

Forever home

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Forever home

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Summary

Ilya has talked to a lot of people during his time at the shelter. They come here, they fall in love with animals, and feel sympathy for their situation. It is so easy to see the emotions in their expression, in how their brows furrowing or smiles dance around their mouths. He usually focuses on the animals he works with, not the people coming here, but he cannot stop himself from following Anya as she makes her way towards the guy currently watching the guinea pigs.

He is less expressive, as if he is holding back feelings towards the creatures around him, but Ilya is convinced that there is deep emotion in the depths of his eyes, as he looks at Anya. He sees the way his dark eyes sparkle like cool pools of water in the moonlight and Ilya needs to pull himself from their depths to answer his question without looking like a fool.

Or: Ilya owns an animal shelter. Shane is suddenly very motivated to do volunteer work.

This fic is finished. We will be posting chapters on Sundays and Wednesdays

Notes

Thank you, Bianca, for being part of this journey and listening to us rant about those two
24/7 <3

Chapter 1

Shane

Shane doesn't like noise. In fact, he hates it. His life has been arranged in a way that means he can avoid it. He chose a career in IT and works remotely, his flat is in a quiet area, his neighbours mostly sixty and over. Apart from work, he keeps himself busy with his favourite hobbies: reading and running in the woods.

There is an exception, one he had not expected. Shane loves his best friend's children. They are noisy, chaotic, unpredictable, and they own his heart. Ruby and Jade are five now, blond curls, innocent eyes, and have too much energy for their own good. Arthur is eight months old, and he gives the best cuddles. Jacky is pregnant again, Hayden told him a few days ago.

So, is it a good idea to add a pet to that mix? Shane isn't sure, but then, he is just the chosen uncle, and he knows how hard it is to resist those children's eyes.

"We'll just be looking around," Hayden had said. "Haven't even told the girls. And Jackie is very sensitive to smells at the moment, so I need you to come with me."

Now, Hayden is parking the car. The car park is mostly empty, so hopefully, there won't be many people here. As they walk up to the small building, Shane notices how much it has changed. He'd been here as a kid, but he doesn't even remember what for. Back then, the buildings had seemed run down, and the kennels had been crowded. Now, the arrangement of buildings seems to be the same, but it is obvious that a lot of effort and work has been put into making the place more colourful, more attractive for visitors. As they step through the gate and walk the thirty feet to the main door, Shane notices that there are now outdoor runs for the dogs and cats. He can see a big, ginger cat, sleeping on a cat tree in a kennel just to his left. The fluffy feline seems relaxed, less stressed than he remembers the animals being, from his childhood visit. Not that it is paradise, as this is still a shelter, but it seems to be a better place now than it had been.

He follows Hayden inside, trying to pay attention to the small talk Hayden is making with the young man in the lobby.

"We just want to look around a bit, if that's okay," Hayden says, and the guy explains where they can go, before they walk along a small corridor and through a glass door with a large cat on it. For a while, all they do is look through glass windows and coo at the cute, elegant creatures sleeping, playing, and pacing before them.

"I want to take them all home," Hayden pouts. "But Jackie has an allergy, so no cats."

Shane huffs. "Why did we even look in here, then?" Shane could have a cat, maybe. His flat is big enough, but he has never had a pet, and he does not deal with change well. Still, he wants to take at least 80% of the animals home, or at least sit with them and scratch their little heads. "Why did you put me through this?"

"Because they are sooo cute. Okay, let's see. I think it's dogs, next. We can just have a look. They also have smaller animals in the other building."

Shane follows him again. The kennels are just as loud as he remembers and as soon as they step in front of one of the kennels, the dogs around them run up to the glass, fighting for their attention by barking and jumping.

He sees one dog sitting alone, that doesn't run, bark, or jump. It seems afraid of the noise and the chaos. They stare at each other for a minute, he feels like they both understand the other one's apprehension. Shane wants to hold it and protect it from the echoing noise and loneliness of being the odd one in a crowd. His heart breaking for the poor thing. It makes him feel even more overwhelmed, as he wonders how it feels to be in here all day, never being able to leave.

Hayden doesn't seem to mind the noise. He starts sweet talking to every single dog, and that means the barking doesn't stop, it gets worse, causing Shane to give Hayden a sour look. It is so loud, so consistent, and Shane needs to escape before his head explodes. He touches Hayden's shoulder and points at a door that leads outside, not waiting for an answer, before quickly pushing through it.

Quiet surrounds him like a blanket, and Shane feels the tension leaving his shoulders. For a few minutes, he just breathes before taking a few steps into the garden. The outdoor runs for the dogs are to his left, so he turns right. A small path leading him to a smaller building, with a "Staff only" sign, before he reaches an area with what must be dozens of guinea pigs, enjoying the sun and munching on veggies.

For a while, Shane watches them, listening to their quiet squeals. It is calming to follow their movements and watch them interact. Shane could do it for hours, but a movement catches his eye. The door to the staff building opens, and the man that steps outside must be the most beautiful man Shane has ever seen. He is tall, maybe a bit taller than Shane. His dirty-blond hair curling beautifully, wildly, as it shimmers in the sun. He has a sharp, stubbled jaw, a t-shirt with the shelter's logo fitting snugly around impressive arms, and a chest Shane wants to bury his face in. What traps him though, are clever, blue-green eyes, both observant and kind.

Shane swallows his own spit and looks down in an attempt to hide the blush creeping over his cheeks. He has never reacted to anyone like this. Yes, he has found men attractive before, but this. This is new and Shane is overwhelmed by his own reaction to him.

As he looks down, he realises the man is not alone. A medium sized dog trots over to Shane, looks up at him, and then starts wagging its tail. To his own surprise, Shane slowly squats down, letting the animal smell his hand.

"Sorry. This is Anya." The man's voice draws Shane's attention back to him, low and smooth. He must be Eastern-European or Russian, as his tongue does not fit around all of the English consonants.

Shane should not be thinking about his tongue. Or his mouth.

"Hello, Anya," he says, because it is easier to talk to the dog. "Nice to meet you."

“She just had check-up with vet. Is all good. She is good girl.” The man’s eyes grow soft as he watches Shane pet her black-and white fur. “You want to adopt? Or just look around?”

Shane clears his throat. It would be polite to get up, but Anya is not a fan of that. “Oh, no. I’m here with my friend. Him and his wife want a pet for the kids. They have three little ones. Well, four. Jackie, his wife, is pregnant. What animal would you say could work for them?” He’s babbling now, great. Hayden should be here, telling him to stop. Where is Hayden? Still with the dogs inside?

“Well, sound to me like no animal is best for him. So many kids already. Pet is big responsibility.” The man shrugs, stepping closer. From here, Shane can read the name tag on his shirt.

Ilya.

“That’s what I told him.” Shane looks up at Ilya, feeling very small now, and as he debates getting up again, Ilya kneels down next to him, bringing those fascinating eyes into view. Blue and green dance with each other, shifting, blurring together until Shane feels dizzy. Dropping his gaze does not help, because his arms are just - delicious. Never - of that Shane is sure - has he used that word to describe a human, but that golden skin, those muscles, the veins disappearing into his tight fitting shirt, look good enough to bite. Ilya is so close, just Anya between them, her tail wagging happily. Shane’s heart starts racing. God, he is so hot, Shane cannot think straight. His mouth just keeps running. “Jackie would be the one carrying the burden of taking care of all the kids and a pet. And babies need a lot of attention. He travels for work, so it is irresponsible.”

Shane scratches Anya behind one of her floppy ears.

“Good thinking. People don’t consider. Think that dog is cute, or cat, or want to adopt bunnies, but is bad with kids, because they hate when kids pick them up and grab them. Are flight animals. Need to run. But people only think about cute animal, and what animal can give them. Not other way around.”

Both anger and sadness colour Ilya’s voice. He cares so much. That is obvious.

“Are there other options? For Hayden, I mean? My friend?”

“Yes. Kids can come here for play hour with cats. Or can come and take dog for walk. We need volunteers. Need all help we can get.” Blue and green eyes wander along the buildings behind them, encompassing the entire area. Shane can only imagine how much work, sweat, and heart goes into working here, how much heartache they have to endure and how much Ilya knows about people’s carelessness or even cruelty against animals. He wishes he could help and very egotistically, he also wants to see Ilya again.

So, Shane does something brave, surprising himself most of all.

“Well, I go running at least five times a week. If I wanted to ... take a dog with me, how would I go about that?”

And then he awaits Ilya's answer.

Ilya

Ilya has talked to a lot of people during his time at the shelter. They come here, they fall in love with animals, and feel sympathy for their situation. It is so easy to see the emotions in their expression, in how their brows furrowing or smiles dance around their mouths. He usually focuses on the animals he works with, not the people coming here, but he cannot stop himself from following Anya as she makes her way towards the guy currently watching the guinea pigs.

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“Okay. I can sort for you. Take one dog or different ones?” Ilya stares at the man in front of him, wondering if he means it, or is he just being kind, because he made him feel bad for the animals here. He looks sincere. He has a very sweet look about him. Childlike and innocent. Maybe it's the freckles, sprinkled across his nose and cheeks. He sees him flick his tongue across his lip in what he thinks is a nervous gesture. He isn't sure, but it makes something jitter in his belly.

“Well, I thought maybe one, or, or maybe different. I mean.... I don't really mind. I just thought, you know, I could do my bit. Help out a bit.”

He's jabbering nervously, and Ilya finds it endearing. He could listen to this guy talk for hours. He offers him a small smile and he sees the man settle and calm. Maybe it's inbuilt into his years of working with helpless animals, but he knows people and he knows what they need, sometimes before they do. “I.. I like Anya. She seems sweet. There was also another dog I saw in there.” He motions towards the kennels. “Quiet. Looked like it was terrified of the other dogs”.

Ilya smiles. This guy is beyond anxious. As if *I* am anyone to be nervous of, Ilya thinks. He watches as the man stutters through his words, touching his eye as he speaks. This man is unusual and Ilya likes unusual. He thinks about the dog in the kennel. He straight away knows which animal he means, because this man reminds Ilya of her and this confirms his feelings of what a kind soul the man has. He noticed her in the corner. Only kind people would not overlook her. Maybe Chloe would have been a nice friend for him.

“Oh, Chloe. Yes, she is good dog. Going to new home in few days. Had tough time before here, but will be happy there. New owners have lot of space and no noisy children like your friend.” He laughs, imagining how loud his friend's house must be. “But Anya would be good for company. Has lots of energy and gets lonely, yes? She has taken liking to you. I can sort out and contact you, if you leave number at desk. What is name?”

The guy reaches out a hand to shake Ilya's. “Shane. Good to meet you.” As they shake hands, Ilya gets a better look at how strong the man's arm muscles are as they ripple when he squeezes his hand. Ilya wonders what kind of workouts Shane does. Yoga, maybe. He is

probably very flexible, which makes thoughts that shouldn't, enter Ilya's head. He is obviously fit, if he runs that much. He wonders if the rest of him is as muscly as his arms, before telling himself to snap out of it. Honestly, he can't even remember the last time he had thoughts like that about anyone. Maybe he's tired, because he cannot be thinking about people, who are trying to help, in that way.

"Ilya. Is also very good to meet you." He flashes him a toothy grin, knowing the effect it has on people. Shane's smile widens, along with Ilya's, and he wishes Shane wouldn't keep avoiding his eyes and look at him, so he can get a better view of those bottomless pools, hidden under floppy tufts of straight, jet-black hair. He wants to swipe it away, to stare into those eyes and look deep into Shane's soul. Shane fascinates him and he doesn't even know why. This just feels different than he's ever felt before.

"Great. I'll definitely leave my number and hope to hear from you... from someone," Shane says and then catches himself quickly, cheeks turning pink. Ilya finds his own face heating up too. He's hard to read, but that's flirting, right? If so, Shane sucks at it, and Ilya hopes to get a chance to teach him. "I'd better go and look for my friend," Shane motions over his shoulder with his thumb, walking backwards but not looking away from him yet. "Or I will never get him out of here." Shane bumps into the wet floor sign as he moves and blushes brightly, before bending to pick it up, which really doesn't help Ilya with pushing thoughts of Shane out of his head. Shane lets out a small laugh and a shy smile as he turns to walk away. "Bye, Ilya, bye Anya." He waves awkwardly.

"Bye, Shane. I'll call you." He says, more to himself than Shane. Ilya bites his lip, trying to hold back his grin from being seen by the world. This may be nothing. Just a harmless game of flirting. He may have a partner, a girlfriend even. Ilya knows that people flirt with him, knows they tend to find him attractive. He's not being bigheaded when he thinks that, it's just a thing. There is something about his personality that draws people in, but he doesn't normally feel the pull both ways. Honestly, he feels more love for animals than people. They're kind, forgiving and don't expect things in return. They don't ask for things, don't demand things and don't hold grudges. He has had way too much of that in his life already.

Trust is hard for Ilya. He's like a dog that has crawled back too many times, just to be kicked again. He struggles with putting his heart on his sleeve, knowing it's easily taken and torn apart. Family isn't something he knows much about, having been estranged from his for ten years now. He moved away as soon as he could, when he realised he just couldn't take it anymore.

He moved as far away as possible, knowing no one and not even caring. His English was good enough to get by, but is improving constantly. He found a new home here, feeling drawn to the creatures who have also felt the pain of loss and feeling unloved. He's worked hard, helping to build up the shelter, repairing it and improving the life of the animals in his care. He has a small home here, where he lives, and it suits him fine. He's on call if needed and someone else is always around during the day.

Sometimes he misses people, but honestly, he's happy with the distraction of being with the animals, and cuddling up with an injured creature who needs overnight care. He even enjoys the hourly feeding of newly born animals, who cannot be fed by their mother. He's given his

life to his calling, but he never regrets it. He doubts he will ever find someone willing to share this life with him, but occasionally he wants that. He just refuses to let himself get carried away by it. His heart can't take that.

Shane

It takes him a while to find Hayden. He finally does spot him back in the lobby, talking to a member of staff. His best friend's face is lacking the enthusiasm he had when they first arrived at the shelter.

"Hey," Shane says softly as he comes to stand next to him.

"Hey, you. Harris here told me it might not be a good idea to get a pet right now. At least not without having another serious conversation with Jackie about it. Shelter policy."

Shane is not surprised, Ilya had told him as much. Seeing Hayden's disappointment saddens him, but at the same time Shane's brain is going through every second of the interaction he just had with Ilya.

"Sorry, buddy," He says, eyes already fixed on the front desk. "Maybe the girls could volunteer here? I talked to Ilya - he works here, too. He said they always need volunteers, so I offered to help."

"You talked to Ilya?" Harris tilts his head a bit, apparently confused, but he recovers quickly, kindly smiling at Shane. "He's right. We need a lot of volunteers."

"I told him I would take one of the dogs for a run. He said to leave my number at the front desk."

"Oh, sure. There is a form, actually." Harris walks towards the desk and Shane follows him, Hayden momentarily forgotten.

"That Ilya guy must have left quite the impression," Hayden says, when they are back on the road. "Shane Hollander, doing something spontaneously."

Shane blushes. If Hayden only knew. If Hayden had seen Ilya, then he might have understood immediately. Shane keeps his eyes on the road as he answers. "He just told me about them needing volunteers, and I go running every morning anyway. There are some dogs that enjoy that and I could take them with me. It's a small detour, so I'll have to adjust my schedule but that's okay."

"Yeah, it's a good idea. It's always good to have animals around. Good for the soul." Hayden smiles over at him. "I'm just not used to you doing things without thinking them over ten times."

"Hmm, I know. Guess I just really liked Anya... the dog I met. I'm not much of a dog person, but she is really sweet. Full of energy, but not loud, or hectic." Hayden stops at a traffic light, and Shane prays that it will turn green quickly so Hayden will stop looking at him.

“Harris seemed surprised that his colleague was nice to you. Made me think he is a bit of a dick, maybe?”

“You’re thinking about it too much, Hayd. Maybe Harris just doesn’t like him. He was nice to me. He loves the animals at the shelter, that much is clear.”

“Right, just wondering. I know you, Shane.”

“Are you jealous that Ilya will be my new best friend? A guy I talked to for like ten minutes?” Shane smirks, turning towards Hayden for the first time.

“Oh, shut up! I’m just glad you’re doing something new. It’s a good thing. I’m just disappointed I’m not taking home bunnies or guinea pigs for the girls. They would have loved that.”

“I think it’s great that Ilya and the rest of the staff care so much about where the animals go and that they want to make sure the animals have a good life.”

“I know. But I don’t want to be logical about that right now, I want to be emotional.”

“Ah,” Shane says, focusing back on the road. “Feel free to do that, then. Not sure I can help, though.”

“That’s okay, bud. Thanks for tagging along today.”

The conversation fizzles out after that, but it is never awkward between them. Hayden knows Shane gets lost in his head sometimes, and maybe, with three kids at home, he enjoys the silence as well.

Shane returns to his flat after having dinner with the Pikes. He loves all of them, but he has had a bit too much social interaction for one day. He texts his mom to say he will call her tomorrow, then locks the door behind him, shutting out the world.

Chapter 2

Ilya

Ilya does his duties. He completes the vet visits, does a home visit, walks some dogs, cleans some kennels and all while avoiding Harris and Troy as usual. It's not that he doesn't like them; he does, he's just not a sociable person. He prefers animals and is more comfortable with them. Troy and Harris have a mutual understanding with him. He's not rude, just solitary. He is there when they need him though, which counts.

He heads to the office to shut down the computer and check that everything's ticked off and finished for the day. Harris walks in. "Hey, man. All done I think. Got some great homes this week. The visit went okay?"

"Yes, okay," Ilya replies, being a man of few words. "Nice home, nice people. Think Eric will be happy." He is busy shutting the computer down. "You are hovering Harris. What do you want?" He sounds annoyed, but doesn't mean it.

"Um, someone left you his number. Apparently you made quite the impression on him." It sounds to Ilya like it's a loaded sentence. "He filled in a form, but also left his number. He's going to be back for dog walks, yeah?"

"Yes. He liked Anya. Wants to take her running. Is good for her, going out more." He avoids talking about Shane, but sees a smirk appearing on Harris' face. "What? I cannot talk to people now? He was friendly. Cannot be rude to visitor." He looks at Harris. "Am not rude to you so why would I be?"

"Hey, sorry. Just not like you to be all chatty with the visitors. Normally that's mine and Troy's job. It was nice to hear you made someone's day. Someone that wasn't an animal. Don't think his friend was as happy when I told him to have a rethink." He pulls a face and Ilya smiles.

"Always do best for animals, yes?" Ilya begins to tidy the desk, looking for Shane's form. "Said I would call him. Where is number?" He is trying to act nonchalantly, failing miserably and he knows it. He blushes, hard.

Harris passes him the number. "Sounds like he will be perfect... for Anya," he adds quickly. "Night, boss," he smiles, patting his shoulder as he leaves.

Ilya retreats to his room with some snacks and noodles, exhausted but with something to look forward to. He eats his food and tries to calm himself enough to phone Shane. He thinks of texting, because he hates talking to people on the phone, but it's easier to talk it through and then text the details later. Besides, he wants to hear that voice again.

Taking a deep breath, he calls Shane's number, bouncing his leg nervously as he waits for Shane to answer.

Shane

Shane is in bed, a book in his lap, white noise filling his ears. He'd ended the day with some yoga and a long shower, so now it is time to relax.

Someone seems to disagree with him. His phone buzzes on the night stand. Shane sighs. He loves his mother, but he just wants to be left in peace. Still, he places his book mark on the page he's been reading, takes off his glasses and grabs his phone.

It's an unknown number.

Weird.

Shane considers not answering, but he is curious now. Before he can think about it, he answers the call.

"Hello?"

"This is Shane?" A familiar voice asks, and Shane's brain immediately clings to the sound of it.

Ilya.

"Yes, hello," Shane says dumbly, sitting up in bed as if Ilya could judge him for being slumped against the pillows a bit. He'd probably find all the pillows ridiculous anyway.

"Not that he'll ever see them," he chides himself, clearing his throat.

"This is Ilya Rozanov. From shelter." As if Shane does not remember him, as if Ilya has not been on his mind ever since they met six hours ago.

"Ilya, yes, hi."

Fuck, why is he so awkward?

"How can I help you?" That's better.

"Just want to ask about dogs. You know a lot about them?"

Shane bites his lip. He doesn't. Their neighbours had a dog when he was young, and Shane had loved petting her through the fence as a kid, but Laila had been old and patient. Every other encounter with dogs had been fleeting, and that is probably bad for someone who wants to volunteer at a shelter. Shane should have considered that and not just jumped onto that chance to see Ilya again. It was ridiculous.

"No, sorry. I don't really have any experience. My family never had animals. so... Is that bad? You probably need someone with experience."

“Is okay, Shane. No panic. I... We can teach you basics. You come to shelter and we have a little lesson. Anya is good dog, Will make it easy for you.”

“You or her?” Shane asks, blushing furiously as he realises what he just said. Did he just flirt? With Ilya?

Ilya makes a sound between surprise and amusement. “Both,” his tongue wraps around the word in a way that does things to both Shane’s brain and dick, things that he quickly pushes away.

“I need to talk to vet about some appointments. I can text info later, yes? Then we meet at shelter.”

Shane nods, before remembering he is on the phone. “Yeah, sounds good. Have a good night, then.”

“Good night, Shane.”

“Bye, Ilya.”

The call ends, and Shane drops back against the pillow, heart pounding in his chest.

Fuck.

Ilya

He does a few things, rushing around so he can hurry and talk to Shane. Did Shane flirt with him today? Maybe it's just part of his quirkiness? Maybe he's just awkward and says odd things when he's nervous? He needs to text him and keep it cool. Professional. "Get your shit together, Rozanov," he mumbles to himself. "This is why you don't have friends. Stop drooling over guy you just fucking met."

He eats his noodles, alone in his room as usual. He thinks about what he wants to say to Shane and gathers together the information he needs. There's pages on dogs, caring for and owning a dog, what to do in emergencies, dog behaviour and online forms for police checks. He can't leave anyone alone with a dog who hasn't been checked out, even if they are extremely cute. He tells himself to stop overthinking it all and just write a simple text to Shane with the details.

Ilya:

Shane, it is Ilya.

He deletes the words and starts again. Of course it's him. It's his number. Idiot!

Ilya:

Hi Shane. Here are details for you.

He sends him some things to read and an additional form to fill in online. He then sends him one more message.

Ilya:

Thank you so much Shane. Is nice that people care. X

He sends it. Is it too much with the X? He isn't sure, but he will see how Shane responds. A text comes through.

Shane:

Hi. Thanks for this. I'll go through it tomorrow. It was nice meeting you today. I'm eager to learn from you and I'm excited for our session. X

Ilya's face heats up. There are plenty of things he would like to teach Shane. "Stop it. He is probably straight," he tells himself, "But... he put an X."

He quickly replies.

Ilya:

Me too. Have lots to teach you. Could do Friday? 10, or is too soon?

Shane:

Friday is great actually. X

He starts to write another message to him, but a message from Shane appears.

Shane:

See you Friday then. 10.

Ilya is almost disappointed. Maybe this is just business. They're not friends. He needs to stop reading so much into this. Shane sends another text.

Shane:

I'll leave you to it. Sure you have plans with your partner/family/whoever tonight. Enjoy your evening. You deserve it. You look like you work hard. Lots of manual labour. X

He's confused. Is Shane fishing for information? Does he really think he has a family? Interesting. And what's the manual labour thing about? He does a quick Google search to check if that means what he thinks. It does. Is he trying to say he has a nice body, or is he reading this all wrong. He wants to ask him, but needs to play this cool.

Ilya:

Yes, is hard work, but free gym. 😊💪

What does he say about family? Fuck.

Ilya:

No family. Just me. Live at shelter with so many animals. More noisy than kids at your friend's house. 🐒

Shane:

Wow! It's so cool that you live there. Do you have a house, or a room? Do you live with other people?

Shane:

Sorry. I'm being nosy. I'll stop. 🐒

Ilya laughs. He can ask all he wants. Ilya doesn't have a lot to say. He lives a pretty lonely life and doesn't have much to show for it. He looks around at his room. It's small, with a small seating area, a sofa, fireplace and a TV. His bedroom consists of a bed, big enough for two, as he usually has one animal or another sleeping on it with him, but tonight he's alone. Just him, his thoughts and Shane. He has a small kitchen and living room downstairs and that's it. It's compact but he likes it, even though it doesn't have much in it. Some books, a few personal items and a small cupboard with clothes in. The furniture was all there before he moved in

and is in need of replacing, but he just fixes it up when he needs to. He will get around to replacing it at some point.

This job doesn't pay well, but he does it more for love than money, he tells himself. That's why he took the room. Yes it means more hours, but he doesn't think he could afford a place of his own and he was so grateful when he moved here and had nowhere to go. The small room is all he needs for just him, but he realises, looking at it now, that it's embarrassingly low on personal items and really it's just a place to sleep. He doesn't spend much time here and he rarely gets days off, so it's just an unloved building, in need of some care.

Ilya:

Small home. Just me and animals.

He can't help but ask.

Ilya:

What do you do with your partner/family/whoever tonight?

Ilya throws Shane's words back to him, not knowing how else to ask. He waits. He waits a while, thinking Shane might not reply. Did he say something wrong, or maybe he's busy with his person at home. Finally a reply comes.

Shane:

No. Just me. I live alone, work alone. Am alone. 😂 Life is just too exciting. I'm not really much of a people person either. I should probably do something about that. 🤔

He laughs, partly relieved that Shane's single and partly because he realises that Shane is a lot like him. He won't think he's weird or different.

Ilya:

I would think kind man would have girl, or boy to look after him. Is something I should know before I let you near animals? Are you secret killer? 🔪

He sends it and worries Shane won't get his humour. Fuck. What if he thinks he's a asshole? He replies quickly and Ilya's heart almost stops when he thinks about what the reply might say. He cautiously checks it.

Shane:

No, but funny. 😏 Just not much of a dater. I'd have to go out first. Maybe I need to speak to a shelter about getting an animal to keep me company at home. 😊

Ilya's chest hurts. Is he flirting? Fuck, he seems to be flirting. Shit. Say something good.

Ilya:

I know man who can help with that. Animals less trouble than people. Not best talkers though. Always welcome for talk with me. 😊

Ilya:

Now I do my bit for charity. 😊 Look after human who have no owner and is all alone.

Shane

It's easy talking to Ilya. Banter flies back and forth, and Shane catches himself grinning at his phone over the next few days, and it is because Ilya has texted him something in 99% of the cases. The exceptions are when his mother tells him she is making chicken parmesan for Sunday's dinner - he allows himself carbs when it comes to family dinner- and also, when Hayden sends him a picture of Arthur wearing a hat which is way too big for the little boy's head.

Still, he likes Ilya's messages most. They have too many emojis, a habit which Shane has quickly adopted - hoping to match the other man's enthusiasm - even though they are a bit ridiculous. They keep texting, never running out of things to say, and that makes Shane worry. There are multiple reasons why. Firstly, Shane is an over-thinker in general, and especially when it comes to situations that are new to him. That leads right to reason number two: Shane does not know if he can respond to the man this easily when they are actually face to face. He tends to be awkward in social situations, and Ilya is very attractive. An unbelievable level of hot, to be exact, which only makes it worse.

What if Shane will only be able to blush and stutter around him? Lose the modicum of wit he has? The thought alone makes Shane want to cancel their appointment and move to another city that does not have an animal shelter. Then he will never have to figure out if Ilya is really flirting with him, or if that is just wishful thinking. Maybe he talks to everyone that way. Lots of hot people do, because everyone flirts with them and they think it is how people communicate. Just a reflex. Nothing Shane should read too much into.

This is what he tells himself when he gets too excited about his phone buzzing.

Ilya:

Favourite dog breed? 🙄🐕

Shane:

I don't know. Don't think I have one.

Ilya:

Good answer. Is no favourite because is only good dogs, yes?

Shane:

I suppose there are only good dogs, yes. 🙄

Ilya:

Not suppose. Is only humans that are assholes. Don't know what to do with pets.

Shane:

You could teach some people, offer a class.

Ilya:

Ah, no. Have to deal with humans, then. 🙄

Shane chuckles. He understands that sentiment all too well. He loves his family and his few friends, but dealing with new people is not something he enjoys.

Shane:

You can still cancel for Friday - I am a human too, you know.

He puts the phone away when Ilya does not text back immediately. He should work, after all. Shane manages to focus for a while. When he returns to his screen, he finds a message waiting.

Ilya:

You get special treatment. X

It sends a shiver down his spine.

Shane:

Lucky me. 🍀

Ilya:

Not because I like you - I just need someone for dogs. 🐕

Shane chuckles. Ilya is an asshole, and he kind of likes it.

Shane:

You are this nice to all new volunteers, then?

Ilya:

No, as I say, special treatment. Have to go now, late shift today. See you tomorrow. 🙌

Shane:

See you tomorrow. 🙌

Shane gets up, stretches. He'll do some yoga later to help him with his neck after he's been sitting all day. He is looking forward to that run tomorrow, to just be in nature for a bit, not behind his own four walls. And he'll have lovely company from Anya. He has a few trails saved on his phone already, ones that are close enough to the shelter so he does not have to drive the dog around in his car first. They can start with five kilometers tomorrow, and then

figure out how Anya likes it. He bought her treats, after asking Ilya what she likes. Shane walks into his hallway and puts them into his jacket pocket before he can forget them. Maybe he should have gotten Ilya something as a thank you? No, that would probably be weird. Instead, he snaps a picture of the bright, orange packaging sticking out of his pocket and sends it to Ilya.

Shane:

Well prepared for tomorrow, I hope.

Ilya:

She will love you without treats too. She knows people. X

Ilya texts back almost immediately, and that makes Shane feel a bit less weird about even messaging him after they had already ended the conversation earlier. They keep talking as Shane meal preps for the weekend and pick the conversation up after his yoga session. Shane almost forgets to be nervous about tomorrow.

Chapter 3

Ilya

They've been texting all week. Ilya definitely feels that he knows Shane better now. A digital designer sounds very professional and it is all way over his head. He's a bit of a dinosaur when it comes to computers and apart from having a setup installed, to database information and a basic website, he's not really up to date with technology. Social media is a no go for him. No point when he has neither the patience nor interest in other people and definitely has no time for their drama.

Harris and Troy are always trying to get him on there and showing him shit that is unimportant, or the bad stuff that's happening in the world, which is worse. He can't take that. It invades him and makes everything dark. He prefers to live in his own little bubble, understanding that anything essential, or usually unessential, will be told to him by the two fools he works with, whilst laughing along to idiotic shit they find on their screens. Nope. He has no interest in any of it.

Sometimes Luca joins in too. He's just a kid really, very sweet and he seems to adore Ilya, but does enjoy winding Ilya up, with the help of Troy and Harris. Zane and Wyatt are different. They just leave Ilya to live in his own world of the here and now and let him focus on the present and leave the outside world outside. They're all very different people, but they make up his family these days and he secretly loves them all. They know that, he's sure, by the amount of tears he shed, as best man at Troy and Harris' wedding, but he wishes they'd keep the rubbish they watch to themselves, because he doesn't care about it.

But Shane. Well, Shane is different. He wants to know everything. He wants to know about Shane's thoughts, his habits, his family, his favourite things. He wants to know what his dreams are and more than anything, Ilya wants to know if he's reading far too much into their conversations. They laugh and talk about all sorts of things. Ilya's probably spoken to Shane more this week, than to Troy in a month. How will it be when he sees him tomorrow?

He needs to just stick to his lessons, teach Shane what he needs to know and concentrate on that. Focus on the dogs, not Shane. Use them as a buffer. It's just going to be them, for an hour, or more. Filling that time with conversation and trying not to stare. Fuck.

Ilya has no idea how to do any of it. He doesn't have friends, doesn't date, isn't used to human interaction, on this level and doesn't know how to keep his eyes off Shane. Shane is his weakness. He is tearing down every wall Ilya has, piece by piece. Ilya hardly knows him, but in less than a week Shane has turned Ilya into a new person. With everyone else, he's the same old Ilya. He doesn't know how to be both of these people in one place. That may be his biggest fear right now. Is it going to be obvious, when the others see him with Shane? They will see from a mile away that he has feelings. He doesn't want that. He needs to keep them busy. He needs to send them a list of jobs for tomorrow. He messages their work group chat.

Ilya:

Hello, is Ilya. Tomorrow, could you split jobs, but I will do dogs. Have someone in to volunteer and I need to show them how.

He sends it and wonders why he doesn't feel weird telling them it's him, even though they know it's him. He thinks that sounds ok. They won't know he's being weird.

Troy:

Hey man. No probs. So, who's the volunteer? How come I didn't hear about this? 🙄🙄

Harris:

I did. 😏 *Is it the guy from the other day? He's nice, doesn't talk much. Has a thing for Ilya.*
😂

He's joking, but Ilya hates it. Just because they're hopelessly in love, why can't they fuck off and leave him alone.

He answers.

Ilya:

Fuck off Harris. You are dick. 🙄 *He is taking Anya for jogs. Doing me favour. Harris is jealous that I actually speak with Shane and not him. Noone has thing for me. He's idiot.* 🙄

Troy:

Shane, huh? Is he hot? 😏

Ilya:

Leaving now.

He smiles to himself. They're idiots, but they're like the annoying little brothers he wishes he had. He would never tell them that, but he thinks they know. He hears his phone pinging, but won't look. They'll be trying to wind him up. Zane and Wyatt have probably joined in now too. He will just ignore it.

He tries to sleep, but knows he won't. When he gets into a cycle of overthinking, it doesn't happen. He's had volunteers before and never had a problem. Fuck.

The next morning he wakes early, does some sit ups and press ups to wake himself up. He eats breakfast and spends an unusual amount of time deciding what to wear. He picks some jeans and a stripy brown polo shirt. He doesn't have much in the way of clothes, but he likes this shirt. It matches the colour of his hair and reminds him of something you'd have worn in the 70s. It's tight against his skin and he knows his body looks good in it. Whether or not Shane is into him, he wants to look his best.

He heads up to the office earlier than usual, because he wants to make sure that things are going to go well. He tries to avoid the other two, who will no doubt be annoying him as much

as possible. He sees Harris wink at him and laugh as he passes the window. He shakes his head and turns away, to avoid anyone seeing the smile. He's still not looked at the group chat. He's going to find it hard enough to look Shane in the face today, without them making it worse.

As 10.00 approaches, he starts getting fidgety.

Shane

The nervousness returns as soon as he closes the door behind himself the next morning, stays with him during the drive and reaches its peak as he turns into the parking lot. There are only two cars there, and Shane wonders which one is Ilya's, until he spots the "I only break for animals" bumper sticker. That one, he decides. It's so stupid, Ilya would love that sort of thing.

"Don't pretend like you know him," Shane chides himself. He parks his car, grabs his phone and keys, and makes his way to the front door. Shane pushes at it only to realise it must be locked. The shelter does not open for another hour. Ilya told him they would do their little training before other visitors arrived, and Shane was ten minutes early. Maybe he should text Ilya, or go back to the car and wait. Shane had just decided on the second option when he spots movement behind the glass.

Harris looks up from where he's been sorting papers. He waves excitedly, grabs his keys and rushes towards the door. After Harris struggles a bit with the door, Shane steps inside.

"Good morning," Harris grins. "Ilya is just finishing up chores. I think he's almost done. You can go to the dog room. You remember the way?"

"Good morning," Shane points in the direction he thinks he needs to go. "Sorry for disturbing you so early, I wanted to make sure I'd be here on time, and I thought there would be more traffic."

Harris seems to never fully stop smiling, even as he returns to his desk. "No worries. We start our mornings early. Go, find Ilya. He's very excited. I mean... Anya is." Harris winks, then focuses back on his work. Shane cannot help but smile all the way to the dog room. He finds it surprisingly quiet.

There are still dogs there, a lot of them, but they seem much calmer now. One, a fluffy, white ball of fur, spots Shane and barks, only to immediately shut up when Ilya, who just stepped out of one of the kennels, shushes him with one move of his hand.

Fuck. Shane would shut up if Ilya looked at him that way. Or drop to his knees.

Shane blushes, glad that his thoughts can only ever be heard by himself.

"You be quiet, Herbert. We do not greet guest like this," Ilya chides the dog, closing the door behind him, then his eyes meet Shane's. And Shane's knees nearly buckle.

Ilya

"Hello, Shane," he says, suddenly very awkward now he is seeing him in person and trying not to blush. "Herbert is chatty, but is harmless." He smiles at the dog, avoiding Shane's eyes. "Is silly boy, but likes to cuddle. Want to try?" He goes to unlock the kennel.

"Erm...sure. I mean if you...he wasn't angry barking, was he? How do you even tell?"

"No. Just wants cuddle. Can see by how body reacts." He points to him. "See his face. Not showing teeth, growling or defensive body. He is safe. Tail is wagging at you."

"Sure. I'd love to then. Thanks." He gives him a shy smile, as he watches Ilya open the door and the dog comes towards him. He pushes his head into Shane's hand, waiting for Shane to stroke him.

"See. He is good dog. Good starter."

They talk about some basics that Shane will need to know and where he is planning to take Anya. They sit in the kennel run, dog between them as they both stroke him. A dog barks behind them and Herbert spins around, knocking Shane's hand into Ilya's. They both jerk their hands back and Ilya wishes they hadn't. Ilya has been wanting to touch Shane's skin since the moment they met, and a shiver runs through him.

Shane does an awkward chuckle and looks at his feet. "Someone up there is jealous, I see," motioning towards the sound. "Could we go and see Anya, please? See if she wants to go with me?"

"Of course. She will, because you are kind. She knows people and you will be favourite soon. Even more than me." He feigns sadness and then grins. "But I feed her, so maybe not." He smiles again. "Come on." He gets up and offers Shane his hand, as another excuse to touch him.

Shane takes his hand, pulls himself up and watches Ilya's muscles flex as he puts pressure on them. His hands are soft and Ilya wonders how they would feel, stroking his cheek or holding his hand tenderly. "Stop it, idiot," he tells himself. He pulls Shane up and realises Shane is entirely too close now, as they look into each others eyes, faces flush and breathing heavy, as they try to control it. "Come on. Let's go see her. But don't be favourite. Is my job to be most loved," he says.

They head towards Anya's kennel and Ilya watches as she wags her tail at Shane. "See, you're favourite already," he teases. They enter and Ilya watches as Shane squats at her level, trying not to notice the curve of his arse and his leg muscles as he does. Shane strokes Anya and scratches behind her ear. She loves that. Considering Shane doesn't know much about dogs, these two seem to have a lovely bond. It's like they're a different species, but have the same personality. "Maybe that's why I'm drawn to them both", he thinks to himself.

He talks Shane through some last things and explains how to notice when she's getting tired or just needs to stop. He hopes she doesn't affect his running routine too much, but if this all

works out, he knows they will find their own routine.

Eventually Ilya asks him if he's ready to go. Shane seems confident and Anya is all excited as they leave the kennel and head towards the reception area. "Look after each other." He says it to Anya, because he doesn't want Shane to see his face as he says goodbye. Doesn't want anything to flash up that may give him away. "See you soon." He says, all smiles as he watches them leave.

He turns to walk back in, hiding a grin and looking at the hand that had touched Shane's twice today. He feels a warmth in his tummy as he walks. He hears someone clear their throat and turns to see Troy.

"Went well then? Seems like a nice guy. You two seemed to be getting on great on the floor when I came past. New best friend, or...."

"Fuck off," he says, but with a soft tone. "Don't be dick."

He knows they see something but they've never talked about his sexual orientation and they've never seen him show an interest, because he doesn't. He lives for work and until Shane walked in, there was never anyone he felt drawn to this much. He slept with women in his teenage years, messed around with men and women when he came over here, but he hasn't in a long time and had decided that that was it. He had seen himself growing old alone. Just giving himself to his work.

As far as Harris and Troy are concerned, Ilya assumes they thought he was asexual or something. He's always taken the approach of you like who you like and even though he is more attracted to men, he really enjoyed his time with girls.

"Hey. Just say it how I see it. He could be a good friend for you." Troy's words seem innocent enough, but his face says something different.

"Yes, maybe he is. Is nice to have a person who isn't asshole." He laughs and walks away.

Troy laughs and goes back to work.

Chapter 4

Shane

By the time Shane leaves the shelter with Anya, it is almost noon and he is off his schedule by at least an hour. Luckily, there is no deadline at the moment, and his meeting with his boss is at 5pm, so he'll just have to add a few hours of work in the evening. It takes a while to find the entrance to the path that leads to the woods, and Anya is very excited to sniff around, but Shane tries to do what Ilya told him, and soon, he is able to pick up his pace and fall into a slow jog, Anya falling into step with him.

Sooner than he would have expected, they find a speed that works for them both, and Shane's hand loosens the tight, almost painful grip he has on the lead. The fear fades with every mile through the woods, and he starts to trust Anya and begins trusting himself with her. Ilya was right, she is a wonderful dog, and she loves this, just moving, jumping over roots and ducking under twigs that hang over the path.

There are a few people around and Shane can hear a group of elderly ladies chatting as they walk close by. He hears children giggling from the main path, but he barely sees anyone. It's good. Shane likes this peaceful quiet. He nods at another dog walker as he passes by, Anya barely acknowledging the puppy in favour of keeping up with Shane.

It's good. It's fun. It's good to have company. To be alone but not lonely.

They take a break at a small brook, and Shane lets Anya jump into the water. She yaps happily, then drinks a bit of water, before splashing around.

"God, you are sweet." Shane tells her, taking a sip from his water bottle as well. "What if I just never bring you back?"

It's a silly thought, of course. Shane is not a dog person, he's always preferred cats. And Ilya would be very upset. It's obvious he adores Anya and has a special bond with her.

"Wouldn't do that, don't worry," Shane says to a dog who is not paying attention to him at all.

It takes him a while to convince Anya to leave the brook and start making their way back. He can't blame her. It's a warm day, sunlight dancing through the leaves and along the path, bringing life to the subtle tones of nature around them. Shane finds himself wondering if Ilya's hair would be just as golden.

"Oh, stop it." he chides himself, voice thin, breathless. "Just enjoy the fucking woods and stay in the moment." He is bad at that, he knows, but he tries by focusing on the birds song above them and the soft thud of Anya's paws on the moss. Shane remembers the feeling of pine needles and soft earth against his feet from when he used to run around the woods as a kid. He had spent every summer holiday at his parent's cottage, and had loved to just exist in nature. That part of him is long lost, has been pushed aside to make room for an adult who spends most of his days inside and has only five friends, two of them being his parents.

Maybe he should find out if that kid is still in there, somewhere. He could bring a towel, feel the ground under his bare feet for a while, wash off the dirt in the brook.

As he circles back to the shelter, Shane realises that volunteering at the shelter might not just be about wanting to see Ilya again, or help the dogs, but also for himself.

There are a few more cars in the carpark by the time Shane makes it back and Shane has to make a bit of a detour to avoid running into an elderly lady and her giant dog. He should ask Ilya about how to act in a situation where Anya comes across other dogs to avoid any trouble.

A younger guy holds the front door open for them, and Shane nods politely,

“Ah, hi, Shane,” Harris waves at him. “Just bring her back to where you picked her up. One of the boys should be back there to unlock her kennel.”

Ilya, Shane hopes.

And Ilya does not disappoint. He is talking to a couple when Shane pushes the door to the dog area open. His hair is not golden in the sunlight, but that is because it is trapped under a baseball cap right now. Ilya shouldn't look that hot in a backwards cap. It is unfair. He should look ridiculous in it, as any other man, but the Russian is apparently incapable of it.

Bluegreen eyes meet his for a moment, as Ilya looks his way and Shane flushes red, before realising he is not the one catching the other man's attention, it is Anya. The little dog barks happily as soon as she spots Ilya. The sound causes a raucous with the other dogs, one that is put to a stop by Ilya's sharp voice. Fuck, he really is good with dogs, and it is fucking hot. Shane is glad he is already red and sweaty, or else the Russian might have noticed his effect on him.

Ilya's voice softens a moment later. “Anya. You are back. You take good care of Shane, yes? Good girl.” He kneels, scratching her ears, all humans apparently forgotten for a while. “You enjoy your run, I can see.” Ilya's eyes are back on him, as he reaches a hand out to Shane. It takes an embarrassingly long time for him to realise that Ilya wants the leash back. Shane overcompensates by shoving it at him once he does.

“She was great,” he coughs, mouth feeling dry. “We had fun.”

“Good.” Ilya gets back up. “You come back soon?”

“Yes, I...”

“Good. Text, yes?” With that, Ilya turns to the couple. “Will be right back.”

Right. He's at work. No time to hang out with Shane. What was he even expecting? Hoping for?

“I'll text. Have a good day.” That's all Shane gets out before he turns and moves back the way he came from. He hasn't even said goodbye to Anya, Shane realises as he reaches his

car. He'll have to come back soon, and make it up to her.

Ilya

He hated that it was busy when Shane returned Anya this morning. He didn't even get a chance to talk to him. He did, however, get a chance to look at him. Hot, pulse beating in his throat, his smell drifting towards Ilya. Shane, mixed with a raw, primal scent that makes him want to lick the bead of sweat, slowly sliding beneath the neck of his running shirt.

He can't let himself get distracted and if he stops to talk to him, he will find it hard to pull away. He talks to Anya. That's easier. He holds a hand out for the leash, wanting Shane to pass it to him, risking their skin touching, but Shane just stands there. Maybe he doesn't want to be near him. Maybe this morning and the fact that their hands touched, was too much. Maybe it disgusted him that he'd touched another man. Shane doesn't seem the type, but he can't stand to think that Shane would be disgusted by him like that. He texts him. Best way to see what he is like.

Ilya:

Hi. Wanted to thank you for today. Anya had great time. She says she would like second date if you would. 🐾🍖

He sends it, but then regrets it. Shane will probably think he's either a complete idiot, or flirting and not like it. "Fucking idiot!" He hisses to himself. He goes to delete it, but Shane's text bubbles are already there.

Shane:

Tell her she was the perfect date and I would happily see her again. ❤️

He relaxes.

Ilya:

I am sorry I didn't get to see you. Was very busy, but that is good thing. Have so many people wanting pets. 😊 Lots of visits to do.

Shane:

Oh no, that's cool. I know you're busy. That's great that people want to adopt. 😊

Ilya:

Yes, is very good. Maybe next time I can speak more. When are you coming back?

Ilya:

Anya is asking. X

Shane:

*Oh, is she? Hmm, well, tell her to stop being such a drama queen and I'll be back soon. ☺
Maybe Monday? Would that work for you?*

Shane:

I mean Anya of course!

Ilya laughs. Shane gets him. He doesn't think he's an idiot and isn't disgusted by him.

Ilya:

Will be waiting. 😊

They text a few times, before saying goodnight. He can't wait to see Shane on Monday and thinks about texting him over the weekend, but he doesn't. Shane might not like that.

As Monday rolls around, Shane arrives. Ilya is feeding the rabbits and sees Troy beam at him as he follows Shane up the hallway.

“Thank you, Troy.” Ilya says, rolling his eyes to himself.

“Hi Shane. Nice to see you. Any questions about last time?”

They talk for a while about other dogs and some “what happens if?” questions, which Shane has plenty of, now he's come out of himself a bit more. They talk as Ilya continues to feed the guinea pigs and Shane helps him out by stroking them as they squeak loudly.

He likes how Shane covers everything, but hates that he overthinks and worries about too many things. He wonders what it's like inside his pretty head. It's definitely chaotic in Ilya's head too, but he doesn't worry about things like Shane seems to. It's nice to see how Shane's anxiety seems to quieten as his questions get answered and he can see his body relax. He wonders if this is part of why Shane runs. Maybe it's his way to work through his thoughts and relieve his stress. Ilya runs when he has time, but he usually has to resort to other ways of relieving his stress. Ways that often include thinking about a sweaty Shane, tight shirt and tiny shorts clinging to his body. He quietly pushes that aside and carries on the conversation. He wonders how many people Shane has in his life. He can't imagine there are many and even Ilya probably has more than him, even though they're work friends.

They collect Anya together and Ilya watches them leave. He takes care of as many jobs as he can, wanting more time with Shane, when he returns, if he can get it.

When Shane returns, they place Anya back and this time, Shane's hands touch Ilya's as he passes the leash, fingertips brushing as their eyes flick towards each other, before quickly looking away.

They chat for longer than they thought they would, about work and things they enjoy. Shane happily follows Ilya from place to place, sharing Ilya's personal space once or twice and Ilya not minding in the slightest. Shane leans over him, occasionally, to get something, or bends

close to pick something up. Shane seems at ease here, with the furballs and the fluffy monsters, as Ilya's mother would call them.

Ilya's pretty sure that Shane is as lonely as he seems and that breaks his heart. No one should be lonely. He had that when he came to this country and he hated every second of it. Now, he chooses to be alone, which is different. He has people when he needs them. Shane talks about Hayden and his family as part of anecdotes. He talks about his parents when he says that he didn't have any pets growing up and Ilya sees a look on his face which is maybe him regretting that now, after seeing what animals can do for him. They say goodbye and Ilya spends the rest of the day with a smile on his face.

He texts him that evening.

Ilya:

Thank you for chat today. ☺ Sometimes I get too stuck into work. Need distraction.

Shane:

You're welcome. I'm good at distracting people. People usually give up when I ask too many questions. You did well. 🤖

Ilya:

I like that you ask questions. Is good to learn. You do ask lots of questions! 😄 I don't mind. I like to look smart.

Shane:

You are smart, Ilya. Very knowledgeable. 🧠

Ilya smiles and holds back thoughts about all of the things he wants to teach Shane and show him how good he is at them. He texts him back, trying to distract himself.

Ilya:

What are you doing tonight, Mr sociable? Party as usual? 🕺

Shane:

No, I figured a well deserved night off, with me, a good book 📖 and a comfy sofa. 🛋️ You?

Ilya:

Me? Party alone, maybe read book. Someone told me books are good. Maybe I will give them try and see if I like them. 🤔 Any good ones? Won't have them but can tell you I do. 😄

Shane:

Maybe I can lend you some? What type of books do you think you would like? 🧑🏻‍🦱🗨️😄🌹
👁️🚓?

Ilya wonders if this is a test. Maybe Shane is trying to find out about him. He doesn't want to answer it wrong. Romance would be good. He needs some, but he's not opening that can of worms with Shane.

Ilya:

Not sure. Like facts but also comedy. You don't seem like man who likes fun. 😂

He sees Shane typing for a long time and nothing appears on screen

Either it's a huge message or he keeps rewriting it. Either way, he's not sure he wants to know.

Shane:

I like fun, just not people. Am I really that boring?

Ilya:

Yes. Very boring. 😂

Ilya:

I am boring too. But not as boring as you, Shane. 🗨️

Shane:

You're an idiot! 😏

Ilya chuckles and they continue to chat about books.

Chapter 5

Shane

Shane finds a new routine over the next few weeks. He finds that going on a run with Anya during the week works best on Mondays and Wednesdays. He mostly works independently, but he has a biweekly zoom meeting with his bosses at 5, so he is working later those days anyway. Now he can start those days by driving to the shelter. He comes back on Saturdays, when he has more time to stick around after, talking with the staff, and playing with some kittens.

Four weeks in and he knows most of the morning shift's coffee orders, picking it up for them, but not telling them that it is a bit of a detour because he doesn't want to bring them the cheap stuff. He is pathetic, but they don't need to know that. Ilya does not need to know that.

Tomorrow, Shane needs to get to the shelter earlier than usual because he needs to be at his mom's favourite restaurant for her birthday lunch, but he does not want to miss out on the good weather. He texts Ilya.

Shane:

Will be there at eight tomorrow if that's okay. 😞

It's late, he probably shouldn't bother Ilya, when the man works so much already. He shouldn't bring up work at 11 at night. Still, he needs to know if he can even get in that early, or...

Ilya:

You are crazy person. You ever sleep long? 😂

Ilya's response came quickly, it always does.

Shane:

I do sleep in sometimes. But I have a lot to do tomorrow.

Shane:

But if it is too early, I understand. I want to help, not make things stressful. If you want to sleep in.

Ilya:

No, never sleep in. Dogs need morning cuddles. ☺

Shane smiles at that. He knows Ilya would have all the dogs sleep in his house if he could.

Shane:

Of course they do.

Ilya:

Come at eight. You bring coffee? ☕

Shane:

Of course. See you tomorrow.

Ilya:

Is only me early. See you tomorrow, Shane.

That is why Shane shows up at the shelter with two coffees and his best running shirt. The door is unlocked and he can just walk in, following the hallways that have become very familiar. He greets his favourite cats, scratches some ears through the cages, then steps outside to find Ilya.

They have their coffee sitting on the bench in front of Ilya's little home, and the silence is comfortable, like they have an unspoken agreement to start the day without words. Well, starting is not the right word. Ilya must have fed all the animals already, because the cats' bowls had been filled. Shane wonders if he ever sleeps, especially because there is not a lot of staff working here.

"You usually have help in the morning, don't you?" Shane asks when his coffee is mostly empty.

Ilya nods his head, resting his forearms on his thighs, rolling his cup between his hands slowly. "Troy is here mornings, but has anniversary with Harris. Wyatt has family, so no work on weekends, Zane too. Is okay, I can manage alone for bit."

"And you call me a crazy person for not sleeping in. How many animals is that? You must have worked for like two hours already, just to feed them."

Ilya shrugs. "I like breakfast time. Is quiet."

"Did you have breakfast yet?" Shane knows him well enough by now to know Ilya would neglect himself rather than not take care of the animals here.

A small shake of his head makes Ilya's curls bounce. "Later. Coffee is good." Ilya turns to smile at Shane, making his knees weak. "Thank you for coffee."

"You're welcome," Shane smiles. "You could have told me yesterday. I could have come earlier. Helped you out a bit."

Ilya pulls up his eyebrows, leans back to rest against the back of the bench. "You just want excuse to hang out with cats."

Shane chuckles. "Hush, don't tell Anya that I'm more of a cat person."

The Russian moves his thumb and pointer finger across his lips as if to zip them shut.

"I mean it though. Tell me next time. I can help." Shane sits up, walks over to the bin. "You stay there, enjoy your coffee. I'll pick her up, and we'll be back in about an hour, okay?"

Ilya just nods. Shane feels his eyes on him as he walks towards the kennels, picking up the key from its usual spot. He is greeted with a lot of enthusiasm by a bouncy ball of fur, and he

kneels to pet her.

Ten minutes later, they are on their usual route, Shane's footsteps thudding steadily against the soft forest floor. "No swim break today, okay bud? We have to feed a stubborn Russian."

The dog barks, and Shane takes it as her agreeing that her dad works too much. Funny, Shane thinks, that Hayden had told him the same not too long ago. And yes, he sometimes gets lost in his projects, wanting to finish them quickly, which clashes with his perfectionism. No one, Shane knows, has died because their new website design is one or two days late. Still, Shane has never missed a deadline, not even in school. He'd rather work through the night. Maybe he and Ilya are similar in that way.

In the end, he cannot deny Anya her little swim, so he is in a bit of a rush when he returns. Ilya is at the desk for once, looking very focused as he types something up. Shane just places the paper bag next to him and turns to bring Anya back without disturbing him. He gives her some more cuddles, fills up her water, puts the leash back into its spot, and finally makes his way back.

Ilya is on the phone when he reaches the lobby, half-eaten sandwich in the other hand, which he lifts when he spots Shane. He mouths a thank you, and there is that smile again, small but earnest. Shane just waves back, hiding his blush by quickly leaving.

Shane is fifteen minutes late by the time he arrives at the restaurant. He hugs his parents, apologizes profusely, and places the bag with Yuna's present on the empty chair next to him. They spend a lot of their lunch talking about hockey. His mom manages hockey players and adores the sport. Shane played for most of his life, up to university level, and he could have probably even had a future in the sport, but decided against it in the end. He knows Yuna supports him, but would have loved to have a son in the NHL. Now, she just treats the players she works with as her additional sons.

"I just know they will make the playoffs this year. No Stanley cup, not this year, but they will make it pretty far."

Yuna finishes her speech, taking a sip of her wine. "Anything new in your life, Shane?" She asks. She always does, but he usually does not have any updates. He does this time. Shane finds himself gushing over Anya, praising the shelter and Ilya's hard work. From the look his parents share, Ilya's name has probably come up a lot.

"And this Ilya, is he... cute?" David asks, earning a nudge from his wife.

"I... he has his moments, I guess." Shane says, blushing a bit. "He is mostly very serious, but he drops that when he interacts with the animals. He adores dogs."

"What your dad wants to know is if you like him." Yuna clarifies, making Shane's face flush more.

"It's not like that. I just help out."

Luckily, that is when their food arrives and the topic of Shane's silly little crush on Ilya does

not come up again. Shane cannot forget it, though. When he gets home, he looks up ways to get over a crush. None of the suggestions seem helpful. What makes it even worse is when a text from Ilya comes in.

Ilya:

Thank you for sandwich. 🥪 Saved my life this morning.

Shane:

You are very dramatic, Ilya.

Ilya:

Yes 😊 Was very good sandwich.

Shane:

I'm glad. Did you cope on your own? Sorry, I couldn't stay, it's my mom's birthday.

Shane sits back against the sofa.

Ilya:

Was okay. Haas came to help.

Ilya:

Happy birthday to your mother. 🎉

Shane:

That's good. Luca seems great. 😊

Ilya:

He is. Is still baby, but works hard. Loves animals. Takes good care.

Shane:

Glad you have good help. You cannot do all the work on your own.

Ilya:

Yes, mother. 😊

Shane blushes, turns the screen away for a moment as if to hide it. It's silly.

Shane:

You know it's true.

Ilya:

You tell me stop smoking next? 🚬

Shane:

Yes. It is bad for you.

Ilya:

I can still run faster than you, I bet.

Shane huffs. Man, he is annoying sometimes.

Shane:

Bet is on. You need to join Anya and me soon. 🏃 🏃 🐕

Ilya:

You come on Monday, yes? I have day off. I join you. 😁

Shane bites his lip. The thought of Ilya in a tight running shirt, or even worse, trousers, does things to him. His answering text is more confident than he feels.

Shane:

Loser buys coffee.

Ilya:

Deal. Have good night, Shane. X

Shane:

Night, Ilya. X

Shane drops his head back against the cushions. “How to make your crush worse. Fucking flirt via text.” he chides himself. He should spend less time with Ilya, not more. But then, Shane hasn’t felt this good about himself in a long time. Shane huffs again, staring at the ceiling for a while. He falls asleep right there.

Ilya

Shane:

Did you sleep?

Ilya receives the text as he is just finishing up with Scott, the vet. He knows that Scott sees the smile on his lips.

“Good news?” Scott asks, looking at Ilya.

“No, just friend. He is making sure I sleep.” He laughs. “Thinks I work too hard, smoke too much and will die soon.” He chuckles to himself. He texts back.

Ilya:

Yes. More than usual. Thank you for checking. X

“That’s morbid, but we all have to die sometimes, right? It must be nice having a friend that cares so much. Has he always been so protective?”

“Oh, is new friend. Helps at shelter.” He types a reply back to Shane, amused by his own response and tries to push back the grin on his face.

Scott gives him a look that he can’t work out. “Oh, you’ve become very close, very quickly then? So is he a friend, friend, or a buddy?” Ilya looks away, suddenly busy doing something, as the air between them becomes awkward.

He knows what Scott is asking. “Just friend,” he blushes. “Maybe you meet him one day.”

“I’d like that. He sounds... interesting. You never listen to us. Do you listen to him?”

“Sometimes.” He grins at Scott, who knows he probably doesn’t. Scott’s been the vet here for years. He is fairly young, but knows how things work and is good at his job. He comes around a few times a week and sorts out the list of animals Ilya has waiting. He’s a good guy. Very gentle, quiet, but always easy to talk to.

They walk through the building and Ilya helps him return his things to his car. “Thank you for today. More things ticked off list.”

“Yeah. I’ll be back Monday for the rest. Get those microchips finished and we will be back on track.”

Ilya remembers. “Am not working Monday, but Troy will be here. I have day off. I know, don’t die. Will be good for me, they say.”

Scott laughs and pats his shoulder. “Ok. I will find Troy. Doing anything nice?”

“Going running with Shane.” He pauses. “The new friend.” He smiles softly, before it becomes wider. “Have to prove I am faster than him.” He grins and laughs. “Will have to win. Have to prove he is wrong.” his phone pings again.

Shane:

Someone has to check on you. You don't look after yourself. 🍌

Ilya lets out a laugh.

Ilya:

I run rings around you. Have you seen muscles I have? 💪

Ilya bites his lip, knowing he’s flirting, but hoping Shane won’t notice or care.

Shane:

Doesn't mean you're fast. Just means you're strong. Besides, I am pretty muscular myself, beneath it all. I have hidden abilities that you haven't seen yet. 💪🏃

Yet. That gives him hope. Maybe he will get to see Shane’s “hidden abilities” after all. Trying to stay calm and not get carried away, he texts back.

Shane:

Also, you're an asshole.

Ilya:

But a fast one. 🐶 🏃 🌲 🌲 🌲 🌲 🏃

Ilya:

That is you, way, way, way behind. 🏃

He laughs and waves goodbye to Scott. His mind drifts as he thinks about Shane. There is a lot he would like to do to that asshole.

Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

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

Shane

Shane is running a bit late. There was a long queue at the café, and then the barista had gotten Wyatt's order wrong and had to redo it. He pushes past a group of visitors and places Harris' mug next to him, as he is in the middle of a very lively discussion with a blonde woman who is clutching a small, white, fluffy dog. After that he goes to find Wyatt, then Troy.

"Hi, Shane," Troy stops from where he is cleaning up, taking his hot chocolate. "Thanks for that. I still think you should let me pay you for those."

"Morning. And don't you dare," Shane smiles. "It is my pleasure to help out."

Troy raises his cup, takes a careful sip. "You're going for a run with the boss, today, right?" He nods towards Ilya's building.

"Yes, he said he'd join me on his day off. I have to prove to him that smoking does affect his running." He smiles at the memory of their texts, at the flirting.

"Oh, yeah. We swapped shifts, actually," Troy shrugs. "He wanted Mondays off and I get Fridays off, now, which is nice, because Harris is also home."

The small smile that dances around the dark-haired man's lips, as he speaks of his husband makes Shane grin as well. The two of them have just moved into a bigger place and seem to love it. Shane is so caught up in that thought that he almost misses what Troy just said.

"He did?" Shane schools his face, not wanting to seem too excited about Ilya rearranging his schedule, planning a day off around Shane's visits. His heart thumps harder in his chest, pumping the thought that maybe he likes him too, into every part of his body.

"Yeah, and we're glad he did. All he does is work." Troy nods towards Ilya, who is now making his way towards them. He is wearing work-out gear, which consists of long dark trousers and a white vest that hides nothing. His nipples, a dark outline against the fabric that stretches across his chest, showing off his pecs and abs. He looks insane, like a Greek god, sculpted out of marble by one of the masters. Shane has to look away, hiding his moan into the coffee cup. "You should tell him not to work so hard. He won't listen to us." Troy says that last part loud enough for the Russian to hear, directing it at him.

"Is because I am boss," Ilya says, looking at his employee seriously, then turning to Shane, and his smile makes Shane's knees weak.

"Hello, Shane. Only nice person here." Ilya glares at Troy, failing to hide a small smile, as he accepts his cup of coffee, while the dark-haired man just raises an eyebrow.

"I'll go get Anya," Shane says, needing to take a moment to breathe, to process all of that information - and Ilya's looks. He'd noticed how defined the Russian's body was, of course, having also learned that the only thing Ilya ever does for himself is work-out, but he usually wears the shirts with the shelter's logo. Nothing quite as tight to his skin as today, which is

stretched tight enough to tear. It is unfair, really, to get Shane all hot and bothered before their run. It is an unfair advantage.

Shane goes through the motions of getting Anya out of her kennel. He pets Watson, her roomie, an elderly dog with bad arthritis, who is just glad that he does not have to tag along on any of their adventures.

“We will be back soon, old man,” Shane tells him, putting Anya’s harness on her, then clipping on the leash.

“Already expert,” A familiar voice says behind him. Ilya has apparently already finished his coffee. “You can take over when Troy pushes me into breakdown.” Ilya rubs a palm against the back of his neck, seeming a bit unsure if the joke will hit.

It doesn’t. It is too close to the truth, maybe. In the few weeks Shane has known Ilya, it has become apparent that he does spend all the time he has for and with the animals. “Don’t blame that on Troy. That is all you,” Shane reaches out to poke at his chest to bring the point across, but holds back, arm frozen in the space between them for an awkward moment before he drops it.

“Yes, yes, I know. No smoking, less work. Anything else, Dr. Hollander?” Ilya raises a brow at him.

“More sleep,” Shane adjusts his stance as Anya pulls him towards the doors. “Okay, okay, girl. Yes, I know. We should go.”

Shane reaches to lock the kennel door.

Ten minutes later, Ilya annoyingly proves to him that he is very much capable of keeping up with him, as they race along the paths that have become familiar to Shane, but have suddenly lost some of their peacefulness. Instead, Shane finds himself giggling as the adrenaline coursing through him, trying to find an outlet.

Shane is just a few steps in front of Ilya now, after cutting a corner, as he leaps over a root that he knows is coming, turns a corner, and then his back is shoved against a tree as Ilya stumbles, catching himself against the rough bark with one hand.

“Sorry,” he huffs, trying to find his feet.

Ilya is so close.

His lips are right there, just an inch or two away.

His breath is hot on Shane’s skin, coming in short, quick puffs.

His hand curls against Shane’s bicep, almost burning through the fabric of Shane’s shirt.

Ilya is so fucking close, and he is smiling, as if he can’t believe this is happening either.

He is so terrifyingly close, that all Shane has to do is tilt his chin up and rest his mouth against Ilya's, to taste the caramel on his lips, on his tongue.

His fingers hover just above the other man's hips, coming to rest there, in an attempt to stop them from crashing into each other. It is the gap he closes first, his palms finding the dip where thigh meets torso, the heat seeping through the thin layer that separates skin from skin.

Ilya follows the movement with his eyes, before blue and green eyes find his, and Shane is glad he is holding on to him, or else he might have just toppled over.

"Shane," the other man breathes, and Shane cannot hold back anymore, moving slowly forward.

An impatient bark stops him in his movement as Anya tugs on the leash.

Ilya takes a step back.

The moment is gone.

"She..." Shane tries to find his voice. "She loves water. We always pause here for a bit so she can jump around in the brook." Shane nods towards their usual spot, peeling himself off the tree to follow her, trying to calm his racing heart.

Ilya

Ilya's heart feels like it's beating a hole through his chest as he looks at him. He can feel his hand shaking as it touches Shane's skin, muscly arms holding him up. His eyes look beautiful from here, like deep pools at midnight. He wants to look closer and swim into his body through them, but his lips.... his lips are so soft and plump, with a hint of red from the run. Ilya wants to touch him, stroke his smooth face with his hand, but he's frozen. Shane's breath against his skin makes him prickle all over and causes something to stir inside him. When Shane's hands land on his hips, he wants to moan, lean in and take his mouth in a deep kiss, letting his hands roam over Shane. He can't. He's stuck, unable to move. All he can manage is a fucking smile, as his eyes look into Shane's. He wants this, but he's scared. What if there are no feelings from Shane? He can't risk losing him. He can't fuck this up.

He wants this, so fucking much. So much that his entire body aches with exhaustion and tingles with excitement, all at the same time. He needs to know. 'Be brave, you idiot. Fucking grow a pair and man up.' His father's words echo in his mind. Words that he's heard far too many times. He's a coward and he's going to change that. He takes a breath and whispers the only word he can. "Shane." He doesn't even know what he wants to say, but he sees Shane start to move forward and his heart hurts. Fuck, this is it. What he's been waiting for. But a bark breaks the silence and Shane's arm is tugged on the leash. Ilya steps back, before they both fall over. Maybe it's also because he is a coward after all. He is an idiot.

They both feel the mood shift, words left unsaid and focus now back on Anya. Shane says something, but he completely misses it. "We should go," Ilya says quietly, almost a mumble, before turning and starting to run back. It takes a few seconds for Shane to catch up, running silently next to him, no laughing, no teasing each other, just silent and lost in their thoughts. An urge to say something keeps washing over him. A need to fix this, to find out, one way or the other, but each time he stops himself. It's not the time. He feels like an asshole, who had his chance and fucked it up and it may never come along again.

As they reach the centre, they put Anya back, all polite smiles and few words. It's awkward, as they both talk over the top of each other, terrified of silence, but unsure of what to say. Shane avoids being too close and he wonders if Shane knows how pathetic he is. What kind of idiot can't even kiss someone who he has fantasized about for weeks? Ilya can't look him in the eye, afraid of what he may see there. Disappointment, anger, sadness. He doesn't need to see them, he's living them.

"So, I guess I'll go," Shane says in a small voice, fixated on an imaginary spot on the floor and obviously waiting for something.

"Okay. See you later." Ilya's making himself busy, filling up Anya's water bowl to distract himself. "Goodbye Shane."

"Oh, ok. Um, bye then." He turns and begins to leave, hands in his pockets and looking defeated.

Ilya closes his eyes and breathes deeply, frozen on the spot. "Shane." His voice is louder now, more courageous. He's going to tell him. Fuck it. He needs this. He spins around to face him, both looking into each other's eyes. Ilya takes a step towards him, followed by Shane, so they're just outside of each other's personal space. "Shane, I'm..."

"Ilya, thought you weren't in today!" He wants to scream at Scott as a hand lands on his shoulder. The Russian gives Shane a pained look and Shane turns to leave. "Don't go on my account," the vet directs to Shane. He shakes his hand towards Shane. "You must be Shane. I've heard all about you." The vet gives Ilya a look that says he sees why he's heard so much about him, now he's seen him. "I'm Scott. Scott Hunter. The one who comes to rescue the animals that are in pain from listening to this man's singing." He nods towards Ilya, as he grins at Shane, holding out a hand to shake it. Ilya doesn't like that Scott gets to touch him and he doesn't. It's all he wants and the last thing he wants, all at once.

"He is vet. Cool job but is old and boring. No fun," Ilya says, deadpan, trying not to sound too irritated. "I don't sing. Ever. Definitely not to you." He nudges Scott's arm, trying to lighten the mood, wearing a fake smile as he pats his back, just needing some uncomplicated human contact.

"Nice to meet you, Scott. Hope you've heard good things." Shane musters a smile, but Ilya is aware that it's not real. "I've... I've got to go. Sorry. Have a really busy day today, but it was lovely to meet you. Bye Ilya." He smiles at Scott, avoiding Ilya's face as he leaves. Fuck.

"I like him, he seems nice. Cute too." Scott winks at him and lets out a little laugh, making Ilya feel a surge of something go through him, whether it is anger or jealousy. He wonders if Scott is attracted to men. Ilya has never really given it any thought.

"Yeah, he is good friend," Ilya says, trying to hold himself together, heart breaking inside him when he realises that maybe that friendship is over. Maybe it is all over. Whatever this was, has ended. He tidies some things on a shelf, that don't even need tidying, to avoid eye contact. He cannot show his weakness, even to someone who he knows wouldn't care. He makes his excuses to leave and hides in his room, hating himself, for the rest of the day. He doesn't deserve Shane. If he can't be brave enough for him, he doesn't deserve his love.

Chapter End Notes

OMG almost kiiisssss

We'd love some feedback <3

Chapter 7

Shane

Shane doesn't remember the drive home, even though he must have taken the right turns, stopped at traffic lights and passed city hall. He parks the car in his usual spot and just sits, staring into nothingness.

"Fuck, you just embarrassed yourself," he breathes, slumping forward until his forehead meets the steering wheel. Ilya must think he is desperate, trying to kiss someone just because they are being nice to him and flirting a bit.

By the time he makes it to his flat, Shane has himself utterly convinced that Ilya wouldn't have wanted to kiss him, that he doesn't like him that way, that Ilya just flirts, but doesn't mean it. Not kissing, in the end, was probably the best outcome.

Shane tries to distract himself. He does some breathing exercises and attempts to do Yoga, but his brain refuses to shut up.

Finally, he sits down and works. It helps. He manages to finish a project and tells his bosses about it during the meeting. Then, after some adjustments, he calls the client to present the results. He discusses her feedback with her and adjusts the features of the website accordingly. By the time he shuts off the computer, it is almost 10.

Shane walks to the kitchen to warm up a meal, remembering how he and Ilya had text each other about cooking, a few days ago.

Ilya, who he almost kissed.

Here he goes again.

"Maybe I should buy Anya some more treats to thank her for saving me from further embarrassment," Shane tells his sweet potato curry as he stirs it. "Maybe I should apologize to Ilya."

He scoffs at his own idea. He'd only embarrass himself further, trying to explain. And he might expose his silly crush at the same time, ruining any chance of a friendship. So maybe, as in most things in his life, Shane should just go on as usual. So he eats, does the dishes, and sits down on his sofa with his phone.

Shane:

It was a good run. I am impressed, 🤔 you run fast... for a smoker.

Shane texts.

The run, that we almost kissed on. Shit. Change of topic. Shane flops back against the back of the sofa, wanting to throw his phone against the wall. Instead, he types out another message.

Shane:

It was good to meet Scott today. He seems like a nice guy.

Shane:

I hope he did not think I was rude. I had to get to work.

Three dots appear as Ilya types, and Shane bites his lip as he waits for the answer.

Ilya:

Yes, is good vet. Old, 🙄 but good.

Shane raises an eyebrow.

Shane:

He is not that old. Seems barely older than us.

Shane:

Anyway, I'll be back on Wednesday, maybe I can talk to him a bit longer then.

Ilya:

Yes.

Ilya:

Very busy this week.

Ilya:

Maybe I will not see you much.

And with that, all of Shane's hope that they might just go back to normal, are shattered. He's always seen Ilya before and after his runs, even if there had been stuff to do, there had been enough time for a quick chat at least. Is Ilya trying to avoid seeing him now? Does he want to put some distance between them? Maybe it's understandable. Maybe it's a good thing.

Shane tries to seem unbothered as he texts back.

Shane:

Alright. Do you know what kind of coffee Scott likes? I can bring some for him. ☕

There. Now Ilya knows Shane is not obsessed with the almost kiss, and that he can move on from it.

Ilya:

Don't know.

Ilya:

Ask him.

Shane nods to himself.

Shane:

I will. Good night, Ilya. 🙌

Ilya:

Good night.

They don't text the next day, and Shane tries not to think about it too much. Ilya said he had a lot to do, but Shane can just talk to him tomorrow... probably... maybe.

He drives to the shelter on Wednesday, picks up the coffee order for everyone on shift and takes a calming breath before stepping in. Wyatt and Troy are at the front desk, discussing orders. They look up when Shane enters.

"You are an angel," Wyatt says, reaching out to pick his coffee from the cupholder.

"You really are," Troy nods, doing the same. "That coffee maker in the staff room is shit. Hey, I'll take Ilya's too, okay? He'll pick it up later. There is so much to do." With that, Shane is left with only his own cup, and has now got no excuse to see Ilya. He forces a smile.

"Least I can do. You deserve good coffee, for all the work you do."

"Hell yes, we do, but we're still very grateful," Wyatt bumps his shoulder with his fist. "So thanks, man. Have a good run, yeah?"

"I certainly will," Shane nods, then steps away from the two men. Maybe he should just talk to them more in the future. Wyatt is a huge nerd, he has so much knowledge about Cartoons and Comics, but he also loves hockey, so they have something in common. He hasn't talked to Zane much, but he is funny. And Troy is just a proudly gay man, married to Harris, the love of his life. Shane could really use friends that are part of the LGBTQI+ community, because he has never really felt like he is part of it, maybe because he only realised he liked men after college, and had never hung out at bars or clubs with other queer people. Surely, Harris would take him along to that bar he had mentioned before, some sort of a gay sports bar called 'the Kingfisher'. It sounded like a place Shane could enjoy. Not too loud, or too packed with people, just a spot to hang out at.

Shane tries to focus on that but cannot help but look out for Ilya, while he goes through the motions of getting ready for the run with Anya, and seeing the Russian nowhere.

They set a new record that morning, making their round in just fifty-two minutes. On Saturday, they do it in fifty-four. Ilya is still nowhere to be seen.

On Monday, Shane considers not going to the shelter, the thought of Ilya avoiding him again tightening inside his chest. Still, Shane grabs his keys and his water bottle, heading to his car. He's going for Anya, after all, the little dog that has already won his heart. She should not be part of this - whatever it is between Shane and Ilya.

So, Shane drives to the shelter. He is going to talk to Ilya today and fix this somehow. If it takes talking about the almost kiss to finally get the Russian to stop avoiding him, then Shane will do it, despite the embarrassment he might be experiencing. They are adults, after all, and the friendship that has been developing between them is something Shane appreciates a lot. Ilya is funny, but he is also kind, and insightful. He teases, but he is never mean, and he brings out Shane's competitive side, making him more bold. Shane wants that in his future, so he is willing and capable of pushing aside the attraction he has for him, if he can have him back as a friend. He can ignore those bouncy curls, his perfect chest and those piercing eyes. Anything, just to be his friend.

Shane will tell Ilya that today, when he comes back from the run.

Fifty-two minutes and forty- eight seconds.

Shane gives Anya some water and hangs up her leash. He gulps down the rest of his water bottle, pushes his hair back from his forehead. He realises he really needs a haircut and has missed his last appointment at the hairdresser, which hasn't happened in a long time.

Finally, he takes a deep breath and starts looking around for Ilya. This place isn't too big, there are not a lot of places he could hide. Instead of the Russian, he finds Harris who is cleaning out the guinea pig run.

Shane chats with him for a bit, then finds the courage to ask about Ilya.

"Oh, he's still busy with the chicken coop." Harris says, nodding towards Ilya's small house.

"Chicken coop?" Shane has never heard about chickens at the shelter before.

"Yeah. A family called. Their grandma has twenty chickens living in her garden, but she is in hospital now and it's unlikely she'll be able to live at home again. She's worried about her girls, and Ilya offered to take them in, so he's been busy all week, removing the underbrush behind his house. He had to cut down a tree, too. The whole ground was a mess, but he's made some progress. I think he only needs to build the actual coop now. He didn't tell you?" Harris looks confused.

"No. No, he didn't. Obviously too busy. Thanks." Shane feels embarrassed. While he's been convinced Ilya has been avoiding him, the man was just doing his job, as he always does.

"Not everything is about you, Hollander," Shane chides himself mentally, but to Harris he says: "Do you think he needs help?"

That makes the other man chuckle. “Of course he does. But you know him. He won’t ask for it, not even from us, and we work for him.”

Shane nods knowingly, eyes fixed on the red roof of Ilya’s house, the ivy vines climbing along the sides of it.

“I’ll go find him. I used to build tree houses with my dad at my parents’ cottage so I might be of some use.”

With that, he waves goodbye to Harris and follows the narrow path that leads him back along to Ilya’s home.

Ilya

He's been miserable all fucking week. He's been busy, emotional and even more of a hermit than he ever was. He avoids everyone, but especially Shane. Ilya knows why he doesn't get close to people. He's been hurt too many times, by his mother, his father, his brother. He thought that here would be different. He thought he would feel love and support, but no. His heart's been torn into thousands of pieces, scattered all over the floor and no matter how many times he collects them all up, there's still not enough to make it whole again.

He hasn't text him. Won't text him. Shane text and he replied, but all Shane wanted to talk about was Scott and what coffee he likes. Why the fuck should he care? Ilya doesn't want to think about Scott, who admitted himself that he finds Shane “cute”, cosied up to him, sipping coffee on *their* fucking bench. They can fuck off and cosy up somewhere else, together. Shane was probably never interested in him anyway. Just being nice and doing his bit for the local shelter. “See, never get involved. Leads to nothing but pain. Push them away, before they do it to you.” Those are words he heard all through his youth, which explains why his father is just a lonely old man, with no friends and only one son left, who only looks after him, because of a sense of duty and a hope of inheritance. “Maybe he is right,” he tells himself. “He hasn't been sulking and feeling sorry for himself like a crybaby all week.” He tries to push his father away, but can't. Frustrated with himself, he fixates on what he wants to forget.

He's replayed that day in the woods over and over again, assessing every move and decision. Shane wasn't coming to kiss him, he was probably just moving to push Ilya off or support him, so he wouldn't fall into him. Shane is... he's everything, he's perfect. Why would he want someone who can barely afford to live, has no aspirations, other than caring for animals for the rest of his life, and can't give him fancy things or big holidays. Shane deserves those things. Scott can afford those things. Scott can give him all of it. Perfect Scott, with his perfect face and healthy outlook on life. Scott's a good man, but right now, Ilya cannot see that.

He closes his eyes and puts his forehead against a tree, wishing he could just bash some fucking sense into himself or turn back the clock a week and avoid that fucking tree root, but he can't. He should make it right. He should text Shane, but what does he say? “Hi, I'm the fucking asshole who fucked it all up. Sorry. Go enjoy your life with fucking Scott Hunter. Wish I'd told you I fucking love you.” Yeah, right. Besides, his English isn't always the best and he would probably fuck that up too.

So many times this week, he's wanted to talk to someone and get their advice. He knows the guys would help, but he can barely admit what an asshole he has been, to himself. There's no way he can have that conversation with someone, who will probably tell him what they think he wants to hear, or worse than that, look at him with eyes full of pity, for the poor, idiotic fool he is. They know something is up. They've asked him a few times this week and them sending funny videos, which are only funny to them, has been constant. He has noticed they do this, when he has had a tricky week with animals or cruelty cases. It doesn't work, but the thought is there. The “I see you're in pain and I'm here if you need me” is there. He appreciates that. He can feel his eyes well up and quickly swipes at the tears.

That is not happening today.

So he goes back to how he has spent this week. He throws it into hard work and focuses on his project. He's done it all alone, because with him away from the animals this week, he couldn't spare anyone to help him. Plus, he knows that there would have been questions and he can't face them yet. Hard work focuses the mind and it's how he has always been.

Focusing on sports and school is the only way he dealt with the emotions, or lack of, at home. School and sports have an end goal and a correct set of rules that are fair and consistent. Home was a very different place. Rules changed to suit his father. Things he did right yesterday, weren't right today and he would get punished for that. Walking home from school, he wondered what he had done to be in trouble for today. What would the punishment be? Why wasn't he good enough, smart enough, fast enough, masculine enough or courageous enough today?

Projects were the only safe space he had and he would throw himself into them. That's what he has done all week and after this has been finished, he will find another. That's how the centre had a big turn around, when he came to this country. He had a lot of things on his mind, so he needed many projects to deal with that. That's why he was offered the room. That way, he could work on them when he wanted, fixing up and decorating the shelter in his own time, when people weren't around.

He turns to pick up a piece of wood from the floor and as he rises, he sees familiar running shoes, walking towards him, looking at him, judging him from the floor. "Oh fuck," he mumbles to himself.

He stands, trying hard to avoid Shane's eyes. "Am busy Shane. Told you that. Have lots to do. Don't have time for chats." There was more bite to that last word than he meant to have. He looks up and sees the look change on Shane's face. For a man that hides his emotions well, he sees a flash of something, that looks like hurt.

Fuck, he is a dick. No wonder someone like Shane would never want him. He sighs, face betraying him as he winces at his stupidity. "I am sorry Shane. Been very busy week. Thank you for coffee, was perfect as usual." He gives him a small, tired smile, incapable of pulling together his usual toothy grin, that actually reaches his eyes.

Shane must notice.

"You look exhausted, Ilya. I hear you've had a big project to do. I could... I mean... I could help... if you want? I used to build treehouses with my dad at my parents' cottage, so I know I can help, if you want me."

Ilya's face blushes at the last line. Fuck, he wants him so much. Seeing him again, all sweaty and glistening makes him want to fuck it all, push him to the ground and take him right here. He wants to run his hands through his hair and stroke the length of his cock, as Shane moans against his ear.

His shoulders slump as he looks at him. "I always want you, Shane. Sorry, have been awful friend this week. Just been busy and lost in own chaos. Please stay. I would like help."

Shane lets out a laugh of relief and Ilya sees the tension leave his face. He comes over to see what he has done so far and Ilya explains about the chicken coop he has been setting up. They work hard on the structure, conversation becoming easier as the day progresses.

Ilya tries not to be closed off, but feels more awkward about being close to him than usual, avoiding touching, sitting too close, or being inside each other's personal space. He doesn't want Shane to think he's a creep. Ilya makes them lunch and they sit on their bench, eating and catching up on the week's events, minus the sulking and crying.

He has missed Shane. He didn't realise quite how much difference he had made to his life, until he went away and returned. He wouldn't want to risk doing anything to jeopardise that again.

Ilya watches Shane's throat as he chugs down his water. He tries not to stare, but can't help it, as Shane's throat works hard to swallow it down and his mouth takes the head of the bottle inside it. He lets out a small whimper, which he really hopes was only inside his head. He doesn't know how he can watch him, whenever they meet, and not want to kiss him, fuck him, marry him. He just has to hope he can push it further and further away everyday, until friendship wins. He doubts it, but he is willing to try.

Chapter 8

Shane

Shane is a very responsible man. Still, he doesn't hesitate for a second to email his boss, telling him that he needs the day off, and then, before waiting for a response, starts helping Ilya with the chicken coop. Working together, there is a lot of progress, and Shane finds himself enjoying the physical labour.

He enjoys spending time with Ilya, too. He's missed him that past week. No matter how much he likes the other members of staff here, Ilya is his friend, and he loves spending time with him. Luckily, the Russian does not seem to be bothered about the almost kiss, so Shane can start getting over it, too. It's just that Ilya had smelled so nice and he has those beautiful lips that looked so soft, and Shane really wished he had kissed him just to be sure, just to know.

This is not Shane getting over his crush, and working next to a Ilya, sweaty t-shirt clinging to his muscles, arms and neck glistening with sweat, does not help, either.

Shane shakes his head and picks up the roll of wire.

They chat during lunch, then get back to work. By that time, they are both exhausted, all the coop is missing is the door and the nesting boxes inside, but Ilya insists on doing that in the morning, before the new occupants move in tomorrow. Shane would have offered to help, but he does not want his boss to hate him.

They stand around a bit awkwardly in front of the fencing that they have put up. Shane doesn't really want to leave, but he has worked in the sun all day, after he went on a run, so he is absolutely filthy. He should shower. Get out of the sun for a bit. Still, he stays, shifting his weight a bit as he waits for Ilya to say something.

Before he can, Ilya's phone rings and he excuses himself, talking a few steps away. Shane considers leaving, but that would just be as rude as listening in. So, he stays, looking very interestedly at the coop. He could just put the hinges on the door, to make it easier for Ilya tomorrow. He is just picking them up out of the tool box when he hears Ilya say: "Oh, no. Too old for that. Don't celebrate birthdays. Yes. Thank you. Bye. Yes. Bye." before he hangs up.

"It's your birthday?" Shane's voice gets all high and squeaky with surprise. "I didn't even know."

Ilya raises an eyebrow, then shakes his head. "Oh, no. Yes, it's birthday, but don't celebrate, so..."

"Happy Birthday," Shane beams at him. He loves birthdays. They are some of his favourite childhood memories. Mom would take him to a game around his birthday, and there would be hand pies and presents. He steps towards Ilya, but is too much of a coward, so he squeezes his shoulder instead. "Let's go out to dinner, my treat. You've been working all day, you deserve something nice. Even if you don't want to celebrate, or make a fuss."

Shane is going through arguments in his head, to try and convince him, and he just opens his mouth to start listing them off, when Ilya says: “Okay.”

“I... okay,” Shane sputters. “I need to shower. Change. We could meet up somewhere in an hour or two?”

“Okay,” Ilya says again, voice soft. “Two hours, maybe, yes?”

“Yes, let me just check. There is a restaurant my friend Rose recommended to me, I’ll check if I can still book a table online. I’ll send you the address, okay?”

They say their goodbyes after making a reservation, and Shane quickly makes his way home. He takes a shower, then gets dressed, standing in front of the mirror in his best suit, tie and all. His mom had told him how handsome he looked in it, and it made him feel confident, too. The longer he looks, the weirder he feels.

“What are you doing, dude?” Shane asks his reflection, tugging the tie off again. Half an hour later he leaves the house in a pair of dark jeans, a white t-shirt and a light brown leather jacket he has never worn before. There are a few things he needs to get before seeing Ilya.

Shane is still ten minutes early, but the night is warm and he doesn’t mind waiting. As he shifts his weight, he watches the people eating on the terrace, just a few yards from the front door. People, mostly couples, are eating in the light created by the candles on every table and the fairy lights slung around the fence and across the yard. Soft piano music plays from two speakers.

“Fuck,” Shane mumbles under his breath. This is romantic, and the last thing he wants to do is make Ilya feel like this is a date. Well, a part of him wants just that, but Shane pushes that part down. Friends. They are friends. This is a dinner between buddies because it is Ilya’s birthday.

Maybe he should find somewhere else, tell Ilya there has been a mix-up with their booking. Just as he is about to google places close by, the van with the shelter logo pulls up and parks right next to him.

Ilya is here.

Ilya

Every part of Ilya's body feels something as he watches Shane leave and head for the shelter exit. It's mostly exhaustion and heaviness in his muscles, but also relief. Just knowing it is all going to be ok, that Shane is here and Shane has forgiven him for being such a stubborn, sulky asshole. He feels it rippling through his sore muscles, massaging them and elevating some of the discomfort there. There's also his head, still fuzzy and confused by the whole thing. He isn't a complicated guy. He's never been someone who takes things to heart, holds on to grudges, or cares about misunderstandings, but with Shane it's different somehow. Every little thing that happens between them is important. It all matters so much and it feels like the life he wants so much will end if this all does. It's confusing for him, being so wrapped up in one other person and letting that lead his emotions. He sees so many awful things, working where he does and still doesn't let that rule him, but Shane just engulfs him like a wave and he never wants to swim to safety. Fuck, he's in deep and he needs to be careful not to drown.

He has his whole, albeit small, cupboard of clothes, emptied and strewn everywhere. "Not going. Have fuck all to wear. He will look amazing and I will be poor boy in old, tatty clothes." He thinks back to his past as the kid with nothing who got his brother's hand me down clothes and always had kids picking on him for it. "Why would Shane be friends with me?" He knows he's only talking to himself, but he still expects words of wisdom to appear from somewhere. "Exactly!" He says it to an empty room. He is getting himself into a state and needs to sort himself out. He decides to shower first and maybe calm himself down.

He has always enjoyed the feeling of the hot water running over his body and the feeling of hands, even though they are usually his own lately, running across his skin. He groans as his hands push against his aching muscles and rub and massage them with the shower gel. He closes his eyes, only to enjoy the feeling of his muscles relax, until his hand finds his hard cock and his brain understands what he needs. He slowly strokes himself, lubing up his hand with the soap. He doesn't often do this, but too much has happened today and he needs something to ease him, before he sees Shane. Fuck, Shane. He's trying his hardest not to think of Shane as he strokes himself faster and harder, biting his lip, while his mind drifts to Shane's freckles and his throat, vein pounding in his neck as he tries to regain his breath after a run. Fuck. He imagines that kiss. The one that didn't happen, but should have. He could have pushed him against that tree, letting Shane feel how hard he was against him as they kissed. He could have dropped to his knees and taken Shane in his mouth, deep and full. He could have heard Shane moan as he came down his throat, hands tight in his hair, making Ilya swallow him down. Ilya comes against the shower wall, the realisation hitting him that he has failed. He is supposed to be staying away from seeing him as a sexual fantasy. "Friendzone asshole," he chides himself as he places his forehead against the wall, disappointed by his own brain and body.

He finishes getting ready, eventually settling on a white shirt and black trousers that he had bought for a fundraiser and not worn since. He puts on the tie and decides against it, opening a button or two, to not feel like he was being strangled by the collar.

He gets into his car and leaves to head out and meet Shane. He's never been to this restaurant and would honestly have been happy with a burger or pizza. He doesn't want a fuss, but Shane insisted, and he always wants to make Shane happy.

As he pulls up, he realises that this is a very expensive looking restaurant and starts feeling very insecure about himself. Looking at the people, as he drives in, he realises this isn't a family restaurant, but is full of couples and not much else. It doesn't seem to be somewhere you would go for work dinners and he suddenly feels quite uncomfortable about being here with Shane, after just getting over their awkwardness.

Fuck, Shane. What is going on? His heart is pounding. Is Shane actually going to make a move? Does this mean Shane actually likes him? Does Shane even like men? What the fuck?

He sees Shane and waves, parking the car and walking towards him. "Hello, Shane. This looks... expensive. We can go get burger if want."

Shane's face drops. "Oh... would you rather... I mean, we could, if you don't want to... I mean.... don't you..."

"No, it's fine. Just looks expensive. I don't want you to spend much money on dinner."

Shane's face brightens and he gives him a crooked smile. "Oh. I want to. It's your birthday, man. Come on." Shane leads the way.

It's weird, being at a cosy corner table, with Shane, surrounded by romantic music, dim lighting and candles. If they were a couple, it would be perfect, but they're not. He is trying to concentrate on the menu, but Ilya's eyes keep drifting to the candle between them. They haven't really spoken since they sat down. They're focusing on the menu and trying to avoid eye contact, which almost makes Ilya laugh because he feels so stupid. The waiter comes and takes their order, then their menus, removing the only barrier between them. Ilya looks around, at his hands, at anything that isn't Shane, before hearing the other man say something. "It's cool in here, isn't it? I've never been before. Have you?"

"No. Is nice and calm. I like calm. Thank you for bringing me here. Have never enjoyed birthdays before." He looks at an imaginary dirt spot on the tablecloth.

"Oh. Can I ask why? You don't have to tell me. I just... I love birthdays. Always have. It's sad that you don't like them, isn't it?"

Ilya thinks for a minute. "I... before I came here, life wasn't always good. After mother died, there was no fun, no room for happiness or freedom and whole life changed. Did not enjoy much after that. Life was harder then."

"Oh, Ilya. I'm so sorry. We won't talk about it, if you don't want to. I just... sorry... I just didn't think. I never know when to shut up. Fuck, sorry. Do you want to talk about it. About her?"

Ilya gives him a weary smile and barely meets Shane's eyes. "Another time, maybe. Just, not in room of people, okay?" He wants to talk about her, to tell someone else about how

beautiful and kind she was, how sad she was and how hard she fought. He wants someone to listen and know and acknowledge her. He just can't. Not now.

“Something happy now, please?” Ilya asks as he watches Shane pulls at his eye, uncomfortably, while he, himself, tries to stop himself from crying. “Want to hear about your birthdays.” He smiles.

Shane grins and gives him a nod, looking happy to help and goes off into story after story of the amazing things his parents have done for him on his birthdays. He's not really a party person, so they always took him places, or did things with him instead. He talks about visits to places and adventures they had. Ilya wishes he had had those things and grieves for the loss of that family he never even had. His mother would have done those things with him, if she was allowed, but she never was. By the end of the tales, Ilya is laughing and Shane has told him so many embarrassing stories about his parents, that he loves them already. “They sound fun. Bet your mum is beautiful. Do you look like her?” His brain goes into panic mode and he tries to cover it. “I mean, because she is Japanese, yes?”

“Yeah, I do, but she really is beautiful.” Shane doesn't seem to have noticed.

“And where is your boring from? Your mum or dad? Your boring is genetic, yes?” He teases.

“You're an asshole.” Shane laughs, getting out his phone and showing him a photo of them rock climbing. “Do they look boring to you?”

“So you decided to be boring all alone?” He smiles, eating his food to cover how cute he finds all of this.

They talk and tease each other for a while and Shane reaches for something in his bag. “Oh, I forgot. I got you this. Well, not got, but made. Well didn't make, I was... I've been working on it, as a surprise, but I haven't had time to... well I didn't know it was your birthday, you see...”

“Woah. Can I see before you die from panic attack, please?” Ilya says, holding up a hand. “Let me see if is worth you dying over.” He winks, then instantly regrets it. “Pass it here and let me see it.” He motions with his fingers for Shane to pass it over and pushes his plate aside, so he can eat and look at it at the same time. It is a scrapbook full of doodles and scribbles and chunks of writing. He looks confused. “Is madman's diary, yes? You need some help?” He's smiling, but is still a little confused, as he looks at Shane.

“It's ideas for your website.” He sounds unsure as the sentence gets quieter at the end. “I wanted to finish it before I showed you, but I didn't know it was your birthday and so I didn't get a chance to finish it yet.

Ilya's chest tightens and he looks at Shane. “Shane. This is lot of work. You must have spent very long time doing this. You didn't need to do this.” Shane looks upset and Ilya is even more confused.

“I'm sorry. If you don't like it, you don't have to use it. They're just ideas. They are probably not right for what you want for the shelter, but I would like to do this. I... I always get a bit

carried away. I'm sorry.”

He looks away from Ilya and the Russian just wants to scoop him up and kiss him. He reaches for his hand. “Shane, look at me.” He wiggles Shane's fingers, trying to focus on anything but how much he wants to cry. “This is best birthday gift I could want. You did all of this for me? For shelter? Why?”

He sees Shane pause, trying to decide what to say. “Because, you work so hard and your whole life is given to other people and animals, and never to yourself. You are selfless, kind and I imagine, a lot like your mother, because you must have learnt it from somewhere. You need people to do nice things for you sometimes.” Ilya squeezes Shane's hand and wants to stand up and kiss him across the table, not caring if he gets turned down in front of all of these people, but he can't risk it. He can't risk losing Shane. Kind, wonderful Shane. His knight in shining armour.

“Shane. You are best friend...” it pains him to say, “anyone could want. Am so glad I found you.” He flicks through the book some more. “This is perfect. I love it.”

Shane beams at him, excitedly. “Well, take it home and look through it. We can get together and work out what you want, okay?”

“Thank you Shane. From me and animals.”

“Oh, talking of that. I also got you something else, but it comes with conditions.” Shane gives him a look.

Ilya hopes that the words that follow are, “you need to kiss me hard for it.” Unfortunately they're not.

He pulls out a present, wrapping paper, covered in cartoon dogs and Ilya laughs. “I guess that is for me?”

Shane giggles. “No. Why would you think that? It's for Anya, of course.” He holds it in his lap. “It's actually a joint present from both of us, but we agree on the conditions.”

“Sounds serious,” Ilya says, concerned by what is inside. “What conditions?”

“It is for personal use only.”

Ilya wonders what the fuck it is and raises his eyebrows, pushing his lips together hard and nodding, trying not to smile at Shane's serious face and tone.

“Not for the shelter, Ilya. I'm serious. It is for you and your new life.”

“New life? Am in witness protection now?” Ilya laughs and Shane loses his seriousness.

“I'm serious, Ilya,” he says, unable to hide the amusement in his voice.

“You don't look it, Shane.” Ilya says, eyebrows quizzical.

They both laugh. “Asshole. Just open it,” Shane says, passing it over.

Ilya opens the present and takes out several boxes. It is a Polaroid camera and accessories. There are also boxes of spare film, lots of it. “I... I got everything,” Shane says, talking quickly and obviously nervous about his choice of present. “Didn't know what to get, but the guy said it's the best one. He even set it up for you, so it's ready to use. I hope you like it. I want you to use it for you. For the achievements and times that you want to commemorate that aren't just shelter ones. Your friends who love you, your adventures, road trips and days out. Things that are yours and not necessarily things you share with the world. People love you, Ilya. You need to start realising that.” He gets it out. “Let's start with tonight. Let's make tonight your first memory.”

Ilya's brain doesn't know how to handle this much kindness. He stares at Shane, wanting to say so much, but unable to speak. Shane calls over the waiter and asks him to take a picture of them. Ilya shakes off the feeling, wondering if all of this is actually happening to him as he smiles at the waiter.

“Take two please. We both need more adventures,” Ilya adds, before scooting his chair next to Shane's and coming in close for a picture, unable to stop himself from putting his arm around Shane. People probably think they're a couple, but he doesn't care. He wishes they were. He really fucking does. When they develop, they're looking at two grinning faces, in each of their pictures, matching their beaming faces now.

“First day of the rest of our lives, Ilya,” Shane says, raising a glass to Ilya's.

Ilya returns to his box, placing the photo into the picture album Shane also gave him. “There are hundreds of bits of film. You think I have life. I have no life with this much adventure, Shane.”

“Well, we are going to change that. There is also another present for you. I know you love ice hockey and you never get to go, because you are always working. Well, you are having a night off, coming to watch it with me, in two weeks time and the lovebirds are going to watch the shelter overnight. No worrying, no phoning or texting. Just a night off and you can crash at my flat, as I have plenty of room. You need this, Ilya. Bring the camera.”

“Shane, I can't leave...”

“You can and you will. It's all sorted. I've spoken to the guys. I'll explain later, so shhhh.” He raises his finger to his lips and Ilya laughs. “Now, dessert time.” As if on cue, the dessert arrives at the table.

They talk and laugh about adventures they would go on in an ideal world, and things that they have never gotten to experience. Ilya wishes he had met Shane years ago, before he had all of the worries of the shelter, but knows he would never want to change what he does. He loves his life, but finally is starting to see that he could have a personal life and his working life, all at the same time.

After they eat, Shane leads him out to Ilya's truck. "There is one more present I want to give you. Well, it's not really a present, but..." Shane leans in and Ilya feels like his heart will stop. Fuck. Is he going to kiss him at last? He wants this so badly. He can't even look at him. He takes a deep breath as he smells Shane's aftershave growing stronger.

Shane lifts his phone into view. "Some people wanted to say hello." Five familiar faces pop up alongside Shane's on a facetime call video he recorded earlier. "We did a call earlier. Sorry. That's why Troy and Harris disappeared for a while." He laughs as Ilya rolls his eyes. "Zayn, Wyatt and of course, Luca wanted in too. Just listen and don't talk."

Harris starts. "Hi man. We just wanted to say happy birthday, but seeing as you hate it, we thought, well actually, Shane thought that this would be better and you know he is always right. Right Shane?" He winks. "Anyway, I just wanted you to know how amazing you are, as a boss, but also just as a human. You have helped so many animals, but also us. We all respect you and want the best for you. Shane just figures out better ways of telling you that." Ilya hides behind his hands, suddenly embarrassed and emotional.

Troy is next. "Hey. What Harris said. You are such a beautiful fucking human. When will you see how much we all love you? Do some things for you and we will all pitch in. Go and see that hockey match with Shane and have some drinks, lighten up, ok? Love ya, man." Ilya is crying now. He knows that they would never say these things to his face, because it's not how they are, but he knows they mean it.

Luca chimes in, as excited as ever and gushing over how amazing his idol is. "Ilya, you have been awesome, man. You've taken me on board, taught me loads and let me into your family. You've taught me that it's ok to be me and what it's like to be a real man in this world. You're like a father to me. Thank you." Ilya rubs at his eye and he and Shane both smile at each other over how cute he is.

Wyatt starts talking next. "You are there for everyone and now you need to start being there for yourself. Listen to Shane and he will help you with that. He's so good for you and it's nice that you finally listen to someone," He laughs. "Look after yourself, please?"

Zayne adds in, "hey, we all just wanted to say happy birthday, dude. You're hard to give compliments to in real life, so we're doing it this way. Hope you know how much you mean to us, and just to prove it, let's sing, boys," he laughs, before starting an awful rendition of happy birthday.

Shane pulls a face at Ilya, and as the song ends Ilya hugs him, never wanting to stop. It's long and they just hold each other while Ilya silently lets the tears flow. The emotions from the week all come to a head and he can't stop. "Thank you Shane. Thank you," is all he can manage through the tears. He can smell him, feel his hands on him and his hair tickle his cheek. He wants to kiss him but knows he isn't thinking rationally. He pulls back, unable to look at him.

"Will go home now, die of embarrassment and never see you again. Thank you for tonight." he turns and leaves, not wanting to look at him, in case he runs at him and kisses him. He waits until he is safe behind the truck's door and looks, smiles and waves. "I love you," he whispers, before he can stop it.

Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

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

Shane

Shane does not text Ilya the next morning, not wanting to seem too needy. He knows his presents have been a lot, and he doesn't want to be too much and overwhelm Ilya with his attention. Yesterday was nice. More than nice, and Ilya had enjoyed it too. Of that, Shane was sure. He never worries about this stuff while he is with him, but as soon as he is alone, his brain won't stop wondering about "stupid shit", as Rose called it, when he told her about it during their two hour phone call this morning.

"I have never met him, but from what you told me, I think he likes you. Like, a lot. And you like him, obviously, so you should totally text him. Or hang out with him. Or both."

So not texting him only lasts until his lunch break, standing on his small balcony.

Shane:

Have the chickens arrived yet? 🐔🐔🐔 Do they like their new home?

Ilya had sent him updates on the coop this morning, and had even painted the door in a bright blue. Shane had saved the selfie of Ilya, cheek covered in paint, beaming at the camera, without even thinking.

It takes Ilya a bit to respond, Shane is already back to work.

Ilya:

Mother's health worse, daughter can't come, so I pick them up after shift.

Shane huffs. When does Ilya ever not work? One day, he'll burn-out.

Shane:

Is it far?

Ilya:

One hour. Van is slow but fits all the ladies.

Shane:

Want me to join you? We could have a little road trip. 🚗

Shane types it out before even thinking, because he'd really love that. He could drive back, make sure Ilya does not fall asleep behind the wheel. It could be fun, too. They could listen to one of the podcasts Shane likes.

Ilya:

Yes, if you want.

Ilya:

Can pick you up at 5, yes?

Shane:

Yes. I can bring some snacks for the road. 😊

Ilya:

Good. See you at 5, Shane. 🙌

The door of the van makes a screeching noise as Shane opens it, and struggles to get all his bags in first, placing them on the middle seat.

“You are running away? Moving out?” Ilya raises his eyebrows, watching him with both interest and confusion.

“Fuck you,” Shane scoffs, but he is grinning as he pulls himself into the seat and closes the door. “Are you sure this thing is safe to drive?”

“Will find out, yes?” Ilya turns the key, then, seeing Shane’s concerned face, reaches out to touch his arm, skin to skin, leaving behind warmth. “Would not let Shane Hollander in a car that is not safe. Precious cargo.”

“Precious? Wow.” Shane teases, focusing on the word instead of the genuine kindness, because he can’t handle that without falling for Ilya even more.

“Yes, looked it up.” Ilya turns his head as he starts driving, and Shane quickly reaches to pull the seat belt across his chest. “Or maybe I just watched Lord of the Rings.”

That leads them into a discussion on movies, as they make their way through the city and onto the highway. Ilya tells him about movies, and then Shane has to admit he hasn’t seen them, or that he can’t quite remember the plot, and the Russian in the driver seat looks at him in shock, making him promise that they will watch them soon.

Half an hour flies by. They have just reached the highway when Shane unpacks all the snacks he prepared, and maybe he’s gone overboard a bit. As he drives, Ilya accepts veggie sticks, apple slices and grapes from Shane, munching on them happily, childlike joy softening the tough features of his face. It creates the most adorable crinkles around his eyes and mouth, and Shane wants to press his lips against them, feel them, taste them, make them his own.

He holds out the last grape for Ilya to take, but the Russian is in the middle of switching lanes, both hands on the wheel, and he just turns his head slightly, opens his mouth. “Give,”

he demands, and Shane feeds the fruit to him, fingertips brushing against Ilya's lips for a brief moment. The touch sends a shiver down Shane's spine, curls his toes, and he has to look away for a moment, shaking off the image of kissing that sweet, sticky mouth.

"That was the last one, but we still have some cucumber slices and bellpepper." Shane busies himself with putting away the empty box, only looking back at Ilya when he lets out a soft chuckle.

"Only Shane Hollander would bring whole buffet on drive," Ilya grins, "and make it boring and healthy. Like food for guinea pigs."

"I don't hear you complaining. Anyway, you have eaten, like, nearly all of it," Shane retorts, grin on his face.

"Not complaint. Is nice." Ilya reaches out, and for a short moment, a large hand comes to rest against his arm. There is that smile again, small, but as bright as the sun. "You bring me snacks. Is nice."

No one has taken care of Ilya Rozanov in a long time, Shane realises. This simple gesture, something Shane had with every road trip during his childhood, is something special to Ilya, and Shane wants to bottle up this moment for both of them. He wants Ilya's fingers against his skin, again, wants to hold his hand as they drive.

"Be careful, I bring you on every pick up soon, if you spoil me."

Shane wants to tell him that he deserves to be spoiled, that he deserves time that is just for him, that not every moment has to be spent taking care of others. That is why he had given him the camera, to remind him of that.

"I don't think I'd mind," Shane says, honestly. "I can help more. It's... good. Helping. Running with Anya. I work too much. I love my work, I just get lost in it sometimes. So it's good to have something else that matters."

Someone else that matters.

Shane has never had many friends, and that has always been okay. He gets on with people well enough, but the only people he is close enough with to consider them his friends are Hayden, Jackie and Rose. And now Ilya. He is going to get home late tonight, but he is still not going to feel like his battery is drained, because he never does with Ilya. The thought makes him smile.

"We are glad to have you. Anya loves you," Ilya turns his head to check the mirror as he pulls the car onto the offramp. "Loves runs. She is much happier dog, now."

I'm much happier now.

"Win, win, then," Shane focuses on the road ahead. "She's great, and I have improved a lot over the past weeks. Better pace and everything." He holds back on rambling about numbers, not wanting to bore Ilya.

“I’m still faster,” Ilya teases, and Shane would shove him, but that would be a safety concern. “Fuck you,” he says instead, grinning like a fool. That smile dies at the thought of Ilya’s lips, so close to his. Before Shane can get lost in another panic attack about their almost kiss, Ilya pulls into a narrow street with small houses, surrounded by large, well taken care of backyards.

“We need 1410. Can you look?”

Shane is glad to have something to do. They find the house they need, less than five minutes later, and Ilya parks the van. “There are boxes in back. Can fit two to three chickens in one, but let’s meet lady first, yes?” With that, he gets out, and Shane follows him into the cool evening.

For the next hour, Shane watches Ilya in his element. He is very professional, both in dealing with the distraught woman, treating her with empathy, and with the animals. His entire being exudes calm as he follows Mira into the chicken shed. The hens are already up on their perches, getting ready for the night, and Ilya carefully plucks them off, showing Shane how to hold them as he puts them into the boxes. Shane walks back and forth, stashing the boxes in the van, making sure there is enough room to breathe but that there is no chance of escape. To his surprise, the chickens remain mostly calm, even though they are not too happy to be in the tight space together.

“It’s not for long,” Shane promises, as he places the last three animals in the van, then quietly closes the door. Ilya is nowhere to be seen, so Shane walks back to the shed. What he finds is Ilya, arms full of a chicken with light grey feathers and a dark head, beak tucked against the tall man’s arm. She looks very cozy, almost like a cat being carried around.

“Priscilla loves my mom. Those two are attached at the hip, she always follows her around, and it’s...” Mira’s voice grows tight with emotion, and she wipes at her eyes. “I’m sorry, this is just... my mom loves her chickens. She’s had them for ages, and they are her reason to get up in the morning. She needs someone to take care of.”

Eyes, more green than blue now, become soft with empathy, as Ilya listens, taking a step closer. “I understand. It is difficult. She can always visit when she gets better. Chickens can come back if health allows it, yes? We will take care of them as long as we need to.” He gently strokes the back of his hand against the hen’s neck. “Especially this little cutie, right, Shane?”

Kind eyes now focus on him, and Shane hides his blush. “Of course. Ilya has built them a great home. I think they will leave five star reviews.”

That earns him a soft laugh from Mira. “I’m sure. Thank you again. This is really difficult, and I appreciate your help. So does my mother.”

With that, they say their goodbyes, Ilya following Shane to the car, Priscilla still tucked against his chest, making soft, happy sounds. Shane never knew chickens could be attached to people like this.

“She is adorable,” he says when they are alone, reaching out carefully to touch her soft feathers. “Very cute.”

“She is new bestie, now,” Ilya grins, and their hands meet where they both pet a very happy chicken.

“Let me not separate you from your bestie, then. I can drive. I think she is very cozy and does not want to give up her spot.” Shane does not wait for an answer. He already has the keys, so he just climbs into the driver’s seat. There are a few sounds coming from the back of the van, but the girls seem to have settled down, calm now that it is completely dark.

“Priscilla and me are passenger princesses now, yes?” Ilya manages to fasten his seat belt and leans back. Shane switches on the light to orientate himself for a moment, and he spots the camera in the glove box that apparently does not shut completely anymore. Careful not to scare the chicken, Shane reaches out and grabs it, snapping a picture of Ilya and Priscilla, all cozied up together, tempted to take another one for himself, but maybe that is too much. He lets the picture develop, instead, handing it to the Russian.

“You and your bestie,” he grins, giving Ilya a moment to look at it before he switches off the light again.

As they start driving, Shane feels the Russian watching him in the dark of the car, and he bites his lip, suddenly not knowing what to say. The drive back is the exact opposite of the way there, the only sounds are those of the car, the occasional cluck from the back, and Ilya’s breath, becoming slower as he falls asleep in the passenger seat.

Shane catches himself glancing at him, every chance he gets, studying his relaxed features in the low light of the car. His head is slumped to the side, curls falling into his face, and his mouth hanging slightly open. He looks so young, so vulnerable, and Shane wants to tug a blanket around him, keeping him comfortable and safe.

Shane finds himself wishing there was more time, when the car pulls onto the shelter parking lot, because it means disturbing the sleeping Russian next to him. He parks the van just in front of the entrance. Troy is on the night shift tonight, but Shane can’t see him from here. He is just about to text him when the dark-haired man shows up in the doorway. He waves at Shane and reaches for the keys to unlock the door for them.

“Ilya,” Shane nudges his friend gently. “We’re here. Back at the shelter.”

Ilya makes a soft sound, then yawns and straightens, arms adjusting around Priscilla. “You are good driver, Hollander. Is surprise.” He smirks, then quickly gets out of the van, not wanting Troy to see him tired and vulnerable. Human, for once.

They work together to move all of the ladies into their new home. Priscilla is the last one, Ilya wishing her a good night as he carefully places her on the perch, stroking her head one last time.

“You’ll see her tomorrow,” Shane whispers, and what is meant as a tease, comes out gentle. Ilya has so much love for these animals, and Shane loves that about him.

Shane loves him.

The realisation hits him in the middle of the chicken shed, while Troy is just outside, folding up the boxes. He loves Ilya, and he wants more than an almost kiss in the woods, so much more.

“We have chickens now,” Ilya interrupts his musings. He looks around, then his eyes find Shane in the dark. “That is fun.”

“You can have fresh eggs for breakfast every day, now,” Shane nods, moving towards the door. There is no reason to linger, not when he thinks that what he feels might just burst out of him in this small space, making him act irrationally.

A hand on his arm holds him back, and a moment later Shane finds himself wrapped up in a hug, his world narrowed down to warmth and scent, and Ilya. “Thank you for help today.” Ilya whispers, dropping a kiss to Shane’s hair, that Shane feels lingering there long after he has gone home. “And for helping with building coop.”

Shane squeezes the other man tighter for a moment. “Happy to help.”

The hug should end there, but neither of them lets go, needing to be close, needing to be held.

“Boys, how about some pizza? You’ve had a long day. I’ll order some for us.” Troy calls from outside. Shane is about to pull away, but Ilya does not budge.

“Pizza sounds good. Thank you, Troy,” he shouts, then leaves another kiss in Shane’s hair before he steps outside, his warmth lingering for a moment. Shane watches him go, then forces his legs to move as well, before Troy starts wondering why he is hanging out in a chicken shed in the dark. He locks the door behind himself, and follows Troy and Ilya to the main building.

Ilya

“We have chickens now,” Ilya says, to distract from the silence and the tired, burning urge to reach out and kiss him, which will bring his house of cards falling down around him, when Shane turns him down. “That is fun,” he adds, knowing the only fun is that it means he may have more time hiding in this enclosed space, feeling Shane's body heat and sharing in the joy of having brought these chickens here together. “Like proud parents,” is what he wants to say, but he knows that's too close to home. Shane says something, but he is too lost in his own thoughts to hear it and when he sees him start to move away, he grabs for him, more reflex than thought.

He needs this to last, just a while longer, before they have to separate and this time together ends. Saying goodbye to Shane seems to get harder, every time he has to do it. The last few hours, as with the previous night, have meant more to him than anything has in a long time. Why isn't he braver, smarter, kinder, more... more... he doesn't know. Just more what someone like Shane might want. He doesn't know what he's going to do next, just stood here, holding his arm. He has to do something, so he pulls him into a hug, shielding his face from view and taking in the smell and feel of his warm body. He did this last night and wishes he could do it every night for the rest of his life. Not sex, not passion, just this. Those things are good, yes, but it's this warmth, this love that would sustain him forever. When he's old and his body no longer works that way, his love will always be something that lingers on.

He almost can't control himself as he feels his lips touch Shane's hair, planting a kiss there that he wants to press against his lips. He barely hears the thank you that leaves his lips, or the reply from Shane's, before pushing his face back into his hair. He can do this. He can show him how much he wants him.

He opens his mouth to say those words, when Troy's booming voice comes crashing through the coop. His fists clench and his body tightens as he wants to tell Troy that his timing sucks, but he doesn't, fear settling back inside his throat and chest, along with the damp, cold air. He calls back through the door as he refuses to let go of Shane. The moment has gone, but he can't help himself, pushing another kiss against his hair, before turning and walking away, needing clear, cold air against his skin.

The three of them sit around Ilya's small table, eating pizza and talking about their day, avoiding the huge elephant in the room that is staring at Ilya and beating its foot against the floor, trumpeting at him and judging him. Troy and Shane seem blissfully unaware of it watching them, eyeing Ilya and making his pulse rise. He could tell Troy to leave and explain the situation, knowing he would likely understand, but he might think Ilya is setting himself up to fail and see it for what it is. Ilya's childish little infatuation that Shane couldn't possibly want.

His father was right. He will never be good enough for anyone and especially not someone like Shane. Someone that could have anyone he chose and would truly deserve them. He's laughing with Troy about Ilya and his new best friend Priscilla being “cute as buttons,” but he can't tell what that means. Does he think he is cute, or is he laughing about how Ilya has no real friends. He doesn't know. His judgement is off and he's grumpy and tired. He can't make

decisions right now, and especially not life changing ones. Tonight, he will have to let Shane go his own way.

"It's late, I should go," Shane says, not really moving very quickly. "I... I will talk to you tomorrow, Ilya, yes? I mean, maybe I will. If you're not too busy."

"Yes, I'm sure we will talk then. I let you know how girls are doing." He stands up and walks Shane to the door. "Thankyou again, for today. Was very helpful." He shakes his hand, keeping distance between their bodies and understanding it's all getting a bit confusing for him now.

Shane seems to look confused too, shaking his hand and quietly saying goodnight, before slipping out of the door.

"You are an idiot," says a voice from behind him.

"You are idiot, Troy. Why would you say that?"

"Because you're so scared to admit anything to yourself or anyone else, Ilya. It's ok to have a fucking feeling from time to time. Jesus Christ, man, let yourself live a bit, alright?"

"What are you talking about, Troy? I have feelings." He doesn't know who he is more angry at, Troy or himself.

"Well use them to get what you want and live your fucking life, before it's too late and the people you love get bored and fuck off with someone else."

"I do not know what you mean, Troy." He does, but he sure as fuck won't admit that.

"Sure, Ilya. Like you and him weren't making sad little puppy eyes at each other all night."

"Well, why the fuck did you not leave and let me talk to him?" Ilya's suddenly too annoyed to keep up the pretense. "Why not say this earlier?"

"Because you could barely look at him. You hardly spoke to him at all and if I wasn't here, he would have likely just left, dude. You really have no idea, do you? Just sort it out, man. I'm going home. Sort it, before it's too fucking late. I love you, man, but you need to sort your shit out. Call him. Now, before he gets home. Maybe he can come back." Troy pats his shoulder, before heading out of the door.

Ilya takes a deep breath as he picks up the phone. He doesn't know if he should. What if he fucks things up for good? What would he do without Shane around? But what if Shane wants him too. Was he really making puppy eyes at him? Whatever the fuck that means. He needs to think, needs to sleep on it. What happens next may change his life for better or worse. He can't take this risk lightly.

He takes out the photo of him and Shane at the restaurant, from the album by his bed. He stares at those smiling faces, needing that to be the last thing he sees, before he falls asleep.

Chapter End Notes

Bonus Chapter today :P We'll give you the sunday chapter tomorrow, as usual

Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

explicit

Shane

Shane wakes up just before his alarm clock. He sits up, checks his phone and allows himself to sink back into his pillow, closing his eyes. In the early morning light, Shane lets himself dream.

As his fingertips brush over his chest and down his belly, he wonders what would have happened if Ilya had gone home with him last night after the pizza. They could have kissed on Shane's door step, and Ilya could have made slow, deep love to him right here in this bed. Shane could have woken up with his weight on top of him, his scent in his nose, his curls tickling his face as he leaned down to kiss his forehead.

His fingers could be Ilya's lips, raining down kisses on his body, below his belly button, against his hip, and finally, the head of his cock. Shane strokes himself, thinking about intense, blue eyes looking up at him, wishing he could bury his fingers in soft curls. His hands fly over his dick, as he tries to remember Ilya's scent, the heat of his palm against this arm. The orgasm hits him hard and fast, arching off the bed as he covers his hand and belly in cum.

The heat that had built up quickly cools down, and Shane drags himself out of bed and into the shower. He texts Rose during breakfast.

Shane:

I've done something weird.

She messages back immediately. Her response makes Shane chuckle.

Rose:

Let me ask you this: Is it really weird, or is it something everyone does and you just think it's weird?

Shane:

I thought about Ilya while masturbating. I wonder if that is crossing some sort of line. I feel weird about it.

For a while, he watches three dots dance over his screen as Rose types, and he grows more and more nervous.

Rose:

Not weird, Shane. People do that, thinking about their crush. And I'm still convinced he likes you back. Maybe you just have to be brave.

Shane shakes his head. He cannot risk his friendship with Ilya, not for the slight chance that the other man might like him back. Rose is a romantic, of course she wants Ilya to like him back.

Shane:

You know me. I'm not good at this. And I'm not good at reading people.

Rose:

That's why I'm telling you.

Shane:

You don't even know him, Rose.

Rose:

But I know you. And I've heard you talk about him. You like him a lot.

Shane puts the phone on his desk and runs his palms over his face. If he is being this obvious, then Ilya will know, sooner or later. So, maybe Rose is right. He has to be brave, or get over Ilya.

Both seem impossible.

Shane:

I guess he deserves to know. Then it's his decision if he still wants to be friends.

Rose video calls him, and Shane panics. He quickly pulls on a shirt, because he should be wearing a shirt, before he answers, he tells himself.

Rose is in her small garden, and she is wearing giant sun glasses. She is even more beautiful than the last time he saw her and it is only now that Shane realises how much he misses her. She is one of his best friends, and the only close friend he has apart from Hayden and Jackie. They had met on their first day of college, and there had been an instant connection.

"Rose," he beams at her, and finds his own smile mirrored on his best friend's face.

"Shane. Hi. Listen. I love you, but you are being very stupid."

"Good to talk to you, too," Shane huffs.

"I know you love me, and you know that when it comes to love, I have much more knowledge and experience than you." She lifts her sunglasses to look at him. "Don't you dare bring up all my gay ex-boyfriends, because I still know much more than you do."

Rose is right, of course. Shane has liked people before, but even as a teenager, he'd never really had a crush on anyone. And that had always been okay. But now, he is twenty-four, and the thought of being in love scares him. Something else scares him, and it has to do with his best friend. When they had met, Shane had been amazed by her. She had been - and still is - so open, so adventurous, the opposite of him, and for some time after first getting to know her, Shane had been convinced that he was in love. It had put their friendship in danger, and they both could have been hurt if it weren't for the astounding empathy Rose is capable of.

"And I know you. You are thinking about everything that could go wrong."

Shane relaxes into his sofa cushion a bit. "It's just... it's been good. I like my new routine. I like the shelter. I - I have friends. You are in LA, Hayden has a whole family, I just... I'm in a good spot right now."

"And you could be in an even better spot. In his lap, or under him, depending on..." Rose giggles at his reddening face.

"Shut up," he retorts, blushing further.

"I mean it, Shane. People don't just almost kiss for nothing. I bet he is worried about the same thing, and you two are just both too scared to make the first move."

"He hugged me last night," Shane blurts out. "And the night before, at the restaurant."

"He did? See, that is what you're supposed to tell me at the beginning of the conversation," Rose sits up, and Shane only sees the sky for a moment. He should really visit her in California, get some sun and meet some of her actor friends. "Tell me about these hugs."

Shane thinks about the moment Ilya's arms wrapped around him, about his warm chest pressed to Shane's, the way he had felt his breath against his neck. "I don't know what to say," he admits. How do you put into words what it felt like being close to Ilya?

"Okay, let me ask you some questions, then. Did you like them?"

Shane nods, blinking away tears that suddenly threaten to run down his cheeks.

"Was it like - a bro hug? Like Hayden hugs you?"

Shane shakes his head. That is definitely not how Hayden hugs him.

"How were they different, then?" Rose's voice is so soft, filled with understanding. She's always understood him, somehow, often better than he understands himself.

"Just ... he has giant arms. Like, he works out a lot, so he is really strong and he smells really good, and hugging him felt really safe. And he, like, held me for a really long time." He can't even look at Rose as he says all that, so he misses the way her smile widens.

"He likes you," She says, voice soft. "Promise. Just ... talk to him? Even if he doesn't like you for some unfathomable reason, he is your friend. He deserves to know, right? Imagine

how miserable we would have been if we weren't open with each other back then? We might still be in an awful, loveless, and definitely sexless, relationship, right now."

Shane blushes at that. "But that's the problem, Rose. What if - what if I don't like him like that? I'm bad at figuring that out. I thought I loved you..."

To his surprise, Rose laughs out loud, before her face turns soft. "That's different, Shane. You're gay." She tilts her head. "And he is a hot, muscular Russian who hugged you. Twice. And almost kissed you."

"He is more, Rose. He is funny. And kind. Even if he tries to hide that."

"See? You are crushing on him so hard. And he deserves to know that."

Shane nods. "I guess he does. I'll... try. I'll see him tomorrow, after my run, probably."

"You can do it. I know it. And if you chicken out, I'll call the shelter myself and tell him."

"I'm not a chicken. And you wouldn't."

Rose grins. "You better not risk finding out," she says. "Tell me how it went, okay? I'll talk to you soon, Shane. I love you."

"Love you too, Rose. Miss you. I'll come visit you soon, yes?"

"Oh, you should." She blows him a kiss, the call ends and Shane flops back against the sofa. Fuck. He has to tell Ilya. At least he has 24 hours to come up with a plan.

Next to him, his phone buzzes with a text. Shane opens up his chat with Ilya to find a picture of the man himself, all glorious curls and bright eyes, with Priscilla perched on the arm of the bench where he is sitting in front of his house.

Ilya:

Told you, new bestie 😊 She hang out with me, now. 🧑♂️🐔 Soon, she run the place for me.

Shane chuckles, catching himself running his finger over the screen, disappointed in meeting cool glass instead of soft strands of golden hair. God, he is so fucked. He is so fucking in love with his man.

Shane:

She is looking at you very judgementally, 🙄 like she is already your boss.

Ilya:

Yes, I think so, too. Not scared of dogs. Not even Hugo, and he is scary big. 😨

Shane:

Didn't know chickens were so much fun to be around. And you can have eggs for breakfast every day now.

Ilya:

Yes, too many eggs. Had twelve there this morning. You can take some after run tomorrow.

Shane:

I will, thank you. 😊

They keep texting throughout the day, whenever there is a chance in their busy work days. Shane manages to finish another small project for the public library, designing a page for their pride month event. He calls his dad to talk about the weekend he'll be spending at his parents' cottage soon, then starts preparing dinner.

He doesn't put the phone away as he eats, because Ilya keeps texting, and his messages are... flirty? Shane, being brave, texts back, a smile on his face. He really needs to talk to Ilya tomorrow, and tell him that he wants more than flirty texts, a lot more, actually. As he gets up to put his plate into the dishwasher, there is another text coming through, and Shane almost drops his phone.

Ilya

As Ilya finishes his day, having fed the last animal and locked the last kennel, he decides he might watch a movie, eat last night's left over pizza and have a well deserved quiet night in. He will do his usual job of checking the cameras later and making sure all is still quiet, but he will try and switch off his brain from work tonight. Maybe Shane is getting to him after all.

Shane.

What the hell is he supposed to do about that situation?

He's avoided Troy all day today. Only being in a room with him, when other people are there, to avoid having that conversation. He assumes Troy knows that Shane didn't come over last night and will definitely ask him about it. He wonders if he will say anything to Shane.

Troy doesn't usually overstep, which is why it shocked him so much with the outburst last night, but he knows Troy means well. Always does, and he understands how difficult putting yourself out there can be. When he and Harris met, Troy found it hard to be open with him, as he wasn't out and he didn't know if Harris liked him. It took him a while to get to where he could do it, so he knows. He has been there too, and watching how happy they are now, is the main thing spurring Ilya forward, but he also wonders how it would be if he was honest, and he spends a long time thinking about all of the possible outcomes of Shane not being interested.

He sits on his bed, eating pizza, and picks up the picture of him and Shane. He wonders what a picture of them would look like in five years time, or in ten. Would they still be friends? Would they still be happy? Would they be surrounded by kids, or a family of dogs? He stares at Shane and the feeling of confusion and terror is taken over by feelings of love and warmth. His mind is made up. Tomorrow he will tell him and live with the consequences, one way or another.

He text him earlier, but he wants to speak to him again. Just to calm his nerves and because, when he is bored, his mind always drifts to Shane anyway. He sends him a message. He continues to talk about Priscilla, keeping it light.

Ilya:

Put the girls to bed. They say hi. Priscilla say she is now new best friend as I told her you took Anya away. 😭 She says "Cluck you". 🤔

He chuckles to himself as he types, not even caring that he feels like an idiot for laughing so much at his own silliness. He gets up, leaving the picture of them sitting back in its spot on the bedside table, as he goes to put on a movie. A message comes through.

Shane:

Idiot! 😏 Well cluck her! 🤔

Ilya laughs.

Ilya:

She is very grateful and says she thinks you are kind of cute, even though you are mean to her best friend. 😡 Don't see it though.

He sends it and wonders if it's too flirty, but figures he's going to confess his love for her tomorrow, so why is he trying to hide it?

Shane:

Oh. Well tell her I'm flattered. 😊 She's quite cute too, I suppose. For a chicken. Not exactly my type. 😊

Ilya's heart is thudding so hard that he can feel it vibrating through his body. He doesn't reply yet. He is unsure what to reply. He gets another text, that he looks at, anxiously.

Troy:

So, how was the talk? Please tell me you've spoken to him!

Ilya:

Am talking to him now. Just want to do in person. I'm doing it tomorrow, pushy!!

Troy:

Good. Don't try to get out of it or I will march over and bang your fucking heads together. Harris too. We both think you're made for each other. Don't fuck this up, ok?

Ilya:

Ok, I promise. Now I have two of you annoying me! Not fair. He may say no. Would you get some flowers and wine on way to work, please? Will bring him here after run, or before? Tell him then.

Troy:

Yes. Anything to get this on the move. Do it before. We can't take the wait! Love ya, man. See you tomorrow. X

Troy:

Proud of you!

Ilya smiles to himself, as he sends Troy his last text.

Ilya:

Thank you. Needed you to stop me being coward.

He thinks about how to reply to Shane. He can't just leave it. He decides on something.

Ilya:

She will be upset. 😭 Had high hopes. She thinks you are lonely and need partner. 😊

Shane:

Says you, who is always alone.

Ilya:

I am surrounded by 100 animals, Shane. Am not alone. Like them better than people. Nicer.

Shane:

I'm nice, Ilya. I am always nice. 😊

Ilya:

You are exception, Shane. Will always like you. ❤️

He's getting bold now. He might as well fucking tell him. Surely, even Shane isn't oblivious to his flirting, or is he?

Shane:

I will always like you too. ❤️

He types another message which reads

Ilya:

I want to tell you something.

But then deletes it, knowing he has his plan. He can't do it like this. He wishes he was here. He could get him over and tell him tonight, or call him, or video chat, but Shane is a creature of habit and he knows Shane doesn't like last minute changes. He likes to know in advance. He has told him that several times.

Something then clicks and he realises that that is true, but he is the exception to that. Last minute birthday meals and presents and last minute coop building and chicken moving. He did that for him and it goes against everything Shane normally does. Maybe this is more than a friendship. Be brave Ilya. Maybe he likes you.

Ilya:

Shane, can you-

He doesn't even finish writing the text when he gets a call come through. He huffs, but knows if it's the shelter phone, it's important. He answers it.

A woman on the other end is distraught. He talks to her, keeping her calm and telling her he will help. He takes her number and address. Fuck.

All thoughts of telling Shane disappear as he deletes the text and replaces it with a new one.

Ilya:

Shane, need to go. Some asshole dumped litter of tiny kittens in box on ladies front door, in pouring rain. They are tiny and cold. No mum around and doesn't know what to do. Need to get Troy to pick up. They need help ASAP. Speak later.

Within seconds, there is a call from Shane. He answers. "I'll do it. I'll collect them. Where is she?" His heart melts with the urgency in his voice. He is a kind soul, this one. Always here to help.

He prepares what he needs, after giving Shane advice on what to do and the details of where to go. He wants everything ready for when they get there. He's angry. After all of these years, he still doesn't understand why people do this. It's bad enough that they endanger these babies, by just dumping them at the most critical point of their lives, but they don't even take them to a shelter. They just put them somewhere random and hope someone finds them. It makes his fucking blood boil. He doubts they will all make it through. In his experience, in cases like this, they lose at least one. There is always a smaller one, a weaker one, that struggles and with the rain and the cold, they'll be lucky to just lose one. He can't let that emotion take over. He needs to be clear headed now. He needs to focus.

He sets up the box, the heat source and the fluffy cat with the artificial heartbeat, that will be used for snuggling. He prepares the colostrum syringes, knowing that they will need those first and makes sure that he has enough supplies to see him through the night. Five kittens will need a lot of helping. The rest he can show Shane when he arrives and he's sure he will help.

Shane

Shane drums his fingers against the steering wheel, hating every second that the traffic light stays red, which seems like an impossibly long time.

Every minute counts with the small ones, Ilya had said, and from what the woman had described, those kittens are only hours, maybe a day old. Finally, the light switches to green and Shane quickly continues his journey.

The lady, Lydia, is waiting for him on her doorstep and ushers him inside, offering him tea and some cookies, which Shane would be too polite to decline if time wasn't of the essence.

"I don't know who does that. I put them in a new box, with a towel and a hot water bottle. They were shivering, poor things. You can keep it." She babbles on as Shane picks up the box. The animals inside are small enough to fit in his palm, covered in black, white and sticky, red fur, their eyes still closed. When Shane moves them, they start making the most heartbreaking noises.

"Hush, it's alright. I'll get you some food, loves," Shane whispers, tucking the box against his chest. He says his quick goodbyes to Lydia, promising to call her with updates in a few days, and ducks under his umbrella, as he makes his way back to the car. Carefully, Shane straps in the box, making sure it is secure on the passenger seat, before he starts driving again.

Shane finds himself talking to the little creatures next to him, the entire way back to the shelter, mostly to calm himself down. He is already half in love with all five of them, and they are so vulnerable. So depend on him.

Ilya calls him a few moments before he gets there, and Shane curses himself. He had promised to update him.

"Hi, Ilya. We'll be there in about three minutes, I think," Shane says, turning left carefully.

"Okay. Good. I leave back gate open, you can park car in front of my house. Is faster."

Shane nods, before reminding himself that Ilya can't see him. "I can do that. They have a hot water bottle with them, that's good, right?"

"Yes, good. They need dry and warm. I see you soon, yes?"

"Yes, I can already see the shelter. See you in a minute." Shane pulls onto the parking lot, passing all his usual spots to take a narrow path that leads to the private entrance by Ilya's house, one that Shane has never used before. The Russian is by the door seconds after Shane parks the car, pulling it open. His curls are stuck to his forehead, even under the hood of his jacket. The rain hasn't let up, and Ilya is drenched only from the short way to the jeep.

"Hi," he says softly, his voice directed at the mewling kittens. "Is okay, will get you inside."

“Take the umbrella,” Shane reaches for it, hands it to Ilya over the console. “I’ll close the gate. Be right with you.”

For a moment, Ilya seems to want to argue, but with a short look at the tiny cats, he grabs the umbrella and hurries to the house. “Thank you,” is all he says, but it is so sincere, his voice so small, Shane wants to kiss him for it. He doesn’t, of course, instead he pulls the key from the ignition and steps into the wet darkness of the night.

By the time Shane has struggled to push the old gate back into its place and lock it, his nerves have cooled down a bit. The kittens are with Ilya and they are in the safest place they can be, with the most caring person Shane knows, a heart of gold hidden behind muscles and cool-guy bravado. Ilya will give his all for them and he will stay up all night, if he has to, Shane knows that much. And he’ll be damned if he does not support him every step of the way.

Rubbing the rain out of his eyes, pushing his long, still uncut, hair from his forehead, Shane rushes towards the other man’s home, stepping inside and closing the door.

The house is small and cozy, wood-paneled walls, a mix of different furniture, a few nick-nacks here and there. It is evidence of Ilya’s personality. Nothing is new here, and the walls needed a new paint job about five years ago, but the Russian has put every second, and every dollar into the shelter, not his house. Still, it seems like a home, and Shane feels comfortable here.

Quickly, he takes off his shoes and leaves them beside Ilya’s, hanging up his coat, and following Ilya’s soft voice to the small living room. The table is covered in equipment, and all six foot 2 of Russian are tucked into the corner of the sofa, a kitten cradled in his arm as he feeds it from a syringe.

“You can feed other one. Just grab one syringe and kitten. I can show you,” Ilya nods at the other side of the sofa, and Shane sits, takes a deep breath, then gets to work. The kitten is white with a few red spots in her back and one red sock, and it greedily eats as soon as Shane pushes the nozzle against its pink mouth.

“There you go,” Shane tells the tiny creature, watching every move with fascination. “That’s it.”

He looks up when he feels Ilya’s eyes on him. “You’re natural, just change angle a bit. Yes, like that, is easier, now. Use other hand to cover it a bit, keep it warm.” Shane does, rubbing his thumb along the head, feeling tiny ears. For a while, their breath, and the smacking sounds of tiny mouths as the kittens feed, are the only sounds they can hear.

“Is colostrum. Like first milk they get from mother,” Ilya explains after a while, carefully putting the syringe away. “They need to poop after. Mother does help by licking them, but we are mothers now, so...” He leans over and picks up a cotton ball and gently rubs the black and white kitten’s body.

“So they really are just born, like you suspected?” Shane’s stomach twists. “You think they didn’t even get to feed from their mom?”

The Russian's face mirrors his own pain as he carefully cleans up the urine and poop. "Yes. Maybe even just few hours. Bet people took them away from mama immediately. They haven't been fed, I'm sure. But look at full little belly, now." A frown turns into a smile as Ilya carefully peels the kitten off his shirt and places it back with its siblings. He picks up the next one.

They fall into a routine. Shane feeds the kittens, Ilya makes sure they defecate and are back, surrounded by the rest of the litter and under their warm blanket.

"This is biggest one," Ilya nods at the last kitten, currently eating happily against Shane's chest. "Sure he will make it. I worry about two smallest ones. Runts. Every litter has one, and they often don't make it through first few days in bad situations."

He reaches for his phone, types on it. "I will feed them every two hours. We will weigh them, and check if they gain weight," He flips the phone, showing Shane the alarms he has set. "Will be long night, but I have done before. Always worth it." There it is again, that small smile Shane has come to love.

"I can help. Stay. We are faster working together."

Ilya lifts his head, surprised. "You want to? Won't sleep much, Shane. You have work tomorrow?"

"I can - I brought my laptop. I could work from here, if you don't mind. I mean, if you have an extra toothbrush. Or I can just stay a bit longer, and then go home. We could watch a movie, eat something. Or you take a nap, and I do the next feed, and leave after? Whatever works for you." He's rambling, and he can't help it. Yes, he wants to do this for the kittens, but very selfishly, he also wants more time with Ilya. Shane almost misses that the kitten is done feeding, and he carefully hands it over to Ilya, their fingers brushing.

Does Ilya seem shy all of a sudden? God, he is adorable, Shane can barely hold back from brushing a stray curl from his forehead. "Will be nice, having company. I can show you how to prepare milk."

"Okay. Good. Here, I'll order some food," Shane peels his phone from his wet pocket. He wipes at the screen, then opens the delivery app. They agree on Sushi and a few snacks to get them through the night. After he places the order, Shane pulls his arms closer around himself. He is wet and cold, and he'd forgotten about that as they took care of their five tiny children.

"You are cold," Ilya is the one to say it out loud, barely looking up at Shane from where he is focused on tucking in the last kitten. "Get dry clothes. My bedroom is upstairs, room to the right. Get whatever you need, I will weigh little friends here."

That's how Shane finds himself in Ilya's room a few minutes later. Not wanting to snoop around, he quickly pulls a pair of sweatpants and a shirt from his wardrobe and closes it again. Shane gets undressed and dressed as quickly as possible, feeling like he is invading his friend's most private space, but as he pulls the t-shirt over his head, he cannot help but notice his scent. Blushing, Shane covers his mouth and nose with the fabric and breathes him in. For

a moment, he allows himself to close his eyes, be surrounded fully by Ilya, before quickly taking a step back.

“You are such a weirdo,” Shane chides himself. He pulls on the trousers, rolls up the legs that are a bit too long for him, then steps towards the radiator so he can dry his own clothes. He finds it under the window by the bed, but it is cold. Of course, it is summer after all. He will have to ask Ilya. As he turns, his gaze falls onto something on the bedside table. Among the few things there, leaning against a half-empty glass of water, rests the picture of the two of them at the restaurant, its twin safely tucked up in Shane’s wallet. Shane picks it up, brushing a gentle finger over it.

Ilya put it on his nightstand of all places, in a way that he could look at it from his bed. Ilya cared that much about the memory, maybe even about Shane, that he wanted to keep it this close. Without thinking, Shane rushes downstairs, picture in one hand, wet clothes tucked over the other arm. His own footsteps seem loud in the quiet house, and Shane does not seem to be able to control his legs anymore as he makes his way to the living room, stopping only when he reaches the table.

Blue eyes - how do they always seem to have a different colour - meet him when Ilya looks up, eyebrows furrowing in confusion as he notices what Shane is holding out to him. Only then does Shane come to his senses. Fuck what is he doing, holding out the photo to the man he loves without comment? Ilya must be so confused, and Shane wants to explain, or better even, turn back time, but both seem impossible. Instead, he stands there, frozen to a spot, and all he can pray for is that Ilya understands.

Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

explicit

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

Ilya

Ilya sends him upstairs, knowing there are many reasons he would want Shane upstairs in his room and even more reasons he would want him to be taking off his clothes, but not many that involve him redressing. He lets his mind drift to all the things he would like to do to him, while he sets up the weighing scales for the kittens.

He needs a distraction from all that has happened tonight. From the flirty texts to the rush to save the kittens. He laughs to himself, thinking about how his life at the shelter is always unexpected, but taking comfort in the fact that his plans always seem to include Shane.

Ilya weighs the kittens. The two smallest, really are tiny. He wonders how they will fare overnight, but he knows they will do all they can for them.

He hears Shane's footsteps, running down the stairs, as he's returning the kittens' box to its cosy spot in the corner. He is just tucking them all up safely to their mechanical mother, as Shane appears, looking a bit dazed and breathing heavily. Ilya looks at him, confused, tired and unable to work out whether that's his photo or Shane's.

"Yes, Shane, is photo. You know this." Ilya is suddenly embarrassed when he realises it is his. Fuck. Why was he so stupid, leaving it there, for anyone to see. He gets defensive and is about to say something stupid, when he sees the look on Shane's face. He looks away, quickly taking Shane's wet clothes from him and walking over to hang them on the clothes horse. He is buying himself time, whilst he tries to explain that he's not a creepy fucking pervert and he likes him. Fucking loves him, in fact. He really has fucked this up.

Ilya places his hands on the back of the sofa, standing behind it and putting it like a shield between him and Shane. He digs his hands into the soft fabric, like he's massaging the awkwardness out of two enormous shoulders in front of him. He follows the patterns across the sofa covers, with his eyes, as his mouth tries to make words, but nothing escapes.

"Ilya, I..." comes quietly over the top of the barricade, trying to bridge the gap as Shane stands there, not moving, hands wedged into his pockets, thumbs stroking the corners them as he looks Ilya up and down, avoiding his eyes. The photo is on the table and Ilya can't even bear to look at it. If it wasn't for that, he wouldn't be about to lose Shane for good. He tries to ignore Shane's words, but the lights, reflecting off the tears balanced in his eyes, won't allow that.

He stands tall, his hands stroking each other now, as he tries to comfort himself. "Shane, I... I wanted to tell you, but I couldn't. I was scared. Scared I would lose you." He pulls a hand up over his mouth, trying to stop himself from saying something wrong or making this worse. "Fuck. You are all I think about Shane. Every second of every day, you're there. I know you do not feel the same but..."

That's all that comes out, before Shane is on him. Standing on the sofa, pulling him into a kiss. He is taller than him that way, and fuck, the angle is delicious, Ilya pulling the other

man down to deepen the kiss. "Fuck, I feel like that too. Ilya, I have wanted to kiss you so fucking much. I've wanted to tell you too." The words escape through kisses and tears and bodies tightly pushed together, but it's not enough. Ilya climbs over, pushing Shane onto his back as he lies on top of him, stroking his hair and wiping at tears.

"Shane, I thought I might lose you. Didn't want to risk that." The kissing has stopped and Ilya holds Shane's face, palm against his cheek, other hand gently on his shoulder, fingertips gently stroking his skin, as his eyes flick over his freckles. "Fuck. You are so beautiful, Shane." He suddenly laughs, finally realising he can say these things now. He runs his thumb across his freckles and then back across Shane's lips, taking them in a slow kiss, less frenzied now, as he parts them with his tongue and lets himself explore Shane's mouth. It's almost silent, apart from the sounds they make, as their hands roam and the noises of the kittens in their box fade away.

Ilya wants to touch everything, needs to, as he pulls Shane to sit. "Can I?" He asks, as he holds the bottom of Shane's t-shirt in his hands. Shane nods and Ilya grins, unable to believe this is actually happening. He pulls Shane's shirt over his head, unable to take his eyes off the skin as it is revealed. "I have thought so many times of this, Shane," he whispers against his neck as he kisses and nibbles the skin there. It's a mixture of the taste of salt and the smell of rain, mixed with the usual scent of Shane, that he loves so much. He tastes him and wants more. "This ok? Can stop if you want to, ok?"

"Don't want to stop. Keep going," Shane breathes, pulling Ilya's t-shirt over his head. They both take each other in. The muscles rippling and tensing under each other's fingertips. "Can I touch you?" Shane asks, quiet and cautious.

"Yes. Need you to." He sees Shane's face, like he's a deer in headlights. "Is first time with man?"

Shane nods and has a look on his face that Ilya doesn't understand. "We can go slow. No rush. I take care of you, sweetheart, promise." He pulls his chin up, so he can kiss his mouth.

He leans in close and whispers. "Want to touch you. Want to taste you, Shane." Ilya starts to trail kisses from his neck and down his body. He takes to his knees, on the floor, pulling off Shane's remaining clothing, eyes fixed on Shane's as he starts to stroke Shane's heavy cock. Shane's hands stroke his curls as Ilya slides his tongue along his beautiful cock, tasting the precum that pools at the tip. "This okay?"

Shane nods.

Ilya takes him into his mouth, being gentle and slow. He doesn't want to push him over the edge. His hands wander to Shane's butt as he takes his cock to the back of his throat. Shane pushes off quickly, Ilya thinking he did something wrong. "Sorry. Was too much?"

"No. No, just.... Fuck, sorry." Ilya stands to kiss him.

"Is ok Shane. No pressure. We can stop." He kisses him again, as he pulls them both to the sofa, sitting, but removing his clothes, hoping Shane will feel better if they're both naked and vulnerable.

“No. Want this.” He drops to his knees, taking Ilya straight into his mouth, gagging and sloppy. Ilya closes his eyes, hand resting against Shane’s hair as he lets him figure it out.

Shane

Shane learns three things about Ilya Rozanov in a really short time, and it makes his head spin. He learns them while he is in his arms, under him on the sofa, on his knees for him, as all that pent up longing breaks free, setting them both on fire, and it will take Shane a while to process everything that happens.

The first thing he learns is that Ilya is a great kisser. Shane jumps into the kiss, cupping his head for balance, but as soon as their lips touch, Ilya takes over. His touch is demanding, guiding, confident, but the tenderness interlaced in every contact between them makes Shane's eyes well up with tears. "Fuck, I feel like that too. Ilya, I have wanted to kiss you so fucking much. I've wanted to tell you too," Shane whispers against Ilya's mouth, never straying far from the kiss. What he had thought would be a relief - finally kissing Ilya - just feeds the flame and Shane needs more of it, more of those soft curls between his fingers, the greedy hands on his body, that clever tongue in his mouth. Ilya awakens a hunger in him that Shane has never known. One that he thought he was incapable of feeling.

Ilya seems to be able to sense Shane's desperation, and he knows just what to do about it. That is the second thing Shane learns about him. Ilya knows him, knows how to handle him, knows what he needs. His weight grounds him as they lay down on the sofa together, blue eyes looking for any signs of distress, voice growing soft as he keeps checking in with Shane.

"Is first time with man?"

Ilya knows. Shane never told him about his inexperience with men, or shared the fact that he had tried dating women for a long time, but somehow, the Russian had sensed what was going on. For a moment, Shane is scared that the other man will find it weird, but he is met with understanding, and the sweetest of kisses.

It is a blur from there, fingers and lips, tongue and warm breath on his skin, as Ilya reduces him to nothing but lust. Plush lips wrap around his cock, and Shane loses himself in the perfect heat of his mouth, barely registering that the sounds that fill the room are torn from his own throat. It's perfect, until it is too much, and Shane is too close, pushing him away.

Ilya stays with him as Shane tries to catch up with his own brain, kisses bringing him down, grounding him instead of feeding the flame. "Is ok Shane. No pressure. We can stop," The blonde man sits them down, giving him space, and suddenly, that is the last thing Shane wants.

"No. Want this." Shane needs to know. He needs to learn how to make Ilya feel just as good. They shuffle around until Shane's knees hit the carpet. Being brave - it has worked so far for him, tonight. He guides the head of Ilya's cock to his lips, filling his mouth as far as he can without struggling. The small part of his brain that is still functional tries to provide Shane with memories of what he enjoys about oral sex, and he tries to translate that into his own movements, one hand around the base, the other finding a spot on the Russian's body he can hold on to, finally resting against his pecs, squeezing.

“Da, sweetheart. Fuck, just like that,” Ilya’s voice is low, rough with arousal, and his hands reach for Shane, stroking his face, his hair, his neck, not guiding, but encouraging. On his knees for him, Shane learns a third thing about the man he is in love with, and that is how much Ilya cares. He lets Shane explore, he bears what is probably too much teeth, he encourages him constantly, letting him know what feels good.

“So good for me. Can try putting your tongue against underside. Yes, like that. Feels so good.” Fingers tug at his hair, sending sparks down to his own dick, making his toes curl, and Shane makes a desperate, muffled sound around Ilya.

Shane learns something about himself, too. He loves this. He loves doing this for Ilya, but also for himself. He wants to become better at this, until he can drive the man above him insane with just his mouth.

All of the sudden, Ilya’s fingers tighten in his hair, and for a moment, Shane wonders if he is going to orgasm right then, instead, the Russian pulls him up and into a kiss, and Shane scrambles to rearrange his limbs as he crashes down on top of his... lover? No, that word is weird, but there is not enough brain capacity left to find a different word.

“You liked that, didn’t you? Could feel it,” Ilya’s voice is low, his eyes dark with lust, and he is impossibly more beautiful like this, all raw, stripped of the mask of indifference he usually wears. “Going to make you feel good, sweetheart. You want that, yes?”

Shane only manages a nod, then a moan, as Ilya’s long fingers wrap around his cock, stroking a few times. “Hips up,” Ilya demands, shifting beneath him, muscles in his arms dancing. “Will stroke us both, yes? Make a mess.” At that, his smile turns from aroused to sweet. “Bet you are beautiful when you come. Will find out.”

The hot flesh of Ilya’s dick presses against his own, wet with spit - Shane’s spit - as Ilya envelopes them both in his large hand. Shane watches, fascinated, at how well they fit together in the Russian’s large palm, and he could get lost in the sight of them, but there is one urge that is stronger, so Shane lifts his head to kiss the man he loves. The kiss turns from slow to desperate, until all they do is share hot breath.

“Ilya,” Shane smears his lips against the corner of his mouth, pulling him impossibly closer. “I...”

Ilya understands. He reaches out, guiding Shane’s hand down, covering his own. “Show me how you need it.” So Shane guides him, finding the slow but tight grip he uses to get himself off, and it takes only a few more strokes for Shane to come all over their joined hands and Ilya’s dick.

The Russian groans, fist flying over them now. “Yes, Shane. Fuck,” He spits, voice tight, and Shane watches him come in three tight ropes, mouth a tight line, eyes barely open. Shane kisses and kisses and kisses him, his cheek, his jaw, his brow, and finally, his mouth, as they slowly come down.

Strong arms wrap around him, pulling him against Ilya’s chest, the warm press of lips against the top of his hair. “That was so hot,” Shane hears himself say, as he curls closer, seeking

warmth. For a while, they stay quiet, hands and lips taking over communication, speaking tenderly, and Shane is close to falling asleep now, but the thought of waking up all sticky makes him finally sit up, eyes never leaving Ilya.

“I will need to get cleaned up. And our food should be here soon,” He reaches for the clothes he had just gotten from Ilya’s wardrobe, and for a moment he is scared that Ilya will sober up, and will come to regret this. Instead, he gets a small smile.

“Take shower if you want. I will pick up food,” Ilya reaches for a tissue on the table. “I make sure we have not traumatised our children.” He nods towards the box, and a laugh punches out of Shane’s chest.

Chapter End Notes

So excited to finally be able to post this one :)

Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

Trigger Warnings:

Mentions of Irina's suicide

Not all the kittens are well. No animal death in this chapter

Ilya

After getting Shane the things he needs, Ilya cleans himself up and runs down the stairs to answer the door. He thanks the driver, who struggled to find his door and is now soaking wet.

“Sorry. Deliveries normally come through shelter. Have good night, okay?” He gives him a tip. It's not much, but he feels bad for not being at the main door for him.

“It's ok. No probs. You do good work here. We got a dog from you last year so you're forgiven.” He grins at Ilya, very flirty, which Ilya brushes off, asking him about how it's getting on and the guy answers, happily, glad to be safe under the dry porch. The driver notices Shane, as he walks down the stairs, putting on Ilya's shirt, and finishes the conversation quickly.

“Have a good night tonight, yeah, guys?” The man says, waving goodbye. “I'll tell Ted you said hi,” he laughs, as he walks away.

“Who's Ted?” Shane has a tone to his voice that Ilya doesn't understand. “His dog. Got him here last year. Sweet dog, looks fierce, but big softy.”

“Oh, sounds cute,” Shane says, tense.

“You jealous, Shane?” Ilya wraps his arms around Shane from behind, kissing his neck. “You sound jealous?” He whispers against Shane's skin. “No one else will do. Just you, okay?” He hugs Shane, hands running over his chest. “And Priscilla of course. She won't share.” He giggles against Shane's shoulder, feeling Shane relax. “Come on. Must be hungry.”

Ilya kisses Shane's shoulder, before picking up the food and laying the table. “Help yourself. I haven't checked kittens yet.”

“Always animals first, yes?” Shane laughs. “I will make you a plate, ok?” He shouts after Ilya.

“Please. Am very hungry and not just for you,” Ilya calls back.

“They are ok. We can eat,” Ilya smiles, as he comes back, not telling Shane how concerned he is over the two little ones. They're definitely not as strong as the others. There isn't much he can do now, so he leaves them to rest. He will look them over at the next feed.

They take their food to the sofa and Ilya gets them some drinks, sitting as close as he can, knees touching, whilst still able to eat, because he needs Shane close right now. He's never been able to have this before. There was always a bit too much space between them.

They make small talk and avoid talking about what happened earlier. Mainly talking about the kittens instead. As they finish their food, the alarm goes off and Ilya offers to show Shane how to prepare the milk for their babies.

They head to the kitchen and Ilya shows him how to do it, step by step, making sure he gives Shane all the information he can on caring for their new friends, without overwhelming him. As they feed them, Ilya talks about how things will work for them, growing up over the next few months and when they will be able to be rehomed. They also talk about names they can give them and Ilya informs Shane about how one litter of kittens can have many fathers, which sometimes can be why they are so different in size. He hopes that makes Shane feel better, after seeing the concern on his face, when he picks up the tiny one. They clean them, toilet them and feed them. Ilya reheats their water bottle and packs them all back into their box, cosy against their robotic mother.

“It's ok. Come here, sweetheart,” Ilya says, leading Shane to the sofa, after they've finished cleaning up. “Life is hard, Shane. Some animals just fight as hard as they can, until they cannot anymore. They are together. All that counts.” He pulls Shane into a hug and they lie together, staring at the glow from the lamp across the room. “Sometimes people are strong, but that is not always enough.”

“Is this... are we... still talking about kittens, here?” He asks quietly, afraid to look at him.

“Yes, mostly, but sometimes people too.” He has a sadness to his voice, as he tightens his jaw, trying not to sound emotional.

“Is that what happened... you know... with your mum? Was she sick?”

“No, not sick. Just sad. Just hurt and afraid. She was not coward Shane. She fought hard and strong, for long time, but...”

“Did she... ?”

“Take her own life? Yes. Was accident, my father said, but I saw in her eyes. It was not accident, Shane.”

“You saw her?”

“I found her, yes. She was sad and alone. No one should ever be alone, at the end. Ever.” His grip around Shane's waist tightens and he rests his head on Shane's stomach, teardrops soaking into his t-shirt, making his clothes wet, for the second time tonight, Ilya realises.

“She wasn't alone. Not really. She had you and you loved her. She was never truly alone, Ilya.” Shane strokes his hand through Ilya's curls, as the other runs along his back. “How old were you?”

“Twelve. She was everything, Shane. Irina. Her name was Irina and she was beautiful. I should have been there to hold her. Was supposed to protect her. She said I was soldier and protector. I failed. I never fail to protect anyone again. Never.”

Shane kisses his hair, before quietly asking, “What about your family?”

“They never even cared about her. Said she was weak. Both think she took easy way. My brother and father never gave her respect. Just me and her against world, she said.”

Ilya gets lost in his thoughts for a while, thoughts of her beautiful face as they ran in nature and drew and painted, talked about wildlife and the lives they wanted to live. It soon comes to a halt with visions of her tear stained face and a little boy hiding from harsh words, cries of anguish and things being smashed or slammed. He sobs, hard, not even caring that Shane probably wonders if he wants to be with someone that has so much hidden baggage, but it's all just been too much today. The hiding, the truth telling, the kittens, the kisses. It's all just overwhelmed him and the things he normally hides so well, have just overflowed the box as it's filled. The ugly is flowing out now and if Shane wanted him to stop, he doesn't think he could, but Shane holds him, soothes him and hums him a tune, instinctively knowing what he needs right now. Funny how roles reverse, he thinks, as earlier it was him guiding Shane.

He hears Shane say something, but not what.

"Sorry Shane. It is lot. So sorry to ruin night. Don't know why I needed to say that."

"It's alright, Ilya. I said in the restaurant, remember? I said I was here if you wanted to talk and with the kittens, I suppose it brings things back, right?"

"I suppose. Am sorry though. Is a lot."

"So... is that why you came here? To get away from your family? I mean, you don't have to tell me. I just... I just want to know more about you. We can do it another time."

"No. I want to say. Yes. Came here when I could get money. I saved and left week after I turn 18. Didn't know what to do and found myself here. Met Bob at work site, when helping with construction jobs and he got me job doing fixing here. Met Harris here, who helped me out and Jonathan ran shelter. He was like a father and gave me room here to stay in and work from. I would look after place at night. He trained me and when he left, he passed it to me. People came and went, but team we have now, have been here years. Like family. I have given everything I have to shelter Shane. I still will, but need to be me too. You make me realise that."

"I'm glad. I want that for you too. For us." Shane kisses his hair. "So where did he go? Jonathan? Did he retire, or?"

"Retire, yes. Came into money when his father passed. Gave some to shelter and went to travel. Was him who gave my birthday secret away on phone."

"Oh, well I have him to thank then, for my first chance at hugging you, having a dinner date, that neither of us knew was a date and wanting so badly to pull you across the table and kiss you." Shane sounds happy and it finally makes Ilya smile a bit. He sits up, wiping his face with his t-shirt and looks at Shane.

"How did I get this lucky? Have most perfect man in world wanting to kiss me?"

His head hurts, from the pressure of the day, pressure building in his chest, but from something different, too. Love. Ilya looks at Shane, so many emotions racing through him. This man. This beautiful, fucking man, who wants him. He opened his heart to Shane, feeling he could and knowing Shane would be there.

His whole life he has been told he's not enough, never been allowed to be weak, or sensitive and never allowed to open up. He became a closed off container of emotion. Someone who learnt to keep that lid locked tight, keep it inside and hide it from view. It was not to be seen, not to be heard, never a scream allowed to escape.

He doesn't have to be that with Shane. He broke down, clung on, cried and let himself be seen. He hasn't done that since his mother and it shocked him how easy it was to do. He feels lighter, more able to make space for someone else to love him now. For Shane to love him. He wants that. He wants it so much that he almost cries again.

He's heard him and he's here. He's still here. No voice barking at him to “man up and stop behaving like little girl,” or “maybe you need me to buy you pretty little dress to help with your problems”. He fucking hates them. He feels that heat rising inside him, understanding even more now than ever that he is here to be loved. He doesn't have to earn it, to pander to anyone, or be what they need him to be. He is him and Shane is here for that. Whatever Ilya is, Shane wants to be here, by his side, stroking his hand as he cries. The anger begins to subside, taken over by his intense love for Shane.

Emotions run riot inside him and normally he would find something, a project, a job, something to do and give him purpose. That's how he's survived his entire life and that's all he knows. He doesn't need that now. He will take those feelings, twisting inside him and feel. He will feel everyone and know Shane will support him. Right now, it's not about the past, or the future, but the present. He wants nothing but to feel. Feel with this guy who never pitied, never judged him, just listened, patiently. He wants to feel all of these things right now, no words, no expectations, just feelings.

He leans in, pulling Shane's head towards him as he kisses him, moaning and desperate. He needs comfort and touch, needs pressure and pain, needs Shane in his mouth. He takes to the floor, pulling down Shane's joggers and stroking him. “Fuck. Need you in my mouth,” he says, more to himself than Shane. He looks at him, waiting for his consent. He takes him deep, cock hitting the back of his throat as he moans around him, hollowing his cheeks, hand teasing his balls, showing Shane how much he wants to please him.

Shane seems to understand, Ilya thinks, as if he senses his lover's thoughts. He follows Ilya's lead, just letting him act out and being all for it, as a willing participant, always giving him what he needs. That's why the Russian loves him so much.

Shane's hips buck and Shane apologises, which only makes Ilya smile around him. He puts Shane's hand in his hair, showing him what he needs and Shane follows, gripping it hard.

Ilya's hard cock throbs between his legs as he tries to focus on Shane. Fuck, his cock twitches inside his mouth as his screams to be touched and he can't stop himself taking his own cock in his hand and pumping it in time with the movements his mouth makes on Shane's. He feels Shane cum down his throat, fighting to push Ilya off, but Ilya refuses. He wants to taste him, wants to feel used and owned right now.

“Oh god, I'm sorry, Ilya. Fuck, sorry. I couldn't stop, I...”

“Is ok Shane. I wanted to. Sit there. Don't move.” Ilya stands next to him and tilts Shane’s head, so he can insert himself into Shane's mouth. “This okay?” He whispers and Shane hums around him in reply.

“Fuck, your mouth is so fucking soft.” He starts to slide gently in and out of his mouth. His hips move slowly and he wonders if Shane is also thinking about how it would feel to really fuck. Shane on all fours on the bed, Ilya's tongue inside his arse, back arched in pleasure. Fuck, he wants that. He pulls out, coming all over Shane's, or rather his, t-shirt.

The two collapse in a heap, breathless and kissing. “We should probably go to bed. Long night ahead. Clean up and snuggle?”

“Snuggle, huh? Didn't take you for a cuddler. Thought you'd be more of a starfish,” Shane grins.

“Maybe. Will see. Haven't shared bed with someone in very, very long time.”

He sees Shane blush and try to hide his smile. He also sees him relax a little. He wonders if Shane thought he was a manwhore, which makes him smile in turn. That is a conversation to have later. Right now, he wants to cuddle in bed, with the man he loves. *Loves*. Fuck.

Shane

Shane hates waking up in unfamiliar places, always has. As a kid, their holidays had mostly been to his parents' cottage because every time they had stayed at a hotel, Shane had struggled to fall asleep or had woken up in the middle of the night, crying. Moving into his dorm in college, and then his own flat had been difficult, but he had adjusted after a while, figured out what kinds of curtains he needed, what kind of bedding, what to set his thermostat to.

Maybe that is what makes him wake up just before three. He's hot, and he is on his side instead of his back. There is a light shining into the room, and Shane remembers that street light right next to the gate outside. They should have closed the curtains, because how is Shane meant to fall asleep again like this? Shane squeezes his eyes shut, snuggles closer against Ilya, rubbing his nose against his shoulder.

He has never been happier to wake up anywhere than he is here in Ilya's bed, with the man next to him, the arm Shane is currently using as a pillow slung around Shane's back, hand resting on his side, warm and heavy.

Ilya.

Ilya, who he kissed, had sex with, fell asleep next to. Ilya, who is now asleep, mouth hanging slightly open, features relaxed, not a trace of the pain that had been visible there just hours ago. Ilya had been so open with him, about his family, his mother, and the man he became after all that trauma. He had turned it into something beautiful instead of giving up, into care, into hard work.

For a while, Shane just looks at him, trying to understand how he got so lucky that Ilya likes him back, wants him.

A low buzz tears him from his thoughts and Shane moves quickly, grabbing the phone and turning off the alarm. Next to him, Ilya moves, curling up on his side, but does not wake.

It takes Shane a moment to realise why the other man's phone had buzzed. Two hours. Someone downstairs is hungry. For a moment, Shane considers running his fingers through blonde curls, waking Ilya as gently as possible. Instead, he brushes a kiss against his forehead and sneaks downstairs.

Shane follows the directions Ilya had given him earlier to prepare the milk, then sits on the sofa with the box. As soon as there is light, the kittens start complaining, somehow sensing him, even with their eyes still closed, and it is both adorable and heartbreaking to hear their little sounds. Gently, he takes out the smallest of the litter. She is tiny, thin, and it takes her a while to accept the syringe.

"Come on, little one. You need to eat, grow big and strong," Shane encourages, worry making his chest grow tight.

“That one is small. Scott will have look at it. Runt of litter often has difficult time,” Ilya had explained earlier, but there had been a deep line across his forehead, one that is probably now mirrored on his own face. He makes sure it eats all of the milk, even offers it a bit more, but the tiny kitten refuses, and Shane finds himself hoping that Scott will be here early tomorrow to make sure it gets the help it needs, his heart already attached to it.

Shane spends a long time with the kittens, making sure everyone has eaten and pooped, and gotten enough snuggles, before he sets them back into their little home. He puts on the kettle and refills the hot water bottle. For a while, he just watches them curl up to the heartbeat plush toy like they would to their mother. “We will take good care of you,” Shane promises them, then returns to the kitchen. He cleans up the syringes and then the sink, then slowly makes his way back upstairs in the dark, only barely avoiding bumping into stuff in the narrow hallway.

He pulls the curtains closed and turns to see Ilya has starfished across the bed, duvet pushed down to only cover him from his hips down. It feels very intimate to crawl back into bed with him, to pull up the duvet. As soon as he settles down, long arms pull him close, and Shane huffs as Ilya’s weight settles on top of him, then smiles, hiding his face in blonde curls.

“Alarm soon for kittens,” Ilya mumbles, then tries to sit up. Shane gently pulls him down.

“Already taken care of. Go back to sleep,” he whispers.

Ilya hums, hot lips brushing the tender skin on Shane’s neck. “You are angel, Shane Hollander,” he mumbles, relaxing. They both fall back asleep, Shane slowly stroking Ilya’s hair.

The next time Shane wakes up, it is to Ilya’s alarm, and an annoyed huff from the Russian on top of him.

“Kittens are lucky they are cute,” Ilya drawls, squeezing Shane tighter for a moment, then sitting up. He turns off the alarm, then sits at the edge of the bed, running his hands over his face. Shane watches him, all ruffled in the low morning light, and Shane is very tempted to pull him back to bed. Instead, he sits up as well, every movement followed by soft eyes, as if Ilya can’t really believe this is real either, waking up together.

“I can do this one.” The bed squeaks as Ilya gets up and shuffles to the bathroom. Shane hears the toilet flush, then the sound of the other man brushing his teeth.

He blinks a few times, attempting to wake up further, then grabs his discarded shirt and pulls it on. Not his shirt, but the one that smells like Ilya’s laundry detergent. His own clothes are probably dry by now, but he somehow likes this better.

“You are awake,” Ilya accuses, as he comes out of the bathroom, and Shane cannot help but look at his chest, those broad shoulders, his strong arms. His gaze narrows on a constellation of moles just below his pecks, as his lover - no, that still sounds wrong - approaches, presses a kiss to the top of his head, his hands so gentle in Shane’s hair.

“We can tag-team this one,” Shane lifts his chin, following where longer fingers guide it, until their eyes meet.

“Okay,” Ilya simply says, “I start, and make coffee. You can use bathroom, yes? You need towel?”

“Yes, please. Some underwear would be good, too.”

Once he is provided with both, Shane shuffles into the bathroom. He takes a quick shower and gets ready for the day. When he gets downstairs, there is a cup of coffee waiting for him on the living room table, next to Ilya’s. It feels natural to gently take over feeding so Ilya can take on poop duty. They work in silence, feet touching where they rest on the rug.

“I will text Scott about runt. It is still weak,” Ilya’s voice is rough with worry, and domesticity becomes laced with sadness.

“Yeah, I noticed earlier that it hasn’t really improved. Poor thing.” Shane strokes its tiny ears where it sleeps in the box, still so thin.

Ilya nods, watches him for a moment, the tuxedo kitten tucked against his chest. “We will try, Shane. But sometimes is not enough.” His voice is low, and Shane reaches out to touch his arm, offering comfort.

“It’ll be okay,” he says with a confidence he does not feel. He has to believe it, or his heart might break.

The kitten in Ilya’s arm makes a small sound, and it pulls them from the intensity of this moment, makes them both smile. “Yes, you want back in cozy box, I understand, sweetheart. Your loss. Will cuddle with Shane instead.” Ilya blows a raspberry at the tiny creature, then gently places it back with its siblings, where the tired kitten, curls up right in the middle.

Shane watches, and is surprised to find Ilya very close to him when he turns his head back towards the Russian.

“Hi,” he grins, as if they hadn’t been awake for almost an hour, and Shane is so in love with him, his heart might burst, but as he looks down, his chest looks as it always does. Shane trails his fingers up Ilya’s chest, incapable of resisting.

“Hi,” he tips his head up, accepting the kiss Ilya leaves against the corner of his mouth. leaving him wanting more. They stay close together, palm resting against Shane’s jaw, a thumb tenderly stroking half-circles against his cheek. “Thank you for letting me sleep. Very nice. You can run shelter soon, and I go in retirement.”

It makes them both smile, because they know Ilya would never leave this place or his animals behind. “Thought you could use the beauty sleep,” Shane teases, his hands finding their spot against Ilya’s hips.

“Hmm, had no complaints last night. My tired face made you drop to your knees, Twice,” Ilya’s eyes are bright, observing him, and Shane feels his cheeks heat. He did do that, and

only the thought of it makes him want to have Ilya's dick back in his mouth. "I think you like my face. See you looking at my lips."

Ilya's thumb brushes against Shane's lower lip, and if he had wanted a kiss badly before, Shane is now desperate for it. All he can do is nod.

"You want kiss?" Ilya is torturing him, now, so close, yet so far. "Tell me what you want."

For a moment, all he can do is close his eyes, Ilya's gaze making him feel exposed. "Kiss me, please."

The words come out on a breath, and Shane watches Ilya consider for a moment before, finally, his hot mouth descends on Shane's. They kiss slowly, deeply, hands never still against the other's body, exploring with the same tenderness their lips are.

The yawn surprises Shane, tearing from his throat, ending the kiss abruptly. He tilts forward, hiding his embarrassed face against Ilya's shoulder. "Sorry, I..." The body next to him shakes as Ilya laughs.

"I see, romance already dead," the Russian chides, then tilts Shane's face up for another kiss. "Come, I promised cuddles, yes?" With that, Ilya moves them until Shane is tucked against his chest, and he pulls a blanket over them. It is where Shane falls back asleep.

When Shane wakes up a third time that day, he is on Ilya's sofa alone, and the thought of the tall Russian wiggling out from under him makes him smile as he stretches and blinks against the sun.

He notices the sound of someone moving around the house, and the tiny sound the kittens make in their box. Shane sits up to find Ilya in his typical work clothes in the kitchen as he eats a piece of toast standing up, and he is convinced that is how Ilya usually eats his breakfast.

"Good morning," Shane wraps the blanket around himself for a moment, to feel the lingering warmth of both their bodies now that Ilya seems so far away, already well into his new day.

"Good morning." Ilya looks up, and Shane's heart stutters as those eyes meet his, so intense, so adoring. "You slept through breakfast." He nods at the kittens. "you looked cute, like sleeping kitten."

With just a few steps, Ilya is in front of him, running a hand through his hair and Shane tips his head up for a kiss, welcoming warm, soft lips against his a moment later. When it ends, Shane is tempted to pull Ilya onto the sofa with him, but he knows Ilya has things to do.

"I do morning chores now. There are things for breakfast," Ilya nods towards the kitchen.

"I was thinking," Shane drops his gaze, looking at his hands for a moment, suddenly scared he is being too much. "That I could get some clothes and my running gear at home and come

back here? I could work from here, have a look at the kittens throughout the day. Go on my run with Anya so she does not feel neglected.”

Fingers come to rest against his chin, as Ilya gently makes him look up at him. “I like having you here. I have very busy day. Is that okay?”

“Yeah, that’s okay. We’ll see each other around.”

“Okay,” Ilya presses another kiss against his mouth, “Troy and Harris do morning shift. Will be gossip if they see your car.” Ilya nods towards the windows. Shane gets up quickly at that and is now suddenly very close to the taller man. He takes his chance at another kiss, soft and slow, Ilya’s hands running along his sides.

About fifteen minutes later, Shane is finally ready to get going. He’s packed his, now dried, clothes from last night into a bag, checked on the kittens again and then heads towards the door, hoping he will see Ilya outside so he can say goodbye, and maybe get a kiss. God, he has it bad, doesn’t he? When he pulls open the door, Shane’s gaze falls on a bouquet of flowers first, a Pollock painting made of whites, soft pinks and blues. It takes a moment for Shane to realise who is holding it.

“Troy,” he says, quickly adding a “good morning.”

Troy seems just as confused, but confusion quickly turns into understanding, which he is completely alone with, because Shane does not have a clue what is going on.

“Morning, Shane,” Troy grins. “Had a good night?”

“Ah, well. We didn’t sleep much,” Shane shrugs, then blushes when Troy raises a knowing eyebrow. “No, not... I mean, just because we picked up kittens, and we bottle-fed them all night.” That shifts the conversation for a while, as Shane tells his friend about the little fur balls, and especially the little runt, that Scott needs to have a look at. As they talk, they keep standing in the doorway, Troy clutching the flowers to his chest, and finally, Shane cannot help but ask about them.

“In trouble with Harris?”

Troy laughs to himself. “Not this time.” He shoves the bouquet at Shane. “No, for you, actually,” he says, adding to Shane’s confusion.

“You brought me flowers?” Was there something he had missed? No, Troy was married to Harris, and those two were happy. Also, how did he know Shane was here, at Ilya’s house?

“I didn’t... okay, this is complicated, and maybe I shouldn’t... I don’t know if I can tell you. I shouldn’t even...” Troy pulls his hands back, clutching the wildflowers against his chest again, face now flushed red.

“Is okay,” someone says from the direction of the chicken coop, and both Troy and Shane turn to look at Ilya who is approaching them with a basket full of eggs, looking way more sexy than should be possible. “I ... asked Troy to get them for me, yesterday.”

Troy visibly relaxes, shoves the flowers at Ilya, now. That does make more sense. Still, when did Ilya do this? This morning, while Shane was asleep on the sofa? But why?

“You did?” Shane’s voice is sounding very high, even to his own ears.

“Yes,” Ilya looks down at the flowers for a moment, avoiding his gaze, then straightens. “I wanted to...talk about feelings and I thought maybe flowers help.”

“Oh, wow,” Shane accepts the bouquet, with pink cheeks, when Ilya holds it out for him.

“Thank you. They are lovely.”

“Is why I asked Troy. He has taste in flowers, Harris always says.” Ilya is blushing too, even though he would probably deny it if Shane told him. They stand there awkwardly, the three of them, until Troy clears his throat.

“I’ll give you some space. I’ll feed the dogs, boss. And I ... I know Harris talks a lot, but I’m his husband, so... he won’t talk about this until you are ready. Promise.” He looks between them, then quickly walks off, leaving Shane and Ilya to stand next to each other quietly for a moment.

“They are very beautiful, really. No one has ever gotten me flowers. I love them,” Shane tries to fill the silence as his brains screams at him: ILYA WANTED TO TALK ABOUT FEELINGS. EVEN IF WE HADN’T KISSED, HE WANTED TO TODAY. It makes his head spin, and his heart almost bursts out of his chest. “Thank you for trying to be brave. I... I’m glad we didn’t need a bouquet to be brave, though.”

“Yes,” Ilya finally steps closer, cupping his face. “Me too. Was a wonderful night. You can - stay over again, maybe? Tonight?” Shane’s answering nod is lost in the kiss they share, and Shane is tempted to just throw away the flowers and wrap his arms around the blonde man instead. He does not, clutching them to his chest instead, letting their scent and Ilya’s hot mouth and tongue make him dizzy.

“I’ll be back in a minute,” Shane promises, when they pull apart.

Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

TW: animal death

You can find a summary of the chapter in the end notes if you'd rather skip this chapter
<3

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

Ilya

As Shane steps off the porch, Ilya screams his name. “Shane, come back. Need help!”

Ilya is already on the phone to Scott, trying to remain calm as he relays the information. “Just bring everything with you. Be quick. Thanks.”

He turns to Shane. “Need help, they're really not well. Went to check and two little ones...”

“Are they... did they die?” Shane jumps in, as he runs towards them.

“Not yet but doesn't look good. Scott is coming. Will bring medicine and supplies. Can you help me? Can you do this?”

He pumps at the kitten's chest, in his hand, with his thumb. “It's a lot, but it needs it. It isn't breathing, Shane. No heartbeat.” He hands Shane the tiny kitten, limp but still warm. He shows him what to do and what pressure to apply. “Just keep going. You okay? Is tough, I know, but need to try.” He is in full survival mode, but trying to keep his composure as best he can, to keep Shane and the kittens from becoming frightened. At least that's what he tells himself. “Okay?” He repeats, when Shane says nothing, just stands there, looking at him, thumb pumping at the kitten's chest.

Ilya grabs the other small one and listens to his chest. He was right to call Scott. He hears the slight tapping noises as the kitten breathes. He feels the rattling in its chest. Must have been the cold and rain before they got to them. It seemed fine, but it must have settled into its lungs overnight. Fuck. If he wasn't so fucking distracted, he might have caught it. He knows that these things are easily missed, but he needs someone to blame and right now it's himself. He tries to keep his face as calm as he can, as he wraps the kitten up warm and collects the supplies he needs until Scott arrives with better ones.

He sees Shane looking across at him, as he starts trying to clear the kitten's breathing, using coupage to help his lungs, rhythmically tapping at him, which probably looks mean to an outsider, but Scott appears with handfuls of things that must look terrifying to Shane too. Ilya helps set it all up and once Scott is in place, he lets him get on with what he needs to and checks on his love.

“Shane, could you help Scott please? I will take over. Better you are busy right now.”

Ilya places a hand on Shane's shoulder and one under Shane's hand that is holding the lifeless kitten.

“But... but I want to help it.” Shane's eyes well up with tears and his lip trembles. “Ilya, I need to help it. I can't...” He knows. He will do everything he can to save the kitten and save Shane from more pain.

“I will help it Shane. Promise. Just go. Scott needs you. Please?” He takes the kitten and disappears to the sofa, his back towards them and knowing it will be all hands on deck in a

moment.

Scott is on the phone now, getting someone else to bring a few things he forgot and be quick about it. Ilya hears him talking about BPM and nebulisers and he knows the usual drill. He won't stay here. He needs quiet to concentrate. No more stress.

Ilya decides to head to the kitchen, letting them work. He tries everything he possibly can and sees a movement. Fuck, it's ok, he convinces himself, as he continues to pump, holding the kitten close to him.

He closes his eyes, taking a deep breath as he begins to sing [“Возьми меня, люби меня, укрой. Той пеленой, что мы с тобой создали вдвоём.”](#)

His mother used to sing this to him when he was sad or sick. She would cradle him, just like this and let the beautiful sounds of love flow out of her. He sings, quietly, soothing both of their souls as the tears fall from his eyes.

There is no flinch from the kitten as a tear hits its face. He listens, he feels. There's nothing. The kitten is gone. It wasn't alone. It isn't alone. He refuses to let it be.

He's not normally like this. Death is a big part of the job he does, and he knows that they won't all live, but after last night's raw emotion, he is already on the edge, and can't pull himself back over. He continues to sing. Holding the tiny body close to him, thumb still now, the kitten's warmth started to escape it. He looks at its face, all still and silent. It reminds him of his mother. How she was when he found her, beautiful, still, peaceful, but tragic.

He cries as he sings, voice cracking, but knowing he needs to finish. His mother would always finish, even if he fell asleep before the end. It needs him to finish. He wraps the floppy body in a cloth and lays it on the table. He stands there, letting the tears flow for them all. For the kitten, his mother, for him and Shane. It's too much emotion and his heart can't take it all. He doesn't know how people do this. He's always been the one who has pushed it all down, to deal with later and yes, it gets to him and he cries, but he's never felt this overwhelmed by the weight of his feelings. Not since he learnt how to bury them.

He leans against the worktop, head in his hands and tries to pull himself together. “Deal with it later. Put it into project,” he tells himself, but he can't. He has to look after Shane. Shane will not cope with this loss. Shane has never lost anyone and he needs to be there for him, so that he can deal with this. “Fucking pull yourself together. Man up,” he says, suddenly forming the posture of his father, which makes him feel sick, but he needs it right now. He washes his face and heads into the living room.

He sees Shane and Scott there, hugging, while the cat lays there unaided. Fucking hugging, smiling, while he's dealing with a death. What the fuck do they think they're doing? Is he actually hitting on his fucking boyfriend, right now?

He knows that's not likely, but Ilya's anger and upset rises in him and he storms back into the kitchen, knocking over a picture frame, which was on the cupboard and has now clattered to the floor.

He stands there, hands in balled fists as he breathes heavily, trying to calm himself. He's getting too upset over something that is probably nothing, his head is telling him, but that doesn't help right now.

Shane's hand appears on his shoulder and he jumps, lost in his thoughts. "What was that? What the fuck were you two doing in there?" He hates the way he's snapped at Shane, and even worse, the look of anger which must be written all over his face and seems to scare them both.

"We were just excited. We saved the kitten, Ilya. It's ok. It needs meds, but it's ok." Shane looks around, his face falling flat. "Ilya... where's the kitten?"

Ilya sees the look of realisation on Shane's face and all the anger subsides, posture and personality returning from his father's to his. He just lunges forward and wraps Shane into a hug, not wanting to see the despair on his face. The hug is firm and tight, stroking his hair and shushing him as he lets Shane cry. He doesn't cry himself, now, having used up, what seems like, all of his tears. Now he focuses on Shane. "I'm sorry sweetheart. I tried. There was nothing. It was gone."

Shane doesn't reply, staying silent in that hug, for what seems like forever. Suddenly Ilya hears a small voice escape from inside his cocoon of arms. "I know." He looks up, emerging from the tight embrace, both seeing each other, eyes all red and puffy. "I heard you. I heard you singing. It wasn't alone, Ilya. It was never alone."

His words echo Ilya's thoughts and it's all too much. Ilya begins to cry, along with Shane, and they just hold each other. Shane knows. He understands what the rage was about. It doesn't make it better, but it's a conversation for later. "It was beautiful. Did Irina teach you that?"

Ilya nods.

"She would have loved that you sang it, when the kitten needed you the most. Maybe she saw you do that. I don't know if you believe in those things, but I'd like to think she did."

Ilya nods. "I like to think that too."

They hold each other a little longer, until they hear the doorbell.

"Can someone get that. Kinda busy here!" Scott calls from the other room.

Shane walks to the door, eyes dry now, but his face still stained with tears, as Ilya follows behind him, looking no better. They find a man that, if he wasn't exhausted, Ilya, and probably Shane, would enjoy looking at, a lot. "Hi. You must be Kip. Come in. Scott said you were coming." Shane points the way.

"Hi Kip. Nice to finally meet you. Heard lot about you." Ilya adds, feeling very formal, after all that has occurred and how they must look. As Shane leads him through, Ilya picks up the box of kittens, which seems painfully empty now, and begins to weigh them. "Shane, can you get food please? Just 3," he says, heart sinking. Shane returns as Ilya is assessing the last one. "Will get Scott to look at them before he leaves, don't worry, Shane." He places a hand

on Shane's knee, before they begin their new routine of feeding and toileting them, as Scott and Kip begin working on meds for the kitten, who is now inside a nebuliser box.

They're sat on the floor, backs against the wall, watching the two animal experts sorting out and discussing the kitten, when Shane leans in. "Can't believe you were jealous of Scott. You know that would never happen, don't you?"

Ilya shrugs, "don't know. Is hot man, with good job. Much better than mine. Works too hard, but because he is good man. Might leave me for him." He tries to look like he is joking, but his eyes and mouth always betray him. He knows Shane sees it.

"Well, he is really, really hot, but I can't get you out of my brain and you're staying there." He leans in for a kiss. Before they even stop, Shane says, "besides..."

"Besides what?" Ilya asks, wondering what he's going to say next.

"I think he's already taken." He smiles at him and nods towards the two men, now standing far too close as they work, occasionally stroking each other's arms or backs and smiling at each other, every time they can. Their eyes and mouths betray them too, Ilya thinks, as he watches them.

"Interesting. Actually, makes sense. He talks about Kip all of the time. I thought it was because they were work partners, but it didn't think that they were partners in life too." He rests his head on Shane's. "So smart, Shane." He turns to look at him. "So how come it took you so long to realise I liked you, dummy, huh?" They both laugh, hiding the sadness for a while. It all falls quiet after that and they sit there, just enjoying the comfort of their warm bodies, pressed against each other.

"So," Ilya nudges his shoulder with his own, "you saved first kitten, with help of hot man. Don't expect special treatment now. Animals are my besties. Maybe you can have that one." He nods towards the kitten in the special box. "It owes you its life."

"Erm, yeah... about that. Um, I was thinking. I think I'd like to adopt that one. Like as my own. I... I would like the company and I mean, we're bonded now, right? I mean, when it's bigger and well, of course."

Ilya grins at him. "Knew it wouldn't be long. You would make a great father, Shane."

They both sit there, that sentence hanging over that head and Ilya lost in thoughts of their future.

Shane

So much has happened in the last twelve hours, and it is only while sitting on the floor, Ilya's breath coming in a calming, steady, reliable rhythm, that Shane has a chance to start processing any of it.

He is watching Scott and Kip work, but their shapes become blurred as Shane loses himself in his thoughts.

Last night, he picked up kittens, learned how to take care of them, kissed Ilya, had sex with Ilya twice- Shane catches himself smiling at that memory. They shared a bed and took care of the tiny cats as if they had never done anything in their lives but worked together. Ilya had gotten him flowers, which Shane had never had from anyone, and they are beautiful, and so is Ilya.

And then all those wonderful things had been put on the backburner by the two smallest kittens' health declining. As he tried to help, Shane had found himself surprisingly calm, following what Scott had told him, handing him the stethoscope, holding the kitten as the vet had given it oral antibiotics with a syringe and observing it, curled up in the nebuliser box, which would help it to breathe. As they work, Shane could hear Ilya singing in the kitchen, and it was so beautiful and yet so sad, the low hum, a constant companion as Shane had tried not to be overwhelmed by all that surrounded him.

They had saved that small, helpless thing, who had felt a bit better after just twenty minutes in the box, moving more, and Shane felt relief fill his body. This little creature owned his heart. It looked like it had forgotten to take off one of its small red socks, and its nose was tiny and pink, tempting him to boop it constantly. In his mind, Shane had already gone through all the things he would need to have a cat live at his flat. This cat. His secret favourite from the beginning.

He thinks back to earlier and Ilya's changed of demeanor.

"So, you think it will make it?" Shane had asked, and Scott had nodded gently at him.

"We don't know for sure, and I will observe it further, but it'll be okay, I'm almost certain."

Shane had felt tears well up in his eyes, trying to blink them away whilst the heavy, heavy rock that had been sitting in the pit of his stomach started to crumble, and he felt so light, that it was overwhelming. His fingers had dug into the table, trying to keep him upright, and suddenly, Scott had placed a hand on his shoulder and pulled him into a hug. Shane isn't a fan of touch, and he doesn't know the vet very well, but it had felt a bit like when his Dad hugged him, so Shane had allowed it for a moment.

He regrets that now.

Ilya and him are so new, and they haven't defined what they are yet, so seeing him jealous had been difficult to take in. That jealousy had been mixed with the pain of losing the little runt, which was even worse.

They had helped each other through the pain of that, and Shane is afraid that if he pulls away now, the grief will hit him again, full force. It is a grief laced with anger, anger at the people who left those beautiful creatures out in the cold rain without their mom when they could have brought them here instead. Now one innocent kitten is dead because of that, and Ilya, who had to deal with so much loss already, had it die in his hands. Shane reaches out for Ilya's hand now, pressing their palms together, interlacing their fingers, whilst trying to give comfort and seek it at the same time.

Shane only realises he is crying when warm kisses start raining down into his hair, against his forehead, his brow, as Ilya's rough voice breathes gentleness against his skin. "Is okay, Shane. Let it out. I've got you, солнышко."

Shane clings to his voice as he sobs, focusing on the warmth the other man provides. When he finally trusts his voice again, he does not ask about the kitten. "What does it mean, sol..lnysch..ka?" He butchers the word as he tries to pronounce it, knowing it by the way Ilya chuckles into his hair.

"Cannot say," he whispers, nudging Shane with his nose until Shane looks up at him. "Or you will know that I am soft." Shane cannot help but kiss him, even with Scott and Kip in the room, and he kisses him with both a smile on his lips and salt on his cheeks. They stay close as the kiss ends.

Ilya lifts their intertwined fingers, brushes his lips against his knuckles. "You want to help bury kitten? We don't usually do that, but it is so small. We can find spot."

Shane finds himself nodding. It takes a while for them to get up and sShane watches Ilya walk over to talk to Scott and Kip for a moment. Shane waits for him to return from the kitchen when he spots his bouquet which he just dropped somewhere, apparently on Ilya's shoe shelf. Careful not to ruin it, he pulls out a few small, white flowers for the kitten.

Just behind the house, between the chicken coop and the fence, Ilya digs a hole and gently places the towel with the tiny body inside. Shane watches as the color disappears under dirt, and somehow, that hurts. It makes the evidence of that small, adorable soul disappear, and Shane, as soon as Ilya is done, crouches down to place the flowers on the spot, marking the grave. He stays down there for a while, hand tucked against his chest.

"I'm sorry," he says. "Sorry your life was so short. Sorry you didn't get to even open your eyes and see the world. Sorry you were in the cold and dark without your mommy. A warm hand lands on Shane's shoulder, and the pressure grounds him. "I'm glad Ilya was with you," Shane adds, remembering the low hum of the Russian's voice as he had sung. The fingers travel to his neck, run through his hair, and it is the repetition of that which brings a new well of tears to his eyes.

Ilya knows him. He knows Shane runs on schedules, on ritual, on patterns, that he functions best when he can rely on things. He knows that because he wants to, because it wasn't a burden to him to learn about Shane, inside and out. Ilya also allows him spontaneity, brings him into situations where Shane just has to act, moments that are unpredictable, and he is there, no questions asked, to ground him as Shane faces them, one by one. His calm, his humor, his presence are just what Shane needs.

Ilya does not want to change him, and he still allows him to grow. Shane loves him.

“We did all we could, солнышко. It is sad, yes, and we can grieve. Just remember that four kittens live because of you, yes? Four of them are okay.”

Shane nods, reaching to cover Ilya’s hand with his own where it rests against the side of his face. He nuzzles into it, brushes a kiss against it, takes a deep breath and finally feels able to get up. “Thank you,” he whispers, eyes focusing on the beauty mark on Ilya’s cheek. It is so pretty, just at the perfect spot between his lips and hairline. Shane kisses it because he can, then leans in to hug Ilya, letting himself be held.

“You go walk with Anya, maybe? Sort your thoughts? You have many, yes?” Ilya’s palm draws circles against his back. “I do best if I work. But is maybe not the way for you?”

Shane finds himself nodding. “It might help to spend time with my favourite girl,” he agrees, pulling away just enough to look at the man he loves. “But I will help, after. I have to work, but I can keep the kittens close, at least the three healthy ones. I know Scott is keeping an eye on my little one. I want to be there for them.”

Ilya takes his hand, pulling him gently back towards the house. “Okay,” he says, quietly. “Is okay too if you don’t want to deal with cats today.”

“I want to. I need cute kittens to make me feel better,” Shane follows the Russian back into the house where Kip and Scott are just packing up. It is only there that their fingers disentangle.

Shane doesn’t go for a run with Anya but he takes her on a walk, which is just as nice. His thoughts are still buzzing in his mind, but here, in the calm of the woods, they are the only noise he has to deal with. It helps.

After he returns, Shane sits down on the sofa, with the box of kittens. He works. Feeds them every two hours. Checking on them constantly. He is up and down, his brain switching from focused to being capable of nothing but staring at the three bundles of fur next to his laptop.

Ilya keeps checking in on them, and so does Harris, and once, even Wyatt comes and makes him coffee, proving to Shane that the people here are a family, and somehow, he is part of that now. It makes all the loss, the grief seem less unbearable.

He is cuddling with the kittens after a feed, when Ilya finds him, a few of his curls clinging to his forehead, sweat making his skin glow. Shane has never seen anyone more attractive in his life, and he gladly accepts a kiss, letting it linger.

“Shift is over,” Ilya says, as they pull apart. “Zane agreed to take the kittens tonight. His wife is pregnant, and they both will wake up multiple times a night anyway. I pack all the stuff.” On instinct, Shane clutches the kittens closer. He knows it only makes sense to share the responsibility, especially because they have to get up so much, but he will miss his new buddies. “I think we maybe go out? Get food?”

Shane snorts a laugh. “Go out? Who are you and what have you done to Ilya Rozanov? You want to leave the shelter voluntarily?” He looks at him suspiciously, but likes the idea, likes the thought of having Ilya all to himself, away from his work.

“Ah, yes. Am allowed off shelter grounds once a month, with full moon,” Ilya smirks. “And want to spend time with you, yes?”

“Hmm, I’m lucky, then,”

“Yes, very lucky. I will shower, okay?”

When Ilya returns, Shane has already packed up everything for the kittens so Zane can pick them up, and he has texted Scott about the sick kitten, making sure she is improving further. The Russian looks so good in his dark jeans and tank top, and his dark jacket is wonderfully tight around his muscular arms. Shane considers staying exactly where they are, but convinces himself that they will be back later, and that he can take the clothes off Ilya then.

Chapter End Notes

Summary: One of the kittens dies, even with Scott (the vets) help. Shane and Ilya comfort each other. They also briefly meet Scott's boyfriend, Kip. Zane takes over kitten duty over night so the boys can go on a little date.

Chapter 14: Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

A bit of fluff after the last chapter :)

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

Shane

They take Shane's car, Shane's hand in Ilya's as they make their way through the city. Twenty-four hours since their first kiss, and it already feels so domestic, so familiar. After finding a spot to park in, they grab some tacos at a stand and then make their way up to the river, no real plan in mind, just enjoying their food and each other's company. For a while, they don't really talk, lost in thought, but it's a good kind of silence, after a day that has been so loud.

When he is finished eating, Ilya reaches for Shane's hand, interlacing their fingers again. "Is okay?" he asks, always making sure. Always checking in. Shane looks around. There are a few other people out here, enjoying the warm night, but no one seems to be looking at them, too busy with their own lives to bother with two men showing public affection.

Shane nods. "Is okay," he echoes, squeezing Ilya's hand to prove it. Shane wants to ask about Russia, but doesn't, deciding to avoid heavy topics today. Instead, they chat about hockey, and Ottawa, and how they both went ice skating at the other ends of the world with their mothers when they were little.

Too soon, they reach Shane's car again, and their hands part as Ilya approaches the passenger door. Shane had assumed that he would drop Ilya off at the shelter and then go home, but it seems unbearable now, with just the jeep between them, to let Ilya go. He hesitates, hand on the door handle, before quickly getting in. It's stupid. They have their own lives, and just because Ilya is his favourite person, it does not mean they have to be together 24/7.

Shane starts the car, then looks over at the Russian in the passenger seat, Ilya's eyes finding his. "I don't want to be alone tonight." Ilya says it as a statement, but it hides a question that Shane has been too afraid to ask.

"I'm not getting on your nerves already, then?" Shane asks, as he pulls out of the parking lot, glancing at Ilya.

Ilya smirks at him. "Will just have to keep you from talking for rest of night."

Shane smirks. "Alright, I'll hold you to that."

Ilya

They end up driving to Shane's house first to grab a few things, before going back to the shelter and once Ilya sees Shane's flat, he knows why he was dreading coming here. Everything is clean, tidy, new and organised. The complete opposite of his house. Ilya doesn't have much, so he supposes it's tidy, but cleaning, organising and buying new things are definitely not something Ilya prioritises.

He looks around, while Shane packs his things. His desk has nothing but a tray of papers, a coaster, a lamp, a laptop and a notebook with a matching pen. Ilya smiles as he runs his hand across it. It's even all perfectly in line. Just how Shane likes it. His coaster reads, 'Have you tried turning it off and on again?' he laughs to himself at that, guessing it was a gift from his parents or Hayden. There are only a few things on the shelves, but he sees some pictures of Shane with his parents, dotted around and Shane smiles in all of them, throughout different stages in his life. He looks at little Shane and wonders what he was like as a boy. He wonders if he was ever carefree and spontaneous, or always someone that considered everything before doing it. He's always been cute, though and seeing the three of them together, makes it obvious which parts of his face come from his mother and which are from his father.

They look happy, just being together and it's all smiles and hugs. Ilya has never known that from his father and it makes his chest ache, wondering how it would feel to be wrapped up in his father's arms.

His thoughts drift to the man who raised him. Raised him doesn't seem the right word. Bullied and dragged him up seems more apt. He might never be able to see him again. It doesn't bother him too much, as there is no love lost between them. He wonders how his life would be, and about how the relationship with his brother would have been different, if they had a different father. One that didn't play them off each other. Or if his mother were still alive. He hates them, but family is family and they will always be a part of him, even if he doesn't want them to be.

There is a picture of Shane, a man and woman, that he assumes is Hadyn and his wife, because there are two little girls, pulling faces at each other in the bottom corner. Ilya remembers their first conversation and thinks it was definitely the right call, not having a pet.

Then there's another picture frame, with several pictures of him and a woman he's never seen. He wonders if this is Rose? Shane's spoken about her, but he's never seen her. She looks funny and they're being goofy together. Not like the other pictures. This is a different Shane. The side that Ilya sees when they're together. He grins, imagining all of the fun times Shane and Rose have spent together. They look like siblings.

He's suddenly very aware of his brother's absence. He doesn't feel it often, and doesn't miss him, but occasionally he misses seeing him. He wishes he didn't. He's an asshole, but he wonders about him sometimes. He wonders what he is doing. Does he have children now? He was married, so he assumes he would, but who knows. Ten years is a long time to be away.

He runs his fingers across the photo of Shane with Rose.

“She had better not be your type, Ilya.” Shane grins. “I love her, but I'm not sharing you.” He walks towards him, wrapping his arms around him and kissing his cheek. “She is dying to meet you. She's been the driving force behind me being brave enough to tell you I like you. You have her to thank.”

Ilya looks at Shane. “You never were brave enough to tell me. Just stared and shoved picture at me. I told you. Have Troy to thank,” he smirks. “I like her already though.”

He kisses Shane. “Ready. Want to try out bed, before we go?” He winks.

“No. I want to go and snuggle at your house,” Shane says, looking at him.

“Fine, but taking hot man with us,” he teases, picking up the picture of Hayden and winking at Shane.

Shane grabs the photo. “Ilya, that's Hayden. The most heterosexual, obsessed with his wife, man I know. Also, he probably hates you for not letting him get a pet.” He laughs, as Ilya pouts at him.

“Better never meet him then,” he pulls a worried face. “Might beat me up and you will get turned on by men wrestling.”

“He's my best friend Ilya. That's not what I want to be thinking about. Gross.”

Ilya laughs and pulls him into a kiss. “Come on. Let's go and watch a movie.”

They head to Ilya's house and eventually choose something to watch. Ilya enjoys being snuggled up next to Shane in the dark bedroom, with only the light from Shane's laptop filling the room. He loves feeling Shane's chest rising and falling underneath this arm. When he starts to hear Shane's breathing change, he knows he's asleep. Ilya gently strokes his face as he whispers, “Я люблю тебя, Шейн,” into his hair. He turns off the laptop and cuddles up to him, feeling his warmth and quiet breaths, calming his soul.

Over the next week, they spend more time together than normal. Shane comes over some nights, and on others they call. It's nice now. There's no hiding their feelings, the kittens are growing stronger each day and the staff all tell Ilya how happy they are for him. It's nice, and for once he's happy. He has someone to come home to, to talk to and share his days with. It's all going well and he worries that something might go wrong. It always does, and he just wants it to work, for once.

They work on the website and finally they know what they are going to use. Shane gets to work on it and promises it won't take too long. Ilya's in no rush, as they haven't had a professional one before, but appreciates Shane's commitment to the shelter. He knows how lucky he is to have Shane and wants to give him more than he ever could.

He knows Shane is visiting his parents for a few days and he is dreading it. He's only been in his life a few months, but it feels like a lifetime. Not being able to see him and touch him is something that already hurts.

“Do not want you to go. I know you have to, but will miss you.” Ilya's sulking on the sofa, as Shane is collecting his things to go home. “You will call, yes? Cannot cope if I don't hear from you.”

Shane slumps down next to him and pulls him against him for a hug. “I will still speak to you every day and I'll be back before you know it. Promise. I'll miss you too.” He kisses his hair as Ilya becomes a dead weight on him, thinking if he's heavy and floppy, Shane can't possibly leave.

“It won't work Ilya.” Shane says, unable to cover the humour in his voice.

“Not doing anything, Shane.” Comes a muffled voice from the face against his chest.

“I'm not an idiot. I will get up. I've got to go, you madman. I'll call. I promise. I'll miss you, just as much as you miss me.”

“Promise?” Mumbles the voice.

“Promise.” Shane says.

Ilya grumbles as he pushes himself up and looks at Shane, all pouty and strokes his finger up and down Shane's chest. “Will be bored. Only annoying people for company. Not boring at least, but annoying. Cannot touch their dicks either. Do not think they would like that.” He tries to smile.

Shane laughs. “You are an idiot. Please don't touch anyone's dick. I do not want you getting arrested for groping your coworkers.”

Ilya smiles now. “You are asshole. No fun, Shane.”

Shane smiles and pulls him into a kiss. “I won't be gone long and we have our hockey match to look forward to, so think about that, ok? You will have me all to yourself. No shelter, no annoying people, just me. The boring one.”

“Yes. That is downside. You are very boring” Ilya gives him more kisses. “Fine. You go. My heart will break but you go and have fun time with family, while I die of sadness.”

“You are a drama queen,” Shane laughs. “You won't die and think about how good it will be when you get to touch me after I get back. Think about that. I know I will.” He blushes at him. “I've really got to go. I will let you know when I arrive, alright?”

“Fine. You are big meany, Shane. Do not even know why I like you,” he teases.

“Because I give you lots of kisses. That's why.” Shane smiles to himself as he gets up.

“Want to walk me out? I might pop and see Anya before I go. I'll miss her too, you know.”

Ilya gets up. “Breaking two hearts. Bet is fun for you. Mean, mean man.”

They spend far too long saying goodbye and hugging at the door, before checking in on Anya and the kittens, which Ilya insists on joining Shane for, now he can walk around, hand in hand with him.

Shane

Shane would find the way to his parents' cottage with his eyes closed after being spun around in a circle a dozen times. All of his summers as a kid had been spent there, and even as an adult, he comes here for most of his holidays, sometimes with Yuna and David, sometimes alone. As he drives there now, he cannot shake the thought of bringing Ilya some day soon. They could go kayaking on the lake, sit by the fire and go for runs through the woods there. David would make pasta, Yuna would talk hockey with Ilya all day, and Shane would be so happy to spend time with his favourite people, in his favourite place.

Would Ilya want to come? He knows the Russian likes nature, but he is so connected to the shelter that maybe he would not want to spend too much time away from the animals and his staff. But maybe they could have a weekend, like this one. Shane pulls off the highway and the roads soon become narrower and lined with trees. There are fewer cars, and soon he is the only one around. Finally, he parks the car, grabs his bag and enters through the front door.

The evening is spent playing Yatzee, eating beef curry that his dad made, and chatting by the fire with a glass of wine, or in Shane's case, ginger ale. It is just as always, but Shane cannot help checking his phone, and he catches himself grinning at Ilya's texts more than once. He should have known that his mom would notice, but he had hoped she would not bring it up. He does not get so lucky. Yuna's eyes are on him, as soon as he looks up from his screen, her eyebrows raised and Shane knows what that means.

"Do you want to talk about who makes you smile like that?" She asks, and for a moment, Shane considers saying no, but then, there is no reason hiding the best thing that has happened in his life, is there?

"I'm texting Ilya. He owns the shelter." Shane is grateful for the flickering light of the fire that hides the pink of his cheeks. "I told you about him."

"Oh, yes, I remember. You did the trip to pick up the chickens with him, right?" David puts another log into the flames, making the sparks fly. Shane nods as he watches them dance like fire flies, glad to have a reason not to look at either of his parents.

Yuna seems to recognize the name as well. "Oh, I got you the hockey tickets for his birthday, right? Cliff says hi, by the way. He said that if you wanted a signed puck or something, just tell me."

"That would be great. Marlow is one of Ilya's favourite players, I think."

"He knows a lot about hockey, then?" Yuna smiles, then leans back on her chair. "What else does he like, your Ilya?"

My Ilya.

Shane runs a hand over his chin and mouth, attempting to hide a smile. "He... loves animals, of course. We... He is raising kittens right now. They are only a few days old, and their eyes are still closed, but they are so cute." Shane gets out his phone to show off pictures Ilya had

sent him. “Sadly, the smallest one passed away. It was just too weak, and they had been left out in the rain, in the cold, without their mom. But the other four are growing well.”

“Oh, look, how adorable. I don’t understand how people can be so cruel. I love cats,” Dad reaches for the phone to have a closer look. “I always wanted a cat, but as you know, I’m allergic.” For a while, they talk about cats, but Shane knows his mom won’t let go of the Ilya topic.

“So, cats are all you are smiling about?” She asks, and Shane takes a breath.

“We... Ilya and I are... dating, I guess. It’s new, so we haven’t talked about titles, but I like him very much.” There is no way he can look at the two people opposite him right now, but he can see his mother’s eyes growing wide from the periphery.

“Oh, darling, that is wonderful. You seem very happy.” She brushes a gentle hand against his upper arm. “And he seems wonderful.”

Shane nods again, his smile now splitting his face. “He is. He can seem... like a bit of an asshole at first. Like, he likes animals more than people. But he is very caring, and he gives his all to the shelter. I know he struggles, especially financially, but he works so hard, and he would never let his animals be harmed,” he gushes, which is something he has never done in his life. Fuck, what is Ilya doing to his brain?

“Could we help? Make a donation, maybe?” David asks, hand reaching to hold his wife’s as they move a bit closer.

“That would be nice. Every small amount helps,” Shane nods.

Yuna straightens, and from knowing his mother for half a decade, he knows what that means. She has an idea, and is already forming a plan in her head. Usually, those plans are very thoughtful, and very clever.

She does not disappoint. “What if we could get a bigger donation? Bring some attention to the shelter? I could see Marlow or Dykstra donating, or they could raise some money, get the fans involved. Post some pictures or a video on social media and ask for donations. I’m sure that we could reach quite high numbers. And people might adopt some of the animals, too, if they see them online.”

“That’s a great idea. I mean, I have been changing up their website, to make it more accessible and grab people’s attention, but having Cliff Marlow promoting the shelter would be something else.”

A very satisfied smile crosses Yuna Hollander’s face as she gets up to refill her wine glass. “Well, you talk to Ilya, then, and I will email Cliff as soon as we know if he likes the idea.” She says, before disappearing into the house for a moment.

Later that night, Shane texts Ilya about his mom’s idea. He is already in bed with a book in his lap after his shower, washing away the smell of the fire.

Shane:

You could get both attention and money out of this. Imagine the things you could do with a couple of thousand dollars. 🤔

Ilya texts back a moment later.

Ilya:

*We could do a lot. It is good idea.
Say thank you to your mother, please. ❤️*

Shane:

I will. She will email Marlow, or even Evan Dykstra. She manages both of them. I'll tell you if there are any updates.

Ilya:

How is cottage? Having fun or is boring? 😁🤔

Shane grins at the last text.

Shane:

The cottage is not boring. 😡 It is relaxing.

Shane:

You should try that. Relaxing. 🤔

Ilya:

I do relax. With you. 😁

Shane:

For like 5 minutes.

It is nice, though. Relaxing with you. 😊

Ilya:

Yes, especially after I make you come. 😊

Shane:

Ilya. I am at my parents' house. 🤔

Shane can already feel his body reacting to Ilya flirting with him. He woke up next to Ilya, still, it already feels like he has not seen him in too long. He is horny, and he is in love, and Ilya is not making this easier.

Ilya:

Can you be quiet? 🤔🍆💦

It turns out, Shane can be very quiet when he has to be, even with Ilya whispering filthy things into his ear, while he kneels on the bed for him, desperate for touch. After, he lays on the bed, chest heaving, phone still propped up on the cupboard and hand sticky with cum. He ends the call to Ilya, saying goodnight, then, as Shane is about to wash up, Ilya calls back.

“You are very pretty when you come. No, always very pretty,” Ilya whispers, voice rough. “Want you in my lap, soon, so I can feel you.”

“Want that,” Shane mumbles back, tempted to let his eyes slip close, and let Ilya lull him to sleep, but he needs to get up and get cleaned up.

“Soon then. Monday, yes? Or Sunday night? Maybe you can’t resist and drive right here?” Shane can hear the smile on Ilya’s face, and he mirrors it.

“Maybe.”

“Certainly. You need it.”

“Certainly? Wow. That is a big word. And you used the adverb correctly. Very impressive,” Shane teases, as he sits up.

“Ah, you are asshole,” Ilya moves as well, Shane can hear him move around as he makes his way to the bathroom. “Everyone should know this. Shane Hollander is asshole.” He yells that last part, as if to inform the entire shelter. “I will tell kittens. They will bite you when you come here.”

“They would never. They love me.”

And I love you. How easy that would be to say, but how impossible it seems.

“Ah, yes, I forgot. But I feed them, now, so I might convince them,” Ilya retorts, and Shane listens to him walking down the stairs, probably walking to the living room. A moment later, he can hear the tiny creatures mewling in the background. “Is feeding time soon. I will talk to you tomorrow?”

Shane wishes he could, but he and his parents have plans.

“Maybe we can have a phone call in the evening again? I will be off my phone most of the day. We are going kayaking, and I’ll leave my phone at the cottage, just to be sure.”

“Phone call is nice. But you will take picture of you and your cute freckles in sun for me, right?” Ilya asks, still shuffling around his house.

“I can ask my mom to take one, yes.”

“Good. Have fun in tiny boat. Good night, Shane.”

“Good night, Ilya.”

For a long time after the call ends, Shane just holds his phone, smiling.

люблю тебя, Шейн - I love you, Shane

Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

Bonus chapter today :)

Ilya

Shane texts him soon after reaching his parents' house.

Shane:

I made it. It's beautiful here. You need to visit sometime. ❤️

Ilya:

I will, once I know parents won't kick me out for corrupting you. 🤔

Shane:

They would never. My parents love everyone and they're good people. Mum is a bit of a hardass at work, but that's just the job. Outside of hockey, she's a sweetheart. ❤️

Ilya:

Tell them hello, okay? Miss you already. 🥺

Shane:

Miss you too. 😊

Ilya busies himself with jobs and then extra ones on top, just so he has no time to miss Shane. He makes an extra fuss of Anya, who feels like his link to his annoyingly cute boyfriend. The kittens do, too. They will always be special, even though he tries not to have favourites.

Troy and Harris try to cheer him up and offer to make him more coffee than he could possibly drink, but he doesn't want it. They tease him about how lovesick he is and make some comments about how he's probably missing the sex, now he's actually getting some. He hasn't told them that they haven't taken the step into penetrative sex yet, but the sex they have is enough. It's none of their nosy ass business. He isn't in a rush. He is missing the physical closeness, with Shane being away, but mainly he just misses him.

He's told himself that he isn't allowed to text him and he has to wait until Shane does first, so as not to seem like a love sick obsessive.

Fortunately for Ilya, Shane texts him later that afternoon to tell him about a plan to help raise money for the shelter.

The conversation turns flirty and makes Ilya as horny as fuck.

Ilya:
Can you be quiet? 🤔🍆💧

Shane:
I think so. I don't know if this is a good idea, with my parents here.

Ilya:
They are watching you? You have no door? What? You never got yourself off when you were teenager?

Shane:
Of course I did, asshole. Just what if they guess what I'm doing?

Ilya:
They know you are adult. They could stand at door and listen, Shane. 😳

Ilya likes to test Shane. He likes to push him to his limits and get him to try new things. Phone sex at his parents house might be too far, but he wants to see.

Shane:
You are a disgusting pervert, Ilya. Just plain dirty. 🤔

Ilya:
I will call you. Video. Be naked.

Ilya:
Lock the door, Shane. 😳

He doesn't give him long. He gets naked himself and then calls Shane, wanting to see him. It rings for a while and Ilya wonders if Shane has decided against it, but he answers, looking nervous, but hot.

“You naked or in underwear?” He questions, raising an eyebrow. “I am fully naked. Want to see?” He bites his lip and pans the camera down his body as he lays on his bed. “You now.”

Shane blushes as he tilts the camera down to show Ilya his bare chest. “Fuck,” he whispers to himself. “Keep going, Shane. Need more.” Shane tilts it more, showing him the whole length of his naked body. “Want to see you touch yourself. Show me how you like it.”

He hears Shane whimper and knows he has him, as he watches Shane run a hand down over his body. “Close your eyes. Imagine I am touching you.” He watches him close his eyes and moans as his hand moves to his hard cock. Ilya's hand finds his own as he watches Shane wrap his hand around himself and start to stroke slowly. “Fuck, so beautiful. Hands and knees. Want to see you finger yourself.” Shane whimpers again and moves to all fours, balancing his phone on the side of his bed, where Ilya can see him.

Shane blushes so hard, Ilya can see it, even in the darkened room. “That's it, baby, let me see how you touch yourself. Shane gives a barely noticeable nod and seductively slides two fingers in and out of his mouth, wrapping his tongue around them as he sucks them. He moves his hand towards his prize and his finger finds the puckered skin of his hole, while

Ilya watches him intensely. He licks his lip as Shane teases his hole, trying to look less nervous than he obviously is.

Ilya's breath hitches as Shane's finger pushes inside him and Shane's mouth hangs open. "So hot, fuck," Ilya says as he strokes his cock quickly. Shane adds another finger.

Shane mumbles something that Ilya can't hear.

"Louder Shane. Can't hear."

"Fuck, I want..." Shane replies.

"Want what Shane? Tell me."

"You. Fuck, I want you." Shane buries his head in the pillow as one hand strokes his dick and the other fucks himself with his fingers.

His words push Ilya over the edge, imagining himself inside Shane. He wants that too. He comes with a loud moan, Shane following him, before he collapses onto the bed, panting.

"Fuck, Shane. Was hot, watching you fuck yourself with your fingers. Wanted to do that to you."

"You will. Fuck, I want that." Shane looks down and pulls a face. "The bed's all dirty. Best change it."

"Your mother will know what you did. That you cannot stop jerking off over me." He grins, teasing him.

"Night Ilya. Going now." He points a finger as if he is going to press the off button.

"Give me kiss first. Please?" Ilya blows a kiss into the phone and watches as Shane gives out a little laugh and shakes his head.

"You're an idiot, but too cute to ignore." He blows a kiss back. "Now I'm going, before I stick to the sheets. Goodnight, Ilya."

"Goodnight Shane."

They finish the call and Ilya is about to head to the shower, when he realises he needs to tell Shane something and calls him back.

"You are very pretty when you come. No, always very pretty," Ilya whispers. "Want you in my lap, soon, so I can feel you."

He hears Shane's breath catch. He has him. They flirt for a while, before they finally say goodbye for real this time. They will talk tomorrow.

Shane

The Hollanders start their tour early, and spend most of their Saturday on the water, only interrupted by a picnic at one of Shane's favourite spots. It is calm and relaxing, but as soon as they return to the house, Shane finds himself wanting to talk to Ilya. He grabs his phone, but there are no texts from Ilya, instead, Harris has called him three times, then texted him.

Harris:

Did Ilya tell you where he is going? He just rushed out, told us to take care of the shelter for a few days.

Sorry for calling so many times, but we worry. He just left suddenly, and he looked distraught.

Shane feels dread creep up his back. This can't be good.

Shane:

*Maybe something happened with an animal and he is picking them up?
I will try to call him.*

Just as he starts the call, another message comes in.

Harris:

Okay, keep me updated, please?

Shane listens to the ringing sound, the beep sound, then Ilya's voice mail message. He doesn't leave a message.

He texts him.

Shane:

Are you okay? Harris texted that you left suddenly.

He does not get a reply, and his message does send, but does not get received.

"Fuck," he curses, heart clenching in his chest. Shane usually does not dramatise, his brain rarely goes into worst-case scenarios with unknowns like this, not when there have to be rational explanations. Still, his gut feeling tells him that something is wrong.

He barely manages to eat and tries to call a few more times.

He is already in bed, trying to distract himself with a book, when his phone rings.

Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

TW: Death of a parent

Ilya

Ilya works extra hard that next morning. He has appointments with Scott and home visits, as well as all of the animals to feed and clean out. He doesn't even get chance to check in for messages from Shane.

When he eventually checks, he has 5 missed calls and 2 messages. It's not Shane. It's an unknown number. What if something's happened to him and his parents have phoned? Fuck. He always has his phone. His heart starts pounding as he checks the messages.

Unknown:

Ilya, it's Andrei. I know you don't want to hear from me, but our father is dead. I thought you should know. The funeral is in two days. If you want to come, I will send details. You can meet my daughter. She is 8 and never met her uncle. She should.

Ilya is shocked more by his brother reaching out than his father dying. His father is old and it was expected, but his brother's message wasn't. Also, he has a niece. He hears a voice inside his head. Family is family, Ilya. Always. Words his mother used, whenever there were issues at home. She stuck to those words but now she is dead. His father is dead. And his brother reached out.

It's all too much. He sinks into the sofa and wants to call Shane. He needs to talk to the one person that makes him feel safe. He can't. Shane won't have his phone. Fuck.

He doesn't want to not go and regret it, but Andrei and he might never come back from things that were said when he left before. And he has a niece. A niece he would like to meet. Even if it's only once. To know his family again, would be awkward and maybe painful, but he has a niece. He always wanted to be uncle Ilya, but he can't. He won't.

He will hate every second of it, but he packs a bag and rushes out of the building, only stopping to tell Troy he needs to watch the shelter for a few days, as he has something important to do.

The flight seems to take forever. It takes him 15 hours from home to Russia and it gives him plenty of time to think. He remembers things he hasn't thought of since he was a child. He finds it hard to recall good times with his father. There must have been some. He must have been proud of him at least once, but everything he remembers is negative. It's closure, more than anything, that makes him return to his homeland. The hope of new beginnings and either rejoining the family, which he doubts, or leaving them behind forever. He left so suddenly before and he didn't tie up loose ends. He wants to visit his mother's grave and bring her flowers, sit with her a while and say a real goodbye to her.

He thinks of Shane. He didn't want to bother him at night and he didn't want to call him in public and it's not something you text, so he waits until he reaches his hotel room, seeing all of the worried texts from Shane. Fuck. He's probably put him through hell. Why didn't he just text to say he was safe. Fucking idiot!

He texts his brother from the airport and all he can manage is,

Ilya:

I'm coming back

Finally he phones Shane, alone in his hotel room, where they can speak openly.

“Hi sweetheart, I am so sorry,” Ilya almost whispers down the phone when Shane answers his call. “I didn't mean to worry you. I...”

“Where are you? Fuck. I was worried. Are you ok?” Shane interrupts, sounding angry, but maybe he's just worried. Ilya doesn't know. He feels bad enough as it is.

“Yes. Am fine. I'm.... in Russia. My father is dead.”

“Oh Ilya.” A softer Shane breathes. “I'm sorry. I mean, I know you weren't close, but if it was my dad...”

“Different Shane.” Ilya says. More abruptly than he means. “Just here to say goodbye, not have family funtime. Haven't seen them yet. Will be hard. I wish you were here, holding my hand.”

His voice sounds small and scared. He is scared. He could take on ferocious animals and nasty owners, but his family? They had shown so much anger towards each other before he left, that he doesn't know how this will go. He just needs to hold his nerve, be the bigger man and go to them. Maybe he will be pleasantly surprised, but he doubts it. He'd been going over every scenario in his head on the journey. None were ideal, but he won't know until he gets there.

“I wish I was too. Keeping you calm and being a comfort. How did you know?”

“Brother messaged me. He is police here. Can find anyone if tries hard enough.”

“Oh.”

Shane goes quiet and Ilya understands that he doesn't know what to say.

“I didn't know you still had your passport.” Shane asks, sounding confused, as he knows Ilya never leaves the Shelter for long.

Ilya huffs a tired laugh. “I almost didn't. Jonathan's fault. Like my birthday.” Shane doesn't reply. “Jonathan. Who ran shelter, and gave away birthday secret. He renewed passport when he left shelter. Wanted me to come and visit when they settled somewhere, but haven't had time. Keeps telling me I have to.”

“We could do that. Both of us, together,” Shane says, obviously glad to finally be able to talk about something positive.

“Maybe. I would like that. You would like them.

“I will go now. Need to be strong, yes? Will call you later. Sorry Shane.”

He hangs up, before Shane can even answer and walks to the address his brother has given him. He needs to clear his head and familiarise himself with being home again. Looking at familiar streets where he played as a boy and where he walked with his mother. He walks past his old school, his playground, where he spent most of his free time when he wanted to escape home, and his best friend's house, where he felt wanted. He moved away before Ilya did, but he smiles at the good memories they shared there. His mother was loving and his father was fair. It was something Ilya had wished for as a child, but never got. This beautiful family was so kind to him growing up. Maybe there were some good memories after all, even if they weren't from his own home.

Shane

Shane watches his father down by the lake as he does some repairs on the dock. David is in jeans and a t-shirt and he's wearing a straw hat, probably Yuna's doing. She worries a lot about heatstrokes and sunburns, and David loves her, so he follows her advice. Shane wonders if Ilya and he will ever get to this point. He wants that. He wants the bickering, the laughter and that love that lasts for decades. To always be each other's support system.

It starts here, today. Ilya needs him. He is almost five thousand miles away, and Shane wants nothing more than to see him, to hold him. He did not know much about Ilya's family, only that he had no contact with them. Well, until now. Now, Ilya was back in Moscow, dealing with his father's death.

It takes a moment for Shane to realise that his mother is sitting next to him, her brown, observant eyes on him. "Is there something wrong?" It's not a real question, but Shane still nods yes.

"Ilya called me last night. His dad died. He lives - lived - in Moscow, so Ilya is back there." He watches his mother's face pale and quickly adds: "But they weren't close. They had not seen each other in years."

Which does not make losing him easier, he realises. It adds another layer of complexity.

"I'm so sorry," Yuna leans over, squeezing his shoulder. "That must be hard for him."

Shane nods, eyes finding his dad again. He does not want to imagine losing him, grieving him. His heart aches just thinking about it.

"I just - I want to be there for him. I want to support him. But I don't know how."

For a while, Yuna does not answer, considering her response. "There is no simple answer to that because grief can be so different for different people. Especially if their relationship was difficult. I can imagine there will be lots of different emotions."

Shane nods.

"All you can do is be there for him. To show up. Even if they're not the right or perfect words, it is important that you say something. He will appreciate that. People not saying anything, pulling back, is the worst."

Her voice breaks, and Shane reaches out to touch the hand resting on his shoulder, squeezing it. On her face, he watches the effects of her own memories - Yuna had lost her dad early, when she had been 21. Her eyes are glistening with unshed tears, brows furrowed, head tipped down in a way he has rarely ever seen. Yuna rarely is so openly emotional, or showing vulnerability.

"He might not even know what he needs yet. But you can be there, and help him figure it out," Yuna runs a hand over her eyes, an elegant movement, even in this moment.

“Thank you, mom,” Shane squeezes her hand. “I will. I want to. In any way I can.”

Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

TW: domestic violence. There is a brief scene between Andrej and his wife in Ilya's part of the chapter.

Shane

While being with Ilya has allowed a bit of spontaneity in his life, Shane is still a man of routine, so Monday morning, he gets coffee and drives to the shelter. He is a little late because there is a line at the café and by the time he arrives, there are quite a few people looking around.

Harris gets up when he spots Shane, pulls him into a hug. “How is Ilya?”

Shane tries to update him but keep it vague enough not to talk about secrets Ilya is not willing to share. They chat for a while, before Shane goes to find Zane. The tall man is in the cattery, where the four remaining kittens have their own little home out back, now. They seem to have doubled in size since Thursday when Shane last saw them.

“Hello, little friends,” Shane coos at them, looking at Zane who nods at him.

“They are your kittens, man. Feel free to cuddle them any time you want. I’m just looking after them until the big boss is back.”

Shane does not need to be told twice. He scoops up the first kitten, stroking its small face. “Oh, you have opened your eyes. Look at that.”

He pulls his phone from his jacket pocket and takes a picture.

Shane:

They have your eyes. 🧐

Ilya:

Cute ❤️ I hope they have your ass 🍑 😊

Shane:

You are weird 😂

Ilya:

You love it 🤔

Shane:

I do. Are you doing okay?

Ilya:

Better now that I see kitten. Better if I see your face. 🧐

He sends Ilya a picture of another kitten, pressed against his cheek.

Ilya:

Very cute. Will hurry back to Canada for pretty Canadian boy 🥰

Shane:

Shut up 🙄

Ilya:

Never!

Shane:

I'll go on my run with Anya now. I'll see you in a bit. Feel free to text me or call me, okay?

Ilya:

Yes! Thank you. Have to get through funeral, then I come home in few days.

Reluctantly, Shane puts the kitten back with its siblings, promising it that he will be back soon. He might even offer to take a night shift so he can hang out with them more. He won't sleep well until he has heard about the funeral anyway. With a last look at the cute little balls of fur, he makes his way outside. It is down to muscle memory, grabbing the leash, and Shane only looks up when he has almost reached Anya's kennel. He stops dead in his tracks when he sees Luca there, next to a couple with a small child. The boy must be about four, and he is petting Anya's head, the dog sitting in front of him patiently, tail wagging excitedly.

Dread blooms in his stomach, reaching out its vines to squeeze around his heart, his throat. Shane barely manages to make his way to the staff room before the panic attack hits. Making himself small, he slumps against the wall, wrapping his arms around his legs and curling into himself as he tries to breathe.

Anya needs a home.

Anya finding a family is the goal, here. She deserves it, deserves to be treated like a princess every day, have her own bed, her own bowl, her own routine.

Shane knows all of that is true, and he knows having a family with a kid will do her good.

But she is his dog, his little girl. He loves her for more than her being his running buddy. He loves her silent companionship, her quiet, her joy.

Now, he might lose her.

Shane should have been faster.

Now it might be too late.

Shane does not know how long he sits there, attempting deep, slow breaths until the door opens, then closes. Troy sits with him, not touching, but a grounding presence, allowing Shane to calm in his own time.

“Is this about Anya?” he asks after a while, eyes fixed on the wall opposite them.

Shane nods.

“They didn’t take her, Shane. They wanted a puppy for their son.”

A sob tears from Shane’s throat, and it is half a laugh as relief fills his body, making him dizzy. “They didn’t?” He wants to make sure he heard right, because he couldn’t bear a misunderstanding.

“They didn’t,” Troy reaches up to the fridge next to them, opens it and hands Shane a bottle of water. Instead of taking a sip, Shane presses it to his cheek, whispering his thanks.

“You want my opinion?”

Troy waits for the other man to nod. “I think your reaction to the possibility of her getting adopted tells you what you need to know.”

Shane knows. If he is honest with himself, he had thought about it before, but always pushed the idea away, finding excuses why he couldn’t. They were all excuses, because having a dog might break his routine. But breaking his routines had brought him Ilya, and had brought him the friends he had found at the shelter. Shane has never been happier than he is right now, and has never lived more.

“You think it is a good idea? I keep telling myself that it would be a big change, but now - I can’t let someone else adopt her, can I?”

Troy’s smile is soft, understanding. “I... struggle with change, too, but maybe this is something you have to trust your heart on, instead of your brain. I mean, it is not a decision you should make on a whim, but I have a feeling that you already decided a while ago.”

“There is a lot to plan. To prepare.”

A chuckle comes from next to him. “You know, I heard you have connections to experts, right? You hang out with like five of them on a regular basis.”

That makes Shane grin, and he opens the water bottle, emptying about half of it. “Where do I sign?”

Ilya

When he walks into his brother's house, he is greeted by people he remembers. Older and more weatherworn, but still people he knew in a life long ago. He sees his brother and his brother's wife, Anna across the room. Andrei walks towards him, dragging his obedient wife behind him. She looks as browbeaten as she ever did, as she gives Ilya a small smile.

"Ilya." Andrei nodded, without really looking at him.

"Andrei, Anna." He says in return.

"Is good to see you brother. You look healthy."

"I am. Happy too. Just wanted to say goodbye to father. Won't bother anyone for long. My niece here?"

Andrei clicks his fingers at a small girl who comes over, looking shy, with her dark hair hiding her even darker eyes. "Anastasia. Is Ilya. Your uncle. Say hello."

"Hello," she waves. "You are very tall."

Ilya squats down to her level. She reminds him of his mother. He has a love for her already, that he doesn't understand, but accepts whole heartedly. "And you are very pretty. You look about 13," he teases. "How old are you?" He grins at her.

"I'm eight," she giggles. "I am tall like you."

"Wow. So grown up. Could you show me where I can get some food? I'm starving."

She leads him away and he relaxes. That was a short and civil conversation. Maybe he can do this after all. He doesn't care if he came across as rude. He just needs to keep his distance and not cause drama in front of people.

The only thing keeping him present is Anastasia, filled with his mother's energy, and messages from Shane, which he reads in secret. Photos of the kittens fill his screen, snuggled alongside the man he loves.

The funeral was as he expected. He has attended several funerals for members of the police force over the years. People his father knew, and honestly, he felt more for them than he did right now. Here, he felt nothing. He just felt numb as he stared at the coffin, followed the usual routine and watched the false displays of affection. He didn't say anything, didn't speak, just listened. He listened to people describing a man he didn't even know. The public face of his father. Someone respected and cherished, who always took care of the people around him. Ilya did feel something. He felt anger. He clenched his jaw as he stared at his hands, worried that if he looked up, people may see the hatred in his eyes.

Finally it was over and people gathered and made small talk. Ilya didn't want to do that, so he snuck off with his niece and she showed him her small collection of toys. They played and he

told her all about his life, his shelter, his friends. Shane counted as a friend for this conversation, even though he wanted to tell her the truth about the man he loved. It was just too much of a risk. If he was overheard, that would bring all kinds of trouble.

As the last people left, Andrei went out to spend time with his friends from the force. Probably sharing more stories about what a wonderful man his father was. It made his stomach churn. He offered to help Anna with the cleanup, but she refused, besides, she had some other women there and they seemed to be having a rather secretive conversation, giggling occasionally. It was a very different atmosphere, once Andrei had gone and Ilya was relieved. He wondered how Anna really felt about his father. How she felt without his brother's gaze on her.

Ilya settles down to spend time with Anastasia. As they are watching their movie, he receives a text from Shane. He smiles as he texts back and assures him that he will be home in a few days. God, he misses him so much.

Anna puts Anastasia to bed and she insists that Ilya reads her a goodnight story. He does, then another, and then sings her his mother's song. It breaks him, making him think of his mother and the kitten, but he wants to put a new, happier memory with it. Him, singing to his niece and teaching her something her grandma loved. Something that he loves too, and she can keep with her, forever.

He hears his brother return home, obviously drunk and shouting. He rolls his eyes, stroking the hair of the little sleeping girl. He walks slowly out of her room and shuts the door behind him, not wanting her to have to hear her father, like he used to.

He finds his brother alone, in the kitchen, with Anna. He is shouting at her about the food not being good enough, her not being pleasant enough or looking as tidy as she should. Ilya sees him grab Anna by the arm and raise his fist.

Ilya storms across the room, taking his brother's raised arm into his hand and holding it still. Andrei has a lot of weight behind him, but Ilya is strong. He won't stand for him hurting a woman. Hurting anyone, but especially a woman. He spins his brother around and pins him to the wall.

"Get the fuck off of me, you worthless piece of shit," his brother hisses through gritted teeth. "I will fucking kill you."

"Try it. I'm not scared of you. Maybe others are, but I'm not. Wasn't of him and I won't be of you. You're the piece of shit and I'm glad I don't have to see your face anymore."

Anna grabs Ilya's arms and tries to pull him off, terrified and screaming at Ilya to stop and get out. He turns, shock all over his face, until he sees hers. He knows that face. He'd seen it so many times on his mother. Stick up for your man, because it will make it easier for you after the hero has left. Make him think he's won.

Ilya gives her a look that asks if she is sure and she gives a little nod.

Ilya pulls back, readjusting his blazer and glaring at his brother, both men full of rage. “Stay out of my life. I never want to see you or hear from you, ever again,” Ilya growls. He turns to walk away and gives Anna a pleading look that says to take her daughter and run, but he knows she never will. His mother didn't.

They're not your family. She's not your child, he tells himself. Ilya cries all of the way to his mother's grave, just needing to be near to her, unsure if he's crying from anger, grief or sadness.

He sobs at her graveside, knowing she's not there. Not really. It's just bones, but it's something he can hold and touch. Something that symbolises she was here and proves she lived. He talks to her about life, about Shane and about how much he misses her. He cries for her, for his niece, for Anna, not really for himself, but he lets the tears flow. He cries until his head hurts and he just wants to sleep.

Ilya somehow drags himself to the hotel, buys himself a ticket home, repacks his bags and heads to the airport. Fuck Russia. There is nothing for him here. He fears for Anna and Anastasia, but if he reports Andrei, it'll all be covered up. He's police and does a good job of hiding who he truly is.

He's going home to Shane.

Shane

Shane does not sign the adoption papers immediately. Instead, he listens to Troy's advice and takes Anya on another run, to not make the decision in a moment of distress. It helps. Running clears his mind, and it also allows him to spend some more time with Anya. She seems unbothered, happily falling into step with him.

They stop at their favourite spot, Shane watching the dog splash around in the water, and his heart clenching at the thought of not seeing her do this ever again.

"Try to think of at least two options, or people, who can support you if maybe you have to leave town for a bit, or go to hospital. Having a pet means planning, and it means you need support," Troy had told him. "We can always help, too. We have boarding options, but it is good to have a plan b."

Shane calls his dad first, leaning against a tree, eyes fixed on Anya. "Hi, Dad. I have a question. If I adopted a dog, would you and Mum look after her if I couldn't take her on some work trip or something?"

There is a clank as his father puts something down, then a frustrated sound. "You lost me a bet, son," David chuckles. "Your mother and I bet 100 bucks on how quickly you would bring home an animal from the shelter."

"Daaaad," Shane drags out the vowel. "You should have bet on what kind of animal, too."

"Oh, that would have only cost me more money, you know your mother."

"I was ... sure I'd take home one of the kittens, as I told you. But today ...," Shane kicks at a few small rocks as he tells David about the panic attack. It's why he had called him instead of Yuna, because he needs someone to just listen, not plan or problem solve. At least not immediately.

"That may be your sign that it's the right time then, Shane. We are happy to help. She'd love it at the cottage, I'm sure. And I have just watched a video on unlikely animal friendships. Maybe Anya could get along with a kitten."

Shane laughs, but the thought sticks, as he wraps up his conversation with his father.

"Anya, come here, girl." Shane calls her over, clipping on the leash. He scratches her ears. "You and I make a good team, I think."

Anya yaps, obviously agreeing. They make their way along the path slowly, walking, instead of running, so Shane can call Hayden. "Hi, man. I have a question. If I adopted a dog, would you and Jackie be able to look after her sometimes? Maybe if I had a work trip and stuff?"

There is screaming in the background, and Hayden calls out Ruby's name before answering. "Sorry, bud. Wait, are you getting a dog?"

“I am considering adopting Anya. She’s the one I take on runs, and we bonded over the last few months, so…”

“That’s so mean, you go to the shelter with me, to pick a pet for my kids, and now you get a dog?” Hayden chuckles. “We’ll support you. The kids will love it. And maybe that way we can find out if we can handle three kids - four, soon - and a puppy.”

“Okay, thanks, man. How is Jackie?” They chat for a while, and Shane promises to visit the Pikes’ house in a few days and hopefully bring Anya.

Shane returns to the shelter, calm and determined. He wants this, he wants Anya to live with him. And yes, maybe he will get a chance to take home his kitten too. If not, he can always hang out with the cats here. Anya is his priority now.

Harris awaits him in the office, beaming up at him. “Well, hello. I have something for you,” he smirks. Shane should have known that Troy would fill in his husband. Anya happily accepts her cuddles from the blonde man, who kneels to scratch her ears. “Something for you, too, sweet girl.”

He gets up, picks up a piece of paper and hands it to Shane. It simply says: Adopted. “You can place that under her name on the kennel when you take her back. Then, the two of us can fill out some paperwork, alright?”

Shane blinks away tears. “Yes. Yes, I’d like that.”

Harris’ smile is warm. “You know, we all thought this would happen. And we are glad you took your time. So many make a rash decision and are not prepared. But you are. And you can have a few days to get stuff, find a vet, a dog trainer, whatever else you need. Anya can wait for a few days, and you can take her home whenever you feel ready.”

Shane nods, blinking away tears. “Yes, I’d like that. Thank you.” He tugs the sheet of paper against his chest, somehow needing it close. “I’ll be right back.”

Pinning the “adopted” sign under Anya’s name feels like claiming her, and a calm washes over him. “Soon you’ll have a cozy bed,” he promises Anya as he pets her and tells her goodbye, before returning to Harris.

An hour later, he finally makes it home. Shane can barely focus on work or a phone call with his boss, but his boss does not seem to notice. As soon as the call ends, Shane dives into his research. He looks up the vets that Troy recommended, orders a few books with good reviews, mostly on dog behaviour and training. Then he opens his spreadsheet. It has changed a lot over the past month. He has made room for his running, which he had dotted in his diary as spots of magenta, that have brought so much more colour into his life. Shane adds some more as he readjusts his planning in favour of either two short or a long run each day. He marks out potential days for training with her, and in a watery blue, Shane marks potential time slots he could spend with Ilya. Maybe they’d need to compare schedules. Shifts at the shelter are planned in advance, so it would be easy to do.

Shane shakes his head, deleting the watery blue spots. Spontaneous. So far, Ilya and him have made room for the other, and have always found a way to spend time with each other. Any future planning needs a conversation first, one he dreads a bit, one that defines what they are to each other. Shane knows what he wants, and part of him is convinced Ilya wants it too, but then Shane has never been good at reading people and Ilya might have a different idea. He might distance himself as he processes the loss of his father. The thought stings.

Quickly, Shane closes the spreadsheet and focuses on equipment instead. Harris got him a list, and he cross checks it with a few online sources. Before he gets in the car, he texts Ilya.

Shane:

I hope you can sleep better tonight.

The offer to call still stands.

Anytime 💕

Ilya answers while he is already at the pet store, deciding between the blue and yellow dog bed.

Ilya:

I am spending time with niece. Is good. Only nice person in family. 😊

Shane:

How old is she?

Ilya:

Eight. We are watching movie. 🍿

Time for bed, soon.

Shane:

Good night. 🙌

Ilya:

Thank you for checking in 💕

Shane considers telling him about Anya, but then, he'd rather tell him on the phone. And Ilya is busy with his family, still processing the loss of his father. Shane can wait. He can still tell him when he's back in Ottawa.

In the end, the blue dog bed, a variety of toys, a leash similar to the one he has been using at the shelter, two bowls and other small items make it home with him. Shane spends almost an hour getting everything ready. He stands at the door to the living room, looking at his

favourite room in the flat. Anya's items fit perfectly into this space, as if they belong. And he could fit a cat tree behind the sofa, right?

Shane smirks, shaking off the thought. One at a time. He grabs his keys to pick up the kittens for his night shift, stopping by the door. He's drilled another hook into the wall, and Shane brushes a finger over the smooth material of the leash. He cannot wait for his new roomie to move in.

Chapter 18

Ilya

As Ilya steps into the airport waiting room, not seeing his bus home, he finds a chair and sinks into it. The last few days have worn away any part of him that still had fucks to give. Give to his family, his reputation, the way the outside world sees him. He's a good man and he knows that. Nothing his family says or does will affect that, or how he sees himself. A weight has been lifted now and he feels more free. He knows he dropped a call to some people anonymously about his brother and people being sent to keep an eye on his wife and child. He couldn't let that go, but now that's in someone else's hands. He knows the world is cruel and especially hard for those that can't always protect themselves, and he won't allow that to happen on his watch, but it's not his problem now. People make their beds and all he can do is straighten them for them.

He feels numb, as he thinks over the last few days. He knows he needs to process this and clear his head before he sees Shane. He knows Shane worries and wants to protect him, but he can handle this. He has this, just like he did when he moved away and Ilya knows it's over now. He's said goodbye to his mother and has his beautiful boyfriend waiting for him at home. He messages Harris.

Ilya:

Hope is not too late. You may be sleeping, but am heading home. Should be back about 2am. You can leave and go home to Troy soon. Thank you for taking care of place. Just leave notes on important things, ok?

Ilya:

Can't wait to come home. See you in 2 hours.

His phone pings almost immediately.

Harris:

You mean, you can't wait to see Shane. He will be excited to see you. We all will. Great things to come now Ilya. Only great things, man. Xx

Ilya:

Yes. Shane too. Thank you. X

He smiles at his phone and then opens his photo gallery, looking at pictures of Shane, with his dark, cavernous eyes and the constellation of freckles, scattered over his skin. God, he misses him so much. Loves him so much. He needs to tell him that. He will. He just doesn't want to overwhelm him. Ilya knows that Shane likes things to be slow and not take him by surprise. He's been waiting for Shane to bring up the love word and he hasn't, so he will do it first and hope it's ok. When they next see each other. He will do it then.

He thinks of texting Shane, but he knows how much beauty sleep he likes and gets grumpy without it. He also knows he's been the cause of him not getting as much lately, so he won't. He will let him sleep and text him in the morning.

Ilya messages Harris when he's five minutes away and finds him waiting on the porch, when he gets home, with a warm cocoa and two slices of toast.

“Thought you'd be hungry, so I came prepared. Here. Enjoy. We will talk later. I'm here, okay?”

Ilya's heart warms. "Thank you. That means alot.”

Harris hugs him and walks towards his car.

Ilya eats his toast as he takes his cocoa inside, settling on the sofa and enjoying the warmth on his hands, while he wraps himself in a cosy blanket. He needs to be up in a few hours, so he really should sleep, but he slept a lot of the way here and is wide awake now.

He looks through the ideas Shane gave him for the website and makes notes, excited to see it coming to life. Shane deserves so much and he wants to give it all to him. They have the rest of their lives, and Ilya cannot imagine his without Shane. To think that they didn't know each other a few months ago is insane. Now, Shane is taking over every thought, every decision and every inch of him.

He's still grinning to himself as he heads out to feed the animals, having missed their loving faces in the mornings and their excitement at seeing him, even if it is more about the food than him, he tells himself. He spends some time chatting with the chickens, collects some eggs. Priscilla follows him around until he offers her some mealworms as a distraction and sneaks out. He moves on to the dog house.

He waves at Luca, approaching him as he walks up the hallway, Luca wrapping Ilya in a hug.

“Good to have you home. I missed you bossing me around.” He teases.

“Good to know,” Ilya winks and then remembers Shane saying he needs to stop that, because Luca obviously has a sweet little crush on him. Ilya blushes and walks away, catching a glimpse of Harris through the fence.

As he hands out the dogs food, he leaves Anya for last, wanting to spend some more time with her, as he's missed her and Shane so much. She's a lovely girl and the reason him and Shane came together in the first place. If she hadn't wanted to go over and see him, he would probably have just not spoken to him at all.

Walking towards her kennel, he sees something that makes his heart almost stop. A small sign, he's seen so many times. It's a source of excitement and joy for everyone, but not for him. Not today.

I found my forever home.

His heart drops in his chest and he slows his pace, hoping the sign might vanish before he gets to it. It doesn't. Anya bounces behind the gate to her home, temporarily, it seems, excited and whining for him to stroke and feed her. He slides the food through and she nudges his hand, encouraging him to cuddle her, but he can't. He just looks at her.

“Congratulations, girl,” he says flatly, with a whisper.

He turns, as if he's on autopilot and walks down the hallway. He sees Harris. “Be back soon. Need to see Shane.” He's holding his emotion in and Harris doesn't notice, saying something about the big reunion. Ilya just raises a hand, saying goodbye over his shoulder.

He drives to Shane's, conversation running through his head, as he tries to decide how to tell him. Maybe he knows. Maybe someone else told Shane. But why not tell him? Ilya knows it's been a horrible few days and maybe people didn't realise quite how much Anya means to him, but he should have been told. Anger burns within him, and he doesn't know how to tell Shane that on top of losing a kitten, he is now going to lose Anya too. Shane will probably realise he's seen more loss in the past week than he ever has and realise he can't do this and leave too. Fuck.

Ilya knows this is probably all more about him than Shane, and yet, he can't stop the panic inside him. He's never had to think about other people's feelings and about protecting them this fiercely. Not since he was a boy, anyway. He reaches Shane's house and realises his eyes are wet, his heart is pounding and he just wants to feel Shane's arms around him.

He rings the buzzer to the apartment and Shane lets him up, seemingly excited to hear his voice but also probably confused at him being a day early.

As Shane opens the door, his face drops and he pulls Ilya into his arms, wrapping him into a tight hug.

“Ilya, what's happened? Why are you back so soon? Is everything alright? Talk to me. Is it your brother? What's going on?”

He's already sitting them down on the sofa when Ilya's croaky voice says, “It's Anya. She's going to new home. I am sorry Shane. So fucking sorry.” He grips Shane tight, almost crawling into his lap. “I should know this would happen and you are so close. I...”

Shane laughs and Ilya lifts his puffy red eyes to him.

“I am not joking Shane. Is not funny joke.”

Shane bites his lip to stop himself. “I'm sorry. It's just,” he pulls Ilya in gently for a kiss. “She's mine. She's coming here.”

Ilya's brain goes quiet as it tries to decipher what he just heard. “She is? You adopted her? But you said that...”

“I know what I said, but I didn't want to lose her and I got scared, just like you did.”

“I wasn't scared, Shane.” Ilya scowls. “Just sad for you. You didn't tell me. Why did you not tell me?”

“You just had so much on, with your family and everything. I wanted to tell you when you got home. She's *ours* now. Forever.”

Ours

Ilya lets the word sit there for a while and he wants to tell Shane all of the things he's thought about saying, but it doesn't feel the time to make this about that.

“Well, should we get her today?” Shane asks. “I was planning on waiting until you're home and here you are, so would you like to? While you're here, you could make sure I have everything sorted. Especially all of the low down stuff, so I can look at your butt.” He smirks at Ilya, who can't help but smile at him.

“You owe me, Shane Hollander. Was so upset for you and for nothing. Make it up to me first.” He gives him a look as his hands move to his zipper. “Need your mouth on me.”

“Thought you would never ask.” Shane grins, hands helping Ilya to remove his clothes.

Shane

Shane had expected a slow day. He'd woken up, showered and sat down at his desk to get some work done. There had been no text from Ilya, so Shane had quickly messaged him a good morning, before remembering the time difference. It was probably early afternoon in Moscow now.

He had expected to spend the day waiting, but then, Ilya had shown up. Ilya, who was now curled up on his sofa, his heartbeat steady against Shane's ear. They are half-naked, their clothes strewn on the floor except for Shane's socks and Ilya's shirt which has been bunched up, giving Shane an excellent view of his stomach and the happy trail leading down to his cock, still wet from Shane's spit.

It is almost too much, and Shane turns his head, pressing his lips to Ilya's chest over the fabric. Beneath him, Ilya shifts, wrapping one arm tighter around him for a moment.

"Let us get cleaned up. You hate mess," the words are left against his scalp, making his skin tingle. "And then you tell me why you adopt dog and do not tell me."

Shane nudges him, but gets up, offering a hand to Ilya. As they clean up, Shane tells him about the couple at the shelter, how he realises Anya couldn't belong to anyone else, and that he had wanted to tell Ilya in person. He feels guilty about it now. Ilya had been very worried for him, and sad to see Anya go to a stranger, and that guilt does not fully leave, even as Ilya kisses him, promising him he did not do anything wrong.

Once they're cleaned up, they're back on the sofa in their underwear, and Ilya pulls a blanket over them.

"You will have puppy here soon," Ilya looks around the flat from this position. "And you are well-prepared, of course. How many hours of research?" There are fingers in his hair, and they almost distract him from the tease.

"A lot of them. Harris probably hates me for how many questions I asked."

"No, he does not. Is impossible to hate you. And is his job. He wants animals to be happy, so he is happy to answer questions of new owners."

Shane has to turn his head and kiss him about that. Fuck, he missed kissing Ilya. It had only been a few days, but all Shane had wanted was to crawl through his phone, wrap his arms around Ilya and kiss him, be kissed by him.

Not that Shane had kissed many people in his life, but he knows that Ilya is exceptional at it. For a while, he gets lost in the touch of lips and tongue, sweet and slick, the gateway to more, if they let it. When he pulls back, Ilya's beautiful face is framed by his hands. He looks at the man below him for a while, at the golden lashes, the strong eyebrows. Shane leaves a kiss there, then another, but the question that has been on the tip of his tongue escapes anyway.

“How was it? I mean... being back in Russia. I know the funeral must have been difficult.” He bites his lip to stop talking. “If you want to talk about it. I just want you to know, I’m here to listen if that helps.”

For a while, Ilya says nothing, and Shane settles back against his chest, giving him a way out. They could just cuddle, and Shane would be happy with it.

“Was... difficult... to go back. My brother is not good man. My father was not good man. And I am not good man when I am there. I do not want to be man I am, when I am around them. Is why I left,” Ilya’s voice is quiet as he speaks, but he does not hesitate. “I do not want to return. Not anymore. My life is here.” At that, he pulls Shane closer, and Shane smears a kiss against his shoulder, encouraging him to continue speaking.

“You must... feel something. About your dad. Even if he was shitty,” Shane tries to understand what it would do to someone, to lose a parent they had a difficult relationship with.

“Yes. Many feelings. Confusing mix of feelings. Sad, yes. Anger. Relief. And guilt, because it is relief.” Shane looks up, finding the other man staring at the ceiling, jaw clenched.

“Anger at brother. Pity for him, because all he feels is anger. Fear that I could be like him.” There is a pause and Ilya continues. “His wife is nice, but has hard life. Will always have hard life and their daughter too. She will probably have husband the same one day.” Ilya strokes Shane’s hair. “I hate them but love her and fear for her. I did everything I could, Shane, but I fear is not enough.” Ilya’s lip twitches as he holds in the tears and Shane feels Ilya’s hands ball into tight fists.

Shane wonders if he has ever felt that much at the same time, imagining how overwhelming it must be to be filled to the brim with feeling and be so close to bursting.

“And you hid all of that from them,” he whispers, sadness and love mixing in his own chest, tightening it.

He feels the nod before he feels the tears, and Shane moves before he knows it, turning until he sits in Ilya’s lap, pulling him up and against his chest, holding him close. There is a watery “sorry”, before Ilya shudders, and breaks.

Shane holds him, rocks him as he cries, and keeps his hold firmly on him when the tears end. Finally, he gently guides Ilya’s face up to kiss him, trying to reassure him without words.

“Sorry,” Ilya says again, but Shane just shakes his head.

“No, it’s okay. I’m glad you trust me with this. I’m glad you’re here, Ilya.” The kiss they share is deep. It tastes of salt, and of a deeper understanding between them.

They leave the flat in the early afternoon, after Shane has shown Ilya everything he has bought for his new flatmate and asked about a dozen more questions. He is all giddy, and glad that Ilya reaches for his hand in the car to calm him. Over the past few hours, something between them seems to have shifted. Shane feels impossibly close to the other man, now that

Ilya has shared his vulnerability with him. Grief is a complicated thing, but Shane is convinced that they will navigate it together somehow.

Soon, they arrive at the shelter, and Ilya's hand is back in his as soon as he steps around the front of the car.

"Okay?" Ilya asks softly.

"Nervous. Scared that something will go wrong, that I won't be able to offer her what she needs."

Ilya pulls him closer, presses a kiss to his knuckles. "Is impossible. She loves you. She deserves home, and you will give her one. Everything else, you figure out. We can all help, yes?"

"Yes," Shane nods, "I love her, too. She's the most wonderful dog."

They step into the shelter, and Ilya gets the paperwork from the office to check it again. Shane has to sign another form, before they go to the kennels.

Anya barks happily when she sees him, and Shane kneels to pet her, trying his hardest to keep her from licking him, giggling the entire time. "You don't even know it yet, but you are coming home with me. We'll be roomies."

Half an hour later, Shane unlocks the door to his flat and unclips the leash. Him and Ilya lean against the kitchen worktop, as they watch her explore her surroundings, sniffing everything curiously. As time passes, Shane finds himself ever closer to Ilya, until a head of blond curls rests against his shoulder. It happens on instinct, wrapping his arm around Ilya, running his palm along his upper arm, from shoulder to elbow and back, until he can feel goose flesh forming under his touch. Against him, Ilya sighs happily, so Shane continues, feeling the other man relax. No one would have known at the shelter, how vulnerable Ilya must still feel, how raw his emotions still are after opening up to Shane this morning, all of that hidden behind that usual, slavic cool. It is a privilege to be let behind those walls, and Shane is very aware of that.

He tries telling Ilya all that with a kiss to his hairline, which is the only skin he can access at the moment. At his touch, Ilya turns his head slightly and Shane lets his lips wander. If he could, he'd kiss every part of this man's body, but that will have to wait.

"How about we let Anya explore a bit more, and then take her on her first walk here?"

Ilya nods, eyes finding the dog who is currently walking back and forth from the bedroom to the kitchen, seemingly wanting to check if they are still there. This time around, she saunters over, nudging Shane with her wet nose until he scratches her ears. Shane does so without letting go of the man in his arms.

Their plans of a walk get distorted a bit because they all fall asleep on the sofa, and when Shane wakes, it is to the sound of Ilya's steady breath against his ear and the warm weight of

Anya who has managed to lay on top of both of them. She has only been here for two hours, but Shane is already wondering why he ever thought a 'no dogs on the sofa' rule would be put in place.

"Hi, girl," He murmurs, gently running a hand over her fluffy ear and down her neck. "I didn't think this would be where we'd end up, you and me." Soft, brown eyes find him. "But then I should have, right? We were a good team from the moment we met.

She yawns, apparently not interested in all that sentiment, then starts to get up, stepping on both of the men underneath her in the process, and poor Ilya wakes to a paw on his cheek.

"This is why you need dog school," he scoffs, but his tone is warm, patient. "No manners."

"At least she did not drool on me," Shane shrugs, pointing at the wet spot on his shoulder. He gets up as well, but not before kissing the pout off Ilya's face.

Ilya

They walk Anya through the park, later that day, as the darkness begins to fold in. It's carefree and calm, which Ilya has only just started to realise he enjoys. He used to be so busy, throwing himself into job after job and not understanding that he didn't need to do it all. Shane and the others have finally made him realise that.

“So, now there is no Anya running time, will you stop coming to shelter?” It's been on Ilya's mind, he can't lie. He worries that their thing, whatever it is, will blow over once Shane realises he doesn't need to visit as much. It might become less and less, then stop altogether. Ilya doesn't want that.

“What?” Shane stops them and looks into Ilya's eyes. “Of course not. I'll be there just as much. Maybe more, as long as I can bring my beautiful girl with me.” He smiles down at Anya and ruffles the fur on her head, as she pushes into his touch.

Ilya huffs out a laugh. “Of course. She told me she misses me and likes me more.” He winks at Anya and Shane gives him a playful shove with his elbow.

“Fuck off. Keep on like that, and I may never bring her to see you at all,” he laughs.

Ilya pouts, knowing Shane can't resist him when he pouts.

Shane sighs. “Fine. We will still visit. I... had some ideas actually,” he says quietly. “I spoke to Harris.”

“Oh, did you? You spoke to him, before me?” Ilya's intrigued and a little impressed that Shane did that. “So, tell me these big ideas, hotshot.” He grins at Shane, unsure what these ideas are, but knowing Shane's ideas are usually good and beneficial to everyone.

“I... I was just thinking that... maybe...”

“Don't be shy, Shane. Won't bite. Unless you ask, anyway.” He gives him a grin that says his cock is into that.

Shane gives him a shy, blushing smile and continues. “Well, I have this website design, and I thought, because Harris normally does the website and he enjoys, well not enjoys, well, you know...”

“Am lost Shane. English is second language, need to use easy words.” He's trying to put Shane at ease, but Shane doesn't always get that he's joking. “Just breathe. I am sure it will be good. So you have website, yes?”

“Er, yes. I have worked on it a lot and I would like to run it for you.”

“Ah. Ok. What would Harris do? Twiddle thumbs and stroke animals. He cannot leave desk for long. It will be boring for him, no?”

“Well, that's the second part. He could run the social media sides. Make funny videos and take cute pictures of you and the animals. Make it seem like a nice place to adopt from. I mean it is, but people don't know that before they come here. I think seeing who works there and some of the animals we have, will draw people in and make it easier to contact you or look if we have animals similar to what they are looking for. You know how much Troy and Harris know about social media and Harris would really like to do this. He can film most of it before or after the shelter's opening hours. We could put adoptions up and photos of smiling families, taking their pets to new homes, advice and chat pages. It'll be so good. I promise.”

Ilya is holding it together, but barely. Since Shane said we, for the first time, he hasn't heard much of anything else. Shane is in. We means us. He's in it for the long haul. Fuck. He loves this man so much. “Yes, please. Sounds wonderful. Will you have time? Really have time? If it is rush...”

“It won't be,” he interrupts. “We've worked it out. It will be doable, won't affect my work, and the good thing is, I can do my work from anywhere. Well, except for part three.”

“There is more? You have been busy man, Shane. Been making secret plans with Harris and not me? Should I worry? Are you having affair already?” He grins, letting Shane know he is joking.

“Fuck off.” Shane taps his arm. “I thought, I could still come to the shelter and walk Anya, but use her as a dog that can help other dogs learn to safely be around each other. Obviously we need to choose the dogs carefully, but we can take them for walks and teach them how to bond with others. It might make rehoming them easier. Would it?”

Ilya thinks. “It might. We could try. Have you asked?” He nods towards Anya and Shane laughs.

“No.” Shane looks into her beautiful eyes. “Would you like to, girl?” She looks up at him, as if to say she will do anything, if she is with him. “You are such a good girl. I'm lucky to have you.”

“She's lucky to have you too,” Ilya adds. “I have you both, so I am luckiest.” He takes Shane's hand and continues to walk.

“I think all the ideas are great, Shane. We need to look how we will do it. Small problems, but we can do that. I will tell Harris is sorted out. Thank You Shane. Our shelter is so lucky with you.”

Chapter 19

Shane

Shane is relaxing on the Pikes' terrace, Arthur tucked against his chest as he naps. It is rare that he gets to hang out with the littlest one of Hayden's children, because the twins demand to play with their uncle Shane, the moment he steps in the door. But right now they are occupied with Anya, who is more than happy to run around the garden with them, and has been doing so for almost an hour.

"They love her," Jackie says, then sighs as she sinks down into the chair next to him, her eyes fixed on her daughters for a moment, before they turn to Shane, her eyes softening, and she reaches out to stroke her son's back. "He looks so tiny against you. Can't believe he'll be a big brother."

"I don't know how you do it. I'm barely managing with a dog," Shane squeezes her arm. "You sure about watching her?"

Jackie nods slowly. "Of course. Look at them. They will wear each other out. All three of them. The house will be quiet by seven. If not, then maybe that will teach Hayd that we really don't need a pet right now."

Shane chuckles at that. "So, this is you proving a point, then? What if it backfires?"

"It won't. Also, Harris from the shelter told him their boss is very strict on who can adopt animals. That's why Hayden hates the man's guts, but only because he knows he's right."

Shane grins, hiding it in Arthur's hair, but Jackie notices, of course she does.

"He's the one you're going out with, right? Tell me about him?"

Shane does. It is easy, talking about Ilya, about the amazing work he does, the giant heart in his chest, the way he teases Shane, challenges him.

"You look very happy," Jackie sits up a bit, helping Ruby to adjust her ponytail that has become loose, before the girl rushes off again to join her sister and the dog.

"I am." Shane does not look up at her, knowing his cheeks are flushed pink. "It's just... so much has happened in the time since we had our first kiss, and we haven't talked about us. About what we are." It is hard to find the words for what he wants to say, and Shane fears that he already sounds like a teenager.

"You just want to define your relationship, because that is how your brain works. You need to be sure," his friend supplies. Her smile is kind, understanding. Shane nods, biting the inside of his cheek. Even after everything, there is a small part of his brain that doubts, no, that is convinced, that Ilya might not feel as deeply as he does. "Today might be a good time for that, though. You can go to the game, have some dinner, and then just ask him."

"Is that what you did? Just ask Hayden? Because that sounds scary."

“Ah, well, he told me he loved me during our second date. That man is obsessed. There is a reason I ended up like this,” she smirks, stroking her small bump. “But yes, I imagine it is scary, to be vulnerable like that. But it can only make things better, in the end, because it is better than not knowing, right?”

She is right, of course. Shane hates not knowing, And if he starts the conversation, it will give him a certain amount of control over the situation. Before he can answer, Jackie is up on her feet to comfort Jade who has fallen and hit her knee.

"Adults are so complicated," Shane whispers into Arthur's hair. "Just never grow up. Stay this cute, forever." The baby makes a soft sound in his sleep, curling his little fist, and Shane feels his heart melting. Would Ilya want kids one day? A family? Could they have a future like this? Shane shakes the thought off. It is too early to be thinking about this, even if he knows, deep down, that Ilya is it for him. He is his person, and he will tell him that, tonight.

First things first, though. Shane has prepared well for their first, real date. Yuna sent him over the tickets for the hockey game, the dinner reservations are made. His flat is cleaned, he's changed the sheets on his bed, and purchased a few options for breakfast.

After Jade's tears are dried and he has hugged Anya goodbye, Shane makes his way home. He takes a long shower, making sure he is clean everywhere, then walks into his bedroom, wrapped in his towel.

On his bed, there is a variety of clothing laid out, and he is just waiting back on a text from Rose to tell him what to wear. He'll pull his Ottawa jersey over whatever she chooses, but he wants to look nice at the restaurant. There are a few options that are not his usual hoodie and jeans, and Shane is a bit hesitant about wearing them. Yes, he trains a lot, and he likes his body, but he doesn't usually show it off.

Rose:

Yellow one 🔥

Makes your skin glow, like holy shit. 🥵

Rose:

He will undress you with his eyes all night.

Shane:

Rose!

Rose:

Shane!

Believe me. With the dark jeans. 🍑

You won't be able to walk tomorrow. 🤕

Rose:

I'd prefer the light ones, but those don't work for the game, I don't think.

Shane:

Rose Landry, you have no shame! 😂

Shane puts on the outfit she suggested, taking a photo for her.

Rose:

Can this Ilya person fight? Because people will try. 🦊

Rose:

You look so good 😊

Rose:

And your hair has gotten so long, I love it.

Shane runs his fingers through it. He's never had hair long enough for some of the strands to fall into his forehead or frame his ears, and he thought he'd hate the feeling, but he doesn't mind it at all. He thinks he looks a little bit less boyish, more like a grown-up now. Maybe he should do some research on hair products and how to style them properly.

Shane:

Love you, thank you for helping me choose. 😊

Shane:

And boosting my ego. 😂

Rose:

I want every filthy detail in exchange. 😊

Shane:

As I said, you have no shame. 😊

Shane keeps texting her as he dries his hair and gets dressed. Then, he messages Ilya.

Shane:

I'm almost ready. I'll pick you up in about half an hour. Does that work for you?

Ilya:

Yes, works for me. Excited to see you.

Shane smiles at his phone, glad that Ilya does not tease him for making sure that they are sticking to the plan.

Ilya:

Might not survive though, as Boston fan in Ottawa.

Shane:

You're not wearing Boston merch, are you?

Ilya:

Maybe. 🙄

Shane:

Ilya!

Ilya:

Don't worry, am not. Maybe next time, but not when it is date with you. 😊

Shane:

You are so annoying!

Ilya:

You love it

I love you.

The words slip free, hang in the air around him, before they dissipate into the air. Shane wants them to catch in Ilya's golden eye lashes as he says them. He'll just have to be brave enough to repeat them to Ilya instead of to an empty room.

Ilya is waiting for him by the front gate. He's dressed in all black, leather jacket over a tank top and jeans, and Shane, who has been accident free ever since he got his driver's license, almost crashes the car into the sidewalk. The car comes to a sudden stop, and Shane can barely recover from the small jump forward, before Ilya is stepping closer, colourful flowers a stark contrast to his dark clothing. Shane didn't get him anything, and this is the second time he will be getting flowers. He thought of so many things, why not that?

Quickly, he frees himself of his seatbelt and opens the door, suddenly nervous like a teenager.

“Hi,” Shane fixes his eyes on the flowers, barely capable of looking up at Ilya, but trying to find the blue ones amongst them, as he watches them come closer.

“Hi,” Ilya’s voice is as soft as the kiss that he breathes against his cheek. “Is mean. You look so good I want to miss hockey game.”

“There is plenty of time after the game,” Shane shoves him a bit, giggling at Ilya’s offended face. “You look unfairly hot, too. So, we both might be distracted from the game.”

He gets a grin for that, then Ilya hands him the flowers. “Okay, you are forgiven. Here are pretty flowers for pretty man.” Shane blushes as he takes the bouquet.

“I should have gotten you flowers, too.” He feels bad because he did not even consider it.

“Is alright, sweetheart. We can both look at them,” Ilya brushes another kiss to the corner of his mouth, and Shane needs to be a much stronger man to resist him. He doesn’t even try, instead, he turns his head and kisses him properly, almost ruining the flowers as he throws his arms around Ilya.

Ilya kisses him back, mouth hot and sweet, and Shane loses himself in his touch. Hands wander along his sides, against his ribs and shoulders, before fingers loosely curl around his chin to pull him closer, as the Russian shows him just where he wants him. Shane has never been touched like this before, like he is both desired and adored, and his heart transports that sensation through his entire body until it makes his belly flutter and his toes curl.

The kiss ends, has to, but Ilya stays close, breath hot, skin hot, making Shane’s head spin as he tries to catch his breath. “Later, yes?” Ilya strokes his thumb across his brow, and the touch is so tender, Shane has to close his eyes or he might combust.

“Yes.” It takes colossal strength to step back, clutching the bouquet to his front instead. “We should go, or we’ll be late. I’ll just give these some water,” he adds, walking to the kitchen with the flowers.

They get in the car. The drive isn’t too long, and it is filled with Ilya singing along to the radio, Shane’s hand clutched in his, Ilya’s thumb brushing Shane’s knuckles. It is the perfect little bubble, one that is warm and soft. It bursts as Shane pulls into the parking lot. He has been so excited for this, going to watch a hockey game with Ilya, to have him meet his mom and some of the players, but as he watches dozens of people in hockey jerseys walk up to the rink, a realisation hits him.

This is hockey, and he is here on a date with a man. A man who is holding his hand, who is so affectionate towards him. The thought that they will have to hold back cuddles and kisses, even something as simple as holding each other’s hand or brushing fingers as they talk and laugh, breaks Shane’s heart. He does not want to hide Ilya, or the feelings he has for him, but he is so scared of the attention they might get here.

Ilya is speaking before Shane even realises he has pulled his hand back. “Will be challenge, yes? To hide how much I want to push you against glass and... but I have to behave, will meet mama too, yes?”

And even in his casual tone, his teasing, Shane finds instant comfort. The other man understands, both the situation and Shane’s feelings about it. Shane hopes he can convey his gratitude, as he reaches for Ilya’s hand again, squeezing it, before he focuses on finding them a parking spot.

They meet Yuna by the staff entry. Within minutes, the confident, teasing, maybe even rude, Russian, turns into someone quiet, almost shy. He politely shakes Yuna’s hand, calling her Mrs. Hollander as they chat for a bit outside the door. Shane wants to tell him that it’s alright, and Yuna started liking him the moment he shared his distaste for Dallas Kent, as both a person and a hockey player, and maybe he will, later, when they are alone again.

Yuna gives them a little tour of parts of the building. They are in a break room with lots of plants and a little kitchenette when Cliff Marlow and Evan Dykstra find them. Shane met them before, but he is still in awe with both the respect and the obvious love these two world famous and very talented hockey players have for his mom. He cannot imagine how Ilya feels, especially because Marlow played for Boston, his favourite team, for so long.

There is a bit of awkward small talk at first, but then Marlow asks about the shelter, and Ilya is suddenly very much in his element, gushing about the amazing work his team does.

Shane steps back a bit in the small space, giving him the room.

“He is very passionate, isn’t he?” Yuna does not take her eyes off Ilya, but there is a soft smile dancing around her mouth. “He seems very kind.”

“He is,” Shane nods. “He cares so much for others. For the animals.”

“For you,” Yuna turns to him, and there is a knowledge in her observant eyes, one that Shane hopes she will share with him. “It is obvious how much he likes you.”

“I like him, too,” The words are out of his mouth before Shane can hold them back, and he looks at Ilya who is sticking his head together with Cliff and Evan, obviously showing off some pictures. “A lot.”

“You should bring him to dinner soon. Your dad is dying to meet him.”

“I’ll ask him,” Shane nods. “I’m sure he’d do anything for you, now. You’ve made his dream come true. He gets to gush over kittens with Marlow.”

His mother smiles, squeezing his shoulder. “You are very welcome.”

They leave about ten minutes later when the hockey players have to start warming up. They get something to drink and find a spot. Being part of the crowd allows them to press their shoulders together, to stay close. Ilya knows almost as much about hockey as Yuna does, and Shane is happy to discuss strategies with him as they watch and wait for the first period to

start. He is buzzing with energy, eyes bright with excitement and Shane cannot help but grin right back at him. The moment the puck drops is almost lost on Shane, as he ponders which one of the moles on Ilya's face is his favourite and he finds he does not mind missing it at all.

Marlow scores a hat trick just before the final minute, earning the Centaurs a 4:1 victory, and for every goal, Ilya presses a loud kiss to Shane's cheek, eyes sparkling with unshed tears of joy, and Shane wonders if a moment like this can just be placed in an old jar, the ones David uses to put his self-made jam into, to be sealed in there forever, because it seems too precious to just fade away.

"Next life I will be hockey player, yes?" Ilya smirks, one arm thrown over Shane's shoulder, breath hot against his ear. "Will earn millions, and will have shelter that is three times bigger. Save lots of animals."

"And what would I be?" Shane smirks.

"Ah, you will be on team with me. Hockey boyfriends, yes? Play together. Win every game."

Boyfriends.

Shane loves the sound of that.

"Is only problem, I will be very distracted by pretty boy on the ice."

"Who? Marlow?" Shane teases, earning a nudge against his arm.

"Yes, Marlow. Prettiest boy in hockey. With his pretty, crooked nose and fake teeth."

Shane giggles, trying to come up with a clever retort, but just then, the countdown for the last ten seconds sounds, and they are pulled back to the game. Ilya's arm stays wrapped around him as they scream and jump with the rest of the crowd, cheering for their team.

They return to the car, and it feels like the masses of celebrating fans are carrying them out of the door, the air around them buzzing with energy.

The car is quiet, and Shane sinks back against his seat for a moment, eyes closed, trying to process all the input, the noise, the people. When he opens them again, he finds himself smiling at Ilya, who beams back at him.

"It was best date of my life. Thank you, Shane."

Shane ducks his head, then looks back at the man on the passenger seat. "It was only the first part of the date," he murmurs, trying hard not to burst out the three words he does not know if Ilya is ready to hear yet.

"Ah, well. Have sad news. Have to cancel restaurant."

Shane's face drops. Ilya wants to end this early? Shane had hoped to spend the rest of the night with him, and possibly the morning.

“Yes. I am weak man, you know. I cannot resist. I need you to take us to flat, and take you to bed. We can order food after, I do not care. But I need you naked first. That okay?”

It is more than okay. Shane wants it. Ilya is right, sitting opposite each other without being able to touch each other would be torture. Who needs dinner, anyway, when he can have Ilya in his bed?

Shane starts the car.

Ilya

As they arrive at the game, the easiness between them shifts and he sees Shane tense. He knows why and his heart hurts. He hates that even in this day and age, people still have to hide who they are from the world. He wants everyone to know this man is his and to shout it from the rooftops, but instead, they have to hide it. Right now his priority is Shane. He reassures him and reminds him of the big step they are taking in their relationship tonight. He is meeting Shane's mother. Ilya is terrified, but hides that as best he can.

Ilya wishes he could hold on to Shane for support, as they make their way towards the staff door, but he knows he can't and that makes this harder, but seeing Yuna's warm smile is all he needs to steady his nerves, as she greets him with a hug.

"It is lovely to finally meet the man that makes my son so happy."

"He makes me happy too, Mrs Hollander. It is good to meet you. Thank you for this."

"You are welcome. Please, call me Yuna. Come, I will show you around." She gently pinches Shane's cheek, before taking her son's arm and walking closely, chatting to him like they haven't spoken in years. Ilya likes the bond they have and feels mostly forgotten, until Shane gestures for him to catch up, where he has fallen behind. She shows him all of the best parts of the centre that people normally don't get to see, and even lets them step into the players entrance for games. They end up in the break room, where Cliff Marlow and Evan Dykstra stroll in and Ilya nearly drops the cup he is holding. His hero is standing before him, in the flesh and looking smaller than he imagined, without all of his gear making him look much larger. Ilya's not sure he can speak. Marlow has always been a favourite of his and even after he joined a rival team, Ilya couldn't help but follow his career. It's incomprehensible that Marlow is right there, in front of him and close enough to touch.

Yuna introduces him as Shane's boyfriend and Ilya bristles, unsure how that will go, but Marlow shakes his hand. "Nice to meet you man. We've heard a lot about you and your rescue."

"Yeah, Yuna said we might be able to help you out with some fundraising. Happy to," Dykstra adds, making Ilya smile.

Ilya mumbles something similar to thank you and then suddenly doesn't know what to say. They chat about hockey and that breaks the ice, while Shane and Yuna stand and talk in the corner. They're obviously discussing him. He knows by the way they keep looking at him. They both have happy faces, so at least that's something.

"So, are you raising money for something in particular, or just the general running of the shelter?" Marlow asks, curiously.

That's all he needs to feel comfortable and he starts talking about his plans for the shelter. He tells them about Shane, Anya, the chickens and the kittens. They all laugh when he tells them about Priscilla, queen of the chickens and how she rules the roost, literally. He tells them

about his team and all of the amazing things they plan to do. He talks about how much animals can enrich people's lives and shows them some of the beautiful ones they have. After exchanging numbers, taking multiple photos and thanking them many times, Shane tells him they need to take their seats for the game. Ilya thanks them all again, hugging Yuna, before leaving to watch the match.

Ilya loves this. Watching a game with his boyfriend. A secret boyfriend tonight, but once they're alone, he will make up for it. He takes some selfies of the two of them pulling faces. Nothing too close, just two bros hanging out. It turns his stomach, but it's what he has to do for time like this with Shane. Ilya uses every goal as an opportunity to hug, touch or kiss Shane, unable to believe that he never realised how much he was missing out on, before he met him. Doing things like this, with the person he loves.

When the game ends and the spectators leave, cheering and singing, they get in the car, but even the closed doors can't drown out the merriment. They smile at each other, tired, as their hands touch, but nothing else. Not yet. It may not be safe.

He needs to tell him what a fantastic night he's had and does, watching Shane's face grow as serious as ever, like he never expected anyone to enjoy his company and want to spend time with him. He would spend every second of every day with him if he could.

He's lost in his thoughts and only hears half of what Shane mumbles about the date. Ilya just wants to rip his clothes off and take him right here. Fuck, he's so beautiful, sitting there, watching him.

"Ah, well. Have sad news. Have to cancel restaurant."

He sees Shane's face change. Shane looks confused and then a little upset. Shit. Has he spoilt their night? Maybe Shane was tired and hungry. Maybe he really wanted to eat.

"Yes. I am weak man, you know. I cannot resist. I need you to take us to flat, and take you to bed. We can order food after, I do not care. But I need you naked first. That okay?" He needs to check. He's worried, but he sees Shane blush, his expression change and heat light up in his eyes.

On the journey home, Ilya's hand keeps wandering up Shane's leg. He can't wait to touch him, strip him naked and kiss every inch of him. They have all night and he intends to make the most of it, without animals, phone calls or people to interrupt.

Chapter 20

Chapter Summary

explicit

Chapter Notes

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

Ilya

By the time they get the front door open, they're kissing each other, hands roaming and mouths breathing heavily against one another, like they're desperate for air. They practically fall through the door, Ilya picking Shane up and carrying him to the sofa, laying them both down.

“Fuck. Do you know how hard it was to watch you tonight and not touch you?” He kisses and nibbles along Shane’s jaw and neck, Ilya's leg moving against his very interested erection. “Wanted to stroke your cock and get on my knees for you, right there, in front of all the people.”

A moan escapes Shane's lips. “I missed you touching me,” Shane breathes. “Fuck Ilya. I want you.”

“I want to be inside you. My fingers, my cock, my tongue. Can I do those things with you?” Ilya asks, voice low and breathless.

“Fuck, please. I want that.”

“Shall we move to bed? More room there, yes? Don't have to.”

“Want to. Please,” is all he gets in return.

He picks Shane up, not wanting to break their touch. “Come on. Will look after you.” He kisses his nose, before carrying him to his bedroom, never letting go of him and enjoying the feeling of Shane's legs wrapped around him.

He pauses at the bedroom door, looking over Shane's shoulder. Shane looks at him. “Why did you stop?”

“Shane, what the fuck?” He looks at Shane, never putting him down. “Why so many pillows? You have bad back or is this secret grandmother’s room? What the fuck?” He grins at him. “I did not know I was dating old man with pillow fetish.”

“Fuck off! I don't have a pillow fetish. Is that even a thing?”

“Everything is a thing, Shane,” he whispers against his ear, making Shane shiver. “Maybe you want me to put it over face during sex? Not really my thing.” Ilya's trying to take Shane's mind off how intimate they are and it works, because Shane gives out a little laugh.

“You're such a dick.”

“Yes. Can suck my dick later. Right now, I have other plans,” he smirks as his legs hit the bed.

He places Shane on the mattress, crawling over him and using the pressure of their bodies against each other to calm Shane's nerves. He runs his hands up Shane's sides as they kiss, lifting his arms and pinning him to the bed with one of his own large hands, the other sliding down and palming his hard cock through his trousers. “Hmmmm, love having this effect on you,” he purrs, voice low and husky. He licks a strip up his neck, wanting to taste him, before nibbling his earlobe and whispering, “I want to make love to you. Want to cherish you and take time. You want?”

Shane nods, eyes closed and obviously trying to hold it together. “Need you naked, sweetheart.” He stands, helping Shane up, because all that is solid in his body right now, is his rigid cock.

Ilya stands there, pulling off his own clothes and watching as Shane carefully folds his and places them on the chair. He smiles to himself. This is another little thing that he loves about Shane. He does this at night, when they have time to take things more slowly with sex and when he's nervous. He has all the time in the world for him to finish and will wait forever if it means he is comfortable. Ilya watches patiently, waiting for Shane to finish, before walking to him and kissing him softly, holding his chin and whispering to him. They are skin to skin now, and Shane looks nervous.

“Hey, no nerves. Have had sex before, just different kind, yes?.” He grins against his neck as he kisses him. “Fuck. Wanted this since first saw you.”

He kisses him and holds Shane's face in his hands, thumbs rubbing across Shane's cheekbones as he searches his eyes for doubt. “You want to do this? You need to be sure.” He is suddenly serious. It's more about Shane than him. He can see, by the look on his face, that he is overwhelmed. “Don't have to, ever if don't want.”

“Yes, but, um, slowly... please.” He says, quietly.

Ilya grins, unable to help it, biting his bottom lip as he moves in to kiss Shane again, leading him to the bed and pushing him down on it, stepping between his knees.

“Can go as slowly as want.” He runs a hand over Shane's chest, mouth following, gently sucking his nipple between his lips, as he falls to his knees.

“Oh fuck!” Shane's back arches as he leans into Ilya's touch. Ilya smirks at him, before tweaking the other hard, erect nipple between his finger and thumb.

“Turn over. On your knees, okay?” He helps Shane, but can see how awkward he is. “Is okay, Shane. I only bite if you ask me to.” He winks and bites his lip. He runs a hand down Shane's spine and a finger along the crack of his butt. “You ever touch yourself here, when you are alone, Shane? Maybe have toy?”

Shane's face is hiding in a pillow, the words coming out muffled.

“Can't heeear you Shane,” he says, playfully. “Do you have massive dildo? Maybe pink or rainbow like unicorn?” He grins.

“Fuck you, Ilya,” comes a louder, still shy, but more confident Shane. Ilya hears a smile in his words and feels Shane's body relax a little. “Yes, I have a...” he lowers his voice. “A dildo.”

“Do you use it? Maybe thinking about me?” He laughs. Thumb trailing lightly over his soft, puckered hole.

“No. Why? Do you?” He looks at him confused.

Ilya smiles, shrugs, then begins to laugh. “No, but it's fun to think about, no? Would be hot to see you fucking yourself with dildo and thinking of me.” He trails kisses down Shane's spine, following the path his hand took, until his hot breath is upon his prize. His tongue licks a stripe across Shane's entrance and Ilya holds him in place, as he tries to move away. “Relax Shane. Tis fun, enjoy it.” He flicks at it and slowly begins to open him up with his tongue, listening to the muffled moans through the pillow. “No hiding Shane. Hearing you is favourite part.” Shane grumbles as he pulls the pillow towards his chest, not losing it's comfort, just the ability to hide behind it.

“That's good. Don't be shy.” He fucks him with his tongue, giving both of their cocks the odd stroke, before lubing a finger and gently pushing it into him. “Relax, tis okay.” He kisses Shane's arse cheek, distracting him from what his finger is doing and helping to Shane relax. Shane softens and opens for him like Aladdin's mystical cave and Ilya wastes no time, popping in a second, then a third, before feeling Shane's legs start to tremble. He gives Shane a few small tugs to relieve some pressure on his dick, then he pulls out. “On your back now, sweetheart, so I can see you,” he says, keeping his words calm and loving. “Are you ready?” He asks as he kisses him softly. He puts on a condom, using extra lube. He wants Shane to be comfortable.

Shane nods and Ilya smiles at him, before lining himself up and slowly, bit by bit, edging himself inside. Shane moans and arches, Ilya running a hand from his chest to his cock, before squeezing the base. He stops as he feels his cock fill him up. “Okay?” He checks and Shane nods again. Ilya begins to move, as he kisses him, his mouth never leaving Shane's as their hands connect either side of Shane's head, Ilya's elbows framing him like a work of art. “Fuck. Feel so good Shane. Not hurting? Sure is okay?” Shane nods. He wants this to be perfect. There is plenty of time for fucking but now, in this moment, it is about making sure Shane is taken care of, and feels loved and worshipped. This is about him. The man before him. The man he adores.

Shane

Shane had known that their sex life would evolve, that as they explored what they enjoyed

together, penetrative sex would be something they would consider. Shane has been on his knees, fucking himself with his fingers for Ilya. He has used his dildo quite a bit whenever he masturbated over the past months, imagining the Russian over, behind or under him. He'd managed to stretch himself, to take the girthy toy without pain.

Nothing could have prepared him for what it felt like to have Ilya inside him, splitting him in half. The moment of feeling overwhelmed had nothing to do with the size of his cock, but the sheer intimacy of this. Of being connected on more than a physical level. Ilya filled him, surrounded him, and Shane felt so loved, so well taken care of, even when touches become less gentle, thrusts less slow. This, he realises, is why people love sex, none of his past attempts had felt this good. Shane is capable of feeling this, of getting lost in this.

"Fuck," Shane hears himself moan, legs moving on their own valition to wrap around the other man, pulling him impossibly closer as he tries to keep up with Ilya's rhythm, enjoying the hot kisses being smeared against his mouth, his cheeks, his jaw.

"You like this, yes?" Ilya smirks, and Shane opens his eyes - when did they close? - to look at him. "Already can't get enough?"

There is an instinct to deny it, to not make himself feel even more vulnerable than he already is, but he feels something stronger than his vulnerability. Something much stronger, deeper, warmer, knowing he can trust Ilya with this, with his body, his heart. How could he even deny it, when his cock is already leaking precum where it is resting against his belly, when he welcomes every thrust with a sound from deep in his throat?

"Yes," he breathes. "Ilya." Shane leans up into another kiss, one that is more sharing breath than actual touch, but just as perfect.

"Knew you would. My perfect Shane. So good for me," Ilya's large hands come up to cup his face, and Shane breathes in his words, letting them fill his lungs, his heart.

"Will make you feel so good. Turn around for me, yes? Better angle, promise," Ilya slows his movement, but does not stop, seemingly incapable. For a moment, Shane hesitates. Above him, Ilya is so beautiful, golden curls plastered to his forehead, skin shining with sweat, pupils blown wide. All their kisses have painted his lips red, and changing position would rob Shane of that sight.

Still, after another kiss, Ilya pulls out and they shift on the bed, Ilya staying close, hands running down Shane's sweat-slick sides as he comes into a kneeling position, legs straining to carry his body weight. A moment later, Ilya is plastered against his back, leaving hot kisses against his spine.

"So beautiful. Here," Ilya drags the pillow closer, and Shane rests the side of his face against it, letting Ilya take care of him, tender in this intense situation, Shane can barely take it. "This okay?"

Shane nods, incapable of any other response. Ilya understands, either way. Another kiss, then the blunt head of his cock presses against Shane's rim again.

It is a relief to have Ilya back inside him, and Shane pushes against his thrusts, needing more, needing Ilya, needing to come with Ilya's cock filling him, rubbing against his prostate. It only takes a few thrusts before that happens. Shane barely manages a warning before orgasm hits him, zinging along his spine.

"Ilya," That last vocal gets lost in a grunt, and then, in the blink of an eye, the world turns dark, and is reduced to nothing but feeling and pleasure.

Shane comes back from the sense of floating between wakefulness and dreaming, Shane realises that Ilya must have fallen over the edge just moments after him, and was now arranging them on the bed, his back pressed against Ilya's chest, impossibly close.

For a while, they just breathe, Shane's hand in Ilya's hair, Ilya's mouth wandering over his body, soothing now, instead of setting him on fire. It is a state that can only last for a moment, before reality seeps back in. Shane flinches as the Russian slowly pulls out and disposes of the condom. By the time he returns, Shane has rolled away from the wet patch and is lying on his back. He curls into Ilya as soon as the other man sinks back onto the mattress.

"Worth the wait?" Are the first words spoken. Shane's eyes find his love's face, finds it stripped of any of the bravado, the cockiness. What is left behind is adoration, but also self-doubt, as if he had not just blown Shane's mind, reshaped who he is as a person. Shane cannot stand it, afraid that words cannot describe what he feels, so he kisses him, first his mouth, then his brow.

"That was so fucking hot," Shane cups his face, holding it, looking down at him until Ilya, hoping to see the self-doubt disappear. "I didn't think I could feel like that." Ilya's low chuckle is just what he wanted to hear, and he swallows it down as they kiss.

"We are going to have so much fun, yes?" The Russian shifts, tugging Shane against his chest, making him feel safe.

"Hmm, first, we have to change the sheets. This is a mess," as much as Shane enjoys this, he cannot escape his own skin, and a cum soaked bed is unacceptable.

Ilya laughs so loudly, his entire body shakes, and Shane feels it vibrate through him, as he joins in.

Three hours later, Shane is tucked against Ilya's chest, sated in the best way. They order sushi from one of Shane's favourite spots and eat it in front of the TV. Afterwards, Ilya drags him back to bed. Now, after a shared shower, the Russian is asleep, mouth hanging slightly open, curls a mess, and all Shane wants is to close his eyes and dream of him, waking up to the first rays of sunshine dancing through the room and over Ilya's skin, letting his lips follow their path.

Instead, his brain will not let him sleep, no matter how tired he is, how comfortable Ilya's chest is, his heartbeat a comforting rhythm. On the nightstand, two o'clock shifts to three, and Shane has no other choice. If he wants to sleep, he needs to know. Shane leans over to switch on the lamp on his nightstand

Gently, he runs his hand through Ilya's hair, nudging him awake. Blue green eyes blink open, and Ilya looks so adorable in his confusion, that Shane is almost glad he woke him, but he feels mostly guilty.

"Something happened? You okay?" Ilya moves to lay on his side, blinking a few times.

"I... no... I can't sleep," Shane looks down. He is making a problem out of nothing.

"Ah," Ilya is smirking now, rolling on top of him, and his weight is an instant comfort. "I did not wear you out enough? You need another round?" Warm palms run over his chest, and Shane is so tempted to brush off the thoughts he's been having and give in to Ilya, to just focus on feeling.

"No, that's not it. You wore me out pretty well," Shane lets his fingers travel over sharp cheekbones, and the bump of his nose. Ilya is so beautiful, inside and out. Shane watches those beautiful features shift back to something more serious.

"What is it then?" His voice grows softer, "You woke me in middle of night? Is serious?"

Shane nods, shakes his head, then nods again. "Sorry, I'm giving you mixed signals. I... I was just wondering if we are, I'm... boyfriends."

Shane thinks they might be. They have been seeing each other for weeks, spent as much time as possible together, shared a bed for many nights before that. But then, Ilya might see it differently. Maybe to him, it takes more than that to be in a relationship. How would Shane know, especially with dating culture these days. The things he has heard from Rose, about affairs and situationships and all that stuff, how can he be sure?

Ilya stops moving for a moment, before his mouth turns into a smile. "You wake me in middle of night to ask if we are boyfriends?"

Shane can feel the heat rising in his cheeks, and he ducks his head, trying to escape those observant eyes. This was stupid. He should have waited longer before asking, but he had been so sure Ilya was on the same page, but maybe he had projected his own feelings onto him. A panic attack starts growing in his chest, threatening to take his breath, but Ilya is there, and although his smile is teasing, his eyes are filled with adoration.

"God, Shane, you are so..." Ilya drops his head, smearing kisses against Shane's neck, his cheeks, seemingly searching for a word, and Shane would have tried to help him if he could form a thought, but his brain is slowly turned to mush by hot, sipping kisses.

"You are..." Ilya repeats, moving away just slightly so he can look down at Shane, his eyes wet with tears now and confusing Shane even more.

"I love you."

For a moment, those words hang in the air between them, as Shane attempts to process the weight they hold. For so long, he felt that way, and Ilya just hasn't been brave enough to put them out into the world, knowing he would be incapable of taking them back.

Ilya loves me. Ilya loves me. Ilya loves me.

His brain provides. What comes out is something else.

“Holy shit,” Shane hears himself say, and, in horror, watches Ilya’s expression shift to doubt, to fear. “I love you, too.”

To prove it, Shane pulls him close, lets his touch show what his words might not be able to, as he kisses him, soft at first, then increasingly desperate, as if not kissing Ilya is not an option anymore. “I love you so much.”

There is no space between them for the words to escape into as they press together, chest to chest, forehead to forehead, sharing breaths.

“So, boyfriends, yes?” Shane needs to be sure.

“Oh my god, Shane Hollander,” Ilya pulls back a bit. “Are you serious? Of course we are boyfriends. You want that, yes?”

Shane nods enthusiastically, that final knot in his chest loosening, and the space filling with warmth. “Yes. Yes, I want that.”

“Good,” Ilya brushes a warm thumb against his cheek, and it takes Shane a moment to realise he is running it along his freckles. “Now, does my boyfriend want sleep, still, or can we...” He looks down their bodies for a moment, then raises an eyebrow.

Sleep, Shane decides, can wait.

Shane is a man of habit, and he learns that he cannot stop himself, even with his gorgeous, sleeping boyfriend in his bed. For a while - five minutes exactly - he tries to just stay there, curled up against Ilya, taking in his warmth, letting the thud of his heartbeat rock him back to sleep.

He fails.

Carefully, Shane wiggles out from under the Russian’s arm. He leaves a soft kiss against his brow, then gets out of bed and heads to the bathroom.

Ilya finds him in the kitchen half an hour later, their bodies fitting together perfectly as he wraps himself around Shane’s back, making the cutest, sleepy little noises, nuzzling at his neck. Shane finds that he does not mind the distraction, his smoothie and Ilya’s toast can wait just a little longer. He lets himself sink into the hug, turning his head to brush a kiss against the side of his boyfriend’s head.

“Good morning.” His words are more movement than sound, and as Ilya’s curls tickle his nose, Shane wonders if he has ever been this content in his life. There is just one thing missing. “I wondered if...”

His sentence is cut short as Ilya cups his face and tilts his chin up for a kiss, and for a while, nothing else matters but the soft brush of his sweet mouth, his slick, hot tongue. Shane loses himself in it. When they part, a string of spit still connects them.

“Is early morning, and you already have ideas,” Ilya complains, but there is no heat in it. “Only idea should be to come back to bed.” Observant eyes wander over his face, as if the Russian is trying to find the end of the sentence he interrupted earlier.

“I wondered if we should meet...”

Another kiss, quick, teasing, and Shane nudges Ilya, giggling.

“Could you let me finish for once?”

“I let you finish three times last night, Hollander.” Ilya raises an eyebrow, then pulls a dramatic face when Shane shoves him playfully, putting some distance between them, one hand against Ilya’s chest.

“I wondered if we should meet the Pikes at the shelter. They could bring Anya; the kids could meet the kittens. They love animals.”

Ilya tilts his head, piercing eyes going soft. “That is a good idea, солнышко.” Still there is something hesitant, and Shane closes the distance between them again, thumb brushing against the corner of his boyfriend’s mouth.

“Really?” He asks. “It’s okay if that is too much. Meeting them all.”

“Really,” Ilya nods, turning his face into his touch. “I just... when do I get you for as long as I want? Just us.”

Shane feels the heat rise until it pinkens his cheeks. “We could go to my parents’ cottage for a bit if you want. This summer.”

“Yes.” Ilya pulls him into a slow, sweet kiss. “I like that.”

“Really? You’d take time off? Trust someone else with the shelter?” Shane thinks about how much time Ilya has put into his work, and how little into making himself happy, so this seems like a big step.

“Yes, really. I have good team, yes? Can trust them. And now I have reason to go on holiday.” The words are spoken against his lips, and they go straight to his heart.

Shane watching the Pikes, Ilya, Anya and the kittens interact.

He stands by the door to the kittens’ room, watching the chaos unfold within. There is so much going on in the small space, and a part of Shane just wants to take a step back and close the door between him and the noise. A bigger part of him wants to stay in this moment forever, take in all the love and the cheerful chatter.

A few months ago he had come here to help Hayden pick out a pet for the kids. Now, his best friend is kneeling on the floor, Arthur sitting in his lap, as they watch two of the kittens - the twins have named them Alder and Daisy - tumble around on the floor. Jackie is standing close by, a hand on her baby bump, the largest kitten, Maple, tucked against her chest. The last kitten, Violet, is asleep, her tiny body snuggled against Anya's side, the dog surprisingly calm with all the chaos going on. She looks very content, large, brown eyes open and relaxed.

Ruby and Jade are hanging out with their new favourite person. Ilya is showing them how to prepare the milk for the kittens, and they are happy to learn, asking a lot of questions. His boyfriend seems to love it. His eyes are sparkling with joy as he laughs and jokes with them, and Shane can't help but imagine a future where Ilya would be a dad to their children.

"He's good with them," Jackie turns to him, speaking in a low voice. "I think you found yourself a good one. Good with animals, good with kids."

Shane has to agree. Besides being a ten when it comes to looks, Ilya is the kindest, funniest person he's ever met. "I got very lucky," he says, not taking his eyes off the man he loves. The way his arm muscles flex as he reaches over the table to help Ruby, holding the bottle for her, makes his face warm.

"I'm glad. You deserve it," Jackie follows his gaze. "I'm glad you are happy."

Just at that moment, Ilya looks over at them, and the small smile on his face is just for Shane, he knows it, and his heart jumps in his chest. Shane is so in love, he can barely take it, and knowing he is loved right back is the best feeling in the world. Better than any routine, better than the quiet, the order. In Ilya, Shane has found a home.

Chapter End Notes

One more to go

Chapter 21

Chapter Notes

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

Epilogue

Shane parks the car in what has become his usual spot. He grabs his wallet, keys and the leash, balancing the box on one arm, being careful not to drop it. Anya yips excitedly as he opens the door for her, but stays in her spot until he tells her to get out. They've been making a lot of progress with her training, but she still struggles to hold back her excitement sometimes.

"Good girl. I know, I missed him too. Let's go see where he is," Shane tells her as they walk across the parking lot.

They find Ilya in front of the dog kennels just under the huge banner that spans along the entire building in big, red letters.

Irina Animal Shelter Fund Raiser.

This, today, is the result of six months of work. Scheduling - mostly Yuna. Planning the event - Ilya and Troy. Creating posters and flyers - Shane and Harris. Cleaning the place up - all of them.

Now, the yard is filled with people standing around in groups, cups in hand. Some of the children are sitting around tables, colouring in animal masks to take home. Troy and Luca are offering guided tours around the premises, and one of the most beautiful men Shane has ever seen is sitting behind a piano and playing soft music. His mom told him she knew the guy because he was dating a former hockey player - Ryan Price. Fabian is breathtaking. He is unique and it suits him. He seems to be enjoying the attention, which makes Shane smile. Ryan sticks out with his red hair and sheer body size, but it looks like he doesn't particularly like being noticed, which is in stark contrast to his boyfriend. Ryan is standing back, half hidden behind a pillar, talking to Dykstra.

The hockey players are why most people are here. Marlow and the boys have been signing merch and chatting to their fans all afternoon, posing for pictures with some of the animals to spread the word. The Centaurs have announced a big donation, that will allow Ilya and his team to renovate some of the older buildings, and today will bring in more money, and hopefully some of their guests will fall in love with one of the cats or dogs, and come back for them next week.

"Ah, the cake is here," Harris reaches out to help Shane set the box down. "I've got the candles. We should have Ilya blow them out, right? I mean, it's not his birthday, but this is his baby, so..."

"Yes, probably. You'll take some pictures, right?"

“Of course. For the fans.” Harris winks, then disappears into the office.

The fans. Right. Shane looks across the yard towards his boyfriend, who is surrounded by a group of women who all talk to him animatedly. They are not here for hockey, or for the animals, but for Ilya. Ever since that video of the big Russian with the adorable little husky puppies has gone viral, their social media is overrun with fangirls and boys professing their undying love for him. Sometimes, Shane regrets ever taking the video, and that jealousy flares up for a moment, but then it has been good for the shelter. They have been finding homes for a lot of the animals in the past months, which is what they wanted. And it isn't any of them that get to carry the cake across the yard, and are met with a surprised look that morphs into a soft smile.

Ilya bends down to pet Anya first, but Shane knows he is trying to school his features, keeping it together by stroking his fluffy friend and getting the sensory input he needs from her soft fur. Today has been a lot. Ilya has had to chat to a lot of people, charm them, and although it always seems to be so easy for him, Shane knows it also takes a lot of energy.

Around them, conversations come to a halt as everyone looks at the dog shaped cake Shane had just picked up from the bakery.

“Speech,” someone - Harris - yells, and others join in, not leaving Ilya much of a choice.

“Okay, Okay. Everyone listen,” Ilya grins. “I want to thank you for being here, for supporting this place. This is home for animals that did not have one, and is my privilege to take care of them. You being here allows me to do so, to improve conditions here even more. So thank you for that.”

People cheer. Marlow yells “Rozanov” really loudly.

“I also want to thank Ottawa Centaurs for their help tonight. You have not only become friends over past six months, but also my second favourite hockey team.” He winks, and Shane scoffs. He knows he is grinning from ear to ear.

“Thank you to my team. You are putting all your heart and hard work into shelter, and I cannot thank you enough for love you give. Thank you. I love all of you.”

“Love you, Rozy,” Troy calls out from behind the table that they have been using as a bar. “And you're welcome.”

Shane gets to witness the smile on Ilya's face from up close. He might also be the only one that knows his eyes are wet with tears. God, he deserves all of this love.

“I also want to thank my Shane,” Ilya steps closer, only the cake between them. “You make today possible. You make every day easier. You remind me I am more than shelter.”

Ilya leans in and blows out the candles.

“Ya tebya lyublyu,” Shane whispers, close to tears now. “I love you.”

“I love you, too.” Ilya leans in. Their lips meet to loud cheers, but Shane does not care. All he cares about is the kiss, soft, but deep, Ilya’s hand cupping his cheek, and not dropping the cake.

The day goes on in a blur, and by the time they stumble through Shane’s door, they are both exhausted from all the conversations, the smiles. Violet, now able to be home with him, meets them in the hallway with a small meow, stretching and yawning, as if she was the one doing all the work.

Shane bends down to scratch her ears. For a moment, she lets him, rubbing her face against his palm, until there she smells something more interesting and follows Ilya into the kitchen. Shane takes off his shoes and hangs up his jacket. By the time he steps through the door, Ilya is kneeling on the floor as he fills up the water bowls, both Violet and Anya happily eating to either side of him. It is terribly domestic, and it’s all Shane ever wanted. His little family. His home. And he wants it forever.

Chapter End Notes

This is it - thank you for following along, it was a joy both writing and posting this story
<3 Please let us know how you like this story

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