived at 1:58 PM with the tense precision of a military operation. He is crouched outside the dog's kennel, not touching, just watching. His shoulders fill the doorway. Shane takes a steadying breath and walks in.

"Good news," Shane says, trying to control his voice. "Radiographs are clean. No fractures. It's severe soft tissue trauma, some deep bruising. Bloodwork is normal. She's dehydrated and malnourished, but there's no underlying disease. She's a very lucky girl."

Ilya stands, turning that intense blue focus on Shane. "And the chip?"

Shane delivers the facts as he would any clinical prognosis. "Owner information is outdated, so that makes them also unreachable. We've filed the necessary reports. She's now officially a stray in our custody for a 72-hour hold. If no one comes forward with proof of ownership by Friday, she'll be legally available for release."

The silence that follows was thick. Ilya looks back at the dog, who is now pushing her muzzle against the kennel door, seeking his fingers. "What happens then? Release to where?"

"Options," Shane says, slipping his hands into his lab coat pockets. "We have a relationship with a few good rescues. They'd take her, evaluate her, put her up for adoption." He pauses, the next words feeling significant as he speaks them. "Or, a qualified individual could adopt

her directly from us, bypassing the rescue system. We'd do a screening. A home check. It's faster."

Ilya's eyes narrow. "A home check."

"Standard procedure. We need to ensure the animal is going to a safe, suitable environment." Shane meets his gaze. "It's not an interrogation. It's about the dog's welfare."

"You would do this check?" Ilya asks, his voice a low rumble.

"I could," Shane says. "Or Rose. Or Kip."

Ilya seems to turn the information over, examining it from all angles. His knuckles, resting on the kennel door, are scraped raw. From the road? From something else? Shane doesn't ask.

"What would she need?" Ilya finally replies, his attention back on the dog.

Shane shifts back into professional mode, a comfortable shield. "Medication. Meloxicam for the inflammation and pain, once daily with food." He pulls a clipboard from the wall. "A strict, bland diet for a week to reset her system — boiled chicken and rice, we can give you a starter pack. Limited activity. No running, no jumping. She needs rest. Follow-up exam in ten days to assess healing."

Ilya's nodding before Shane even finishes. "I can bring her in, yes. As many times as necessary. I am very responsible."

Shane gives him an odd look and double-checks his chart. "I will hold you to that, Mr Rozanov."

"It's a commitment. She's young, probably under-socialized, likely has no training. Possibility of past neglect or abuse. She'll be a handful."

Ilya doesn't flinch. "I have hands."

A reluctant, almost imperceptible smile touches Shane's lips. "So I see." He taps the clipboard. "If you're serious, there's paperwork. The city 'found property' release, our own adoption contract, medical records. You'd be her legal owner. Financially and ethically responsible."

"I understand responsibility," Ilya says, and the way he says it carries the weight of an unspoken story. Something Shane recognises but cannot pry into.

"Okay then." Shane hands him the clipboard. "Fill these out. I'll get her discharge meds and food ready."

An hour later, the bureaucracy is complete. The forms are filled out in a surprisingly neat, blocky script. Ilya Rozanov, of a nearby apartment address, gainfully employed. Shane has quietly run the basic information past Kip, who gives a subtle thumbs-up from the front desk. Nothing nefarious in the system.

In an exam room, Shane goes over the final instructions. Ilya listens, nodding sharply at each point, his gaze flicking between Shane's face and the dog, legally now *Anya*, who sits patiently at his feet, leaning against his leg as if she'd been doing it for years.

"This is it," Shane says, handing over a bag of supplies and a folder of paperwork. "You're all set."

Ilya takes the bag, his fingers brushing Shane's. His hands are warm, calloused. "Thank you," he says, the words deliberate, deeper than just for the medical care.

"Just doing my job," Shane replies automatically, the deflection hollow even to his own ears.

Ilya's mouth quirks, as if he heard the hollowness too. He clips the new, simple leash Shane provided onto Anya's new collar. "We go," he says to the dog, his voice dropping into a softer, accented cadence. "Home."

As Shane watches them leave, the huge, careful man and the limping, trusting dog moving slowly through the waiting room, the familiar contradiction settles in his chest, warm and unnerving. The home check is scheduled for Sunday. Shane had volunteered to do it himself, citing his thorough knowledge of Anya's medical needs and his own veterinary qualifications. It was for a professional reason. It feels like a lie.

The address is in the glittering spine of the city, a sleek tower of glass and steel that pierces the evening sky. Shane stands in the muted, marble-lined lobby, feeling acutely out of place in his sensible jacket and carrying his utilitarian vet bag. The concierge, after a quiet phone call, directs him to a private elevator with a keypad.

"Penthouse A," the man says, with a polite, knowing smile that does nothing to settle Shane's nerves. The elevator ascends in a silent, gravitational rush. When the doors slide open, they open directly into the space.

A wall of floor-to-ceiling glass presented the city as a sprawling, twinkling diorama. The interior is a study in understated luxury: pale oak floors, furniture of clean lines and rich fabric, a single, massive abstract painting in oils that dominated one wall. The air is still, temperature-perfect, and smells of sandalwood and, faintly, of the chicken-and-rice diet Shane had prescribed.

And in the center of it all, on a cream-colored rug that probably cost more than Shane's car, lays Anya. Her new bed is a plush, orthopedic monstrosity. She thumps her tail at the sight of him.

Ilya emerges from a shadowed hallway, not from a door. He seems to materialize from the geometry of the space. He's dressed in dark, tailored trousers and a simple black sweater that clung to the breadth of his shoulders. No shoes, just a pair of bright red socks. The contrast is jarring — the lethal elegance of a panther in a museum.

"Shane," he says. His voice was the same low, velvety rumble, but here, in this acoustic perfection, it feels intimate, a private frequency.

"Home check," Shane manages, his own voice echoing his incongruity. He holds up the folder, a pathetic paper shield against all this.

Ilya's mouth quirks. He gestures with a slight tilt of his head. "Come."

Shane steps onto the pristine floor, his shoes feeling suddenly gross and communal. He focuses on the dog, the one familiar, uncomplicated thing in the room. Animals, he finds, are way easier to understand than people. He kneels beside her, the rug softening his descent. "Hey, Anya. Let's see you."

Her examination is a familiar ritual, a lifeline. He palpates the healing shoulder, checks her gums, her eyes. She's pristine, her coat, although still a little patchy, now brushed to a shine, her weight already improving. "She's perfect," Shane says, the clinical pronouncement sounding absurd. "You're doing everything right."

Ilya had crouched down nearby, a respectful distance, but his presence is a tangible force. He watches Shane's hands, not the dog. "She is happy here."

It is undeniable. The dog radiates contented security. Shane looks around, truly looking now. He sees the discreet baby gates closing off a hallway, the elevated ceramic food bowls, the toys neatly stacked in a woven basket. It's a home designed by someone with immense resources and intense focus.

"This is... quite a place," Shane says, standing up, needing to break the intensity of Ilya's gaze on his kneeling form.

Ilya rises with a fluid, powerful grace. "It is quiet." He says it like it is a defect, sharp in his throat. "She makes it less quiet."

Shane walks slowly towards the windows, the breathtaking view a convenient distraction, the heat trapped beneath his shirt. "The home check is a formality at this point. Your environment is more than suitable. It's exceptional." He turns back, leaning against the cool glass. "I just need the final signature."

He pulls the clipboard from his bag. Ilya crosses the vast space to take it. The distance between them collapses in the open room, feeling more charged for the emptiness around them. When Ilya's fingers brush his, the contact feels electric.

The wire between them, first felt in the clinic, is now pulled taut here, thirty stories above the city, humming with a voltage that could power the grid below. Shane is cataloguing again, but the list is different now: the line of Ilya's throat above the shirt's crisp collar, the shift of muscle in his forearm, the absolute, waiting stillness of him as he signs.

Shane sets the clipboard down on a low, marble table with a soft, final click. "I don't do this," Shane said, the words for himself as much as for Ilya.

"I know," Ilya replied, his voice dropping to that intimate rumble. He takes a half-step closer. The space between them is no longer professional. "You do not own pets. You do not visit clients. You have rules." He says like it's a shared secret. "And yet, here you are."

Here he is. In the penthouse of a man who was a beautiful, dangerous mystery, having just legally handed over a piece of his own carefully ordered heart in the form of a rescued husky.

Ilya's gaze flicks to Shane's mouth, then back to his eyes. "The home check is complete?"

"Yes."

"Good." Another half-step. Shane can feel the heat from his body. "Then you are no longer my vet."

"No."

Ilya nods slowly. He doesn't move back. His eyes were that impossible, bright blue, fixed on Shane's, searching for something. The air grows taut. Shane knows he should step back, offer a handshake, leave. Even so, his feet are rooted to the polished concrete.

Ilya's voice, when it comes, is a low proposition. "You stay for coffee?"

A terrible, wonderful, compromising idea. Shane feels the contradiction wrap around him, warm and inescapable. His life is kicking the door down again, and this time, it feels as though it is inviting itself in.

"Yes," Shane heard himself say, the word leaving him on a soft exhale. "Coffee would be good."

The clipboard, the final barrier, lowers slowly to his side.

In Shane's professional opinion, the dog is a delight.

Scruffy and friendly and healing well. She eats enthusiastically, tail like a metronome, eyes bright with the wonder of being looked after. Ilya, it seems, is catering to her every need. A textbook success story: if all of Shane's patients could recover like this, his job would be a dream.

Her new certified owner, Ilya (who came in and proudly showed Shane the paperwork) is also a delight. A little sharp, a little hostile at times, but that's normal. People worry, and people love their animals. It's honestly nice to see.

Shane wonders about what Ilya does for a job, though, because he comes into the clinic far more than strictly necessary, and the bills must be piling high — and that's even with Shane charging him for the minimum amount for a consultation. Unless he has some kind of killer animal insurance.

“I think she’s walking differently,” Ilya says, hovering, as Shane watches the dog trot across the exam room, completely unbothered. “Maybe she hurt her ankle? Or an injury from before?”

Shane crouches down, observes, and inclines his head. “Looks normal to me.”

“Oh, okay,” Ilya says, then pins Shane under his scrutinous gaze. “Just wanted to make sure.”

The next time, Ilya brings the dog in because she didn’t finish her breakfast.

“What kind of food?” Shane asks, flipping through papers on his chart.

“The same one you recommended,” Ilya replies. “She usually eats it right away, but today she hesitates.”

Shane goes through a regular check up of the dog. Her gums are pink, her weight stable. Even her energy is high, he notes as he scratches behind her big, perky ears, and gets an immediate enthusiastic response, and a sharp pleased bark.

“She seems fine,” Shane says. “Dogs change their habits sometimes.”

“Oh,” Ilya says again. He smiles a sharp, attractive smile. “I guess I am paranoid. She licked protein powder off my floor.”

Protein powder is not a surprise, judging by the sheer bulk of Ilya’s arms. It’s kind of mouth-watering. “Rather protein powder than creatine. She’d be bouncing off the walls.”

Ilya inclines his head. “That, too. I have to eat around my job a lot. Busy hours.”

Busy hours but he always finds time to come in for Shane. “What do you do?” Shane asks. To keep himself busy, he checks both of Anya’s ear canals.

“Lawyer.” Ilya says simply. “I work from home, of course. For the dog, so she is not alone.”

Shane chuckles. “You’re doing great. Anya’s a really lucky dog.”

Ilya seems absurdly pleased by this, but Shane doesn't think too much about it. People like reassurance, especially from authorities. Anya had been fragile when she came in, it’s only natural that Ilya is protective of her.

He gets a message from an unknown number.

[18:03] Unknown: hi

[18:03] Unknown: quick question

[18:04] Unknown: is it normal for her to sleep like she is dead?

Beneath, the stranger has attached a photo of Anya. That eases Shane's confusion. The picture is a bird's eye view of a cushioned dog bed padded with extra blankets. In it, Anya is curled tight. A little carrot toy is tucked between her paws, burrowed against her nose.

[18:05] Shane: Yes. Dogs need to reboot sometimes.

The reply returns a moment later.

[18:05] Unknown: good.

[18:05] Unknown: okay, now she is snoring.

[18:07] Shane: Optimal performance.

Shane changes his contact information to *Ilya*, and has a sneaking suspicion he somehow bribed Kip to give him Shane's personal number. It doesn't bother him as much as it should.

A week later, he brings her in for sneezing.

"Once or twice," Ilya says. "Not, like, a lot. But sounded meaningful."

Shane blinks. "Meaningful."

Ilya just shrugs. Shane checks her lungs, her clear nose. "Probably dust," he says, "or excitement."

Anya sneezes again, then goes to lick Shane's chin before he can move back.

"See?" Ilya says, but he doesn't sound that alarmed at all. "Right there."

Shane laughs and wipes his face, rising to his feet. "I think she's just affectionate."

[11:59] Ilya: i taught her to sit

[11:59] Ilya: by accident

[12:02] Shane: By accident?

[12:05] Ilya: yes

[12:05] Ilya: she is so cute i just kept giving her treats

[12:05] Ilya: now she just does it

[12:06] Ilya: this is ok?

[12:07] Shane: This is impressive.

[12:08] Ilya: she is only nice to me to get treat?

[12:08] Ilya: :(

[12:11] Shane: She's just greedy

It gets so consistent that Shane starts scheduling the follow-ups himself. It is easier than talking to Ilya over the phone. Now he's texting and calling Shane all of the time. Which is... admirable. Yes, admirable. He is a very diligent pet owner, and nothing more.

Every time, Anya seems even healthier than before. Shinier coat, better posture, bulked out around her skinnier parts. Every time they come into the office, Ilya is wound tight like he's bracing for bad news — but Shane doesn't know what such bad news he could give him. Anya is in perfect health.

"What happened to your face?" Ilya asks sharply when Shane meets him.

Shane looks up from his tablet and frowns. "Hello to you too." Ilya just points at his own cheek to reflect where three parallel angry scratches have been gorged into Shane's cheek, shallow but red. "Angry cat."

Ilya crosses his arms. "Dogs are better." But his eyes follow those cuts for their whole appointment.

[19:40] Ilya: she ate her dinner

[19:40] Ilya: just letting you know

[19:43] Shane: Excellent news, she's an A+ patient

[19:43] Ilya: what about me

Just before one such appointment, Shane takes a moment to brew himself a mug of green tea in the staff room. Rose comes in, brushing off her scrubs and looking like she just got into a fight with the yappy chihuahua she'd been trying to treat for a stomach worm.

She catches sight of him, waves lazily, and leans against the counter. "Do you want to take Mr Doherty's visit from me?"

Shane eyes her suspiciously. "Why?"

"Let's just say we need to take a bull by its horns with dear old Starshine." At Shane's bewildered blink, she tacks on, "A cow. Starshine is a cow."

"Do we even treat cows? How would she fit in the waiting room?"

Rose sighs. "With difficulty. So, whaddaya say? You want her?"

"I can't. I have another check-up with Ilya and Anya." It's her turn to give him a look, and Shane feels defensive all of a sudden, heat scorching up his neck, even though he knows he's done nothing wrong. "What?"

"What'll it be this time, eh?" Rose crosses her arms. "Did the dog stub her toe? Did she accidentally eat a gram more kibble than expected?"

"Ilya raw-feeds her, so, no."

"Exactly my point, Shane."

He turns from her, cheeks ablaze, and fishes the teabag out of his 'World's Best Vet' mug. "And what is your point?"

"We both know that dog is perfectly fine. He's just finding any old excuse to drag her in here to see you."

"Well, that's nice." Shane scratches absently behind his ear. "I do like Anya. Maybe it's an emotional support thing for her."

She pins him with her eyes, unimpressed. "Shane," she deadpans.

"What?"

Rose doesn't answer right away. She just watches him, head tilted, expression somewhere between fond and exasperated, like she's deciding how gently to hit him over the head with the obvious.

"What," she repeats slowly, "is your professional opinion on Ilya?"

Shane pauses, mug halfway to his mouth. “As a client?”

“As a human being who owns a dog,” Rose clarifies.

“He’s attentive,” Shane says automatically. “Protective and engaged. Frankly, I wish half our clients were that observant.”

“Mhm.” She hums, unconvinced. “And as a human being who owns a phone?”

Shane frowns. “I don’t see how that’s relevant.”

Rose sighs, pushes off the counter, and steps closer. “Shane. He texts you photos of the dog.”

“That’s not—” Shane stops, considers. “They’re usually accompanied by a question.” That’s not breaking any patient-doctor boundary, is it? Ilya isn’t his patient, his dog is. That’s okay, isn’t it? It’s not inappropriate? Unprofessional?

Shane opens his mouth, then closes it again.

Rose probes, “yesterday’s was ‘She looks happy, right?’ What was it the day before that?”

“He’s taught her to shake his hand,” Shane mutters.

Rose lifts an eyebrow. “And?”

He clears his throat. “I said yes.”

“Of course you did.” She smiles thinly. “Because you’re a good vet. And because you are, medically speaking, a liability to yourself.”

“That feels unfair,” Shane mutters.

She softens slightly. “Look. I’m not saying he’s doing anything wrong. Or that you are. I’m saying... he’s not subtle. And you’re spectacularly bad at noticing when someone is circling you.”

“Ilya is not circling me,” Shane says, a little too quickly. “He’s anxious. She was hit by a car.”

“Two months ago,” Rose counters. “And now she’s built like a small athlete and sneezes for attention.”

As if on cue, there’s a sharp, cheerful bark from down the hall, followed by the unmistakable sound of nails skittering on linoleum.

Rose grins. “Ah. Speak of the devil.”

Shane exhales, sets his mug down, and straightens his scrubs. “I’m late.”

“You always are with him,” Rose says lightly, then adds, quieter, “Just... be aware, okay?”

Shane hesitates. Then nods once. “I am aware.”

He is absolutely not.

When he steps into the exam room, Anya launches herself at him with full-body enthusiasm, tail whipping like a metronome. Shane laughs despite himself, crouching instinctively to catch her around the chest.

“Hey,” he says warmly. “There you are.”

Ilya stands nearby, hands tucked into the pockets of his jacket, watching the interaction with open, unguarded fondness. He looks... relaxed today. Less coiled. Comfortable.

“See?” Ilya says, smiling. “She missed you.”

Shane freezes for half a fraction of a second, then recovers smoothly. “She misses the treats,” he says, rising and reaching for the chart. “What brings you in?” he asks, then notices what is in Ilya’s hands.

He’s got four take-away cups of coffee in a polystyrene holder. “For clinic,” says Ilya, holding out the tray like an offering. “I did not know what you like. So I guessed.”

Rose, who Shane hadn’t even noticed at the door, reaches forward to take a cup before Shane does, and immediately gets pinned beneath Ilya’s pale, assessing eyes. She plucks a cup and chirps a thanks, reaching down to pet Anya. She shoots one more knowing look at Shane before walking back down the hallway.

“Is there one for Kip, too?” Shane asks, as he takes another drink from the tray. Black, with milk, without sugar. A good guess.

Ilya’s eyes narrow. “...Yes,” he says finally, then looks down at Anya. “She stubbed toe.”

Shane almost does a spit-take.

[14:22] Ilya: anya is learning stay but only if i don't leave room

[14:22] Shane: That's normal at first. Positive reinforcement is key.

[14:23] Ilya: right

[14:24] Ilya: so i only call her good girl if she does what i say?

That makes Shane’s stomach flip.

[14:29] Shane: If she recognises praise as a reward, yes.

[14:30] Ilya: who doesn't?

[14:30] Ilya: ;)

Shane almost drops his phone.

Over time, Shane recognises the sound of Ilya's car. It's a very nice car. A gleaming alizarin-red Bugatti, its paint job immaculate and scratchless, its engine humming. It rolls into the carpark of the clinic on cue.

Shane doesn't consciously do anything with that information, of course. He just happens to be done with paperwork when Ilya arrives, just happens to be nearby, just happens to take the appointment himself.

The one time he could not attend to Ilya, and was about to go into surgery, and offered for Dr Hunter to take the check-up appointment instead of him, Ilya turned on his heel and walked out. They later rescheduled. He is very protective of his dog. Shane toys with the idea of the dog developing an attachment issue.

"She looked at me weird this morning," Ilya says, leaning against the exam table. They've gotten more casual over the weeks. Shane finds himself allowing Ilya to drape himself over the countertop or sit in Shane's chair — places he would never dream of letting others sit. Ilya stretches with a languidness that is akin to a cat napping in the sun.

Shane raises his eyebrows. "Weird how?"

"Like she knows something I don't."

Shane smiles despite himself. "Dogs don't really—"

Anya barks.

"Okay," Shane concedes, "sometimes it feels like they do."

Ilya laughs, bright and unguarded, and Shane feels a brief, warm satisfaction at having caused it. Which is totally normal, too. He likes his clients to feel comfortable.

On a Thursday afternoon, right in the middle of a packed waiting room, Shane gets yelled at.

Shane knows it's coming before the door to exam room two even opens. He can hear the man's voice through the wall, loud and sharp and carrying.

"This is unbelievable," the man snaps, the door flying open. "You people charge a fortune and my dog is worse." He's standing over Kip, who's looking unimpressed at him over the reception desk.

Shane steps out immediately, posture straight, hands relaxed at his sides. "Sir," he says evenly, "let's take this somewhere private."

“No,” the man says, jabbing a finger toward Shane’s chest. “You don’t get to hide. You sedated him, you sent him home, and now he won’t eat. What did you do to him?”

A hush ripples through the waiting room. Chairs squeak. Someone’s dog whines.

Shane keeps his voice calm. “I explained the risks and the aftercare. Post-procedural nausea is—”

“Oh, don’t talk down to me,” the man barks. “You think I don’t know my own dog?”

Shane feels the familiar tightening behind his sternum, the reflexive urge to de-escalate, to absorb the blow. “I’m trying to help you,” he says. “But yelling in the waiting room isn’t appropriate.”

The man swells up, “oh, I’ll fucking show you ‘appropriate’—”

That’s when a chair scrapes loudly against the floor. “I think he asked you to lower your voice.”

Shane looks up.

Ilya is standing now, leash looped loosely around his wrist, Anya seated perfectly at his side like she’s been trained for moments exactly like this. His expression is polite but unyielding, eyes fixed on the angry man with a cool, assessing focus that Shane recognizes immediately. “This is medical facility,” Ilya continues. “There are animals here who are already stressed. And people who didn’t sign up to be yelled at.”

The man scoffs. “Mind your business.”

“I am,” Ilya replies. “You made it everyone’s.”

The tension spikes, thickening in the air. Shane opens his mouth to intervene, but the man hesitates, clearly reassessing. Ilya isn’t loud. He isn’t aggressive. He’s just very obviously not someone who’s easily intimidated. He’s tall and sharp-eyed.

“I want answers,” the man snaps, though the volume has dropped.

“And you’ll get them,” Shane says, stepping back into the space, grounding himself. “In my office. Now.”

A beat passes. Then the man huffs and turns, stomping back toward the hallway. Shane exhales slowly and gestures for Kip to manage the room before following. Just before he disappears, he glances back.

Ilya has already sat back down. Anya’s tail thumps once, proud and pleased. Ilya meets Shane’s eyes across the room and gives a small, unapologetic shrug. Someone had to, it seems to say.

The rest of the appointment is tense but contained. Shane explains. The man grumbles. Eventually, he leaves. When Shane returns to the waiting room, the noise has returned, low

conversation, the rustle of coats. But his pulse is still elevated.

Ilya is still there. Anya is sprawled across his feet now, belly up, utterly unconcerned with conflict or decorum.

“Thank you,” Shane says quietly, stopping beside him. “You didn’t have to do that.”

Ilya tilts his head. “He was out of line.”

“That happens,” Shane replies.

“I know.” Ilya looks up at him, expression intent. “Doesn’t mean it should.”

For a moment, Shane forgets the room around them, the posters, the animals, the low hum of fluorescent lights. He’s acutely aware of the way Ilya’s gaze holds his, steady and protective in a way that makes something warm twist low in his chest.

“Well,” Shane says, professional instinct reasserting itself with effort, “Anya’s ready whenever you are.”

Ilya smiles. “Of course she is.”

As they head down the hallway together, Shane catches Rose watching them from the nurses’ station, eyebrow raised, mouth twitching. Shane pointedly does not look back. But he doesn’t forget the way Ilya stepped in front of him, either.

It’s late at night when Shane gets the text. He hadn’t been sleeping, just dozing on his back with rain sounds on in the background. His phone goes off and it washes the whole room into a sterile bath of light. He reaches for it and squints down at the message.

[01:25] Ilya: hey

[01:25] Ilya: sorry, i knwo its late

[01:26] Shane: It’s okay. What’s going on?

[01:26] Ilya: i think anya has pain in belly

[01:27] Ilya: shes walking weird

[01:27] Ilya: was fine earlier

Shane can detect the stress in his voice. He sits up and turns on the light, fumbling for his glasses before typing out a hurried response.

[01:28] Shane: Is she limping or crying?

[01:28] Ilya: not crynig

[01:28] Ilya: shaking

[01:29] Shane: Okay, when did it start?

[01:29] Ilya: ive been out

[01:29] Ilya: since i got back shes been bad

[01:30] Shane: Has she eaten anything strange?

[01:31] Ilya: don't think so

[01:31] Shane: Can you bring her to the clinic? I can meet you there ASAP.

A pause.

[01:33] Ilya: i cant

[01:33] Ilya: ive been drinking

[01:34] Ilya: cant drive

[01:34] Shane: Okay. Is she warm to the touch? Any swelling?

[01:34] Ilya: yeah. her stomach feels hot. she doesnt want me to touch

[01:35] Ilya: am trying not to panic but am panicking

[01:36] Shane: Alright. I'm going to come to you. I have my equipment.

[01:36] Shane: ETA twelve minutes.

[01:36] Ilya: you are sure?

[01:37] Shane: yes

Shane shows up in a pair of hastily thrown on jeans and a jacket from his hallway instead of his usual scrubs. He carries his bag over one shoulder. Ilya lives in the penthouse apartment in an affluent side of town, an observation that Shane pushes to the side.

Ilya lets him inside quietly, his face drawn and pale.

Shane knows something is wrong the moment the dog doesn't get up. Anya lifts her head when he enters the apartment, her tail giving a weak thump against the rug, but she stays curled up on her side in her bed. That alone makes something tighten in Shane's chest. Dogs always manage to greet someone, unless instinct is overridden by another argument.

"It's okay," Shane says softly, already crouching beside her. "Hey, sweetheart."

Ilya hovers uselessly near the couch, barefoot, his shoulders tense. He's wearing a sheer black shirt and he smells like aftershave. He might've been out at the bar, or the club. There's the faintest smell of alcohol on him, something spirited, but not enough to worry Shane.

"She threw up earlier," Ilya says. "I only just found the sick, in the pantry."

Shane runs a careful hand over Anya's abdomen. She tenses immediately, a low whine vibrating in her chest. "Okay," Shane murmurs, "I know, I know."

He presses gently, watching her face, feeling for distention and heat. Her stomach feels uncomfortably tight, and she flinches when he reaches a certain point. Which isn't great.

"How long ago did she eat?"

"Before I went out," Ilya admits quickly. "Same food as always. No table scraps, I swear."

"I believe you," Shane says automatically. He always does. Anya pants slow and fast, trying to curl inwards and protect her belly.

"Has she vomited again?"

"No, but she keeps trying to."

Shane's pulse kicks up. "I'm glad you called."

Ilya tenses again, his hands curling into fists at his side. "Is that bad?"

"Not necessarily," Shane says, and reaches slowly for Anya, letting her sniff his hand. "Could be gastric distress, gas buildup. Worse case, we'd be thinking about bloat, but I don't think we're there." Ilya's face drains of what little colour he had left, his skin waxy and sweaty.

"She's uncomfortable, but responsive. You caught it early."

Shane checks her gums, listens to her heart and times her breathing. He talks as he works — half for Anya, and half for Ilya. It's a habit he's had to push himself to learn. He likes the quiet in order to concentrate, but people panic less when there's no silence, when there isn't space for their fear to grow.

"I'm going to give her something for the pain and nausea," Shane tells Ilya. "I've got it with me. Then we'll keep her upright and monitor her. If things get bad we can take her to the emergency 24/7 clinic."

He prepares the medication at the kitchen counter. The apartment is vast and cold and spacious. A lamp light casting everything in a half-dark shadow, a wineglass by the sink, a folded blanket over a chair that smells like a dog.

When he comes back, Ilya has Anya's head in his lap, stroking down the back of her neck like he's scared to leave her unattended for even a second.

Shane stays seated on the floor for a minute longer, hand resting lightly on Anya's side, counting breaths until they're slow and even. When he's satisfied, he eases back, careful not

to disturb her.

“She’s stable,” he says quietly. “If she worsens, it’ll declare itself pretty clearly. For now, we wait.”

Ilya nods, still petting her, but some of the rigidity has finally drained from his shoulders. “Okay,” he says. “Waiting I can do.”

He hesitates, then looks around the room as if seeing it properly for the first time. “Do you... want some water? Tea? I know it’s late. I have ginger ale.”

Ilya did not strike Shane as a ginger ale person. Though, Shane drinks it every day. Always has one on the mini fridge on his desk.

“A ginger ale would be good,” Shane replies. “Thank you.”

Ilya extricates himself carefully, easing Anya’s head back onto the cushion before standing. He pads into the kitchen, movements quieter now, unhurried. Shane takes the opportunity to really look around.

The penthouse is spare but intentional, with floor-to-ceiling windows, city lights smeared across the glass by rain. Clean textures and neat lines. There are dog toys tucked neatly into a basket by the couch. A throw blanket folded with care. A bookshelf heavy with case law and dog-eared paperbacks.

Ilya returns with two glasses — one with ginger ale, the other water. He sets one down beside Shane. “I’d offer something stronger,” he says lightly, “but given the circumstances.”

Shane allows himself a small smile. “Probably wise.”

They settle—Shane on the couch this time, Ilya on the floor beside Anya, back resting against the cushion. The television goes on at low volume, some late-night documentary neither of them is really watching. Mostly it’s there to fill the space, to keep the night from feeling so precarious.

Minutes pass. Then more.

“You always do this?” Shane asks eventually. “Sit up with her when she’s not well?”

Ilya glances back at him. “Every time.” A pause. “I don’t sleep much anyway.”

Shane hums. “Occupational hazard?”

“Lawyer,” Ilya says, as if that explains everything. “Corporate litigation. Long hours. Too much coffee. Anya’s actually been good for me. Forces me to go home.”

“That tracks,” Shane says. “Animals are excellent at imposing routines on people who otherwise wouldn’t have them.”

Ilya smiles at that, softer than before. “What about you?”

“What about me?”

“Do you ever stop working?” Ilya asks. Not teasing. Genuinely curious.

Shane considers. “I’m not sure I know how,” he admits. “I sleep. I come back. Sometimes I read.”

“Thrilling,” Ilya says dryly.

Shane snorts. “Says the man who spends his free time worrying his dog into perfect health.”

Ilya laughs quietly — something that almost has Shane puffing his chest with pride — then grows thoughtful. “I didn’t plan on keeping her,” he says. “At first. I just... couldn’t give her up after that first night.”

Shane’s gaze drifts to Anya, curled between them, breathing slow and steady. “She was lucky you found her.”

Ilya looks up at him then, expression unreadable in the low light. “I think I was lucky too.”

Another stretch of silence follows, comfortable now. The rain keeps falling. The city keeps breathing below them.

Anya shifts, stretching slightly, then settles again. Shane watches the movement carefully, then relaxes.

“She’s doing well,” he says.

Ilya exhales, long and relieved. “Thank you. For coming. For staying.” He shakes his head. “If I hadn’t gone out...”

Shane meets his eyes. “You paid attention. You asked for help.” He pauses. “That matters.”

Something warm settles between them, without drama or urgency. Just steady, the kind of intimacy built from shared concern and quiet hours. They sit there together, keeping watch, until the night feels less sharp and the apartment feels, unmistakably, like a place Shane could imagine himself returning to.

When Anya seems to be doing better, Shane manages to relax fully, sinking down on the sofa and staring up at the high ceiling.

“Why be a vet?” asks Ilya.

Shane glances over at him. “Why not?” is his response. “I like animals. They’re easier to deal with than humans. And there’s more variation. I never know what I’m going to get when an owner walks through that door, and I like making them happy.”

“Like cat with hemeroids?”

“Fuck off.”

The comfortable silence deepens, filled only by the whisper of rain against glass and Anya's steady breathing. The warmth in the room is no longer just from the ambient heating, but it also feels warmed by their shared understanding, their combined relief in Anya's improving condition.

Shane's admission about not knowing how to stop working seems to hang in the air. Ilya's gaze on him is thoughtful, tracing the lines of Shane's profile in the dim light.

"You are good at it," Ilya says finally, his voice a low rumble that vibrates through the quiet, velvety soft. "Not just the medicine. The... seeing. You see her." He nods toward Anya. "You saw me, in the clinic, with half-dead dog."

Shane shifts on the sofa, turning slightly to face him. "It's my job to see the animal."

"And the human holding it?" Ilya challenges him gently, a faint smile playing on his lips. "Is that also in the job?"

"Sometimes it's unavoidable," Shane murmurs, his eyes dropping to Ilya's mouth for a fleeting second.

The air thickens, the earlier ease now charged with a new, potent awareness. The space between them on the deep sofa, which had felt comfortable moments ago, now feels like a canyon and a magnet all at once. It feels like a battle of wills. Ilya is too far away and too close all at once.

Ilya mirrors his movement, turning his body so they face each other, knees almost touching. Anya sleeps on, a fuzzy, oblivious chaperone. "This," Ilya says, gesturing vaguely between them, then to the room, the night, the resolved crisis. "This was not unavoidable. This was a choice."

Shane's breath caught. "I know."

"I am glad you chose it." Ilya's voice is now barely above a whisper. He leans forward, just an inch, a question in the movement. Every rule, every guideline about professional distance screams in Shane's mind. And then fall completely away, utterly silent, leaving Shane only with himself, with Ilya's presence beside him. He holds his breath and meets the movement, leaning in that same infinite inch.

The first brush of lips is a test more than a kiss, a shared breath, a silent *is this really happening?* Ilya's lips are softer than Shane could have imagined, a shocking contrast to the hard lines of his body and jaw. They brush against Shane's once, twice, a whisper of contact that sends a bolt of pure, undiluted lightning straight down Shane's spine.

Shane makes a soft, involuntary sound in the back of his throat, and it is as if he'd thrown a switch.

Ilya's hand comes up, his fingers sliding into the hair at Shane's temple with a possessiveness that makes Shane shudder. But his touch is still laced with that maddening, exquisite care, his thumb stroking the arch of Shane's cheekbone, a hairsbreadth from his skin, his palm

cradling the curve of his skull. He holds him like something precious, yet his mouth is claiming him like something won. Is this how he touches Anya, with such delicacy, such control? Shane is suddenly hit with an absurd envy for the dog.

The kiss deepens. Ilya's tongue sweeps into Shane's mouth with a confident heat that steals the air from Shane's lungs. It's all velvet darkness and the faint taste of ginger ale, and Shane meets him with a desperation that shocks himself, his hands coming up to fist in the soft, expensive fabric of Ilya's sweater at his sides.

Ilya makes a low, visceral sound that vibrates through Shane's chest, like a growl, and shifts closer, his other arm bracing on the back of the sofa, caging Shane in. The heat of his body is overwhelming, a solid wall of muscle and intent. Shane arches into it, into him, craving the pressure, the proof. The kiss turns hungry, deep and searching, a frantic conversation that bypasses words entirely. It's all lips and tongue and the sharp scrape of stubble, a heady, intoxicating friction.

Shane has kissed before, but never like this — never with this sense of teetering on the edge of a cliff, of being utterly consumed by a controlled wildfire. Ilya kisses with the same focused intensity he does everything, but here it's unleashed, directed solely at him.

One of Ilya's hands slides from Shane's hair, down the column of his throat, his thumb pressing gently into the frantic pulse there before continuing its descent. It comes to rest, burning through the cotton of Shane's shirt, on the center of his chest, right over his hammering heart. Shane gasps into Ilya's mouth, his own hands sliding around to Ilya's back, pulling him impossibly closer, needing to erase every last millimeter of space.

It is Anya who saves them, or dooms them.

She lets out a loud, sleepy harumph and rolls onto her back, her legs splaying in the air between the sofa and the coffee table.

They break apart as if electrocuted, breathing ragged, foreheads resting together. Their breath mingles in hot, frantic clouds. Ilya's eyes are blown black, his lips slick and kiss-swollen. Shane is sure he looked exactly the same, and has never felt quite so exposed.

Ilya's hand is still tangled in Shane's hair.

"Bozhe moy," Ilya whispers.

"The dog," Shane manages, his voice wrecked.

"I know," Ilya says, his thumb making a slow, deliberate circle over Shane's heart. "The timing is... terrible."

"And perfect," Shane breathes, the truth of it startling him.

Ilya's eyes searched his, the storm in them slowly calming to a warm, dazed intensity. A slow, real smile, one Shane had never seen before, triumphant and a little wicked, spreads across his face.

“Yes,” Ilya agrees, his voice a velvet promise. He finally leans back, putting a mere few inches of cooling space between them, but the connection feels more intimate than the kiss. “Perfect.”

Shane wakes to sunlight on his face and has the immediate, disorienting certainty that he’s made a mistake.

The ceiling is wrong. It’s too high, too pristinely white, and the bed beneath him is wider than his own, without a thin mattress that squeaks when he shifts, a pillow pressing into his shoulder. For one quiet, suspended second, Shane doesn’t remember where he is.

And then it all rushes back.

Anya, the call, the apartment. The way Shane had said ‘just a few more minutes’ until minutes turned into hours and his own exhaustion betrayed him. He exhales slowly and stares at the ceiling.

You slept here, he thinks, on a client’s bed.

Then,

Oh, fuck. They did much more than just sleep.

He turns his head and sees his jacket folded neatly over the back of a chair. By the door, his shoes are neatly arranged. Someone took care not to wake him. Ilya. The thought doesn’t help.

Shane tries to quell the anxiousness that bubbles up in his stomach. He rubs a hand over his face and sits up carefully, listening. The apartment is quiet, but he’s not alone. Soft sounds trickle in from the kitchen: the clink of a plate, a kettle rattling, maybe.

The smell of coffee drifts in, because of course it does.

Shane swings his feet down and pauses. His neck is sore, the muscle bunched, from sleeping wrong, but Anya had been settled and breathing steadily when he finally gave in. He remembers her weight pressed against his leg, the way Ilya had murmured thanks before the world went dark.

He should not have stayed. And he definitely should not still be here.

This crossed a line. Several lines, probably. Not in a dramatic, career-ending way, he hopes. A quiet, dangerous way, though, because Shane consoles himself with the fact that nothing happens, which is not a thought he should be having, even if he runs through the justifications automatically.

She was sick, it was late, he was monitoring her.

Then, more pointedly, *he did not drink. No one has to know.*

None of them feel particularly solid. Shane cannot sit in here and wallow in his panic. Instead he straightens his crinkled shirt, hating the creases, and steps towards the kitchen.

Ilya is there, his hair messy in a way that looks terribly domestic, in a soft white shirt and boxers and socks. Anya is sprawled under the table, her tail beginning to wag lazily the moment she sees Shane.

“Oh, good morning,” Ilya says, turning. His voice is low and rough with sleep. His eyes are careful as he assesses Shane, like he’s unsure what this morning is allowed to be. “I would have woken you, but I made you drive over here at two in the morning, so I thought I should let you sleep.”

Shane nods, his professional instinct snapping into place like armour. “How is she?”

“Better,” Ilya says quickly, “no vomiting. She ate a little this morning, like you said.”

Relief hits Shane first — real, genuine relief — before the rest can catch up. “That’s good,” he says. “That’s really good.”

They’re spared the suffering of more conversation as Anya sloughs to her feet. She pads over, pressing her head into his leg with quiet insistence. Shane crouches automatically and feels her abdomen. She’s relaxed and comfortable, no signs of pain.

“She’s okay,” he reports. “Just keep her meals small today.”

“I will,” Ilya says, then hesitates. “Uh— coffee? Or more ginger ale?”

Shane looks at the mug already poured on the counter. Milky, with no sugar. He swallows. “Thank you.” It comes out stagnant and stilted. “But I should probably…” He stops himself, leaving the sentence unfinished.

Ilya nods, understanding too much and not enough at the same time. His face flattens a little at the edges, as though receding like a tide. “Of course.”

This is where he draws the line, he tells himself. He leaves, schedules a follow-up like normal, pretends this was nothing more than a late-night emergency call.

Except Anya is healthy now, and Ilya is standing in front of him in his kitchen, and Shane feels — unsettled. *Seen*. He feels wanted in a way that has nothing to do with his job. Ilya’s lips on Shane’s mouth, his chest, his dick. He meets Ilya’s eyes and feels it again, sharp and undeniable. This isn’t just concern for a pet, what exists between them. And he thinks they both know it hasn’t been that for a while.

When Shane finally says, gently, “You know, he’s healing incredibly well,” he means it as good news.

Ilya goes still, turns to look out of the window. “That’s great,” Ilya says quickly. “Really great.”

“I’m going to leave,” says Shane, and a lump forms in his throat. “Thank you, for...” And he does. Ilya doesn’t fight it, and that somehow feels worse.

Shane tells himself that the silence is a good thing.

He doesn’t receive any late-night texts, or photos of Anya sprawled across the couch, or updates on her appetite or mood or how she’s managed to open cabinets. The silence is clean and professional, and Shane should be relieved. But he isn’t.

A week passes. Shane catches himself glancing at his phone during breaks, thumb hovering over Ilya’s name before he stops himself. He can’t text. He’s done enough damage already.

Then Anya’s name pops up in his schedule. Shane feels relief before he can quite compute why: a quick and traitorous feeling followed by a swell of hope. He clicks onto the appointment detailing:

Cancelled.

The reason is brief and polite.

She’s doing great. If she has any more problems, I will take her elsewhere. Thank you.

Shane reads it one, then twice, and then a third time, slower, like repetition could reveal something new. It doesn’t. There isn’t any anger or accusation he can detect in Ilya’s tone; just distance.

Shane leans back in his chair and stares at the ceiling. His heart does an irritating, erratic, unprofessional thing in his chest. Of course this is what Ilya would do. He wouldn’t make it dramatic, or demand an explanation. He just steps quietly back, like he was never supposed to be there in the first place.

I will take her elsewhere, he had said. Not *we*, not *for now*, not *just in case*. Elsewhere. The finality of it settles heavy and slow in a creeping feeling over Shane’s shoulders. He considers replying, drafts a hundred messages in his head, all with varying degrees of self-flagellation and anger and apology. He doesn’t type out a single thing.

He just closes the chart, moves onto the next patient.

But later, hours later, when he’s closing up in the clinic, he finds himself thinking about Anya, about the soft look on Ilya’s face when he scratches under her chin.

The thing about absence is that when you’re inside it, it feels enormous. But from the outside, people come and go all the time. Clients switch vets, move, schedules change.

But when one of his other regulars, an old lady with a new litter of puppies asks, “where’s your favourite dog?” It catches him by surprise. Shane looks up from where he’s cradling a labrador puppy, so small it can fit into his hand.

“I don’t have a favourite,” Shane replies carefully.

“Oh, sure you don’t,” the old lady, Margaret, snorts. “Big loud husky with the big eyes? I haven’t seen her in ages.”

Shane forces a smile. “She’s doing well, just seeing someone else now.”

“Oh,” says Margaret, disappointed. “That’s a shame. Her owner was lovely. Very handsome.”

He was.

“They really adored you,” Margaret adds, like it's a harmless observation.

There’s an old park across the road from the clinic, halfway between his work and his home. Sometimes Shane likes to track there during his runs, lost in thought with music slamming in his ears, weaving down the path and between the trees.

Then, out of the blue, cutting through his earphones, Shane hears a furious, excited barking growing closer and closer.

He pulls out a bud and the sound clarifies itself even further, the sharp yapping accompanied by a voice yelling, “Anya! *Anya!*”

He spins around just in time to see a blur of cream and brown streak across the grass towards him, barking wildly in delight. Anya tackles Shane like a fluffy torpedo, knocking him off of his feet. The dog is upon him a moment later, planting paws on his shirt and barking at him, her tail thumping against his leg. She is out of her mind with joy, pausing only to cover his face in eager licks.

“Okay— okay, hi— hi,” Shane laughs despite himself, breath knocked loose, hands coming up automatically to steady her. His chest is tight in a way that has nothing to do with the impact. “Hey, sweetheart.”

Anya whines happily, presses her forehead under his chin, and licks him again for emphasis.

Shane feels it then, sharp and immediate. Relief. Affection. Something dangerously close to longing.

“She doesn’t do that to anyone else.” The voice is closer now. Careful. Shane looks up.

Ilya stands a few feet away, leash slack in his hand, rain-darkened jacket half-zipped. His hair is damp at the temples, curls looser than Shane remembers. He looks tired, not panicked, not desperate. Just... worn. For a moment, they just stare at each other.

Anya solves the problem by crawling higher onto Shane’s chest, tail wagging like it’s personally offended he ever left. “I missed you too,” Shane murmurs to her, and the words

slip out before he can stop them.

Ilya's mouth twitches. Not quite a smile.

"I'm sorry," he says quietly. "She saw you and— well. I lost argument."

Shane sits up slowly, hands still on Anya's shoulders, grounding himself. "It looks like it." Anya huffs and finally settles, sitting squarely in Shane's lap like she's made a decision about where she belongs.

"She's been dragging me past this park for weeks," Ilya admits. "I thought today I'd let her win."

The implication hangs there, gentle but heavy.

Shane swallows. "She looks good."

"She is," Ilya says. "She's been fine. Healthy. Happy." There's a pause. The space between them is careful and measured. Ilya adds, softer, "I didn't think you wanted to see me."

He looks down at Anya, who gazes back at him with absolute certainty, then up at Ilya, rain-damp and honest and standing right there. Her tongue lolls. Shane swipes a hand over her head, flattening her ears momentarily before they bounce back.

"She shouldn't be jumping on people like that," Shane says, defaulting to something safe, professional-adjacent.

"She doesn't," Ilya replies. His eyes scrape down Shane's form. His tight-fitting shirt and loose joggers. "Just you."

Anya chooses that moment to wriggle, tail sweeping damp grass onto Shane's back. He exhales and carefully slides her off his lap, rising to his feet. The movement puts a few necessary inches between them. It also reminds him he's sweaty, flushed, dressed in running gear instead of scrubs, exposed in a way he doesn't care for.

They stand there, rain misting lightly now, the park strangely empty despite the hour. Shane is acutely aware of how close Ilya is, of how easy it would be to close the distance, of how absolutely he cannot.

"You shouldn't let her off-leash near the road," Shane says instead, hating how it sounds even as he says it.

Ilya's jaw tightens, just slightly. "She has recall."

"I know," Shane says. "I just—" He stops. Reroutes. "I worry."

There it is. Too honest, too late. Stupid, he curses himself.

Ilya studies him for a long moment. "You're good at that."

“Worrying?”

“Caring,” Ilya corrects.

Anya sits between them now, looking from one to the other like she’s waiting for instructions neither of them seem willing to give.

“I should finish my run,” Shane says lamely. He gestures vaguely down the path. “I didn’t mean to... interrupt.”

“You didn’t,” Ilya says. “We were just walking.” Another pause. The silence stretches, uncomfortable and unresolved, like a question neither of them wants to ask. “Well,” Ilya says at last, tugging lightly on the leash. Anya ignores him completely. “Come on, Anya.”

She does not come on. Instead, she presses her side against Shane’s leg, solid and warm and stubborn. She lets out a little whining keen.

Shane closes his eyes briefly. “You’re not helping,” he tells her. Anya pants, pleased with herself.

Ilya lets out a quiet breath. “She does that.”

Eventually, after gentle coaxing, after Anya’s dramatic reluctance, she allows herself to be led a few steps away. She looks back twice. Shane stands where he is, hands loose at his sides, heart doing something inconvenient and persistent.

“Take care, Shane,” Ilya says.

“You too,” Shane replies.

Ilya nods, then turns, Anya trotting beside him, glancing back once more before they disappear down the path. Shane puts his earphones back in without turning the music on.

He stands there longer than necessary, chest tight, the encounter unresolved and unfinished in a way that follows him all the way home.

The rest of the park blurs past him, his pace uneven, breath coming a little too shallow. He keeps thinking about the way Anya had launched herself at him without hesitation, the way Ilya had stood there, restrained, like he’d rehearsed every possible version of that encounter and still been unprepared for it.

By the time he gets home, the melancholy has settled into something heavy and persistent. He showers, changes, eats something he barely tastes. Later, stretched out on his bed with the lights off, he unlocks his phone and scrolls without purpose until his thumb betrays him and stops on Ilya’s name.

Still there. Of course it is. He opens the message thread. The last exchange sits like a fault line: clinical, polite, final. He types, deletes. Types again.

It was nice to see you.

Delete.

Anya looks good.

Delete.

Will you kiss me again?

Delete.

He locks the phone and sets it face-down on the nightstand, jaw tight. Wanting, he's learned, is not the same thing as permission. And restraint, however miserable, is still a choice.

The days that follow are quiet in a way that feels intentional now. Shane tells himself this is good. He tells himself the park was a coincidence, that it doesn't mean anything. He tells himself a lot of things.

Then, on a Tuesday afternoon already running late, Kip appears in Shane's doorway, expression unreadable in a way that immediately raises Shane's hackles.

"You have a walk-in," Kip says.

"I'm booked solid," Shane replies without looking up.

"I know." Kip hesitates. "But... you might want to take this one."

That gets his attention. Shane looks up. "Why?"

Kip steps aside. Ilya stands in the hallway. For a moment, no one speaks.

Then Anya breaks the stalemate by lunging forward with a delighted bark, nearly tangling herself in the leash. Shane's chest tightens sharply, painfully.

"I—" Ilya starts, then stops. He swallows. "I'm sorry. I know I said I'd go elsewhere."

Shane is already on his feet. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," Ilya says quickly. "That's the problem." A pause. "She's fine. She's been fine."

Shane blinks, and closes the distance to them before he's fully aware he's moved, instinct overriding caution. He crouches as Anya barrels into him, hands finding familiar purchase at her shoulders. She vibrates with happiness, nails clicking uselessly against the floor as she tries to climb him like he's a piece of furniture she's always owned.

"Hey," he murmurs, low, steady. "Easy."

He gives her a brief, efficient once-over right there — eyes bright, gait even, coat glossy. She is, infuriatingly, perfectly fine.

"Let's go into an exam room," Shane says, standing. His voice is even, but there's a carefulness to it now. "Kip, room four."

Kip nods and disappears without comment. The walk down the hallway is quiet. Anya trots happily between them, leash loose. Shane is acutely aware of Ilya at his side, of the measured pace he keeps, like he's matching Shane on purpose.

Inside the room, Shane goes through the motions with deliberate thoroughness. Heart, lungs, abdomen, joints. Anya leans into his hands with theatrical enthusiasm, tail sweeping the air.

"She's in excellent health," Shane says at last, straightening. "Nothing concerning."

"I know," Ilya says. The admission lands softly, but decisively.

Shane looks at him. "Then why are you here?"

Ilya exhales and leans back against the counter, arms crossing, not defensive, but bracing. "Because other vet was vulgar."

Shane's mouth opens, then closes. He chooses his words carefully. "I respected your message. You said you'd take her elsewhere."

"I did," Ilya says. "Anya did not like him. I had no choice." Anya, sensing the shift in tone, settles at their feet with a soft huff. "I wasn't angry," Ilya continues after a long beat of silence. "You did good job as vet. You looked after her."

Shane feels tension pinch around his eyes. "So what changed?" he asks. When Ilya raises his eyebrows and gestures sweepingly to Shane, standing by the table with his arms crossed tightly over his chest, he's forced to look away. "I didn't... I don't..." Shane sighs, forces the words out around the tightness in his throat. "I've never done this before," he admits finally. "They drill into us about ethics and professionalism." Shane swallows. "And with you? I don't always know where that line is."

"I know," Ilya says, not unkindly. A pause. "But you never crossed it."

The room is very quiet. "I should have said something," Shane admits. "Instead of letting you have to figure things out for both of us."

Ilya leans a little closer. "I didn't mind," he says lowly, and his eyes flash down to Shane's lips, lingering for a second, before flashing back up. "Why do you think I kept dragging Anya in here? Because I thought she would die from sneezing?"

"Because I saved her life," Shane counters, "and you're a good owner, who wants to keep his dog happy."

Ilya's gaze doesn't waver. "I am good owner," he agrees, voice a low thrum in the sterile room. "And I am not stupid man, Shane. I know you are not either."

The air vanishes. Shane feels it leave his lungs in a slow, soundless rush. The clinical lights hum overhead, but all he can hear is the blood pounding in his ears. Anya's tail thumps once, a dull beat against the tile floor.

“I came here because other vet talked only about money. Upselling. He did not look at her. He looked at my watch.” Ilya pushes off the counter, taking a single step that somehow feels like an invasion and a surrender all at once. “You look at her. You look at me. Even when you are trying not to.”

Shane’s professionalism is a thin sheet of ice over a deep, dark river. He can feel it cracking. “I’m her vet.”

“You were her vet,” Ilya corrects gently. “Then you were man in my home. Then you were nothing.” He shakes his head, a faint, frustrated motion. “I do not know what you are now. But I know I do not want to go to vulgar man who sees only a transaction. I want to come here. Even if it is... complicated. Because you care. A lot.”

The word hangs between them, vast and terrifying.

Shane looks down at Anya, who is now sleeping peacefully, her job as a living, breathing buffer apparently complete. He thinks of the cancelled appointment, the cold finality. He thinks of the penthouse, and the touch that never quite happened, but somehow changed everything.

“It’s more than complicated,” Shane says, finally meeting Ilya’s eyes. The blue is softer now, less like ice and more like a deep, still lake. “It’s a conflict of interest. It’s against every guideline.”

Ilya nods slowly, as if he’d expected this. “Then I will find another clinic. A good one. I will ask for recommendation from you, and I will go.” He says it plainly, without malice. “But I needed you to know why I came back this time. It was not for her. I should have trusted you enough to ask.”

They stand there. “This is still my clinic,” Shane says. “And she’s still my patient.”

“Yes,” Ilya agrees. “Professionally.”

Another pause.

“And outside of that?” Shane asks, carefully. His heart pounds.

Ilya studies him for a moment, then uncrosses his arms. “Outside of that, I’d like to start with coffee. No emergencies. No dogs.” Anya lets out a small, protesting whine.

Shane huffs a quiet laugh despite himself. “She’ll survive.”

“Barely,” Ilya says dryly.

Shane reaches for the chart, clicks it closed. “I’m done for the day in an hour.”

Ilya’s expression shifts, not hopeful, exactly, but open. “I can wait.”

Shane nods. “Okay.” Shane closes his eyes for a second. When he opens them, his decision is made, foolish and irreversible. “She’s due for her heartworm test,” Shane hears himself say,

his voice strangely calm. "It's a simple blood draw. We should do it while she's here."

Ilya stares at him, processing. It's not an answer to the unspoken question. It's a deflection. But it's also a stay of execution. It's not yet. A slow, understanding dawns in Ilya's expression, followed by a flicker of something warm and triumphant. He doesn't smile, but his entire posture relaxes.

"Okay," he says, the word a soft concession. "We do the test. I will wait."

Shane turns to the cabinet, his hands steady as he gathers the supplies: tourniquet, syringe, vial. The familiar ritual grounds him. He kneels beside Anya, who wakes and licks his wrist once, a trusting swipe of her tongue.

"Hold her for me?" Shane asks, not looking up.

Ilya crouches opposite him, his large hands coming to cradle Anya's head, his fingers gentle in her fur. Their knuckles brush. Neither moves away. The proximity is electric, a closed circuit over the sleeping form of the dog. Shane finds the vein, inserts the needle. Anya doesn't flinch. The vial fills with dark red.

"All done," Shane murmurs, applying pressure with a cotton ball. His eyes lift, finding Ilya's just inches away. In the quiet, with the scent of antiseptic and dog and Ilya's sandalwood cologne mingling, the complication doesn't feel like a danger. It feels like the only real thing in the room.

"The results will be ready in twenty minutes," Shane says, his voice barely above a whisper. "You can wait in the reception."

Ilya's thumb strokes Anya's ear. His eyes hold Shane's. "I will wait," he says, and the meaning stretches far beyond the test.

End Notes

okay conflict of interest but damn just let the vet fuck his client like dayum

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