thermometer (for rectal use only)

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by crispyskys

Summary

Shane Hollander is a veterinarian. He's fought to be here, loves his job, but his parents are still utterly obsessed with hockey. Shane realises that hockey has it's upsides when Cen's captain, Ilya Rozanov, walks into his practice.

Notes

cross-posted from ao3 because of the great shutdown and i didnt even realise this website existed!
PLEASE BE WARNED ABOUT THE ANIMAL DEATH THAT OCCURS IN THE FIRST SECTION
this is about veterinary work so mentions of animal sickness will come up!

i am not a vet, but ive been in many vet clinics so this is mainly accurate to my knowledge. if theres anything that looks a bit dodge, pls let me know!

i initially posted this fic months ago, and i know find it oddly embarassing, but i thought id contribute my little nugget anyway :)
enjoy!!

Chapter 1

His ginger ale left by the side of the monitor was flat and lifeless. Like the dog that was lying on the table.

It was a small cross-breed. White, probably a bit of bichon frise in it although it was never confirmed. The old woman, Francis, had spent almost an hour just cradling it's dead body after the injection was done. She'd asked him to remove it from her arms so she could leave, her fingers had latched onto the dogs limbs with deafening love.

Shane had left the room, he'd seen the dog so much over the years to help with its seizures that hearing its final snuffle felt oddly personal. It had stared at him from Francis's arms with so much trust as he'd slowly pushed down on the syringe to stop its tiny heart.

He was just logging out of this computer now and collecting his stethoscope to move into the other consult room. The small furry mass was still silent. Obviously.

There was something weird about dead dogs, their body carried some kind of energy, some restlessness. Like if you blinked twice it would bound up excitedly and Francis could have her little Sookie back.

One of the nurses would be down to bag it up to send it for cremation soon, once the lump removal upstairs was complete. Right now, he could hear the noise of an aggressive dachshund in the waiting room and the pug with back issues was back again. He could hear its struggled snorting even with the door closed. He had more things to do, better things to do, than stare at Sookie like it'd make a difference.

He made his way quickly through reception, hands fumbling on the door handles, ducking his head so the regulars didn't have to see red rimmed eyes. The small electric candle was still flickering on the desk.

The other consult room was smaller, this one did have a window which bathed him in sunlight he hadn't seen in a few hours. The window was ajar, making the blinds curl in the breeze and cooling his sweating forehead. Doing a PTS always brought him up in cold sweats, after his first he'd had to go to the cattery and strip half naked until the unsettled feeling had gone from his skin. He was able to manage it now by doing a few laps of the room.

Computers were rarely his friend, but the ones in Beechwood Vet Centre were barely running, they were limping along. Sometimes when they got too overwhelmed they just turned off RoboVet and left Shane utterly stranded. The operating system had been begging for an update with constant notifications for months. Nobody was giving in, they were under siege.

Today's diary was fairly quiet for the remainder of his shift. He had consults up until six, then he would double-check that the nurses had managed to get all the cleaning done and give them a hand before he'd go home, hopefully before eight.

He wasn’t too late for the next appointment, the PTS had been during the lunch break to give the owner some privacy.

A quick glance towards the waiting room showed a handful of regulars staring back at him with anxious smiles. No new patients. That at least gave him time to see what he was up against.

The notes gave him no answers. The sweat prickled over his forehead once again, he fought the urge to do a few more laps of the room to clear the feelings.

The dog, Anya, had seemingly switched owners and vet practices. For whatever reason the old notes hadn’t been put on the system yet, so all he had was the receptionist's notes from the call yesterday. He read it over and over again to prepare himself.

Spaniel, one year 2 months, vaccine booster, itchy ears, owned by a Mr Rozanov….

The spaniel Anya had ended up being five minutes late to her appointment, just below the cutoff time. While waiting, Shane had managed to contact the rescue centre she was from to confirm that she’d been having regular vaccines, flea treatments and a wormer. Then he’d sat back to mechanically scroll through his upcoming consults and wonder why the name Rozanov was familiar.

‘Mr Rozanov (Anya)’, appeared in the ‘waiting’ tab on the side of his screen. Shane practically owed his career to this feature. He didn’t have to face any clients without a purpose, no wandering around the waiting room to see if someone had arrived. It was beautiful, purposeful. The best feature in RoboVet.

Mr Rozanov was still oddly familiar. He didn’t look Canadian, there was something about the sharpness of his jaw and the piercing eyes too accusatory. His lips didn’t look suited to apologies, they were curved with something sharper, like a medieval bow. Shane got his answer when he asked, hesitantly, “Anya?”

“Da,” Mr Rozanov replied, “this is Anya.”

The lilt to the voice, Eastern European, was also familiar. Even the golden curls that tilted around the man’s face were giving him odd flashbacks he couldn’t quite place. Perhaps he had a past life living in Moscow or something, or Shane Hollander in an alternate reality had grown up somewhere in Poland.

Any feelings Shane didn’t like, the uneasy feeling of not knowing how long it was socially acceptable to stare at someone's face, were instantly calmed by Anya leaping around in front

of him. He latched his gaze easily onto her.

“Yes, hello, hello,” he cooed, “come with me, Anya.”

He was still intermittently staring at Mr Rozanov’s face. Whenever he turned around to discuss something with him those eyes stole his attention and made his brain go all foggy, basically to mush. Four years of vet school stolen from his mind by a vaguely attractive European. He’d seen plenty of European men before, plenty of blonde European men.

The current blonde European man was oblivious to his inner ramblings. He was focused entirely on Anya, petting her large silky ears, scratching her under the chin, hugging her as she stood on the examination table to press kisses into her head. Seeing bigger, burly jock types dote on their pets was something Shane always found adorable and fascinating. Something about the sterile consult room turned these men who you’d assume to be completely uninterested in the animals into doting mother hens.

“She’s been scratching for a few days then?”

“Da,” Rozanov replied, “since Monday. I thought she would be happier by now.”
Shane hummed. “We don’t have that many records on her, do you have any idea if she’s been spayed?”

“Spayed?” Rozanov tilted an eyebrow up in confusion, Anya seemed to copy him with her head cocked on one side, “like with water?”

“No, sorry,” Shane laughed awkwardly, before realising that this could easily be interpreted as him laughing at a client because of a language barrier. Four black pupils stared back at him.

“Has she had her uterus removed?” He tried again. To be fair, many native English speakers didn’t know what the word meant, so the moment of confusion was definitely his fault.

“Oh, no.”

“Well, we might want to consider that,” Shane allowed his body to transform into its information state, “it’s a common procedure that would prevent any unwanted pregnancies. We advise most dogs get it done just for peace of mind in the long run, it also stops their heats and slightly subdues their hormones.”

“Little Anya’s do not sound bad, though,” Rozanov argued, “she would have beautiful babies.”

“Of course, it is your decision. But, as a veterinarian I do have to advise you that we don’t know about Anya’s family history, so if you do breed you may have a nasty surprise.”

“What kind of surprise?”

“The expensive, ill kind.”

“Ah. It is fine, I can handle expensive.” He seemed to consider the words, “not ill. No little Anya’s yet.”

“Of course, just ensure no other dogs mount her. Some doggy daycares also require all female dogs to be spayed, so make sure you double-check. It’s also generally much easier to manage bitches when they don’t have heats, so keeping non-breeding female dogs entire is rare.”

The man looked at him, a little blank, “oke.”
Shane really did have to get better at talking to clients. Language-barrier or not, nobody was really interested in his garbled speeches. Especially ‘bitches’, which he tries to clearly to make sound like a medical term but instead always ends up acidic and tart on client’s ears.

“I will get her spayed then, I do not want hormones to make her all strange.” Shane has to blink at the finality the man, Mr Rozanov, says this. “Can you book her in for an appointment now?”

“Yeah,” Shane answers, a bit put out. There was always deliberation, a discussion to be had with someone at home. Rarely, basically never, did someone make decisions as quickly as this. “Just check with reception on your way out, they’re better with the diary than I am.”
Mr Rozanov nodded.

“Right,” Shane announced with as much authority as he could muster, “if you could just place her on the table please…”

He’s climbing the stairs to the prep area when Rose ambushes him with a frenzied expression. There's a lint roller held against her shoulder, her braid is sticking to it.

“What’s wrong? An issue with the lump removal?” He grabs the stethoscope around his neck on instinct.

“No, no, Shane.” She’s laughing, lightly pressing one on of his arms, “no, Richard was fine, post-op checks are all good. I’m thinking more about you meeting Ilya Rozanov.”

Oh. Shit. So that’s what he knew him from.

Shane wasn't really much of a hockey fan. His family, well, they were a little bit obsessed. His dad had played for McGill, his mom had been enamoured with the sport and they'd both been expecting little Shane to take to the ice like a fish to water. It wasn't that he was bad at hockey, he just never had the drive. It seemed so pointless, even more so when he realised all the different short and long term injuries possible. Meeting too many student human doctors in college and realising the animal equivalent of the damage made it hard for him to appreciate the sport now.

Despite his relative lack of interest, he'd still be put up in front of the games whenever he was with his parents, particularly when Ottawa was playing.

The team which Ilya Rozanov, alleged hockey god, ab owner extraordinaire, had recently moved to.

"Oh." The awkward moments in the consult rushed over him like iced water. "Fuck."

"Oh fuck indeed, what was he like? Was he nice? Was his spaniel polite? Are all his teeth real?"

"He was…nice. Booked Anya in for a bitch spay when I recommended it." The other vet gestures at him, "She's in full working order, no past medical issues and he regularly cleans her ears to prevent infection because the rescue she's from said they were always a little gunky. She has minor pollen allergies, so she'll be getting cytopoint when it gets a little worse just to help. She's in weight range, and not currently on any medication. She's friendly with strangers, overly so, and is more of a grazer in terms of eating. She drinks a lot, but not enough to be a worry in regards to diabetes or her kidneys. She's coming in for kennel cough next month, as she might be having to go into kennels when Mr Rozanov is off, well, playing hockey games I guess."

Rose Landry, or Dr Landry thanks to the PhD she completed last year, was one of the few people in Shane's life who could interpret the diagnostics into something that sounded almost romantically human.

"So what you're saying is that he loves her."

"Yes."

"And," Rose picks a few stray hairs off his navy scrub top with the roller, "you liked him."

He shakes his head vigorously.

"Hmmm."

"Just because I'm gay doesn't mean that I'm interested in every hunk that comes in here."

"Even the ones who kiss their dogs heads whenever they whine? The professional hockey players?"

"He was late, anyway."

“Rose!” One of the nurses, Kiara, makes her way down the stairs. Every step comes with the slapping noise of a recently disinfected croc. “Could we have some help with the cat bloods?”

“Oh, I knew he’d be trouble with that skinny little neck.”

Chapter 2

Shane thought, and in the back of his mind he'd hoped, that Mr Rozanov had taken offence to his awkward laughter and moved clinics.

Here he was at eight in the morning staring down the scheduled spay with his name attached. His name, next to Anya.

That meant he would have to collect Anya off Mr Rozanov, call him after the procedure and then discharge her with care instructions. That was three different interactions, three.

He was good at spays, they were a simple procedure, but the idea of a famous client made him itchy. If something went wrong, would he sue? Would he send hockey fans after the clinic, after Shane?

"Rose!" He hissed at the woman as she entered the kennel and prep area, coffee in hand, "can we swap? I'll take your consults this morning."

"Is Kiara the nurse for the spay?" She asked as she placed a ginger ale on the desk next to him.

"No..?"

"I think you can manage a dog spay, Shane. I've got some nasty ones anyway, they'll need lots of admin." She glanced up at him, pausing for emphasis, "one of them even needs a referral." She starts braiding the waves of light auburn hair that never get greasy, no matter how many terriers rub their bodies into it. It's superhuman.

"And if Kiara was involved in the spay?" He gets along well with the nurse, they'd have easy conversations about the intricate henna that she always had up her arms and about the patients, but he thinks there might be something a bit different between Rose and her.

Rose, who he was never taking out for dinner again, shakes her head. "No, I don't think Kiara likes attending spays."

"Rose."

"He seems pretty sweet, he was nice to Linda and Grace on reception."

"Dr Landry."

"Ask him about his teeth! You love doing dentals!"

"Yeah on dogs!" He yells after her as she leaves the kennels by bumping the door open with her hip, hands still wrapped in her hair.

"So…" Eleanor begins from where she's preparing a kennel for a scan patient, "Ilya Rozanov, yeah?"

“Oh god, don’t start.” Gossip in vet clinics was insane, Shane had managed to avoid the majority of it over the years but he was not immune to discussing insane clients. Mr Rozanov was not a client he felt mentally prepared to gossip about.

“I don’t know much about nothing, but, he’s pretty y’know...”

“Y’know?” Shane turns from where he’s posted in front of the main monitor in the room, daring to look at the nurse.

“That hockey has certainly done something good to him, even if his teeth aren’t real.”

“Eleanor.”

“What?” She squirts the yellow disinfectant in his direction, like he’s a disobedient cat, “I have eyes, he’s not here now, is he?”

“Aren’t you a lesbian? And you watch hockey?”

“Who do you think told Rose about your meeting with Rozanov?”

“It was a consult, don’t say meeting, it sounds all…”

“Sordid?” She drops to a sultry tone and uses the blanket she’s just grabbed to wrap her shoulders sensually like some old Hollywood star, “Illicit? So wrong yet so, so right?”

Shane let his head fall into the small standing desk. “Who’s free to go in with me?”

“Kiara and John are going to be helping Rose with the scan, so…”

“Oh no.”

“Hey, spays are boring as hell to watch, okay?”

He hides in the waiting room with the nurses helping with preparing the labelled boxes with the meds in until that dreaded name appear under the ‘waiting’ column again.

John is the first to see it. “Hockey man’s here!”

Eleanor drops what she’s drawing up into a syringe to rush out the door followed by the other nurse. Shane follows with shaky legs which make him clutch onto the banister and awkwardly squeak down the stairs. They’re waiting for him in front of the doors which lead to the waiting room, like puppies expecting a walk.

Eleanor spots his tight grip, “you’re not like actually nervous, are you?”

“A little.” He squeaks out. “He’s just… famous and now I have to remove one of his dogs organs.”

“Hey, hey,” she looks like shes about to go in for a hug and then drops her arms, “I’ve seen you remove so many organs, you’re the best organ remover I know.”

Shane just stands in front of the doors, trying to control his breathing. He’s always nervous, it’s his baseline, but having to operate on a hockey superstars dog isn’t even the worst aspect of this whole situation. No, having to talk to the hockey superstar who probably thinks he’s extremely racist towards Russians or whatever is making him wonder whether he’s experiencing atrial fibrillation.

Rose comes strolling through the doors, swinging them open and almost slamming John in the face.

“Oy!”

“Jesus,” she hisses, “what the hell are you lot doing here? Shane, your patient is in there… oh.”

“I don’t want to get attacked by rabid hockey fans!”

“Your parents are hockey fans.”

“Exactly!”

She puts a hand to the small of his back and starts to push him towards the doors. “I promise, he’s not as scary as he looks. He’s nervous, if anything.” She leans in to whisper into his ear, “go get ‘em, tiger!”

Now was not really the time to explain that what he felt towards Mr Rozanov wasn’t fear, mainly because he was now standing in the waiting room but also because he couldn’t quite tell what he was feeling. His stomach felt like an experiment gone wrong.

“Anya?” He calls out with more trepidation that before.

Mr Rozanov gets up instantly, moving towards the vet with a pinched, wrinkled mouth. Shane is preparing himself mentally for a berating, for being asked if he thinks its appropriate to laugh when someone simply doesn’t understand a word. He’s spent nights reliving every moment, he’s made apology speeches to himself in the mirror.

“She will be okay, yes?” The Russian man seems to blurt out.

“Uhh.”

“It is normal procedure, correct? Small mortality rate, one to five in ten thousand?”

“Yes!” Shane blurted out, perhaps too eagerly, “it’s one of the most common veterinary procedures. Since Anya is young and in good health we expect no complications. Her bloodwork also came back all good, there’s nothing outside of the normal range that we need to be concerned about. On average, spayed and neutered animals also live a few years longer than intact animals, so overall this should make a positive impact on her lifespan.”

Oh my god.

Mr Rozanov only nods. “You will do the best for her, da? She is my baby. You will call after surgery to tell me how it goes.” His blue eyes seem so harsh under the waiting rooms strip lighting, but Shane’s been staring at them for so long he now sees the flicker of pain that crosses the Russians gaze.

“Of course, it’s clinic policy.” Shane tries to lace his voice with as much sureness as he possible could. He tucks his shaking hands behind his back, nobody wants a dud veterinarian operating on their animal.

“Oke.” Mr Rozanov picks the spaniel up from the floor and nuzzles into her brown head. “You be good girl for Dr Hollander, yes Anya?”

“Oh, it’s only Shane.”

Blue eyes searched him once again, “be a good girl for only Shane, Anya.”

With a final kiss to the bitches head he passes her carefully over to Shane’s waiting arms. He usually walks dogs up to the kennels, but seeing how Anya’s already locked on to Mr Rozanov as he steps away him carrying her is probably the easiest way to go about this.

His arms also brush against the other man’s as he takes hold of her, his arms are bare and tingle like an acid burn against the warmth of Mr Rozanovs jacket.

“Goodbye, moya malyshka,” he waves sadly to the dog as he leaves.

Anya struggles valiantly in Shane’s grip with whines that start breathy and soon deafen the man.

“Okay Anya,” he shushes her as she begins to howl. There’s a terrier on the floor who looks like he’s about to join in. “Tsh, tsh, Anya. It’s alright.”

He opens the doors up to John and Eleanor who immediately pounce.

The surgery is, of course, a success. Rose is the one who adds the of course, in Shane's opinion he could've moved a bit quicker with final sutures to reduce risk of any post-anaesthesia complications, but he manages to get it done before Rose has finished up with her scans. She calls his speed 'fucking insane', he always walks away with improvements doing laps in his mind. Like hockey warm-ups. Oh shit.

It's comforting having a few staff just floating around while Shane makes the call. Rose is writing up notes on the computer about the dog, Olaf, who was scanned and Kiara is sitting next to her on the only chair in the room cradling the pom who'd had a few x-rays for a potential broken leg (it was a soft tissue injury). Eleanor is replacing the oxygen tank but is lingering in the room for the call.

"He's just a hockey player," Shane says to curb their expectant glances.

"A rich, famous hockey player. This isn't the beer leagues we're talking about," Kiara replies, petting the pom's head when it snuffles gently. Rose looks like she's about to try the same with Kiara, her gaze is wrenched away from her notes towards the woman who's grinning and focused on the pom's tiny black eyes.

"This is a great opportunity for you to get a sugar daddy," Eleanor agrees.

"Right! I'm calling him now, don't say anything incriminating too loudly!"

"Landry," Kiara jokes.

Shane watches his best friend brighten in a brilliant shade of red.

"This is vet?" Mr Rozanov's voice comes through the phone, "how is Anya?"

"Hi, Mr Rozanov." Shane begins, putting on his best 'I did four years of schooling just for this' voice. "Anya is all good, she's awake now in the kennel. She will be taken for a walk soon. I'm just letting you know that you can pick her up from around four today, I'm sure she'll be very excited to go back home."

"No complications with the surgery?"

"It all went fine and dandy." Rose chokes on her redbull. Fucking hell, did he just say that? "And she doesn't seem to mind the stitches, which is always a positive."

"Very good," Mr Rozanov's voice seems to deflate slightly, "I will be there at four. If anything goes wrong, call me."

"Of course, Mr Rozanov. Goodbye, see you at four."

"Thank you."

Shane ends the phone call with hands so sweaty he's worried they're going to slip off the button. These landline phones are going to destroy him one day.

“Fine and dandy?” Rose screeches with laughter, “oh, we’re getting all western now are we, partner?”

“Oh my fucking god.” It becomes a mantra in Shane’s head. He doesn’t think he’s ever heard those words said in his entire life, he has no idea where that came from.

“He seems like a really sweet guy!” Eleanor croons. “He didn’t even mind that Shane got possessed by the spirit of Texas.”

“Alright,” Shane mutters, “I’m gonna go…”

“Go take your lunch,” Kiara suggests, “you’re back on consults in a few.”

He’d pretty much completely forgotten about the fact he still had half the day to get through, all his energy had been dedicated to worrying about what Mr Rozanov could possibly say.

“You’re seeing your parents tonight, aren’t you?” Rose mentioned casually, clicking through to show him his first consults.

If he thought his heart could take it, he’d be asking for a sip of her redbull.

He meets a kitten called Elephant who’s having trouble urinating and a pregnant dachshund called Inky who needs a herpes jab. Both are sweet as anything, and the owners are happy to lead the conversation with bite-sized amounts of small-talk all relating to animals. It’s a topic Shane’s more than happy to leap on. He always has his hands on the animals, smoothing them down, checking their whole body. He can't quite tell if it's because he needs to do something with his hands, or if it's just been drilled into him. They both seem appreciative and both animals leave without leaving their mark on his hands.

He’s spraying down his table when Rose casually opens the door which leads into the dispensary with a small grin on her face and shifty eyes.

“What?”

“Do you want me to go and get Anya?” She replies with a sweet smile.

“Oh, oh my god.” He tries to use the mirrored window on the door to readjust his hair. Elephant had found refuge from his prying hands on his shoulders and had managed to give him bed head. “How did you know before me?”

She pointed to the monitor in the dispensary.

“You’re such a stalker.”

“I’m just keeping up with all our patients here, only Shane.”

“Oh my god, you heard that?”

Dr Landry just leaves with a sweet smile to go and get the spaniel from kennels.

She returns within a few minutes, something that Shane is immediately grateful for. He can almost physically feel his heart slow when he begins to inspect Anya all over, tapping the corners of her eyes to see her reaction, lifting up each foot and stretching them, curling her lips up to check the pinkness of her gums. Rose watches for a few seconds with a softer smile on her face before heading off to discharge the pomeranian, and to steal him back from Kiara.

“Okay, Anya,” he steadies his breathing, “you’re gonna go back to your dad now, Mr Rozanov.” It felt wrong to refer to Mr Rozanov as anyone’s dad, but that’s what he called every owner at the clinic. For some reason Mr Rozanov was filed away separately in his mind, a large brick wall distancing him from the other owners he saw everyday.

“You’re gonna be a good girl,” he continued, “of course, of course. You’re such a good girl.” And because Mr Rozanov signed the consent form for her to be fed and she was in the weight guides for her breed, he offered her some of the dried chicken liver that was kept as treats. She wolfed it down and then tried to jump down from the table onto the floor.

“No, jesus, Anya,” he muttered as he lifted her down, “please think about your joints.”

The spaniel did a few circles, Shane dropped the leash so she could sniff around the closed room while he waited anxiously. The ‘waiting’ tab was now mocking him, it was completely clear and all squashed up next to ‘inpatient’ which sat occupied with Olaf the pug.

‘Ilya Rozanov (Anya)’

He presses his hands into Anya’s fur for one last second of assurance.

Chapter 3

Mr Rozanov was chewing on the tassels of his hoody and jiggling his leg when Shane entered the waiting room. He should have felt empathically towards the man, who was clearly in a bad state of anxiety, instead he found himself staring at the meat of his thigh as it was intermittently splayed out against the small plastic seating. The jeans, which would be loose on anyone else, looked like they'd been taped on. The denim was captivating in a way denim wasn't meant to be.

"Mr Rozanov?" He asked, once he wasn't looking in the general direction of the man's crotch.

The man leapt up, eyes drawn up from where he was wringing his hands in his lap, "she is alright?"

"Of course," Shane tries to keep his voice steady and low, like he was comforting a spooked horse, "she's just through here." The man practically leapt up to follow him, Shane could see where his shadow covered his own on the floor. God.

"Moyo ditya!" Mr Rozanov exclaimed when he was led into the room and the door was shut behind him. "I missed you so much, so, so much." The tension melted from his body and Shane was struck with a fear the man was about to cry.

Anya was clearly too excited to move with any form of coordination. Her legs were tip tapping on the floor as she spun in circles around Mr Rozanov, crashing into his hips when he crouched to fuss over her. At one point Shane became genuinely concerned she might knock the man out when the leaping began, but he assumed that the he probably had worse from his hockey career. It looked like a game they'd played before, he caught Anya in his large hands just before she collided with him and then placed her on the other side of him, like a strange dance.

"She's recovered well after surgery," he paused as Anya somehow managed to jump into Mr Rozanov's arms when he had stood up, "as you can see."

"Thank you, thank you." Mr Rozanov muttered as he smoothed his face over the fur on her neck.

"I'm going to send you away today with some metacam: it's for pain relief and helps with any inflammation. I want you to give her one dose twice a day for a week, even if you think she's better I need you to keep on giving her the medicine. They're very good at hiding things from us, aren't you Anya?" He pets her head before realising he's now very close to Mr Rozanov since she's still strewn in the man's arms.

"I am also going to put the cone of shame on her," he holds up the cone with the collar already attached. He'd made the mistake too many times of putting the cone together during the consult. It was painful, demoralising and usually ended with Rose offering him carrot

sticks while he sat in the corner of the cattery cradling a small critter.
Anya looked at it with trepidation.

“She might not enjoy it, but it’s important to keep her party hat on. We don’t want any stitches ripped out or the area getting infected.”

Mr Rozanov huffed out a laugh, “party hat. Not like parties that I go to.”

Shane didn’t even want to imagine the parties that Mr Rozanov got invited too. Even the thought of them made his skin crawl. They’d be loud, obviously. They’d be full of hockey players with wide shoulders and harsh grins wrapped around girls and drinking amounts of alcohol that should result in a stomach pump.

The parties sounded like Shane’s little snapshot of hell, but the idea of Mr Rozanov at a party, even these parties, opened the heavy doors in his mind to varying images of the man in states of undress. This was extremely unprofessional, he was struck with the insane fear that the man was in fact a mind reader. Or a god. Possibly both.
He managed a weak laugh. Mr Rozanov just smiled back, his teeth were so white.

Oh god, were his teeth real?

“Do you mind just putting her on the table for a minute so I can get this on?”

Mr Rozanov places Anya diligently on the black rubber. Shane gives himself a moment to celebrate her joint health. Then he approaches the spaniel, who had cocked her head and pricked up her liver coloured ears, sensing danger. Her eyes glared at him, in the affronted manner only dogs could truly manage.

“Okay, Anya.” He speaks to her slowly, “I’m just gonna give you this new party hat.”

Mr Rozanov grabs her back end without Shane even needing to ask, holding her shoulders in place as she tries to squirm away from the clear plastic cone which descends towards her face.

“Anya, Anya,” the Russian croons, “what a good girl, Moyo ditya, moya malyshka. So good for Shane, so good for me.”

Anya is still long enough for Shane to snap the collar into place and leave her a disgruntled dog with a decidedly un-stylish party hat. She doesn’t appreciate the fashion decision, two paws reach up to stroke down the plastic and she shakes her head ruthlessly.

“Please don’t take the cone off, if you do you have to be monitoring her to make sure she doesn’t lick the stitches.” He runs a finger through the collar to make sure the spacing is correct, “you’ll have to come back in two weeks for the final check, we can also do the kennel cough vaccine then if that’s okay with you? Her immune system should be tip top by then.” He wasn’t too sure what was possessing him at this point, the spirit of Texas or just the spirit of hyperactive Labrador. His mouth was moving without any guidance and it seemed to want to destroy any hope he could have fostered of this being a good interaction.

“Yes, of course, Dr Hol - Shane.”

“Her ears are still doing okay as well?” He moves over to the laptop to check the amount of medications he’d given the man. “You have enough ear drops left?”

“Ah, yes,” Mr Rozanov hummed, “no, no issues. No scratching now. We still have good supply.”

“Right, if you have no other concerns I’ll just write up the meds for you and then you should be good to go.” Yes Shane, he congratulates himself, turning back to his monitor, you’ve successfully done it. No hockey fans coming to castrate you, no Russian drones flying for your apartment and your parents still love you.

“Uh,” Mr Rozanov began, Anya looked up expectantly towards her owner from where she was now next to the door, tail wagging and glancing between him and the door. Mr Rozanov looked at her fondly and continued, “Dr…Shane.”

Oh god, was this the complaint he’d been dreading? He gripped the mouse harder, cocking his head in a strangely dog-like manner to indicate yes, he was listening, without having to actually look at the man.

“I am… nervous about owning a dog for the first time.” Oh? “I have always wanted one and my friends said that they had rescue they needed a good home for. I was apparently a good home even if I…”

Mr Rozanov bent down to pet Anya, who was now realising she wasn’t getting out anytime soon and was sitting on one of his trainers, looking mildly disgruntled.

“I don’t know how good of a home I am. I’m not always home, I have cameras yet, but they’re not me. I know about dogs, but I’m always worried something is wrong. I have no experience. I’m always anxious about her, she is my baby, you see?”

Shane nodded because yes, he saw. Everyday he had clients with dogs and cats they’d known longer than their romantic partners, dogs that were owned by their now dead mothers who still seemed to carry their scent, cats that were constant memories of a child who’d left home for bigger adventures.

“I understand.” Is all he said, “you have no need to be anxious, Mr Rozanov. You’re doing a great job, trust me. Anya is in perfect condition and seems like a happy, well adjusted dog.” She had a little bit of separation anxiety, but looking at the mans pained expression this was not something to mention and not something Shane was going to be able to change. They’d become attached, and he’s sure Mr Rozanov had already realised this.

“Ilya, please.”

“Okay, erm, Ilya,” Shane offered what he hoped was a comforting smile towards Mr Rozanov, “you’re doing great, trust me.” He went over to crouch near Anya again, needing the grounding touch and the ability to distract his focus from the man, “Anya agrees.”

“No, yes…” He sighed, almost angrily, “I am sorry, I am wasting your time and being stupid. You are a busy man.” Shane looked up, he was so close he swore he could nearly see under the mans loose hoody.

“It’s fine,” Shane replied gently, “I’m here to help animals, often the best way to help the animals is by helping the owners first.”

Mr Rozanov offered him a small smile, running his hands through the curls of his hair. Shane found himself a little enchanted with the way they bounced over his fingers. Anya was looking up at her owner with such a soft expression, trusting in the way dogs were.

“I want her to meet more dogs as well,” Mr Rozanov explained, “she is only child and I want her to have more friends.”

“Oh!” This was something Shane could help with, “I know just the place, there’s dog training sessions that happen every week in the park. They’re really cheap and anyone can join in, it’s great for training and socialising…both the dogs and the owners.” He hoped he wasn’t implying that Mr Rozanov seemed lonely.

Mr Rozanov (Ilya?) brightened and looked excitedly at the vet, “what is it called?”

“Ahh,” Shane pulled his personal phone out of his back pocket, “I can give you the owners number if you want. I have it somewhere on here…oh!” He waited for Mr Rozanov to pull out his phone.

“The number is…”

“Hollander, err, Shane…uhm. I am not good with numbers, you know, English is my second language and I would like to know number is definitely right before I message.”
Shane looked up at the man in confusion, wondering where the hell this was going. Was he planning to send correspondences via pigeon?

“I am only saying, because I am asking if I could get your number instead so I can message you now to make sure it is definitely you, then you could send me owners number?” Shane took a minute to understand the words, his accent had thickened and the man hadn’t paused once. It was like releasing air from a balloon and listening to it go all squeaky.

The sheen of the artificial light gives Mr Rozanov a faint pink hum across his nose and cheeks.

“Oh yes!” Oh wow, Shane. Real smooth, ice cold, straight from the freezer. “Of course! My number is….”

Later, as he’s packing up his things from the break room he’ll suddenly realise what he’s done. Rose will find him later cradling the kitten brought in for an eye infection and eating celery in the corner of the cattery.

His parents take him out to dinner, some place he couldn't afford on his wage but his dad's job at the treasury board covers with ease. Even his mom is doing better than him, working in management at a hockey sports brand. She gives him performance trainers sometimes, meant for running and weightlifting and everything else hockey bros do.

They have good arch support, which does help when he's one his feet all day, but the colours are so obnoxious sometimes he prays a cat will vomit on them.

"So Shane," his mom smiles at him from the opposite end of the table as he takes a bite of salmon, "how's work?"

"Oh," Shane pauses, mouth full. He's always a bit unsure of what to mention. His coworkers are usually safe bets, in moderation, but the majority of their conversations either make no sense or are pure gossip that his parents probably wouldn't appreciate. They wouldn't enjoy the alternative either, too much of his job is gory or disgusting and not good dinner discussions. Not good for discussion at any time, really, his dad has a fairly sensitive disposition.

"Oh, you know. Same as always, lot's of nail clipping."

His parents laugh. Shane hasn't clipped a dog's nails for a long time. Eleanor finds it so satisfying she demands to do it in all her nurse consults instead. John gets the anal glands (not by request) and Kiara gets the post-op checks. This is all theoretical of course, in reality the client arrives and whoever's there does whatever happens.

"What about you guys?" He asks, spearing a green bean onto his fork and looking at it wearily. It's coated in enough salt it'd probably send a small dog into tremors.

"Well," his dad starts, before looking over to his mom and holding her hand where it rests on the table between them, "its all you, why don't you tell him?"

"Shane," his mom begins with pure excitement dancing in her eyes, "I've got a new job!"

"Oh!" Is that an appropriate reaction? She looks pretty happy about it so he assumes this isn't because she got fired from the last one, but that means she was searching and he didn't even think she was searching. She's seemed pretty happy at the hockey store job. She was able to manage the brands image entirely, ordering around and befriending a team of anxious interns and social media managers. It combined everything she loved doing and hockey, something she adored everything about.

"Shane, it's with the Ottawa Centaurs!" She actually raises her hands in celebration, "I'm going to be the new brand manager, so I'll be helping the social media manager, the merch team, the…" she laughs like the crystal glass full of wine that's set before her, "we'll have free tickets to every game!"

It’s honestly really nice to see his parents so elated by joy. His mother can’t stop rambling about the centaurs, about hockey, about the importance of ‘brand image’ and how to hire the best lawyers. His dad makes a few attempts to stop her, but then sits back and lets the passion just cascade over him with a wry look in Shane’s direction.

Shane is happy to demolish his salmon and let his mom distract him from the salmon’s unnaturally pink tone.

“I’ll be working really closely with Harris Drover, you know, Troy Barrett’s boyfriend?” His mom is staring right into him now, making him look up from his salmon.
“Oh, yes,” Shane thinks he knows who Troy is, he’d seen him play on the TV, “that’s really cool.”

“They were so brave, only the second couple after Hunter and his…well, husband now.” Another overly long pause, she tries to catch his eye over the meal, “Don’t you think they were brave, Shane?”

“Erm… yes?”

His mom seemed satisfied with his answer and just beamed at his dad, who nodded.

Okay. Well.

“I’m going to make sure that the Centaur’s image really says that we support everyone, pride nights are going to be the main event. It’s really important that everyone can enjoy hockey.” She’s still trying to stare at him, food abandoned on her plate as she instead interrogates him with her gaze. He keeps himself locked onto the small section of cooked carrots which he’s sorting through.

But he nods at that, because although he’d never enjoyed hockey, even though his coaches said he was ‘highly talented’ and ‘a great prospect’, he could see the merit to her words. Sexual activity was irrelevant to skill.

“Did you ever feel… uncomfortable in hockey, when you were younger?” His dad asks. He’s also looking at his son, hands clasped in front of him as he leans closer towards the younger man.

“What?” He doesn’t even understand why they’re bringing this up, his last hockey game was around ten years ago now and he still hasn’t told them that he’s gay.
“Because you’re Asian. Did anyone ever make you feel like you weren’t welcome?” Yuna Hollander prompted. Her voice is still, oddly similar to how he quietens panicking dogs and the comparison makes him squirm. It’s her professional voice, lined with ice like a puck.

They’re still making excuses for his lack of hockey interest. They saw his, apparently substantial, skill and had him all set for an NHL career at the age of thirteen. He was going to

be a centre, a captain perhaps if he could just whip up some social skills and the ability to speak with some amount of authority. He was, from what the stats say, very good. There were often scouts watching him from the sidelines, noting his name down onto phones and clipboard.

When he knew hockey wasn't for him, was never going to be for him, he tried to rip it off like a bandaid. Quick, painless. He told his parents, both of them at once, that he simply didn't enjoy it. That he wanted to quit. They had asked him a ton of questions, his mom had gone to bed and come back with a page more queries actually hand-written on a piece of paper. His dad had questioned his coach. He'd left the team at the end of the season and was frankly overjoyed at not having to feign anymore interest in the sport or spend any more hours somehow simultaneously freezing cold and sweating buckets on the ice.

The next step was becoming a doctor. He enjoyed biology, chemistry, and it was in his ability. If he was a doctor he was still somehow connected to hockey. They needed doctors at games, doctors could translate the players injuries to his parents when they happened on TV, doctors were involved in sports medicine. There was a certain level of pride he knew his parents would've enjoyed in saying that their son was a doctor. For a while that was his aim, until at sixteen he'd realised that the only sections of biology he actually enjoyed were when he got to look at the sheep's skull or look at the differences between carnivores and herbivores. He'd started dog-sitting for an acquaintance and he'd realised he'd missed out on having a pet.

He switched trajectory yet again, this time only slightly to the left to become a veterinarian.

"No," he answers, truthfully, "I mean, maybe they did say something but I never heard it or understood it if they did." It was an honest answer, Shane naturally seemed to forget pretty much everything his teammates had said but his mom's jaw still ticked with worry.

"Okay, sweetie…"

"I read something really interesting in the New Yorker about brand engagement…" his dad begins, moving the conversation away.

Chapter 4

Shane was able to push ideas of Russian hockey players out of his mind for another week. He enveloped himself into his work, as he always did, and was able to keep the image of Mr Rozanov's thigh, or the feeling or his jumper against warm skin, out of the front and centre of his brain.

It was still lurking, like a cat ready to pounce, and he often found himself being assaulted the the image just before he went to bed or when he woke in the morning. When he was at his weakest all he could see was the thick meat of the other man's thigh pushing down and dwarfing the blue plastic.

He left the clinic after a stressful day, more than usual. Maisie, the English sheepdog, was only four years old but kept on having seizures, sometimes multiple a day. The medications were barely helping, she was on a concoction of three. She was on phenobarbital for the clusters, potassium bromide for the long-term seizures in general and some metacam to help with any pain and reduce potential inflammation of the brain. PTS was brought up, pretty much every appointment, but the owner was adamant. The dog was costing her an arm and a leg, the owner was experiencing financial issues due to her husbands cancer but was adamant that Maisie was happy and healthy. The desperation in her eyes made Shane ill.

"I talked to your colleague last week," the mousy haired woman began, "she was saying that a PTS might be necessary. I'm not trying to discredit her! I just want a second opinion, because just look at her…"

Maisie was walking about, dragging her short lead behind her. She was ducking around the legs of the consult table and wagging her tail offhandedly. Shane just nods with the woman even as the dog paces in circles. That's never a good sign. She doesn't stop to sniff or investigate anything, even when he puts a hand down to try and greet her she barely even acknowledges him, just continues laps of the room.

"Okay…" He double-checks the notes. Every appointment she's had has been with either Rose or another vet here, and every note has the same sentiment 'medicines changed, medicines added, PTS brought up again.'

Trying to convince Maisie's owner that the seizures were destroying her quality of life wasn't easy, in fact he didn't even manage it. Like Rose and the vets before them, all he could do was make sure Maisie's heart was still beating and her tail was still wagging. He sent her off with different dosages and one final look at the fluffy dog as she altered her path slightly to just slide through the door in front of her owner.

Now he was home, and skimming through studies about cluster seizures in the breed. The prognosis wasn't good for Maisie, he knew this from the second he read through Rose's notes, but he was now going to have to convince her grief riddled owner that she should kill her otherwise, to her, perfectly happy, healthy dog. It was the joke, really. Vets always wished their patients could talk, people always took it as talking to the vets, but animals

communicating with their owners would be even more useful, especially in cases like this. It's an awful thought, but he almost wished Maisie would just start sporadically vomiting or show her pain by writhing around on the floor, so the owner could truly see what was happening.

He's chewing through his stringy kale salad and highlighting another damming sentence in the article when his phone lights up with a call.

It's accepted in a panic, he assumes it's an emergency at the clinic, which is partly why he stiffens in fear when instead he hears the deep Russian accent.

"Shane, Anya has eaten my stir fry!"

"Okay, okay," Shane grabs a notepad, shoving the disgusting kale salad out of the way, "how much of it did she eat?" He glances up at the alarm on his bedside table, who eats this late?

"Little portion, a handful, but she's not meant to eat, I'm so worried!" His accent was thicker, the worried sounded a little more like 'vorried' and his frenzied voice made Shane squirm, he was riddled with anxiety but hearing it so obvious in someone else's voice made his heart stutter and nervousness flood his stomach. He wasn't good at being comforting.

"Okay is she showing any symptoms? Any vomiting, coughing, diarrhoea?"

"No, no. She is lying on my lap now." Sure enough Shane could hear her breath coming down the phone, "she is licking my face."

He had to stop himself laughing at the perturbed voice, "okay, and what was in the stir fry?"

"Err, bean sprouts, kale, green beans…"

"Wait, did you make it yourself?" In Shane's mind this had come out of a package mix. This was much better, at least the man knew what was in the food. He noted the ingredients down in the notepad, with a little tick next to each one. All safe.

"Yes," Mr Rozanov took a rushed breath to move on quickly, "it has some carrots as well and a little bit of ginger…"

"Any onions? Or garlic? Was it especially salty?"

"No onions, or garlic. But it was salty, I added pinch of salt." He sounded even more panicked now, Anya seemed to sense the change because Shane could hear her whining in the background and chattering anxiously.

He considered the situation for a moment.

"In my opinion," Shane began, "she should be fine. As long as there wasn't anything overly toxic to dogs in the food you won't be expecting any bad side effects. Of course, if anything does change you should call Ottowa Animal Hospital, as they give the full-time emergency support in this area."

“Yes,” Shane could hear frantic scribbling, “but she will be okay?”

He did smile now, hoping it didn’t carry into his voice when the other man was so distressed, “shes a young, healthy dog. Unless the salt intake was massive she should be fine, in terms of the gastrointestinal. If you notice anything else, tremors or excessive panting, just call the emergency vets…or me, if you want.” Wow Shane, way to capitalise off a man when he’s panicking. It wasn’t like he was enjoying this call either, his hands were so sweaty they were making the ink in his notepad bleed.

“Tremors!?” Mr Rozanov yelped down the phone, seeming to startle Anya who barked loudly. “Like seizures, shaking?!” Anya was now barking loudly which didn’t seem to be helping the man’s mood as he tried to shush her.

Shane probably shouldn’t have gone there, from the sounds of it there wasn’t nearly enough salt for tremors to be a worry but he’s a big believer in telling the clients everything. He might have to change this sentiment, he can hear Rozanov hyperventilating down the phone. It sounds like he’s choking, “it is okay, Anya, please be okay.” The dog, from the sounds of it, doesn’t need convincing.

“She will be okay,” he tried to explain in a more comforting manner, “if dogs consume excessive salt, which she hasn’t, it can in some cases dehydrate the muscles so it can be worth looking out for.”

“Dehydrate muscles?” The man’s voice was now breaking, he sounded close to tears. “I am going to call emergency vets now, I think.”

“Mr Rozanov - Ilya.” He feels like a dog doing tricks trying the techniques from the networking book his mom brought him, “I think being in an emergency vets would be a more stressful experience for Anya,” he couldn’t believe that his own stupid slip-up was going to make this man actually go for it, “if she has no symptoms then it’s better she stays at home. She will be fine, I promise.”

There’s silence of a second, only the faint noise of Anya snuffling, and then he realises with increasing anxiety that the noise isn’t just the spaniel, it’s also her owner.

“No,” he muttered, voice now sounding a little wet and strained, “I will take her in. It’s better to be stressed and alive.”

Oh my god. Ilya Rozanov is going to turn up to the animal hospital holding a perfectly fine spaniel saying that a vet called Shane Hollander told him she would be having seizures. The hospital would charge him the emergency consult fee - a hefty sum - and send him on his way with nothing changed. He can’t believe he’s going to waste the man’s time like this, from his own stupid slipup.

“No, no!” He tries to argue, “Mr Rozanov, really, she’ll be fine. And the out of hours fee’s are insane, I don’t want you paying all that for no reason.”

“I need to make sure my perfect girl is okay, da?” The man sounds even wetter than before, a little breathy and gaspy. “I do not mind about cost, she is worth everything.”

“Okay,” he stuttered, trying to wheel through the possibilities in his mind: kidnapping, murder, assault. “Tell me if I’m overstepping, but do you want me to come to yours to check on her? Or we can meet up somewhere, I’m sure there’s a few cafes open at this time or…”

There’s more silence on the line, Shane chews his pen to give his mouth something to do while he waits for a response.

“Yes,” the other man seems to exhale, “yes, please.”

There are many lists in the clinic. Stock lists, client lists, cleaning lists. There’s also a list of ‘stupid things people have done’ attached to the pin board in the prep area. It’s written in biro on the back of an old lab report. They always have to remember to take it down before management comes.

The list attacks everyone, clients, animals, vets, assistants. It’s not malicious, it’s small things like ‘opened mouth when doing a lump removal’ or ‘gave a dog with diarrhoea beef stew to ‘settle the stomach’’. Shane is rarely featured on the list, when he is it’s usually along the lines of ‘got a woman’s number without realising’ or ‘was offered sex in exchange for treatment and said yes.’

Now that he’s considering what he’s done and what he’s doing, there are things that Rose would undoubtedly be adding to the list when he’s told her about all this. A whole paragraph, probably. A small essay. Five-thousand word dissertation.

He arrives at Ilya Rozanov’s house (mansion) at around nine. He sits in his fucked up car for around two minutes, he doesn’t want to take too much time and seem lazy or inconsiderate but he doesn’t want to seem too eager. So he sits, and waits, and tries not to talk himself out of this.

The walk up the drive takes every ounce of his energy to make each step, and not just run back to the safety of his grey shitbox and drive away. Maybe the spirit of Texas has possessed him with some kind of cowboy confidence to ask for Ilya Rozanov’s address and then drive to the mans house. He felt a little insane, he couldn’t tell if he liked the feeling.

Rozanov opened the door with panic in his eyes and sweat on his brow.

“She is in living room. I locked her in so we did not have to chase her around house.”

Shane paused for a moment, unsure as to whether this was a shoes off or on kind of household, but Rozanov was in socks so he slid them off and shuffled them awkwardly beside the door.

“Needing to be caught is always a good sign,” he mentioned to fill the silence as they walked through the sparsely furnished house, “I’m really sure she’s fine, Rozanov.”

His face made a pained expression as he gingerly opened the door to what Shane assumes is the living room. He can already hear the spaniels excited scratching on the door. That reminds him, she could probably do with a nail clipping when she gets her kennel cough next week.

“Anya,” he tries to placate the dog, but his tone is so worried it just riles her up even more and she barks at the intruder, “moya malyshka, please calm down. Be a good girl.”
The spaniel was jumping up at Shane and made no attempt to listen to her owner. Shane knew why, he’d shoved a packet of treats in his trouser pocket before leaving his apartment. “Good girl, Anya.” It was usually inadvisable to offer a dog with potential gastrointestinal distress a treat, but it was a good way to check her appetite and seeing as there was probably no gastrointestinal distress.

Shane considered that he was good to continue. “Can I get a little feel?”

Rozanov hovered anxiously as he felt all over the spaniel, her legs, her neck, and then he focused on gently palpitating her stomach. The whole time she was trying to lick his face and dive into his pocket to get more treats. Rozanov made a move to go and grab her, but Shane just laughed. “No, no it’s fine. It’s good she’s feeling this active.”

There truly wasn’t much else Shane could do. Her temperature was normal, even if she did squirm a little with the thermometer which was expected, and her gums were a good pink shade. She drunk water, but didn’t excessively gulp, and accepted more treats with ease. Rozanov still hovered anxiously, hands only stopping their anxious fidgets to pet her and wind his fingers into her soft fur. She seemed content enough to just stand and get fussed over, her white tail kept wagging and hitting Shane in the back.

“Look at you,” he cooed as he moved his stethoscope to check her heart rate, “such lovely liver spots on your little legs.”

“Liver?” Rozanov asked, after Shane slid the stethoscope back around his neck, “there’s an issue with the liver?!"

“No, no!” Oh, he’s fucked this up yet again. “No, no, that brown colour is called liver. She’s, erm, liver and white.”

“Oh.”

Anya, with her admittedly adorable liver spots then decided to leap onto Shane’s chest and sent him flailing backwards from his crouched position. He ended up on his back on Rozanov’s expensive looking black rug and felt disconcertingly like an upended tortoise.

“Oh my god!” Rozanov exclaimed, “I am so sorry, Shane. Anya, give him space!”

He found himself giggling as the spaniel licked all over his face and nuzzled her snout into the crook of his neck. His bangs were becoming slick with drool. It was disgusting, but he’d

sadly gotten used to the array of fluids which came out of animals over time.

“C’mon Anya,” he said in his best authoritative voice, he points, angling his shoulders to the side. “Off. Over there.”

Anya hops off of him to stand by his side.

“How did you do that?” Rozanov questions. He scratches Anya under the chin as Shane gets to his feet after the unprofessional laughing fit.

“Huh?” He looked at the other man a bit blankly. Rozanov just stared back.

“Get her off?”

“Oh! Oh, you just kinda…” He didn’t really know how he got Anya off, but he had a general idea, “say it like she’s going to? I guess?”

“Teach me,” Rozanov said, and suddenly he was holding one of Shane’s hands and pressing something into it.

Chapter 5

It felt like every nerve in his body had streamed down into his hand when Rozanov touched him. It wasn't really much of anything, just the smallest scrape of skin on skin, he'd shared more touches with his colleagues. Even his mother.

His stomach jumped unnaturally.

There were now bills in his hand. Not dollar bills, but the hundreds. A few hundreds sat calmly in his palm.

"Rozanov!" Shane exclaimed, "what the hell?!"

Rozanov looked blank at him, "what? This is emergency vet fee, I looked it up."

"But," Shane began, moving the notes around to see how many there really were, "that's like... for everything. The nurses, the room, the medicine, only a little bit of that goes to the vet."

The other man just shrugged, "I don't see any nurses. We are in my room."

"I can't take it, Rozanov."

"You are doing your job, you get paid."

"Rozanov."

"You call me Ilya, I will take money back, oke?"

"Ilya," Shane said as earnestly as he could, even though his student loans were flashing before his eyes as he held his hand out, "please take your money back."

The other man gave a wide grin as he took exactly one bill.

"I have taken money," he simply stated when Shane just stared with his hand still outstretched.

"No, no, oh my god." Shane stuttered, "Ilya, I can't be in debt to you."

Shane was only a little transfixed by the man's blonde eyelashes as he blinked slowly, "this is payment, for today."

There was well over a thousand dollars casually sitting in Shane's palm and Ilya Rozanov was acting like this was the appropriate payment for a short, useless visit. It felt strange to have a client pay directly, the cash as well and the fact he was casually standing next to the man's oatmeal brown sofa made the whole thing feel extremely illicit.

"This is way too much, Ilya." Shane thought of where he was standing and a horrific thought ambled through his mind. "Are you expecting... an added extra?" That would make sense as to why he didn't want to meet up in a cafe or by a park or any other well lit location this time of night.

"What?" Ilya looked absolutely baffled, "what added extra?"

Shane was brought back down to the crushing reality of who he was saying this too. He felt his muscles contract, ready for him to sprint out the door. He did in fact just imply that Ilya Rozanov was about to pay *him* for sex work.

"Oh," Ilya murmured after a moment, "you mean..." he cocked his head to one side, "sex, da?"

"I'm like literally so sorry." Ilya voicing it was even worse, "literally, literally like so sorry." He sounded like a Californian valley girl, it felt like his mouth was moving on its own accord, like it was being held up with string and pulled side to side by some malicious force.

Ilya's smile was dangerously sly, Shane suddenly remembered that although Ilya might have a gay teammate, hockey players weren't exactly known for their progressive natures. Neither were Russians.

"That much would not even pay for you to take your shirt off," the man murmured, "you should have higher rates than that."

Shane's cheeks flared up in what must have been a spectacular shade of red, because Ilya chuckled in a gravelly tone that wasn't helping the situation. Anya dug her nose into the back of his thigh, he could feel the cold dampness through his joggers, it almost felt like she was trying to push him towards her owner.

"Hmm, you sit, I will get you a drink, and we will discuss money, yes?" The question, because it was a question, was accompanied with Ilya leaving the room to presumably (hopefully) go to the kitchen. Either that or Ottawa's star player was a machete wielding maniac who used his adorable spaniel to lure in unsuspecting veterinarians to turn them into dog food.

He couldn't decide whether to follow Ilya's instructions and sit, or just continue to linger awkwardly by the couch. What he should do is dump the money on a fancy looking wooden coffee table and run out of there, but he had the odd feeling that Ilya would simply find him at the clinic to give him the money. Anya was literally booked in next week for kennel cough. In the end her curling up near the arm of the sofa was what convinced him to take a seat. It was definitely a nice sofa, he practically fell into it and felt the foam moving to almost engulf him. It gave him an odd flashback of learning about phagocytosis in high school.

"What do you want?" He heard the other man yell from the kitchen. He sounded distant in the wide, empty expanse of his mansion.

“Err,” Shane vocalized before realising he probably sounded a little ridiculous, and very stupid. “Just some water, please?”

“I have tea,” Ilya yelled back, “or… ah!”

Shane heard a faint clattering from the kitchen, Anya perked up her ears and for a minute they both got ready to bound after the Russian but then they heard another question, “you like ginger ale, yes? You want a ginger ale.”

“Just water is fine,” Shane replied, smoothing down Anya’s ears, “I really don’t need anything, I’m just heading out now.”

There was a worrying amount of silence, Shane started to rack his mind for the basic first aid he knew. His hand ran over Anya’s spine where it curved, he found himself counting the vertebrae in her spine. Cervical, thoracic, lumbar…

He was still descending her body when Ilya appeared holding a beer and Canada Dry ginger ale. The ale was passed to Shane and the man seemed to stall for a moment, looking at Anya through blonde eyelashes like she was about to tell him what to do before settling down onto the sofa next to Shane.

He found himself swaying sideways like a seesaw, his thighs almost brushing against Ilya’s. He toyed with the tab of his ale anxiously while Ilya took a long sip of his beer. It was something American, it was strong enough that even the smell felt like it was brutalising Shane’s nostrils.

“I kept it sealed,” Ilya mentioned when he saw where Shane was thumbing the ale, “so you know I haven’t put anything in it.”

The consideration stuck with Shane for a moment. He’d never really been overly concerned with being roofied, he barely went out anyway and apart from that he was a man, and not a very small one. He had a few testing strips anyway, stored away in his wallet along with some in-date condoms that he kept not for him, but in case a friend needed them. He was always vigilant with the girls in clubs and bars, people always had the impression that he had

somehow managed to pull any of them and was now playing the role of overprotective boyfriend, he'd just seen too many horror stories and wasn't prepared to risk anything.

It was nice that Ilya considered the rational fear, even if it hadn't even crossed his mind. The other man was big enough that he could probably overpower him anyway if he did want to try anything, but from the return of the leg jiggling Shane assumed this wasn't a concern. Apparently serial killers were often seen to be calm and relaxed before killing, which Ilya definitely wasn't.

"You will take money then, yes?"

"Jesus, Ilya. No, I owe you now for the drink anyway." His pride *was* slowly slipping away every second his eyes fell upon the clump of cash perched on the coffee table.

"Okay, you are a science man, yes?" Shane nodded hesitantly. "That much, two thousand dollars, it is…" He pulled out his phone and started typing, "less than one percent of my wage. Less than *half* of one percent of my wage."

"Okay, good for you?"

"So, take the money."

"Ilya," he turned himself towards the man and forced eye contact, "what I did to Anya is barely worth thirty dollars, let alone two *thousand."*

"You drove yourself here," Ilya took a sip of his beer with a slight hum, "gas is not cheap."

"Oh my god, Ilya."

The man gave him a steady look, "you are actually upset by this?"

"I don't want to take advantage of you," Shane muttered. He didn't care about Ilya's money, he just didn't want to feel like he was doing something wrong, that he was being unfair. Even if the money *definitely* wouldn't hurt.

"You could always give me a, hm, *little extra?"*

Shane stared at the man, absolutely flabbergasted he had the gall to bring that up again. He made a move to leave, barely getting his weight lifted off the couch before Ilya was pressing a soft hand to his arm.

“I call you.” Ilya blurted out. “You take money but I call you, if Anya needs anything or I am worried. It is ‘added extra’.” The man was staring into his eyes, eyebrows drawn tight and with his mouth slightly open.

Ilya Rozanov calling him seemed a little insane, but there was a reason he was sitting on the man’s couch, stroking his dog and drinking his ale. The suggestion that the calls could become a regular thing is what threw Shane off.

“I might not always pick up.”

“Yes, you are busy man.”

“I might not always be able to help.”

“Would still be good to get your opinions.”

“I’m not really the best for this, you’ll be wanting a more experienced vet or someone with extra qualifica-”

“Shane,” Ilya interrupted, saying the man’s name for the first time in a while, “Shane, I want you.”

There was a second of awkward silence where Shane’s knuckles whitened where he was clutching the ginger ale.

“You are,” Ilya sputtered, “so good with Anya, and look. She trusts you.” It was true, the spaniel was propped up against Shane’s side looking like she was dozing off. Definitely no salt poisoning then, something in Shane preened that he was correct.

“Okay… I’ll consider it.”

Ilya beamed like he’d just agreed to something actually worth Ilya’s time, something hockey or party related. But Shane found himself smiling back, allowing himself to lighten on the couch and move ever so slightly closer to Ilya, absorbing himself into the man’s orbit.

Shane ended up driving home at midnight. He doesn’t even realise the time, not until Ilya’s phone chimes and the man swears something in Russian when he checks.

“Blyat.” He mutters, turning away from Shane to pick up the phone from the coffee table, “it’s twelve.”

“Oh shit,” Shane gasped out, "sorry, I really gotta be off.” He got up off the couch, his legs groaning, to make his way towards the door.

“Wait,” Ilya exclaimed, palming the money into his hands as he too got up off the couch a lot more elegantly than Shane, “let me walk you out, yes?”

He followed Ilya out of the living room and down the unnecessarily long corridor. It felt a little like he was a European princess, about to be wooed and wed off to a handsome suitor in this modern castle.

“You know, is late.” Ilya mentioned casually, folding his hands into his jean pockets and rocking back on his heels, “you could stay night. I have many spare rooms.”

“No, no!” Shane said, perhaps a little too quickly. Ilya almost looked offended for a moment, so Shane placed a comforting hand on the man's upper arm and patted him, once, twice. Like an incomplete bro hug. Ilya went straight. “No, it’s all right really. You have a game tomorrow, and I need to get home anyway to feed my mantis.”

“You will not tell anyone, about me being sad on call about Anya, yes?” Ilya’s voice had a strange husky quality, it rose and fell like waves of anxiety. He was wringing his hands together and staring at Shane’s shitty nikes.

“No,” Shane murmured, “of course I won’t.” That would probably destroy Ilya’s bad boy reputation, wouldn’t it. There was something exciting about knowing a famous person, talking to them just like another person in oblivion and hearing their voice go all mushy over a well-loved pet.

“Thank you Shane.” The man smiled oddly at him, “you are a good man.”

Shane fell asleep that night to the odd prickling sensation of the man’s muscular arm tensing under his touch playing in his mind like a mantra.

Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

this formatting is murder so sorry about all this!!

What does someone wear to an NHL game?

He'd have to figure it out quickly, this wasn't his first game and from the excitement of his mom and dad this wouldn't be his last either. Puck drop was in about an hour. The whole city of Ottawa seemed to be preparing with him, but while they were walking through the streets with laughter and beer and four year old's in their favourite players shirts (he'd seen too many Rozanov shirts to feel normal about anything), Shane was in his room staring at his closet.

Right. His array of Dickies scrub stolen from multiple clinics wouldn't quite cut it this time.

Chanel had been let out of her enclosure and was sitting on the top, waving her white arms threateningly at him. Even *she* looked better than Shane, and she had an open circulatory system and six limbs.

It was four, so Rose probably wasn't in theatre, but she might be in consults. He called her anyway, her phone would be on silent if she was talking to clients so there was no harm in anything. Maybe the client could help as well, Mrs Robbie was booked in for today and she was always wearing elaborate shawls and scarves. Scarves were a sports thing, weren't they?

"Hello?" He chuckled a little at the relief of her picking up. "Holly, what's going on?"

"What the fuck do I wear to a hockey game?"

She cackled at him down the line.

“Oh my god, Rose.”

“Okay, okay. Who’s playing?”

“Ottawa and Montreal.”

“What colours are they?”

This is why he called her, thank god. Ottawa were red and black, with a few gold stripes. Well, he assumed. That’s the colours the people on the street were wearing. He quickly looked at Montreal on his laptop while Rose described his predicament to Kiara.

“Okay, okay. Red and black are Ottawa, and Montreal is like, mostly blue.” He scrunched his nose when a picture of Ilya in a face off appeared, he wasn’t in Ottawa uniform, but the caption was Boston vs. Montreal so that mystery was quickly over. He had a look in his eyes he hadn’t seen before, this aggression without purpose. Eyes swirling with almost righteous anger. Shane didn’t think he liked it.

He shuts the laptop.

Rose’s voice rang out from his phone, as well as the howling of a dog in one of the kennels. He heard the familiar clang of a kennel opening and then the noise stopped.

“So don’t wear anything blue, you have black pants, right?”

“Yeah,” he pulled back a navy set of scrubs, “the skinny jeans-.”

“DO NOT!” Rose yells, “do not wear skinny jeans.”

“They’re not that tight-.”

“No way.”

“Hey,” he hears Kiara interrupt from the other side of the room, “they might make his butt pop.”

“Like he needs that,” Rose mutters, “Holly’s got more cake than me, it’s ridiculous.”

“Okay,” this simple question was quickly derailing, and the alarm clock on his bedside table was counting down the minutes to his demise, “what should I wear instead, then?” He tried pulling everything non-scrub related out of his closet.

He can hear her mindlessly clicking the mouse. “Your black cargos, you look good with the whole ‘rugged’ look.”

“Okay.”

“And a red jumper, it’ll be too cold in the arena to wear a tee, won’t it?”

“I don’t know! It’s ice so I think so?”

“Didn’t you use to play hockey?” Kiara asks, Rose hums in agreement.

“That was like ten years ago, I never sat and watched either, playing is different.”

“People online say jeans and a hoody, these people say jeans and a hoody and… yep, these people also say jeans and a hoody. I think you know what you’re wearing?”

“Erm, cargos and a hoody?”

“Good boy,” she answered with the tone reserved for antsy terriers and aggressive cats, “go get your mans.”

“What, I’m not getting anyone!” Shane spluttered as he rested the phone on the table to search for the cargos. “Rozanov isn’t anything.”

“He’s playing tonight, isn’t he?” Kiara asked. If it was Eleanor or Rose he’d accuse her of winding him up, but Kiara genuinely didn’t know anything about hockey. Then he heard Rose’s laughter, so she *was* pissing him off on purpose.

“Oh my god.”

“Hey, no judgement, we all need a sugar daddy in these trying times,” he heard Eleanor yell, *Eleanor*. Now this had apparently turned into a team meeting, weren’t they all meant to be working?

“He’s not my sugar daddy.” Shane groaned as he shoved a bright red t-shirt over his head, “I’m not pimping myself out in red, it’s not my colour.”

“But in general?”

“Oh my god.”

“If two thousand isn’t sugar daddy material, then I don’t know what is!”

He really regretted texting the group with *that* information.

“Turn your camera on, Holly! Let’s see you,” in a testament to their friendship Rose was one of the only people who he’d video call, but in this ridiculous bright red top and cruddy cargos he faltered, and then weakly clicked the button.

He can hear Eleanor wolf whistle from the other side of the room, “you could crush somebody with those biceps, go off Wasian king!”

“Landry! Turn me back around!” He’s always been a blusher, the blood on his face had always appeared as a heady maroon that was obvious to everyone around.

“Oh my god,” Rose gasps, “is that the gay thermometer shirt?”

He looked down at himself. The t-shirt was a genuinely nice colour and fit. The arms were tight, it cut in a little at his waist and it was nice and slimming. He actually looked like a normal person wearing it, not just a box with sagging pants like he did in scrubs. He’d mooned most of his clients over the years whenever he crouched down to see their dogs, Rose found it hilarious but she knew she was doing the same. Sometimes when a nurse would come into the room to check something with either of them they’d give a *look*, the look that really said the client did not pay for an extra show.

The only issue with the red shirt was the thermometer on the front, which had the incorrect increments along the side. It was also completely rainbow. Rose had bought it as a joke when they’d first met at the last clinic, he’d cried on her shoulder at some random bar that they’d gone to as a ‘date’. She kissed his cheek, wiped his face with lavender scented tissues and the next week she’d gotten him the shirt with a ‘gay thermometer’ front and centre. That was the only thing on it. He basically never wore it out, sometimes Rose would wrestle him into it like some sort of anxiety vest and trot him down to the nearest, calmest, gay club in the city.

“Do not take your hoody off.” Kiara warns.

The rink is packed. His mom had told him this would be a ‘low-key’ game, it wasn’t the playoffs or anything ‘notable’. He’d seen Ottawa on playoff game day, and while it was definitely crazier he’d never been walking into the thrum of people like he was now.

His tight tee did feel like one of those dog thunder shirts, the type that people put on them when going to the vets or if it was firework season. It was tight in all the right places and the slightly strange feeling of the laminated thermometer would’ve normally been uncomfortable, but instead it was a nice reminder of Rose.

He gets his elbows out ready to face the crowd. His mom’s waiting for him at the back of the rink, by the staff entrances, but because of all the barriers put in place he needs to walk diagonally through the throng of people to get there. He considers jumping the barriers to get around them all, but there must be some kind of security somewhere and he doesn’t like doing things wrong.

The crowd smells of strong deodorant, weak beer and the musk of men. Shane had always found himself in female dominated areas: small animal clinics, equine clinics and even the farm rotations he did after college. Sure, there might be another man or two but he’d grown complacent to not having to deal with men over the years. He liked men, a little too much, but the lack of experience meant he was quickly overdosing on their presence.

A lot of them were just so wide, and they seemed to take up so much space that he had to stick his arms around to practically squeeze through the gaps. It was a job to avoid spilling drinks as well, even though they were being held protectively against everyone's body they were still sloshing threateningly whenever they moved to take a sip.

The outer wall of men dissipated slightly, more families with smaller children appeared as well as a gaggle of college aged girls with different player jerseys. It somehow got more crowded until Shane popped out the other side, like the crowd had just given birth to him. Which was a disgusting thought, but this was a disgusting environment. Just looking at people's hands clutching the barriers made his stomach queasy and he yearned for his yellow spray to coat everything he saw.

It was much quieter around the back of the rink. He spotted his mom talking animatedly to a bearded man, he was leaning towards her to show something on his phone. People streamed

past her, there was medical staff, media with massive cameras and people he assumed were family of the players or just staff he couldn't identify.

"Shane!" His mom beamed at him, beckoning him over. "Hi, honey! I'm just talking to Harris."

The man looked up from his phone to beam at Shane, "hey!" The smile that stretched across his face was comforting in the way it broke through his eyes and showed off a few teeth. Shane could almost imagine a caramel tail wagging behind the man.

"I'm so glad you're able to make this game," Harris said, beaming at Shane like he wasn't interrupting. "It's always lovely to see the staff's family on game day, we really like to get everyone involved!"

It was now pretty obvious why his mom seemed to love working here, Harris' cheeks were struck with a genuine flush and his grin was stretched wide. Shane hadn't met many people as invested in hockey as his mom, but it seemed she had managed to find someone here. Or a whole horde of people, based on the energy surrounding the stadium.

"Er," Shane began, stupidly, "yeah, I haven't been to a hockey game in a while y'know… so I'm, yeah, I'm excited." He cringed at the tone, feeling its damp stickiness as the vowels spread across his tongue in a way that definitely didn't convey excitement. If Harris was offended he didn't express it, instead he beamed and turned back to his mom.

"I'll let you go and enjoy the game, Yuna."

"Text me if you need anything," Yuna told the bearded man as he smiled and walked away, sending a wave in Shane's direction. He'd turned around before Shane could wave back, giving him the sinking feeling that he wasn't about to be well liked by the social media manager at all.

"We've got really good seats," his mom exclaimed, walking into the building, "your dad's there, I think he's managed to already find some new friends." She chuckled, seemingly overjoyed that everything seemed to be going to plan.

They walked through the tunnels of the staff entrance, there were pictures lining the walls of famous players jersey's, group photos and awards. There was a noticeable gap in the years, the photograph quality went from pretty awful to quite decent in the time jump. Shane noticed a familiar Russian in the higher quality photo, his large frame seeming to dominate the group on-ice shot. He could see at least one chipped too

The rink was packed. He had been expecting it, he'd even watched some YouTube videos of random people going to ice hockey games just to get a reminder of how busy it was to prepare himself. No video could fully contain the organised chaos which hummed through the seating. The constant murmur of people was like white noise, with the occasional louder exclamation cutting through the crowd like a scalpel. Apart from that the smells were also fairly heinous. A strange mixture of cheap hotdogs, popcorn and the sickly sweet smell of sugary foods pounded through his nostrils in a dizzying haze. It was also freezing cold, which meant he wouldn't have to remove his burgundy jumper to reveal the gay thermometer shirt.

His mom did have good seats, they were close to the ice and near the Ottawa bench. Where Ilya would be sitting. He was going to watch a hockey game where llya would be *playing.* He and the Ottawa team captain had discussed the controversies surrounding flea treatments for way too long last night, and now he was going to watch him play hockey. He was going to show up, at what was basically his work, unannounced like some kind of crazy stalkerish fan.

His dad was clutching a massive tub of popcorn in one hand and a can of beer in the other talking to two other men in the row behind. They were laughing together, but his dad broke off to look up when Shane and his mom squeezed past the people in the outer chairs to get over to their seats.

"The media's doing better now, are they?" He asked Yuna who gave him a sly smile.

"Well, we've got them to interview the players in groups instead of one on one," she offered a smile to David's new friends behind them, "they're all much more suited to that setup, their strengths really rely on being a team rather than alone when they're playing and doing media."

“Your mother has been sending some very passive aggressive emails to some very angry interviewers,” his dad explained with a laugh.

“You’re enjoying the new job, then?” Shane asked hesitantly. His dad offered him some popcorn, as usual he refused. He could see the faint sheen of the sugar lining each piece and could feel the tart stickiness it would leave coating his mouth.

“It’s amazing.” Yuna sighed dreamily, “the job at the gear company was nice, but it was only on the outskirts of hockey, I’m right in the centre now.”

“Ottawa needed some fixing up as well,” his dad said, “she’s been able to really get her teeth into it.”

Yuna beamed, “yeah, the social media team is amazing and they’ve been able to keep up with the extra publicity from Rozanov joining the team, but some of the people helping out with the traditional media and making sure that the team’s identity is still going strong have been getting a bit overwhelmed.”

“They’ve been too Canadian to send any aggressive emails,” David replied with a small smile.

“There’s no such thing as too Canadian,” Yuna said, “especially a game.” She gestured to everything around them. “No matter what happens, Canada still wins.”

“I just hope everyone has a lovely game,” his dad said. He always said this before every game on the tv, while his mom would be hollering over her favourite teams David was content to just watch the game for ‘the art’. He would always be more focused on individual players or lines, occasionally pointing out to Shane interesting moves or plays or trying to guess how the team's tactics would change throughout the game. There was no point in Yuna playing, she always guessed the tactics right and figured out the winning team by puck drop. Very rarely would something catch her out.

“Hope for Rozanov using his media training instead,” his mom replied with a smirk, “although we love the whole ‘bad boy’ image he does need to reign it in sometimes.”

His dad just chuckled.

The lights over the crowd dimmed and the ice was brought up in dazzling hues. His mom sat perfectly still next to him while his dad relaxed back in his seat. The crowd had finally hushed, anticipating the players and saving their voices for the screaming and cheering Shane was waiting for.

“Please,” the announcer began, “welcome the boys in blue… The Montreal Voyageurs!”

The other side of the arena lit up in hollers and cheers. Blue scarves twirled through the air in a mesmerizing thrum as the whole rink was lit up in blue. The players emerged, Shane couldn’t tell who was who for obvious reasons but he was captivated by the easy way they glided over the ice and waved to their fans who screamed back.

“And now,” the announcer continued in a husky voice, “please welcome you hometown heroes, the Ottawa Centaurs!”

The colour changed from blue to a deep red and Shane was swept up in the crowds movement as everyone around him began to pump their fists in the air, wave around their scarves and flags or even just clap loudly. His dad began to wolf whistle through his teeth and his mom yelled so much she sounded a little hoarse by the end. He could feel the pounding of the crowd through the floor, and even the plastic red seat underneath him shifted with the weight of people as they moved about to welcome their team.

The Ottawa’s were slowly moving around their side of the ice, the goalie moved into his little section and the others began to do slow rings around him. Shane couldn’t tell who Ilya was from up there, but then he saw the flash of ‘Rozanov’ on the back of a jersey. It felt a little weird, like he shouldn’t be seeing him here. The Rozanov on the ice and the Ilya crying about Anya felt like two different entities. Especially when Rozanov skated close to a Voyageur and the jumbotron picked up the faint movement of mouth as he whispered something before he skated away again, quick and light. The Voyageur glared back, mouth drawn.

“Oh, honey,” Yuna whispered into Shane’s ear, “I forgot to mention. That’s Hayden Pike. He’s the Montreal Voyageurs captain, you used to play with him in the junior league, do you

remember?”

Shane realised he somehow did, he didn’t remember this confident man skating in front of such a massive crowd baying for his failure, but instead a smaller preteen who’d cried when Shane told him he’d be quitting. He was perhaps one of the only true friends that Shane had ever made, he hadn’t even cared that Shane was statistically better than him or favoured by the coaches due to his rare combination of a docile nature and skill. Most of the other boys were friendly enough or just generally ignored Shane. He didn’t mind this arrangement, he could still remember the anxiety that would bubble in his chest before every practice and rehearsing in the mirror how to talk to his teammates. It was always easier with Hayden, he’d made practices feel a little more enjoyable.

For a brief moment he could almost see himself there skating confidently next to Hayden, covered in Voyageurs blue.

“Yeah,” he murmured back, “yeah, I’m glad he’s still playing.” He said ‘still playing’ like this was some kind of beer league, when Hayden wasn’t probably one of the best players in the country.

“He’s one of Montreal’s best players,” Yuna mentioned as though reading his thoughts. They both watched as Hayden skated over to his teammates with the ‘Pike’ emblazoned on his back. “But he’s a better captain than player, they were in playoffs last year thanks to him.”

“So,” Shane asked, “they have a chance of beating Ottawa?”

Yuna cackled, her eyes shining as she seemed to acknowledge the goalie and he waved *back*. “No way.”

Chapter 7

The game was… interesting. Shane had tried to keep up with the puck and who was who but was easily left behind as the players charged across the ice. It was hard not to yelp and gasp like an idiot when a player experienced even the gentlest hit, but it was just all so *violent.*

Ilya seemed to deal out more than he was dealt. He skated like the fates were with him, electric on the ice. When he collided with a Voyageur it always looked painful for both, the two bodies imploding like planets in the solar system of the rink.

It was easy to get captivated just watching the skating, the smooth way that each player seemed to embrace the ice and even the refs caught Shane's eye with their easy backwards skating and the casualness with which they took to the ice.

This meant he stood out like an idiot whenever Ottawa scored, while everyone else was swept up in the joy and seemed to leap up as one homogenous unit he stayed sitting, just trying to process the change on the scoreboard above.

Eventually the game was over, a definite victory for the Centaurs as his mom had predicted. He watched as the players disappeared down the tunnels, mourned the loss of Rozanov and then followed his parents as they went down to the staff areas.

There was something undeniably exciting about seeing everyone clambering for a hint of their favourite player, buying scarves and shirts to feel included and involved and then Shane being able to casually follow his parents into the restricted area. He's instantly wrapped in a layer of calm. There's few staff around, and the ones that are in the corridors don't linger. They nod at Yuna in acknowledgment and scurry off, all clearly busy. His dad even gets dragged off by a harried looking woman who his mom tells him is one of the finance wizzes.

"We haven't had a good team in so long," Yuna explained to Shane, "now people actually want a piece of us, it's good, but everyone's in panic mode. I'm having to convince Harris to hire some new interns to help, poor mans overworked."

Harris, as though summoned by an invisible force, suddenly appeared looking vaguely distressed.

“Sorry, Yuna,” he sputtered, “we’re having an issue with CBC?”

“Yes, of course.” She turned around to speak to Shane, “sorry honey, I just have to sort this out. Go and find something to eat, you didn’t have any of the popcorn and you know I worry.”

He could understand why, there was a time when he was a little younger that he’d get all wobbly when his blood sugar dropped, but having it mentioned in front of Harris made him flush ugly.

“It’s fine mom,” he assured her, “CBC is important.”

She gave him one final wave before striding confidently after Harris down the winding corridors.

He was a little bit lost. On his quest to find something edible he’d found himself stuck in the intertwining areas and rooms across the rink. When he’d initially come back out into the spectators areas he’d been hesitant to reenter the doors with large ‘staff only’ signs, considering he definitely wasn’t staff. He wasn’t sure he could even be considered a fan. But he’d been gifted some amount of luck as he was able to easily walk through the areas with a confident enough step that nobody had challenged him.

The outside world had been found. There was no chance of him buying any food in the vicinity, it was both absolutely terrible for you and overpriced in a way that made his stomach turn. If the additives wouldn’t make him ill, then five dollars spent on *one* hotdog definitely would.

The door he'd used had led to the back of the rink, not where the myriad of fans were spilling out with triumphant, hungry gazes ready to take on the worst drinking spots in Ottawa. He could see them through the barriers, shedding clothes like lizards in the evening sun.

He's figuring out how to escape the enclosure he's found himself in when he spots a child.

Shane had some complicated feelings regarding children. On one hand too many were loud, difficult to deal with and often turned up to consults for no reason and stressed out the animals. They were also much more easy to deal with than the adults. Children always seemed to understand animals a lot better than adults did, they didn't try to place human emotions or experiences onto their pets, so Shane often found himself talking to an interested ten year old during a consult rather than talking to the 'actual' owner.

This child was running at full pelt away from the building like an excited labrador. She was surprisingly fast for someone with such small legs, and he could hear her giggles as she approached the fence.

"Hey!" Shane yelled out to her, "hey, woahh, steady down!"

The girl just laughed and slowed to a lazy skip. She looked, what, about seven? She was wearing a Montreal Voyageurs jersey and there was a blue ribbon in her hair. There was nobody else outside looking out for her, and Shane realised with horror that he was going to have to stop her from doing something stupid like running into the hordes of fans.

"Hey," he said, a bit softer this time as he stood just in front of her. "Where are your parents at?"

"Somewhere," she replied with a shrug.

He looked down at her defiant gaze and found a small smile on his face, "are they in the rink?"

“Yes.” She replied, matter of fact, “my dad’s in the changing room. He forgot his phone.” She giggled to herself, “mommy says it’s because he’s too silly.”

Right. A changing room, that must mean he’s a player right? Or, he could even be one of the mascots which might make him even harder to track down. He was connected to the Voyageurs in some way presumably, from the jersey the girl was wearing. It was a ‘Pike’ one, Shane didn’t dwell on it.

“Alright,” he crouched down to see the kid properly, “can you lead me to your dad?”

“My mom says I’m not allowed to follow strangers.”

“Ah,” Shane murmured, “that’s okay. Do you mind just standing here with me, though? I’m Shane, Shane Hollander.”

“Okay.” The girl replied, “but it’s boring just standing.”

Ah. Entertainment, yes.

“I’ve erm,” he fiddled around with the larger pocket on his cargos, “I’ve got a ball here? It bounces pretty well.”

It was a tennis ball, thankfully unchewed, that he kept in his pocket to distract dogs with. He bounced it casually over to the girl who grabbed it with two hands and cackled.

“I can bounce it higher than you,” she taunted, “look!”

She bounced it back, using her whole body to slam it into the floor for a pretty impressive bounce that made it sail over Shane’s head.

“Alright,” he said to the girl, “I think I can do even *better.”*

Shane really hoped he didn’t look like a massive weirdo to the few people around the back of the rink. He and the girl, Ruby, were quietly talking while passing the ball back and forth between them.

“I like watching hockey,” she was saying, “but it can be annoying.”

He found himself agreeing with her assessment, “it’s very loud, isn’t it?”

“Yep.” She furrowed her brow. “I keep on asking mommy to buy me horse riding lessons for my birthday, but daddy wants me to try hockey instead. But hockey is too annoying for me.”

“Your dad’s a player then?”

“Yep.”

“That must be cool.”

“Sometimes.”

She came back to him with a particularly hard bounce.

“Oh my god!”

A man in a suit was running towards Ruby. He lifted her up, strong arms contracting to hold her midair in one clean swoop. The poor thing looked beyond stressed as he bounced her, like he was making sure she was really there.

“Ruby, Ruby, oh my *god*, you can’t just run away like that! I was just in an interview, sweetheart.”

“Boo, boring,” Ruby moaned, “I got to play with Shane instead.”

“Shane?” The man asked, gaze bitter as he turned to look. “You are Shane, I’m assuming?”

“Hi, yeah, er… I just saw Ruby running so I thought I better stop her before she gets somewhere she shouldn’t be.”

The man looked unconvinced and entirely massive in his smart black suit. Shane could see his biceps expanding as he held Ruby casually, like she was still a baby.

“Oh?” He questioned, “I haven’t seen you around this rink before, I haven’t heard of a Shane.”

“Oh no,” Shane laughed anxiously, “no, no, my mom is the er, brand manager for the Centaurs, I was just invited to the game.”

“Just call them the Cens, bud,” the man laughed, “everyone else does, doesn’t make them seem scary enough in my opinion. So, Yuna Hollander is your mom?”

“Yep.” Shane answered, only now realising that *Hayden Pike* was holding his daughter and casually threatening Shane around the back of the rink. It wasn’t necessarily hard to recognise the players when the helmets were off, but the panic waltzing through his veins was making it hard to think of *anything.*

“Yes, daddy. Now if I could get back to playing, *Shane Hollander* was about to lose our game.”

Pike’s eyes flashed with something.

“Oh shit!” *“Swear jar, daddy.”* “Shane Hollander! We played together, hell, you were a beast on the ice!” He finally relinquished Ruby who returned to bouncing the tennis ball to herself. “Oh man,” he approached Shane to clap him firmly on the shoulder. It felt almost biblical, the true original bro hug from an iconic jock.

“How you been, man? What you were, hell, about fourteen last time I saw you, jesus!”

Shane laughed, “been good. You’re doing *really* good though, haven’t you?”

“Yeah,” Hayden chuckled, “yeah, bud. I couldn’t have imagined I’d be doing this… but, here we are!”

“Pike!”

“Oh, jeez.” Hayden muttered, “I hate these things.”

He smiled back at Shane, patting him again on the shoulder. Shane felt his whole body shake at the heavy handed man.

“See you after, yeah, man?” He grinned, “oh wow, your mom’s working for the Cen’s now! I *knew* I recognised her, I’ll say hi, yeah? She’s a total force of nature, they’re so lucky to have her. She’ll be needed with Rozanov, anyway.”

He clapped his hand *again* on Shane, letting it linger for a moment with a steady shake. “Don’t be a stranger, bud.”

He scooped up Ruby who threw the tennis ball back to Shane with a foul expression directed towards the back of her dad's head. "Bye, bye Shane Hollander!" She yelled, "I beat you!"

He smiled back at the child as Hayden disappeared back into the building. The man stopped for a moment, Shane assumed he was putting Ruby back on the ground or opening the heavy doors but instead he saw his body tighten as he moved past someone else, who was awkwardly standing in the way.

"Pike," Shane heard a voice say, "surprised you can carry child, thought Montreal's eleventh best player would want to protect his back after bad *fall* last season?"

"Fuck off, Rozanov," Hayden replied, voice muffled from the distance.

Shane's twisted with anxiety so much he had a fleeting concern about colic, the subject of his anxieties was then revealed when Hayden slid into the building to reveal a Russian with a damnable smirk written on his face. Like Hayden, the man was in a full suit, but it was a softer grey and the top buttons were undone enough to catch a glimpse of the man's chest. Shane realised he couldn't remove his eyes from the pale swatches, and even more concerning was the fact he didn't want to. He was now openly ogling him.

If the jeans Ilya wore were bad, the trousers were somehow even *worse*. The material looked thin, Ilya shifted slightly and it was obvious that the material was aggravatingly thin. Shane knew about the whole 'grey sweatpants' thing, but this was so much more explicit in the way the tailored fabric hugged the man's body. While sweatpants showed hints, these trousers announced them. His chest was ridiculously delicious, but the bulge that dented out from the grey like a *mountain* made Shane feel ravenous.

Ilya Rozanov was looking back with an expression that Shane couldn't understand, like a signature on the Russian's face

Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

POV Ilya Rozanov

Shane Hollander, the veterinarian, the *distraction*, was talking to the Montreal Captain, Hayden Pike.

Ilya found himself seething at the sight of Pike rocking Shane with his monstrous hands, no skill in the way he blindly patted the other man. It was almost like petting a dog, but somehow with even less care. He didn't see the way that Shane looked so awkward and anxious, nothing like when he was sitting on *Ilya's* couch in *Ilya's* house petting *Ilya's* dog, with such a soft smile on his face and a laugh like candy. His laugh was full of candy.

At the same time, they must be familiar. Pike wasn't touchy, nobody in hockey really was, but why Pike would be smiling at anyone like that was another question entirely. Pike was married, Ilya had met Jackie at an all-star's game last year, but maybe the better Pike had realised that the captain was useless and she was gorgeous. Ilya hoped she had realised this, anyway. Pike being into men? Unlikely, he wore ugly clothes and had never expressed an interest in Ilya.

The fronts of their shoes were almost touching.

Pike was leaving then, scooping up one of his twins and walking in Ilya's direction. He faltered a little when he saw the man covering the door, but just maneuvered his hold on his daughter and twisted sideways to avoid touching the other man.

"Pike," he muttered to the other captain, "surprised you can carry child, thought Montreal's eleventh best player would want to protect his back after bad *fall* last season?" Predictably Pike's face lit up in such a delicious shade of red that Ilya couldn't help but to laugh at the poor man's faltering expression. The girl giggled. Pike covered her ear with a hand to push the other into his chest.

“Fuck off, Rozanov,” he muttered back. The reaction was nice, the reaction was always nice. He loved being able to push a button, to make people feel something with only a well timed sentence. He knew the fall was a soft spot, not that Pike had any ‘hard spots’, but that one had been awful. Even for Pike. He had tripped on nothing and face planted, almost knocked a tooth out. Had to be benched for the rest of the game for a suspected concussion and Montreal had lost to Scott Hunter’s gay parade.

“Bye, bye Rozanov,” his daughter hissed back at him, not unkindly, as the two made their way back inside. He smiled at her, she beamed back.

When he looked back at Shane he caught him staring, which Ilya could understand. Firstly, he was in a well-fitted suit and not the casual clothes the man had seen him in before. Shane was also into men, to some capacity. Whenever he turned away from Ilya his eyes were always the last thing to leave, to catch up with the rest of his face where it had gone.

He loved being ogled, of course. That electrifying feeling of knowing someone wanted you, the power you had over them when you were disinterested. Being ogled by Shane was different, the electric current wasn’t like a shot, it was a steady stream, and it ran over a bed of anxiety. Ilya rarely felt anxious with his sexual partners, maybe with a man in Russia or his coach’s son, but this all present anxiety. The desire to *please*. It was as foreign to him as ginger ale and apologies.

He felt a kinship with Anya, this blubbering urge to sit down and let Shane pet his head with his scrutiny and say *‘good, good’* with a voice made for comfort.

“Hollander,” he said once he’d moved, seemingly unconsciously, over to Shane.

“Hi, erm, Rozanov,” he stuttered out, blushing just a perfect shade of pink. He was eye level with Ilya’s chest, that would explain it.

“It’s Ilya, Shane. Unless you want one hundred dollars?” He tried to say it suave with the easy grin he was known for, but he was pretty sure that there was a hint of a tremor in his words and his English was probably long gone.

Shane still replied with the scarlet blush. It almost matched the rich hue of his jumper.

“No, no. It’s just weird seeing you without Anya, that’s all,” the Canadian explained, looking overly anxious.

Ilya tried for the brotherly pat, clutching on a bit longer than Pike so he didn’t completely bowl the other man over. “Do not worry, she is inside with Troy and Chiron. Animals ‘not allowed’ in locker rooms, bah, players are more animal than them.”

“She’s always fine, Ilya.” The other man beamed up at him, hopelessly distracted by the thought of the spaniel, “she’s perfectly healthy. I should know.”

“Da,” he tried not to stutter, “of course.”

It was embarrassing, really, how easily he slipped out of English in a panic whenever he was faced with Shane. He’d been living in Canada for years and years, had been having English lessons for even longer, and yet it seemed that looking at this silly Canadian vet had him forgetting the word *yes*.

“So, you’re a hockey fan?” That would explain his blush when they first met, how he’d seemed so initially affected that Ilya didn’t immediately jump to the gay conclusion, but instead the hockey fanatic. It seemed everyone in Canada was.

“No,” Shane chuckled a bit awkwardly, sliding a strand of hair out of his eyes, “no, my erm, mom, she’s the hockey fan, or well employee, I guess.”

“Hm?” And then Ilya suddenly made the absolutely insane connection between Yuna Hollander, social media powerhouse and overall woman to be feared, and Shane *Hollander*, mild mannered anxious vet. “Oh! Yuna is your mom, yes?”

“Yeah,” Shane said with a grin, “yeah, she’s doing okay, isn’t she?”

“She has managed to get me under control,” Ilya replied, “*and* she has got Harris little minions so he doesn’t have to go through all the really mean comments, she is doing very okay.”

The other man held the back of his neck, awkwardly. “I’m glad, I knew she would be good, but…yeah.”

“You worry too much,” Ilya said as reassuringly as he could. And it was true, he’d never seen the man’s eyes still, they were constantly flickering everywhere, like he was about to be caught out and chastised.

Shane scowled, looking a little like a dejected kitten. Ilya had the strange urge to wrap him up in a blanket, especially when he saw a small shiver travel through his body.

“Let’s go inside,” he subtly grabbed the top of his arm - just for a moment - to begin dragging him.

Maybe they were both Anya, because Shane was easily led inside. They walked together, side by side. There was something intimate about it, Ilya thought, to walk next to someone so close you could feel the current of air around them. Their hands almost brushed, Ilya tried not to obviously look down to see the proof.

Then he remembered Pike.

“You know Pike?” He asked, as subtly as possible, still leading Shane down the winding hallways towards the Cen’s locker room. He stole a glance towards his hands, seeing the shifting of anxiety as Shane unconsciously pulled at them.

“Oh, yeah!” He sounded a bit too excited for anyone to be about Pike, “yeah, me and Hayden” *Hayden* “played hockey together in the juniors team!”

“You played hockey?” Ilya knew he sounded a little ridiculous now, he could smell the jealousy leaking from his tone, “you said you weren’t a hockey fan.”

Shane gave him an odd look, “yeah, only until I was what, thirteen fourteen?”

“With Pike.”

“Yes?”

Ilya turned them towards the locker room with a frown. Shane’s tone was just frosted with the barest hint of ice, not immediately accusatory but it carried that warning. His teeth were out, about *Pike* of all people. Pike had got a reaction out of Shane, this new, strange response.

“You can er,” Ilya didn’t want to drag an unsuspecting citizen into the mess of the Cen’s locker room, for the safety of both sides, “just wait out here for a moment, please?”

“For what, Ilya?”

“Let me get Anya,” he cocked his head, “I want you to check her, and then I will buy you food?”

The man visibly relaxed at the thought of the dog, “okay. But not food from here, it’s ridiculously expensive.”

“Hmm,” Ilya just murmured, “I will be only a minute.”

“Okay,” Shane said with a smile, soft as he leant away to lean against the wall. He swore the man’s eyes flickered to his lips like a moth to a flame. “Ilya?” He asked again after a pause.

“Da, da, a second.” He opened the door of the locker room…

A furry mass leapt out, as though propelled by god himself. The brown and white blur flew past Ilya and into the hallway. Anya's ears were perked as she slid on the floor to turn into the corridors, ready to run.

“Anya!” Troy's voice yelped from the room. He ran past Ilya, half naked and still wet, the towel draped loosely around his waist threatening to come off with every step.

Shane grabbed Anya easily, clutching onto the wriggling mass mid leap as she yelped unhappily, spraying water everywhere in her efforts to escape. Her damp paws pushed against his shoulders as he held tight, her sopping face drove into his neck and plastered him in water.

“Oh my god,” Troy gasped, “I’m so sorry. She just, *ran out…*”

The vet just laughed happily, even as Ilya could see the water now literally dripping from the man’s jumper, “Anya, Anya.” He murmured to the dog, even as she struggled, panting with excitement.

“She has been in shower?” Ilya asked in confusion, because there were a few other alternatives as to where the water had come from, but the shower was definitely preferable. Getting Shane covered in toilet water was definitely not a priority.

“Yeah,” Troy murmured, shivering a little in the hallway, “Wyatt was just rinsing off and she ran in, he didn’t even try to kick her out.”

“Tch tch,” Ilya stroked Anya’s head where she was still being clutched by Shane, “she does enjoy swimming.”

Troy made a face at him, tilting his head towards Shane, who was now looking very awkward and damp holding the spaniel who currently better resembled a drowned rat.

“This is ah, Shane Hollander,” Ilya was about to explain that Shane was a veterinarian and… a friend? Client? Harris rushed out of the locker room, clutching Chiron in his arms, bumping into Troy with a harried expression.

“Oh!” Harris gasped, “you got her!” His eyes rose to see the man restraining the dog and he beamed, “Shane! Did you enjoy the game?”

“I think the bigger priority is the fact he’s now absolutely soaking, and I’m still half naked?” Troy mumbled, still sending a questioning glance towards Harris.

“He’s Yuna’s son,” Harris explained, placing Chiron back on the floor to open the door of the locker room. He beckoned the group inside.

“Oh, yeah,” Troy smiled at Shane, “she’s mentioned you a few times. Said you used to play in the junior leagues?”

Shane walked stiffly into the room, scooting past Harris as he held the door open. Ilya saw the tight grip he had on Anya, no longer just to keep her steady. “Yeah, it was a while ago.”

“Still, man,” Harris smiled that stupid understanding smile and rubbed a hand through his beard, “it’s nice of you to come to a game.”

“Yeah,” Shane replied, glancing at Ilya over Anya’s head, “it has been nice.”

Troy reappeared, fully dressed in a casual tee and sweatpants which Ilya was immediately jealous of, and looked pointedly at Ilya.

“Get Anya’s lead and we can let poor Shane change his sweater, it’s completely soaked.”

“Awhh,” Harris cooed, “it’s not her fault she’s so happy.”

“Yes, yes,” Ilya muttered, “happy little demon.”

Harris’s phone chimed lightly, he checked the message with a sigh, “oh god, Fox is giving us grief again.”

“C’mon then,” Troy murmured to his boyfriend, grabbing him lightly by the elbow, “let’s go help Yuna before she starts threatening them again."

“It was lovely seeing you again, Shane!” Harris yelled out as Troy dragged him by his arm towards where purgatory waited as the face of Chris the media person from Fox.

Ilya just stared at Shane for a moment, feeling strangely like he was in a bad porno (take off your wet shirt, daddy, let’s wank each other off in the showers). The other man simply placed Anya on the floor, where she shook violently one final time to spray water droplets all over Ilya’s nice suit trousers.

“Sorry,” Shane made a face. “I really thought she’d rubbed it all on me.”

“No, no, is fine. Is my dog, is my responsibility.”

Shane moved to remove his jumper when Ilya became aware of how cold the rink was, but also the very interesting image of the man wearing one of *his* hoodies. “I’m just gonna-” He starts, watching a strip of skin appear when the jumper is lifted slightly. Shane gave him a questioning look. “It’s too cold for just a shirt, I’ll get you a hoody.” His hoody.

“Okay,” Shane replied with a smile. Ilya disappeared down towards his locker on the other side of the room, quickly turning away when the snippet of skin appeared again and widened.

He only had one hoody in his bag, a boring ‘Centaur’s’ one in the team colours, but it also had

‘Rozanov’ written on the back. Most would probably assume it’s merely a custom piece that Shane had commissioned, only he and Ilya would know that it’s not. It probably smells like Ilya as well, and by the time he returns it, it might smell like Shane too.

Ilya thinks of the way Anya scents everything and grimaces. He really is turning into his dog.

He tries not to gasp when he returns, everything he thought about Shane Hollander is destroyed and lit on fire when he sees the large rainbow thermometer front and centre on the tee. The red fabric also clings to his arms, and Ilya never realised that a vet could be so muscular. It looked like one small movement would tear the taut seams.

Shane must see his expression, he looks down in horror and swears, “oh, shit.” He looks back up to Ilya’s face, his cheeks now almost as red as the shirt, and sputters. “It was a, er, gag gift, from a colleague. It’s not like I’m…”

“Do your parents know that you’re queer?” Ilya asked in a gentle tone, feeling now immensely bad for the panic Shane was in when Ilya was just selfishly checking the other man out.

Shane froze, like he could see the hit coming and was dreading slamming into the boards.

Ilya then remembered that not everyone had a gaydar as good as him, and that his harsh Russian accent was definitely going to send the wrong impression. Even the word queer, a word he’d reclaimed from his fathers acidic tongue, could easily be heard as vile and punishing.

“I have just been staring at your arms, Shane,” he began, “I am bisexual.”

Oh god, he didn’t need to profess his attraction to the man. Jesus.

“Oh!” Shane’s blush spread furiously down his neck, Ilya could see his arms tightening under the snug fabric of the tee as he looked at the floor in front of him. “I’m… I’m gay.”

“Good!” Ilya exclaims, with way too much excitement in his voice. He knew Shane was queer, obviously, but hearing him admit it made a small bolt of happiness shock his entire body. “Yeah, it’s good you can be, er, open?”

The other man smiled shyly, crossing his arms. Ilya could see goosebumps running up and down his arms.

“Take this hoodie.”

“Ilya, this is yours.”

“You’re cold.”

The other man took the blue sweater, Anya beneath them leapt up to smash her body into it, but Shane lifted it up just in time to not drench another hoody.

Seeing the man in Cen’s blue, with Rozanov written across his back like a brand, was almost too much. Anya was looking up at the man with similar adoration. He wanted to grab his hand, right there and then, and kiss him in this locker room. Grab the back of the shirt and feel his name written on Shane’s back. He was never a possessive lover, years of hookups had proved this, but Shane felt different. Shane *was* different.

He was completely fucked.

Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

POV Ilya Rozanov

Ilya played well. Of course he played well, he danced across the ice causing chaos, like some tenacious fae. He enjoyed it, he only really played hockey because he enjoyed it, but he was constantly wishing for the game to be over, for practice to end just five minutes early, to fall asleep sooner.

The red text on his calendar was honestly a little embarrassing. Bold letters wrote out ‘Vets, 5:30’. The latest appointment he could get for after practice. He felt like a child counting down to Christmas, checking his calendar each day when he woke up to smile like an idiot.

He messaged Shane as much as he thought he could get away with. Messages with photos of Anya, asking about Anya, asking about dogs in general. Shane always responded pretty rapidly, in a strangled void of scientific jargon. Then, a few minutes later, it would be a simplified version of the confusing science. Why couldn't Anya eat chocolate? It contained theobromine which reduced metabolic rate and overstimulated the nervous system. What are common health issues with Spaniels? Arthritis, back pains, ear infections, eye infections…. It was a fairly substantial list, Anya had looked up at him as he read it aloud. She seemed unfazed. Ilya definitely wasn’t.

Towards the end of the week it turned into voice messages, Shane rambling nonsensically until he pauses, catches his breath, and recounts the information with a more direct tone, something Ilya has decided to simply call his ‘vet voice.’ He replays them, chewing on a pen as he pretends to write down notes, instead finding himself just listening to the voice on the other side. He can hear Shane’s breath, when he gets too close to the microphone. He rewinds to these sections. It’s not normal at all.

Then the messages derailed, slowly at first, then they spiralled into chatter and a warm sense that Ilya knew was affection. Questions about Anya widened into examples from past patients, which became stories of harried vets clinics, strange clients and insane colleagues.

“There’s a vet and a nurse who I have to work with,” Shane explained once in a voice note, “they’re both so in love with each other it’s borderline disgusting having to work with them… not that I’m homophobic, obviously, but they’re staring at each other’s lips every thirty seconds and keep on *stroking* fingers when passing over syringes… God I really shouldn’t be telling you this, should I.”

Ilya disagreed, Shane should most definitely be telling him this. Shane should be telling him everything in his calming honeyed voice. He had a picture book when he was younger, with sirens luring sailors out to sea to steal their treasure and their teeth. He’d always thought those sailors were ridiculous, even at nine. Now, he knew he’d give his treasure and his (fake) teeth to hear more of Shane. He’d pull them out of his mouth for him, if that wasn’t so disgusting and unsanitary. Shane hated unsanitary.

Shane is different over messages, more confident in cracking jokes at Ilya’s expense (although he apologised aggressively at first) and with a lightness to his voice that makes him joyful. He’s the same age as Ilya, he grew up with no pets and his dad loves reading the New Yorker and doing the puzzles at the back. Ilya sees Yuna helping David with a crossword at training and has to fight back a smile.

It does feel a little strange to talk to Yuna’s son without her knowing, it somehow feels like he’s breaking a rule when she mentions something about Shane that Ilya already knows.

“Skechers has reached out for a brand campaign, to be honest I’m not too sure,” she mentions casually after cornering him in her office one day, “they’re not known for being the sportiest shoe ever, but maybe they’re trying to change the image. I think they must be pretty popular with science and health people though, my son’s always wearing them and he’s a vet so hockey definitely isn’t their target market. They’re probably using you as a test to check if branching out is sustainable, I think you’re too big to just be a test, Ilya.”

He decides not to go for the campaign under her advice, but feels oddly resentful about her keeping him from something that’s Shane’s. He could be modelling the sneakers that he wears, he could be the image of those sneakers, of something that Shane owns and has and is tangible to him. Ilya could be connected to that, there every time Shane looks down in consults or when he ties them up in the morning. But he’s not there, he’s not part of Shane’s life. He’s part of the ice, of the team, of bullying the rookies and keeping them safe after a night out, of Dykstra’s awful taste in country music and Wyatt giving out comics to the kids

in Ottawa hospital. He loves his team, loves his part in his own little world but can't help but want to squirm his way into Shane's.

Which is ridiculous. He's known the man for about a month, but Ilya supposed he'd seen people make stupider choices. Like when drunk LaPointe and Holmberg got matching tattoos that they've never let anyone else see in Mexico… allegedly in Spanish.

The money thing is eating away at him, he knows that Shane's an educated professional, he shouldn't be wasting his time talking Ilya through the basics of dog ownership just because he's anxious. Not for the amount of money he's given him, anyway. Ilya doesn't deserve that sort of care, he's a grown man and he should be able to figure it out himself.

That's partly why he needs this appointment so much, to give Shane a little more money as penance for putting up with Ilya's annoying quirks and nearly crying at him over the phone. It's pure nightmare fuel, he still thinks about the moment he felt his voice betray him and break, cracking uselessly as Anya looked up at him from the floor.

Seeing him is also a nice bonus.

When the day does finally come he sneaks out of practice early, makes a few excuses with Coach Wiebe, gets in a flashy car and drives to the vet's clinic with a volcanic amount of energy. Anya seems to pick up on it, he struggles to make her settle in her dog seat. He'd bought a fancy one the same day of getting her, his phone had realised what was going on and he'd seen video after video of dogs getting killed in car crashes. Now, she was attached to the seat and surrounded by padding, and it wasn't like he had any passenger princesses, anyway.

Waiting in the vets gave him little jolts of anxiety. The combination of the thought that *something* could be wrong with Anya and the idea of seeing Shane again was twisting his guts and making tremors roll down his legs. The receptionist gave him a small smile. He tried to return it.

"Just take a seat there, love."

He sat down with Anya straining at the lead to explore. He pulled her back gently to settle her between his legs. The calm was short lived when the double doors swung open and she lept up once again.

“Ilya Rozanov?” A man appeared in front of him, dressed in green scrubs. “Sorry, hi, I’m John, a nurse here. The vet’s going to be a little while, he got tied up in surgery. You can wait for a couple minutes or you can reschedule? It’s your choice.”

“No,” Ilya blurted out, “it’s fine, I can wait.”

“Great!” The nurse, John, replied. Anya was doing little taps around him, so he crouched down to scratch at her head, “she’s beautiful, full spaniel?”

“Er, don’t know. She’s a rescue.”

“Awh, even better,” John cooed as Anya gave an excited spin before sticking her snout between his legs again. “I’d put money on her being full, just from her confirmation alone.”

Ilya nodded like he understood what this all meant.

“Ah!” Another person in green scrubs burst through the doors, assumedly another nurse. She scowled at John, “you always get the sweet ones and I’m left with the aggressive daschaunds.”

“You can er, say hello,” Ilya stammered out, waving vaguely over to Anya. The nurse beamed at him, squatting down and letting Anya move over to her. Her tail was wagging so hard Ilya got struck with the fear that she would hit it on one of the chairs so violently it would just completely pop off.

“Hello, hello, Anya,” she murmured.

“Don’t worry,” John laughed, “Eleanor only knows her name because it’s on the system, not because we’re like creepy stal…” He falters off, “you know what I mean, sorry. I don’t mean t be weird.”

Ilya couldn’t stop the laugh that breezed past his lips, the two nurses smiled up at each other, the kind of looks with dancing hidden beneath the eyes that Ilya only saw echoed on the ice between two really close teammates.

“No, do not worry. You are too nice to be real stalkers,” Ilya thought again, “although some stalkers are too nice, aren’t they?”

“Most stalkers are someone you already know well,” Eleanor replied breezily. John smacked her on the arm, “what?” She squawked, “It's a good fact!”

“In what world is that a good fact?”

“This one, this universe, c’mon Anya, don’t you agree?”

The spaniel just nuzzled deeper into the woman’s hands.

Ilya was still catching up to the concept he could be having this conversation with Shane’s work colleagues, of all things. It felt like peeling back another layer of paint to reveal the hidden code underneath.

He’d talked to Shane's mom last night, after a practice session Ilya had been pulled aside for media ‘training’. He was essentially a prisoner until Yuna deemed his instagram ‘acceptable’. Afterwards, Harris had asked Yuna about Shane, something along the lines of inviting him to the next barbecue. Ilya had given Harris a *look* and Harris had quirked an eyebrow back and Ilya was struck with how nice it was to have someone else in his corner, someone who’d apparently met Shane twice and could already tell he was viciously into men.

Yuna was delighted with the idea, but seemed to imply that Shane was unlikely to turn up, making vague suggestions of an anxious state of mind and a busy job, but did say that she'd invite him.

"I'll mention it as well, he'd be more likely to come if both of us say, yes?" Ilya had suggested to Harris who'd just laughed and clapped him on the back. Maybe it was some Canadian joke Ilya still didn't understand.

He was asking today, perhaps a little unprofessionally, but he really thought that Shane would enjoy this barbecue. There would be plenty of dogs as well, and Bood and Cassie had recently adopted a small patchy kitten that Ilya knew Shane would adore. He'd mentioned the barbecue, once, twice, over text. Just a little hint, a quick mention about the dogs Harris might bring and the patchy kitten who loved to be doted on. Shane had responded in the wishy washy way that Ilya could now identify as a polite Canadian 'no'.

He would be dragging his, *this*, man to his team barbecue.

Another woman entering the waiting room in a pair of blue scrubs, caught his attention. Mostly because her entrance was so much less dramatic than Eleanor who'd practically flung the doors open.

"Mr Rozanov!" She came trotting over, "so sorry about the wait, I can administer the vaccine if you want, but I'm sure Anya would be more comfortable with Shane." She bent down next to the spaniel to ruffle her ears, distracting Anya from where she was fighting with John's fingers, "isn't that right, sweetie?"

Ilya really hoped that Anya clearly being relaxed wouldn't prompt this new vet to do the vaccine, but she just smiled at him wickedly. "Dr Landry," she reached out a hand for him to shake, "it's been a delight having you and Anya at this practice, Mr Rozanov."

"Yes," Ilya replied, completely unsure of what to say, "it is nice practice."

“Hmm,” Dr Landry responded with another smirk. “Don’t worry, *your boy* will be down soon.”

Chapter 10

Your boy. It was wrong on two fronts. Shane was most definitely not a boy, and he was definitely not Ilya's, not in any shape of the word. Ilya paid him for a service, it was like tipping a waiter and then trying to take them home in the cab. The waiter was not Ilya's, Shane was not Ilya's. Dr Landry was most definitely wrong.

But it felt so delicious to hear.

He needed to pivot the conversation. Ilya was about to ask her a question about the job, in some weird contrived way of getting more information about Shane, when the man himself suddenly appeared looking vaguely harried with the normal amount of anxiety drifting among his other features. His bangs were sticky with sweat against his forehead and there was a sheen of liquid on his cheekbones.

Ilya felt a little guilty for not asking Dr Landry to do the vaccination.

"Sorry, Ilya," Shane burst out, "I was well…I mean…"

"He was searching for one of the dog's balls!" Eleanor informed him with a cackle.

"Well… yes, it was kinda that in the most basic sense… What are you all doing here, anyway? Don't you have labs to look at, Dr Landry?" He maneuvered her away from Anya and Ilya.

Dr Landry gave Ilya a look which made his stomach go all squirrely with the knowledge he had been brought into this little collection of people with nothing but smiles and chatter. He wasn't lonely in Ottawa, he had his team and Svetlana who he still messaged on occasion, but it was impossible to ignore the warmth that the glance gave him

"Right then," Shane exclaimed, "since I'm the only one doing my job here."

“And you look so good doing it!” Eleanor cheered sarcastically, getting up to leave the room with John in tow.

“Hollander,” Dr Landry said with a slight nod with her head, disappearing behind the receptionist's desk. The woman sitting behind it was watching everything with a sly smile, “go and enjoy your consult.” Dr Landry finished with a wave in Ilya’s direction.

Shane turned away instantly, but Ilya gave her a shy salute back.

“Sorry about them,” he murmured as Ilya was led to the consult room, Anya straining in front to walk next to Shane.

“Nothing to be sorry for,” Ilya tried in his best Canadian accent, elongating the ‘o’ a beat too long.

He was rewarded with Shane’s twinkling laugh and a small glance back. Beat that, Pike.

“Toileting okay?” Shane asked Ilya as he clicked away on his keyboard with no visible letters. Ilya looked at Anya as if to ask for her opinion. She stared back from where she was almost eye level on the examination table.

“Yes,” He assumed what she’d been doing up until this point was normal for her, “no vomiting or diarrhea either.”

“Wow, Ilya. Doing my job for me now, are we?”

He was Russian, he did not blush or turn any embarrassing shade of red, but yet an inkling of heat was spreading over his cheeks and he could feel his ears begin to burn. He stared again into Anya’s dark eyes, trying to ignore the pull of the blue scrubs over Shane’s wide shoulders and the way his dark hair curled loosely over the nape of his neck. It was paler than the rest of him, like a blank canvas.

Ilya thought he could be quite the artist.

“Alright then,” Shane pulled him from his thoughts of red marks and possessive touches, he came to stand next to Anya, holding the canister. Anya looked at it with pure distrust. “I’ve just got to ask, does Anya come into contact with anyone who has a bad immune system?”

“Bad?”

“Just like easily ill, anyone with a chronic illness or on any medication. Immunosupressed.”

“I don’t think so,” Ilya murmured, “what type of medication?”

“I think it depends if it inhibits any immune responses, she’d just need to be kept away from those people for around a month just in case she passes on an illness from the vaccine.” Shane said this too casually, the words soft and familiar in his mouth. He looked at Ilya sideways when he was met with silence.

“Ah.” Ilya paused and found a rush of panic flooding his body as he prepared his next words, “if I tell you specific drug… could you tell me if it is okay?”

“Yep, I might have to look it up just in case but yeah, better to be safe than sorry, am I right?” Shane’s calm smile made Ilya feel somehow worse about revealing his… misfortunes. The depression pills did make him feel better, he did get less dark spots during his day like mold, but even saying the name or admitting to anyone and himself what they were felt like failure. His father wouldn’t be pleased, he couldn’t bring himself to feel pleased either. Sadness naturally ruined everyone’s good mood, and Ilya was the anti-sadness. He did everything he could to be happy, but Anya was important and he needed to be with her.

“Uhm, fluoxetine?”

Shane looked at him carefully, Ilya felt like one of his patients under the gentle stare.

“Prozac should be fine, that family of drugs can actually produce immune boosting results like lowering inflammation. So Anya doesn’t have to worry about being near anyone taking those drugs...”

Anyone taking those drugs.

“No matter how close she is to them.” Shane finished.

It didn’t feel as bad as he expected it to, someone knowing about his issues. There was still quite a large dose of panic injected into his body, cold feelings of regret which spread throughout his stomach but it was nice to see Shane still looking at him. His gaze hadn’t changed, there was concern present but it was always there. Instead he still looked at him like he was Ilya, not a project or something *wrong*.

“Da.” His voice cracked slightly. He cringed. “They’re just used to, y’know, give better performance…”

“Ilya. I know what they’re used for, it’s okay. I just hope the person taking them has support?”

He could only nod, Shane smiled at him and actually touched his shoulder, smoothing him down in a way that made him jealous of all the pats and scratches Anya and the numerous other pets had gotten. It was nice after admitting to being all wrong inside, the feeling of Shane putting him back into his body.

“Alright then, if you could just hold Anya for me?”

Holding Anya was usually difficult. Especially now that she’d decided that she was no longer full spaniel, but rather full worm. Ilya tried to hold her back, but she still managed to retract her head from where Shane was gently tilting her head up to hold her snout. Ilya tried to hold her in what was essentially a headlock, she just smashed her head into his face. Ilya tried to hold her front and back legs, keeping her airborne, but she just rolled herself sideways.

“Right,” Shane mutters, “Anya you really know how to make this difficult, don’t you?”

The spaniel didn’t even have the decency to look embarrassed.

“At least we know she’s definitely healthy, god Anya,” Shane swore as he lifted the dog off the table to the floor. “Sit, Anya.” She stared at him, still tapping her paws against the floor and definitely not sitting.

“Sit.”

Both Anya and Ilya’s ears perked up.

Being a captain of a hockey team meant that Ilya was often in control, it meant that he’d had to learn how to bring authority into his voice, how to make people listen and act. Shane’s voice was low, almost dangerous. It was comparable, in some ways, to a growl. There was a threat nestled beneath the low notes. Anya heard it, she sat. Ilya fought the urge to.

He stepped over the dog, one leg on either side, to sit nearly on her but still keeping the weight entirely in his feet. Ilya watched in amazement as he casually held her head with large hands, practically encasing her skull, and blocked a nostril with a thumb to squirt the canister into the other. Anya seemed amazed as well, blinking in confusion and flapping her tail slightly against the floor as she reckoned with how she'd been tamed.

"Good girl," Shane cooed, stepping away from her fluidly. If his scrubs pulled at his shoulders, they did despicable things to his thighs.

Anya sneezed and looked a little embarrassed at being manhandled with such practiced ease. Ilya wanted to roll onto all fours and simply say 'me next'.

"That was very," Ilya had opened his stupid mouth and now he had to think of a normal word, "*quick*."

Great. That one definitely had a few sexual connotations.

He got a small grin in return, "I'm well practised, what can I say?"

"*Da*." Even Shakespeare would be jealous of the poetry flowing from his lips.

The typing began again in full force. "Anything else you wanted to discuss while you're here in person?" Which was a subtle nod to their voice messages but yet it still burnt something through Ilya.

"No just," Ilya placed a stack of hundreds on the desk without a word, "for the help."

Shane's whole body stiffened as he turned to take in the money. He even stopped typing.

"Ilya. You know you pay at reception, right?"

“Yes, yes, of course. This isn’t for now. This is for all the extra help.”

“Ilya, what on earth are you on about.”

His words ran away with him, like a flood from his mouth he couldn’t stop or control, “And come to the barbecue, please? You can have money for payment for going to the barbeque.” He barely took a breath as he rambled on, “I think your mom is worried about you, and there will be dogs and patchy cat I need you to check, just to make sure they’re all healthy. They’re mostly Harris’s.”

He wanted to see Shane again, and if there’s one thing he’s learnt from his family it’s that time means money. He didn’t mind having to pay for Shane’s time, the man deserved the money and it was a good service.

“I don’t want your fucking money, jesus christ,” Shane pinched the area between his eyes. There was a large gap where the faint hum from the small fridge swallowed all the air in the room.

“Ilya, thank you for the invite, but I can’t make it to the barbecue.”

“Why? You are not busy.” Which may or may not be true, but looking at the clinic's opening hours and the times when Shane was most online, Ilya was banking on him being free.

“You don’t know that. And my mom isn’t worried about me, she’s neurotic and insane and just stressed about her job, she knows I’m fine.”

“She loves you, she is worried. I think she misses you.”

“The hell do you mean misses me, I talk to her and dad like all the time.” He frowned, “why are you even involved in this?”

“I think she’s just scared you are lonely, you live alone and you are single and they cannot understand why, I cannot understand why.” He practically whispered the last part, “I think they would really like it if you could come to our barbeque.”

Shane turned on his heels, suddenly more interested in a poster on the wall. It was a cartoon dachshund with a nut over its face. ‘There’s more than one way to crack a nut!’. Ilya saw the dachshund's childish grin and wanted to rip it off the dog’s face.

“I don’t know why my mom just can’t understand that I don’t want to have to spend my free time with stupid immature jocks.”

He seemed to retract the statement in the awkward gasp he made after the last word had barely made it out his mouth. He turned and looked at Ilya. Ilya looked back.

“I will not pry anymore,” Ilya said.

“Ilya, I didn’t mean that you’re an immature jock, of course you’re not, I just…”

“So your mom’s colleagues, who she loves and wishes you would meet, are stupid? My bestest friends are stupid? You do not trust us?”

“Why are you so obsessed with my mom? You don’t know her, you don’t know how she feels about me.”

“She talks about you, you cannot ignore love.”

“Right, okay.”

Shane refused to meet his eye.

“You will think about it?” Ilya dares to ask.

“I will think about it, Rozanov. Is that it for today?” The dismissal was practical, professional. It really made Ilya feel like he’d overstepped, but he already knew he had. He didn’t need Shane pointing it out to him, like some dumbass.

“Yes, thank you.” He paused, holding Anya’s lead and ready to exit the room without Shane by his side. “That is still your money though, even if you are not coming.”

“I don’t want your stupid money, Rozanov. God.” He practically spat the last words like a hissing cat.

Bile rose in Ilya’s throat. He was somehow losing this man, who he’d only known for a month. He wanted to tell Shane how his mom talks about him, tell him how much it’d mean to him if he came to this stupid team barbeque. He wanted to hurt the man in some sordid way and then make it up to him again in the next sentence.

“Well,” he tilted his head cruelly, “I may be stupid jock, but I definitely don’t need the money as much as you do.”

Shane still didn’t turn to him, he got no reaction. His brother would punch and fight. Another player would slam him into the boards and get taken off by the refs. Shane’s fingers were spread out either side of his keyboard as he leant against the desk. There would be no retribution, no punishment.

“Goodbye, Rozanov.”

Only dismissal.

Chapter 11

The barbecue was marked in Shane's calendar.

The physical and digital versions had it recorded like some kind of doomsday. Every time he opened his emails or glanced at the unicorn calendar on his bedroom wall he was struck with immense illogical guilt.

The unicorn looked in judgement down from where she stood in a field of daisies. Shane didn't realise how much he'd needed a wall calendar until Eleanor had purchased it for a secret santa gag gift. He thought he might as well put it to good use. The unicorn had now been converted into a harbinger of doom. The dreaded day held the words in thick, black marker. A dark omen of sorts.

He knew he was free, he convinced himself that the sadness came from the guilt of the lie, so instead he booked in an extra shift at the practice and told Becca on reception he was 'just bored.' It was almost easy to convince himself that the strangely mournful feeling that had collapsed in his chest had gone away, even if he still felt fat and bloated with it.

Becca had called him dearie and had even put on her glasses to look at him better with a surveying glance usually only used on emergency cases.

Shane checks his phone every morning, nearly addicted to the feeling of light metal in his hand. The number, still not added to his contacts, never appears in his notifications. No text, no missed calls. No voice notes with a Russian accent. Nothing. It's like waiting for a dead dog to come back to life, he knows it can't happen but still tries to demand it into existence.

The money Rozanov gave him sits in his bedside drawer, the one he never opens right at the bottom. Just knowing it's there is enough to make him feel nauseous, actually having to look at it would probably make him burn it, which is completely ridiculous and illogical and Shane is neither. The money itself isn't bad, he knows that he could probably donate it to a charity or something, but it feels bad. It feels *dirty.*

He tries not to think about the money, or the thick, black ink. He doesn't think about Rozanov, or Anya.

When a spaniel comes in with a cut cornea he doesn't think about Anya's liver spots. When an elderly Eastern European couple comes in with a cat called Lily he doesn't focus on their accents, the curl of their tongue around each word. He focuses on Lily's potential urine crystals and then gets to deliver the good news that she'd urinated while in care at the vets. The owners are overjoyed, Lily looks a bit put out by her adventures.

He focuses on the work.

"Holly, are you sure you want to do this? It's a pretty strange case, it's at least a page of notes." She's watching him with veiled suspicion as he tries to take over the computer.

"You do so many referrals, it's about time I tried my hand at one."

"No," she stuck another piece of pasta into her mouth, "not letting you."

"What?" He exclaimed, "c'mon, Rose."

"Nope. It's my case, my job." She pulled her phone out of a scrub pocket and popped off the phone case. Handing him ten bucks, she turned back to the screen, "go off to the shops and get yourself something nice."

He got her the Redbull flavour she loved, the coconut one that was for some reason blue coloured and he got himself a smoothie, a much more comforting pale green. There's a picture of Rozanov on one of the sports drinks, the drink itself is bright pink and the contrast is so startling Shane almost pulls his phone out to message the man a picture. He quickly leaves the store.

"I said something *nice*, Holly, Christ." Rose sniped at him as soon as she saw the haul, but she still opened the Redbull can with her teeth and gulped it down, shooting judgemental

glares over the top of the can.

“Want some?” She asked with a blue tongue.

Shane shook his head.

The others gave him a wider berth than usual. Something about dealing with the subtle nature of animals everyday meant that the whole practice could tell something was wrong. What's worse is that they had an inkling about *how* it was wrong.

Nobody mentioned Rozanov, or Anya for that matter. Hockey, never brought up normally, now seemed to be forcibly scrubbed from the air. The nurses let him help them clean more than usual, he helped dilute the F10 solution and used the window scrubber Eleanor found lodged behind the kennels to make all the windows shine. He nearly cried over a PTS.

It was very unprofessional.

Rose takes him clubbing. She and Kiara dance around each other, metaphorically and literally, clad in very little for the cold night. They grind together and rub shoulders with strangers, dragging Shane into the throng. He attempts a little shuffle, and when all else fails he finds Rose dragging him forcibly by the hips in some kind of strange sway that’s completely off beat. Strangers casually bump into him, perhaps his hip or upper arm, and he’s reminded of the fact he never truly got to touch Rozanov. A man with dirty blonde hair and piercing eyes glances at him. Briefly, just for a second. Shane feels like he’s been turned inside out. He wonders if the other dancers can see his intestines strewn out on the floor under the hazy lights.

Rozanov is, unfortunately, still famous. The genre of fame that goes beyond strange energy drinks. His face appears on some stupid advert when Shane’s just trying to buy some new sneakers. He just decides to rebuy his same old Skechers. Sometimes his name appears on the radio, as part of some otherwise boring and insignificant sports section that the hosts seem to find very exciting. He flinches at the sound of it during a lump removal. The dog's heart rate rises as he makes the first incision and he can feel his rising along with it.

A friend from college needs some help with a farm rotation. It'd been a few years but he volunteered to go out with them for the weekend and was shoved back into a world of grime and snorting bulls. Rose comes along too, she airs out her old boiler suit and joins Shane in the mud. They help the farmer coral a bull for treatment. Shane whistles at it through the winding metal maze and Rose claps threateningly in its direction. The bull snorts at them, nearly charging for a minute to where they're perched on the gate, but Shane flaps his coat and it reels away. The adrenaline made him forget about Rozanov and his stupid spaniel, and made it easier for him to ignore his mother's messages. It's hard to think when you're shoulder deep in a cow.

As he's coming up to the hypothetical barbeque he realises the other issue. The guilt from the lie is consuming him, the money is still in his possession and beyond all that he knows that he's the one who fucked up. These thoughts rule his existence like some perverse holy trinity. But, the thought that rules them all: the fact that Rozanov is taking goddamn depression medication, is like the icing on the cake, the cherry on top.

He drafts a message in the notes app. It's halfway between an apology and a question. The words are formal yet completely contrary, absolutely illogical. Shane is not illogical. He drafts the message again in his notebook, seeing if the rough paper makes a change.

I still have your money, I can give it to my mom so you can get it from her if you prefer?

I'm sorry, Rozanov. You're not stupid.

I hope you have help, you deserve it.

I'm so sorry, Rozanov.

How often do you talk to my mother? How often is it about me?

Does it hurt when you fall on the ice?

The messages stay firmly lodged in his notebook when they emerge as more of a vomit of his thoughts rather than anything tangible, anything real.

He breaks and googles the man. Well, Rose googles the man and Kiara pretends to clean around them to watch. Shane decides to stay in the room and cuddle with the corgi in for bloods, even though he could leave. Rozanov's looks impressive on the ice, Shane can begin to understand why he's worshipped the way he is. Rose, annoyingly, highlights this as well.

"Huh," she murmurs as they watch a video, "he's fast."

Kiara stops 'mopping' to lean over her shoulder, one hand resting on Rose's lower back to keep her steady. Her thumb moves in slow, gentle circles. "Surprising, he's massive."

"Theres a ton of people who hate him," Rose points out the next day while Shane is trying to insert an ET tube down a retriever's throat.

"Huh?"

"Rozanov." Like the name explains everything. Eleanor looks up from where she's checking the dog's vitals, the scent of gossip thick on her tongue.

"Okay?" Shane asks as she moves to lean on the table next to him, absent mindedly fiddling with the dog's paw pads.

"I think it's 'cause he's always boasting at the cameras, hockey bro's don't like that apparently."

"Okay?"

He sees her glare at him out of the corner of his eyes like he’s stupid. She hands him some pre-cut gauze wrap to attach the tubing to the dog's muzzle in a manner that’s worryingly aggressive. Eleanor glances between them both like it’s a tennis match.

“He needs a trim.”

“Who? Rozanov?”

“No, silly. The dog.” She holds up a paw in her palm, “look, too long.”

Shane just sighs and grabs the clippers. “I’ll do it while he’s out.”

He can’t have Rose doing all the research for him. He understands hockey, to a degree, but it still feels like he’s looking through code as he glances through hockey forums and game logs. The videos are interesting as well, especially the ones where Rozanov appears damp and shirtless, boastful with his words and entirely sexy in the way he winks into the camera.

In 2017 he had a dip, for a normal player it would be business as usual, for Rozanov it prompted hours, actual *hours,* of analysis. Podcasters, sports commentators, randoms online all piled in to discuss his downfall. Two games later the numbers shot back up again, the incident was classed as an outlier and Rozanov reached equilibrium once more.

His move to Ottawa makes no sense either, years of comparing lab results have trained him for being able to just about decode the stats and notice the discrepancies but these skills aren’t even needed with how glaringly stupid the move was. He, as a single player, had more goals than Ottawa as the entire team did the last season he was with Boston. The numbers are a little insane when Shane dives deeper, reaching far into the back of his mind to conjure up memories of what the strange numbers meant and what was actually good, bad or average. Rozanov was definitely good, more than good. He barely dipped his toe into average.

Shane found himself willingly watching hockey games, curled up in his bed staring at his phone, concentrating a little more when Rozanov would suddenly flash into frame like some angel of death and whisk the puck away.

When he saw the man get hit, smashed into the boards by a bigger player, he had to pause and pace his apartment. The video continued with Rozanov casually launching himself back towards the puck in a way that was strangely feline. There was a zoom on his face, his white teeth glinting and he smirked at nobody in particular. His nose was bleeding slightly, mottling his upper lip with the dark red that a pink tongue lapped away.

Rozanov hadn't mentioned any family in their meagre conversations, the internet didn't either. His father had died, apparently of dementia, but you'd think that Rozanov had just emerged from his father by mitosis from the lack of mention of any mother. Maybe he'd never had one, but from the general attitudes of Russia Shane thought this was unlikely.

This wasn't the only Rozanov mystery, the man was private, aggressively so. Only in regards to family, there were *multiple* groups of women online discussing hookups. He had a varied diet, his claims were spread out across Canada and the US and there were even a few in Europe and one woman in… Australia? Which is somewhere Shane couldn't imagine Rozanov ever going. The man exuded ice, his accent, his hair, his sharp eyes. The abstract image of him dutifully fucking a bronzed woman in the scorching heat seemed fantastical. His pale hands encasing her golden skin and, from what Shane read, making her see stars that rivaled those above.

Reading about Rozanov was making him feel worse. Yet he still does. The man was addicting in every way, his photos, his stats, the seemingly random Instagram posts. Every time he looks, every time he clicks, the anxiety curdles in his stomach. He feels a little like a dog, clicker trained with a strange negative reinforcement that made him nauseous whenever he saw anything related to Rozanov.

But he keeps on clicking.

Keeps on looking.

His mom messages him, telling him about the barbeque but then this message was covered by some others, general plans she wanted to make with him, asking him about birthday plans.

She sends him some photos of him from an old album, decked out in his full hockey gear but still clutching a science book in his hands. That's ultimately why he stopped, he couldn't spend so much time in hockey and still know everything he wanted to know. The others eventually got pissed, blaming all their losses on Shane's inability to drag his head out of a book. A little shit called Tommy had told all the guys, and their coach, that his dad said it was because Shane was 'one of those Asians.' Shane at the time, and now, thought that this was illogical and stupid. His mom was the one who encouraged him to pursue hockey, his mom was the person who bought him his first skates and told him he didn't need to stress about schools. Tommy hadn't listened when he'd pointed this out, his dad's word was considered gospel.

Eventually he couldn't justify spending so much wasted time running after a small piece of rubber and getting injured in the process, especially when he dropped to an A in math.

His replies are short and sweet. His dad messages him a photo of a crossword with the clue 'Name of a horse one year of age,' Shane sends back the answer and his dad responds with a thumbs up and a photo of a blue jay looking at him through a window. The blue jay was very cute. Shane sends back a photo of the bat someone had found in their shed that they were keeping in a kennel until the rescue turned up.

Shane, absolutely, under no circumstances, thinks about Ilya Rozanov.

Chapter 12

Ilya admits that he needs his therapist. Galina knows this, which is why she can essentially force him into going to this stupid barbeque.

There's nothing about it which he dislikes. On a fundamental level it's everything he loves: good food, his friends, dogs to hug and even rooks to bully. Beyond that he knows that everything about the party will remind him of Shane. The talking, the eating, the laughing. Ilya knows that he's going to be thinking about the vet the entire time, the idea of what could have been.

Galina told him, in that perfectly intelligent way of hers, that this is why going to the barbeque is so good. A reminder of the importance of friendship, a chance to connect with his support network outside of their work. Ilya had reminded her that they didn't have 'My Little Pony' in Russia.

He stubs out the cigarette that was hanging loosely from his lips, not even having the energy to clamp and draw properly, and breathes in the air of a quiet road. Anya's on leash and absent mindedly snuffling around his legs, pleased to be out on the grass where they've pulled in to a little verge about ten minutes from Bood's. It's been a rest break for Anya, but for Ilya more than her.

He gets back into the dull old mustang, a more diluted option to the original choice of his bugatti, and peels off back down towards the cul de sac area where Bood lives, just about pushing the speed limit. Anya seems to know exactly where they're going from the way she hops around in her seat and whines.

When he arrives, there's a mound of different sports cars (and one fancy truck) already sprawling from Bood's drive so he awkwardly parks the mustang next to the pavement near a neatly trimmed hedge. Anya looks up at him expectantly, she can probably smell the burgers from here. Ilya just attempts a few breathing exercises in the car, rubs his hands over his face once and carries Anya out the car.

Everyone's already out in the garden when he finally walks in, holding a bottle of good Russian vodka which he gives to Cassie as well as a quick kiss on the cheek. She reaches down to stroke Anya.

“Can you go get the glasses from the cabinet?”

He gets some glasses, as well as a few plastic cups for the rooks. More for himself, really, to give some normality. The guys react predictably, Holmberg glares at him in anger and Young tries to make a case for himself. His pleas are ruined when LaPointe barrels into Haas from behind causing him to drop the orange cup. Dykstra, wearing an ugly green cowboy hat, gives them all a judgemental look and actually whispers, “I told you so.”

Anya and Chiron are yapping at the side of the garden where Gen is fussing over them both whilst simultaneously attempting to snap a few photos on her phone. Anya puts her front paws on Gen’s knee and accidentally knocks the phone out of her hold with a wet nose.

“Cannot handle small dog?” Ilya laughs, “in Russia we handle bears.”

“Wow,” Gen rolls her eyes, “out here with the stereotypes.”

Ilya decides to see who else is worthy of harassment at the party. There’s a certain level of homophobia that he feels brewing under the surface when he sees Harris and Troy interlocked on the same beanbag talking to Caitlin. They’re both close, in the way that immediately says these are not merely good friends, and the ugly feeling rears up inside Ilya’s chest at the sight of them so comfortable.

“Ilya!” Harris beckons him over with a grin which shoots the ugly feeling dead, “you know Lady Gaga.”

“What? Stefani Joanne Angelina Germanotta? Of course, I am bisexual.”

“See!” Harris exclaimed, grabbing one of Troy’s arms, “you *should* know Lady Gaga.”

“I’m gay, not bisexual!”

“I’m straight and I know Lady Gaga.” Caitlin chimed in, “despite what Dykstra listens to.”

“Caitlin has an insane husband and still knows Lady Gaga, Roz has an awful fashion sense and knows Lady Gaga.”

Ilya chooses to ignore that first part, “I was born in Soviet Russia, Barret, but I know that Stefani Joanne Angelina Germanotta is still in love with Judas.”

“I just don’t listen to…”

“To?” Caitlin prompts.

“Like, pop music.”

Harris groans, “you just asked if Lady Gaga wrote Shape of You, that’s beyond not listening to pop, babe.”

“Two completely different accents,” Caitlin agreed, “it’s like saying that Luke Bryan and Zack Bryan are the same man.”

Before anyone had the time to question who *those* people were Lisa appeared with a cheery grin and whisked Caitlin away towards the makeshift booze table.

“I’ve not booked time off to not get at least tipsy!” Lisa exclaimed as the two left. Ilya plopped down in the vacated beanbag.

Harris looked Ilya up and down, then side to side, then all around.

“Just say it, whatever it is.” Ilya ground out.

“It’s a no from Shane, then?”

“Do you fucking see him?”

“Woah,” Harris recoiled a bit in shock, even Troy’s eyes widened at Ilya’s sharp tone, “sorry, Roz. I won’t pry then.”

“No, no,” Galina would have a field day with this story, “I am sorry. I tried to convince him but he said no, now I am mad about it, being beaten.”

“Awh,” Troy Barrett had the audacity to look apologetic, “that sucks man. I’m sure he would’ve enjoyed.”

“No, no, it’s okay. I am three thousand dollars too annoying, I know.”

“Three thousand dollars?” Harris asked, “as in, Canadian dollars?”

“Yes?” The questions were repetitive and useless, “no, I gave Canadian man in Canada American dollars.”

“You tried to give him three thousand dollars?!” Troy asked in shock. It wasn’t like that was a massive cut from Ilya’s salary, in fact he would’ve preferred to give more but he was scared that’d scare Shane away. It turns out it didn’t matter in the end.

“No, I gave him. Three thousand so I could message him, three thousand to come to barbeque.”

“You gave him three thousand dollars to come to the barbeque?” Harris asked in confusion, “did he ask?”

“No?”

“So you forcibly paid Shane to come to this barbeque?”

“Yes!” Ilya hissed, exasperated, “and look, he is still not here, so drop it.”

Harris had the indecency to actually drop his head into his hands and Barrett just blinked at the two of them, Harris’s muffled voice emerged, “you know, he probably didn’t want you to pay him for literally just spending time with you.”

“But he needs money more than me,” Ilya pointed out.

Even Barrett was now looking at him like he’d grown a second head, “Did you say this to him, Ilya?”

“Why is everyone so confused. English is your first language, catch up.”

“Oh my God, Ilya,” Harris burrowed his face into the side of Barrett’s neck. The other man leaned into him and rubbed his back comfortingly, “perhaps Shane didn’t want to be paid.”

“Everyone likes money.”

Barrett and Harris shared a look that was so laced in love and their intimate knowledge of each other that Ilya left with a weak excuse of grabbing a drink. Yes, he got it, they were gay and in love. That didn’t mean they had to ram it down everyone else’s throat.

Lisa and Hayes weren't faring any better. The goalie had a large arm wrapped around his wife's waist and she was leaning into him sipping on some Drover cider. Great. Bisexuality was now his curse, he could be both heterosexually and homosexually jealous.

"Rozy!" Hayes calls out, "get the speaker off Dykstra, I can't stand this country shit!"

"Hey! It's not that bad, quit being so dramatic!" Dykstra defends from where he's guarding the speaker next to the patio with a wooden spork.

"You're from Manitoba, not Texas, turn it off!" Bood waves his hot spatula at him, a much more formidable weapon. Dykstra chooses life and changes the music to what Ilya can only assume is a latest hits playlist, not without sending the entire garden a soul eating scowl.

"Rozanov!" Ilya hears a woman call, Yuna Hollander steps out the house holding a drink with Mr Hollander trailing behind her, "I knew I saw Russian vodka!"

"The only good vodka," Ilya tried to quip back in an attempt to soothe the cut that was deepening in his chest. Shane's parents *were* just being friendly, they weren't really anything but, yet Shane's features haunted their faces. Especially when David pulled the apologetic yet friendly smile that he'd seen etched on Shane so many times. Stupid Canadians.

Yuna quirked her lips, "I see the poor rookies have been demoted."

"Yes," Ilya tried not to think of stupid vets and instead kept his voice playful. "Cannot trust them with smashables, they are worse than Anya."

"Speaking of." Mr Hollander produced a small plastic mat with lots of ridges and holes. "It's a sniff toy," he explained. "Spaniel's have an amazing sense of smell, so hopefully she'll enjoy it! That's what Shane told us, anyway. He's a vet, so it's on good authority!"

Ilya did then suddenly realise that neither Hollander had ever mentioned Shane's profession to him, but the pride was still there in every word.

“Thank you,” Ilya tried. Then feeling it wasn’t enough, “thank you, I am sure she will love it.”

“Hey, even if she doesn’t she might enjoy tearing it up!” Mr Hollander laughed, “although, Shane does say to be careful about plastic digestion, which is why this one is recommended as it only tears into larger pieces.”

“She will love it, Mr Hollander, she loves smelling *everything*. It is very annoying on walks.”

“David, please, I hear so much about you Ilya from Yuna it feels all wrong.”

Ilya just nodded, the other man was giving him that gentle, Canadian smile that was Shane’s.

“Shane said Anya might enjoy a chew with holes for hiding treats in as well,” Yuna told him. “Good for their teeth apparently.”

Ilya was struck with the horrifying realisation that there was a very real, and very likely possibility that the Hollanders had asked Shane for his opinions regarding Anya specifically. “You asked Shane about Anya?”

“Indirectly,” David was oblivious to the spark of relief that soared through Ilya, “we just said that there was a friend with a spaniel. Why? Do you need a vet for Anya?”

“No, no,” Ilya assured him, “is all sorted.”

Yuna put a hand on his shoulder. “You’re doing amazing with her, Ilya. She’s so happy, you obviously care a lot for her.”

“Yes… yes, thank you.” He blinks rapidly, trying to rid the sheen of tears from his eyes. David offers him a bigger Canadian smile and follows Yuna as she goes to talk to Harris and Gen, who’ve migrated to the deck chairs and are pulling up photographs on an old Mac. He can just see the outline of the photo, it’s him, probably from the Montreal game. The game where Shane was watching, the last game that Shane will watch.

Ilya knows he’s ruined his chances with the man. For such a stupid reason as well, such a stupid barbeque that doesn’t really mean anything. It’s just a group of people in Bood’s nice garden eating grilled foods and yabbering at one another, it’s not worth Shane in any way. Not his friendship or… the potential of something more. Ilya doesn’t know why he’s still torturing himself thinking about it, seeing the words leave his mouth again and again and physically seeing their easy friendship crumble.

“Rozy!” Hayes whoops, “Bood’s thinking about getting a little pool, imagine that.” He pulls up next to Ilya and takes a sip of his beer, “a little pool.”

“Wow. New phrase, I’m so proud. You’re learning English so quickly.”

“Fuck off. Just like, imagine it. We could go swimming!”

“Not in small pool, not enough space. Could do a little doggy paddle.”

Hayes grinned, “I bet Chiron and Anya would love a pool. You’ve gotta stop taking her to these things, man. Lisa keeps on looking at dogs at the shelter, like hell either of us got time for one. Wouldn’t be fair to the poor thing.”

Ilya huffed out a laugh. Then he remembered that Shane had advised Anya not to swim until the ear infection had cleaned up. He would have to change vet practices, wouldn’t he, especially after he essentially harassed the man at his work place. Anya seemed to really like everyone there as well, and Shane’s friends would now hate Ilya so they probably wouldn’t be pleased to see them again.

“Maybe. As long as ear infection is gone by then.”

“Oh?” Hayes questioned. “Lisa’s always muttering on about ear infections in the swimming lot, it's the same with dogs then?”

“Yes, water creates an incubator for bacteria, swimmers ear. Spaniels are prone as their ears see less air circulation and are generally more moist.”

Hayes blinked in surprise. "You know a lot about ear infections, Rozy," he chuckled.

"Yes, I found out... online."

"The second best hockey player in the league and a great dad. Its a wonder people aren't throwing themselves at you."

"They do. I tell them to get up, sidewalk is hard and uncomfortable."

"Sidewalks! Roz, that reminds me-"

"Chiron! Leave!" Barrett demanded from the back of the yard. The dog in question merely pointed his black nose deeper into the tub he'd managed to find and get open.

"Oh my god," Harris groaned, "stupid thing. What have you got into now, eh?"

Hayes and Ilya walked over to where Barrett was attempting to drag the dog out via his harness. He flopped out with a huff to pad around the small group with a wet muzzle.

"God, can’t take you anywhere,” Harris muttered as he replaced the lid of the white tub. “Ugh, Chiron, it’s probably stagnant water, it smells all fruity.”

Hayes went dead still. “Fruity?” He sniffed the air cautiously.

“Something awful been fermented in there or something,” Barrett muttered, Chiron stuffed his nose into the crook of his knee, “ugh, Chiron!” But he sounded stupidly fond.

“Oh fuck.” Hayes suddenly stammered out. Everyone snapped their heads in his direction. “Smell the air again. You all know it, this is Canada.”

Oh shit.

Chapter 13

“What kind of antifreeze was it?” Yuna Hollander asks Bood, immediately taking control of the situation.

“Just like, the normal stuff! From Walmart! Fuck, fuck, fuck! I’m so sorry, I should’ve put it away or something, fuck!” He pulled at his locks.

“It was sealed, it’s not your fault, Bood,” Dykstra patted him on the shoulder. The other cen’s were circling the scene with varying faces of stricken horror. Chiron seemed relatively unbothered, but kept on desperately nosing at Harris’s face as the man held him tight.

“Right.” Yuna had her phone out and was frantically typing while Harris looked up anxiously, “Ilya, call this vet, I’ll call this one. Gen, call this number…”

They ran to Ilya’s car frantically slamming numbers into their phones. He leapt in to drive and, after a brief discussion, Harris, Troy and Lisa were all shoved up in the back with Chiron on their laps and Yuna sat next to Ilya still frantically calling numbers with an increasingly demanding tone.

“First signs are vomiting,” Lisa explained calmly, “in people at least, but we’re mammals so it’ll be similar.”

“Okay, okay,” Harris cooed to Chiron through the tears, “you’re gonna be alright, buddy.”

Troy met Ilya’s gaze in the rearview mirror. Ilya had to look away.

He peeled off the curb and swiftly turned the corner, rocketing down the street and screeching through the quiet suburban neighbourhood.

“Alright, thank you,” Yuna said curtly before hanging up on yet another clinic. Ilya tried not to listen as she was turned down time and time, he forced himself to focus entirely on the road and not on Harris’s gentle sobs and Chiron’s anxious whines.

“We have a dog who’s drunk antifreeze, can you take him as an emergency?”

“The dog’s eaten antifreeze, do you have space?”

“Can you take an emergency?”

Ilya pressed the pedal down lower and lower as they tore through the flat landscape. The car shuddered as he awkwardly changed gears, cornering slightly too fast. They were about twenty minutes from Ottawa at a normal pace, ten minutes at the speed he was going and seven if he really tried. He could hear the first sounds of Chiron vomiting in the back.

“I’m so sorry,” Harris was whispering slowly, “so sorry baby.”

“You have room for an emergency!? He’s around one, he’s drunk some antifreeze in the back of a friend's garden. We’re driving to Ottawa now, we’ve got about five minutes left until we’re in the city.” Yuna relayed the information at a rapid pace, “he’s conscious, breathing but shaking. We’ve got a human doctor with us who’s helping to keep his airway open and monitor him, she knows some basic animal first aid.”

“Thank you.” She hung up the phone and instantly began telling Ilya the directions. “Make a left turn here.”

Once they were in the city that’s where the problems truly began. The traffic was terrible, soon enough they were bumper to bumper with the red brake lights blinding Ilya.

“Fuck,” Yuna swore angrily, “it’s on the other side of the city.” She hit her phone against the seat, “and the wifi is so slow, it won’t load another route.”

“I can do it,” Ilya assured her.

“There’s no issues with his pulse right now, from what I can feel, but I’m afraid he’s going to choke on his own vomit soon when the seizures start.” Lisa calmly explained in Ilya’s ear, whispering under her breath. Which, fuck. He’s glad someone in the damn car can be calm, if Yuna’s started swearing then things are definitely about to go insanely wrong.

Chiron’s whimpers are set to a high staccato beat as Ilya desperately tries to weave through the traffic.

“Harris, I need you to keep breathing and stay calm for Chiron, okay? Troy, can you pass me that bag,” Lisa instructed. Yuna scowled at her phone, her lips lifting in an almost growl.

Suddenly her phone blared out. “Hello?” She demanded, “Wyatt, what’s the problem?” There were a few more seconds of silence where Ilya tried not to focus on Harris’s gentle sobs but the noise of the rumbling cars all around them instead.

“Right, Ilya. Pull in here and we’re all getting out of the car.”

Any confusion that lingered in the air was completely overrun by their trust in Yuna as Ilya dutifully pulled into a side street and they all ran out. Troy held Chiron in his arms as Yuna led them at a jog down alleyways and across roads into the residential areas, the cool air whipping through them and burning their lungs as they ran.

Ilya suddenly saw their aim. Hayes, Drytska and Haas were standing outside a small beat up family car, a small red shitbox coated in more scratches than paint.

“It’s mine, I parked it outside of my aunt’s yesterday,” Hayes explained, touching Lisa’s arm briefly to give her a nod, “but if you go from here should cut out the major traffic, if you go through the side streets.”

“I'll track the traffic from here, better signal,” Yuna told them, “Hayes can go with you to relay directions.” The man just nodded and slid into the passenger seat.

The small shortcut *had* miraculously cut out most of the traffic, but Ilya could still hear Chiron’s horrible shaking in the back of the car as he desperately pushed the speed limit. Hayes had to sit with one arm snaked behind his seat to hold Chiron’s head to stop the poor dog’s saliva from flowing back down his throat when he convulsed. Ilya could hear the harsh slams whenever he made contact with the car, thuds that echoed through the vehicle and made the whole thing judder. Harris and Troy seemed to be dealing with the body and Lisa was checking his pulse as well as holding his front two legs as still as possible. Chiron whimpered loudly.

“Left here, nearly there,” Hayes said as another message from Yuna came through. His arm tensed for a moment as Chiron thrashed again, holding him away from his seat, “it should be up this street on our right.”

Shane was scrubbing out of surgery when he heard they were getting an emergency, the third one of the day. He’d accidentally used too much soap, so his arms were now lathered in a generous grease that was refusing to budge.

“It’s drunk something or other,” Becca told him when he finally came downstairs, “the poor woman sounded so stressed over the phone, she hung up before I got the chance to ask for clarification. The line was so bad I could barely make any of it out, truth be told.”

“Chocolate milk?” Rose asked as she cleaned up after her last consult, the smell of antiseptic strong in the air. “Remember that one?”

“Poor baby's butthole looked like a volcano," Becca said in sympathy. Shane pretended to gag, earning him a slap on the arm from Rose as she strode past, dragging the mop bucket behind her.

“I’ll go and get the vomiting meds,” she frowned as she disappeared into the depository, “do you think we’ll need fluids? Yeah, probably.”

“First sign of madness,” Shane pointed out to Becca.

“Aww,” the older woman smiled at him, “don’t be mean, dearie.”

“Yeah, Shane!” He heard the distinct sound of cabinets being slammed shut, “this is your case, anyway. I’m helping you out.”

“I wasn't part of that decision,” he huffed.

“You do most of the poison stuff, it’s basically your field at this point,” she emerged, somehow covered in dust even though the depository was spotless, to place a box full of medications on the counter. Becca picked a bottle up in interest.

“It'll keep you out of your head, love.” Becca agreed traitorously. “Stop you thinking too hard about the wrong things.”

Shane just huffed despondently, feeling a little like a dog who’d eaten a pill hidden in ham.

There was a clatter on the stairs and Eleanor shuffled in through the double doors with arms heaped with blankets. “Toxic consumption,” she offered as an explanation as she dumped them on one of the chairs, “poor thing might be needing some comfort.”

“Hmm,” Becca nodded, “that bambi one’s extra soft, y’know I think it’s-”

She was violently interrupted by the heavy glass doors swinging open, causing everyone in the room to jump and swivel to face them.

The dog Ilya Rozanov was holding had been vomiting. That was what Shane noticed first. The streaks had dried on its muzzle causing the flesh to become mottled with green. Rozanov’s arms were shaking, although not from exhaustion, his face showed no signs of it. The only emotion Shane could see was fear, which he mirrored exactly in that moment. An intense, snarling fear.

Then, he stepped up.

“What did they eat?” He asked, moving forward to check the dog's heartbeat while it still lay limply in Rozanov’s arms. A dark eye swivelled in its socket to look up to him.

“Antifreeze,” he answered quickly.

“Oh shit.” Eleanor swore softly and disappeared off into the dispensary. The dog began to shake, assumedly not for the first time.

“Right.” He grabbed the dog's head to turn it to the side as it began to vomit, its whole body lurching with the effort, “right.” He said again as though it would make it that. Its back legs came out to kick against him, both Rose and a man Shane didn’t recognise held them still as he pressed on the corner of the eye. The blink was there, just barely, but still there. The dog's gums were still pink, and there were no immediate signs of choking. He allowed himself a minute to focus, seeing as the poor thing wasn’t in obvious immediate danger.

Harris and Troy were standing behind Ilya staring blankly at him. They were clearly in shock, Shane belatedly realised from the tear tracks lining both of their faces that this was probably their dog.

“They drank a lot,” Rose said as a statement. She came up behind Shane to watch the rise and fall of the dogs, glancing up periodically at the clock to compare it against the time.

“Yes.” Harris cried weakly.

“Antifreeze contains a toxic substance that causes acute kidney failure, luckily you’ve done the right thing and got here fast. We should have the medication he needs in stock..?" He trailed off in a question. Eleanor and Becca came out of the depository and shook their heads.

“Oh fuck!” The man who was with the others cried out involuntarily, before slapping a hand over his mouth. Troy laughed wetly, “alright, Hayes,” he forced out through the tears, holding onto the man's arm. The woman next to him seemed to be focusing entirely on the nurses discussion behind Shane. He ignored this, for now.

They needed fomepizole, or ethanol. They needed this shit *now* based on the dog’s sagging eyes and light gums.

“Do we have any alcohol?” Shane demanded, “as in a drink.”

Kiara shot up, “the vodka in the break room!” She slammed the door open with her body and raced out.

“Eleanor, could you get the Apomorphine?”

She disappeared into the depository. Becca placed the thin blankets on the floor and Rozanov placed the dog gently onto them, Shane holding the animal’s head still as they descended together.

“I’ll go and get something a bit more comfy in a moment,” Becca explained. Rose and her shared a glance with Shane as they watched the dog merely flop down, looking weak and boneless on the fluffy bambi cartoons. He reached around the dog with his stethoscope, realising belatedly in the newly born silence that he didn’t even know its name.

“Who is the patient, today?” Rose asked as he placed his stethoscope back around his neck.

“Chiron,” Harris answered quickly, “he’s part lab, part bernese mountain dog, if..” he stuttered for a moment, “if that’s any use, in any way.” Troy had one arm held around him, and it seemed in that moment that this one arm was keeping the whole man together.

There was a rush of air into the stale room as Kiara ran back in, sliding to a stop on the floor and handing Shane a full bottle of cheap as shit vodka.

“Cmon,” he hissed at Chiron. He unscrewed the bottle, placed his knee under the dog’s neck to prop up the oesophagus and slid the neck of the bottle between the dog's teeth. The weakened jaw opened up easily to allow the bottle inside, there wasn’t even a tremor present to indicate an urge to snap the jaw shut to protect the throat.

The noise of the first gentle swallows filled the air as everyone leaned over to watch. Shane tilted the bottle back further to allow the vodka to enter deeper into the dog’s throat while at the same time ensuring that he didn’t choke. His eyes rolled back to greet his gaze. Rose crouched down to hold his body still and Eleanor lifted his neck.

“Sorry bud,” he whispered, checking Chiron’s pupils by pulling his eyelid back with a thumb, “I know it’s the cheap stuff.”

Kiara leapt into action as soon as most of the vodka was down. It was immediately decided that moving the dog was too risky, instead a bed and more blankets were arranged in the waiting room with a heating mat from the kennels. Once Chiron had drunk some more vodka Shane slid him a little awkwardly over the floor to gently get him into the bed. His vitals were all checked again, and once it was certain he was not actively dying both Harris and Troy pounced as soon as the team stepped away.

“Baby,” Harris whispered reverently as he cried into the dog's ears, “my poor baby.”

Troy’s attempted poker face had slipped. He too was crying, the tears so heavy they rolled off his face and splashed onto the bambi blanket. The harsh fluorescent lighting above gave the wet material a shadowy quality. Shane hated watching people cry, but Troy seemed so ruggedly masculine that the expression looked entirely foreign on his face. Shane turned to look at Becca who was opening up a consult room for them to move into when they could for some amount of support while surrounded by crying men, she offered a juvenile thumbs up.

The woman with dark hair offered Shane a respectful nod of the head, smiling warmly at Becca.

“Is alright,” Rozanov assured from behind him, Russian accent sliding through the soft hum of the room, “Chiron will be okay. Nurses here are very good, as is Dr Landry.”

Shane was startled when a hand was placed on his shoulder, “Hollander is one of the best as well.”

He leaned back into the touch. Rozanov, Ilya, merely gently pushed back to keep him from falling. Chiron snuffled in the makeshift bed as Eleanor did the blink test again, explaining to Harris and Troy what all the checks were looking for. He could hear Becca in the depository explaining apologetically to the next client that they were sadly going to have to delay the appointment. Shane turned slightly, Ilya met his eye instantly and offered a warm smile. His stomach curdled with how much he’d managed to miss him.

This briefest second of respite was shattered when the glass door was slammed open yet again. Shane stepped back behind the counter to make way as another group rushed in, easily identified as hockey bros from their stature alone.

“Oh my god, oh my god,” a man rushed forward to stare at Chiron who offered him a lazy flick of the tail, seemingly happy enough to sass. “I’m so sorry, oh my god.”

Shane could only hear the muffled noise of further conversation as he noticed his mom enter. She didn’t see him, he had made himself practically invisible behind the counter as she rushed forward to see the dog, to the point that she’d have to turn all the way back around just to see him. There was a sharp pang of guilt when he realised how grateful he was for this, for the extra seconds.

Rose, although she’d never met either of his parents properly, seemed to immediately realise who she was from her questioning stare. Shane stared back, only stopping when he noticed the other man who’d come in was wearing the ugliest green cowboy hat he’d ever seen.

“Right,” Becca exclaimed. “I’m going to move Chiron into a consult room now so we can get him on fluids, can I ask that I only have about three people in the room at once, we need to keep his stress levels low.”

There were murmurs of agreement and everyone organised themselves. Shane saw the moment the apologetic man spotted the half empty bottle of vodka on the seat. He pointed to it and turned to Troy in confusion.

“Yeah, Chiron drank it.”

It wasn’t Troy’s fault that the phrase sounded absolutely insane, the poor man was still shocked and desperately trying to comfort his dog. But the implication that Chiron had the agency and ability to drink vodka, present in a waiting room at a vets clinic, was enough to make all hockey bros and their associates stop in confusion.

“He, what?” The cowboy hat man asked, turning to ‘Hayes’, “Chiron drank vodka?”

The group all swivelled to look at Rose, the most obvious vet in direct line of sight. She glared back at Shane.

He cleared his throat awkwardly, it was almost robotic the way everyone turned back to look at him in unison, “the ethanol in the vodka stops the ethylene glycol being broken down into toxic substances in Chiron’s liver. Normally it would be given using an IV with pure ethanol in a solution, but we don’t have that in right now. He’ll be alright.”

“Ethanol is a competitive inhibitor, it stops the production of toxic byproducts like glycolic and oxalic acid in the liver,” the woman nodded. Shane must’ve looked a little surprised, because she chuckled warmly. “I’m a pediatrician, kids and dogs seem to think antifreeze is on the menu. Didn’t realise they were the same principles in dogs, but I guess we’re all animals.”

“Yeah,” he croaked out, “he’ll probably act drunk for a couple hours, but it’s better. Cool to know it’s the same with kids.” The woman smiled at him warmly.

“Lisa Hayes,” she stuck out her hand over the counter for him to shake, “good job, it must be hard when they can’t speak.”

“It’s sometimes a bonus, I reckon,” he tried as he shook her hand. She laughed.

“Shane, quit flirting with a married woman and get over here,” Rose scolded jokingly. He went over obediently, sliding past Ilya, to grab the dog’s legs to help the others carry it into the consult room. The dog was held for a few moments until Becca rearranged the bed and they lowered him in slowly with only a few snuffles.

Shane pressed on the gums again, watching the gums quickly pinken after turning a dull white. “We don’t need oxygen, then.” Rose commented, “but I’ll go set up the IV.” He followed her out the room, leaving Eleanor with Chiron, and opening the door for Harris and Troy to rush back in to comfort their dog. They thanked him profusely as they walked past, Shane tried not to feel too awkward.

Ilya smiled at him when he stepped back into the waiting room. Shane got the urge to say something, anything, slightly encouraging.

“Thank you all for helping to get Chiron here so quickly,” he began, “it likely saved his-”

He was cut off as his mom barrelled into him, wrapping him into a thick hug and holding on tight.

“I’m so proud,” she whispered in his ear, “I’m so proud.”

Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Ilya was waiting outside, alone and uncomfortably damp, for reasons he couldn't put into words.

He was leaning against the wall of the clinic, like some kind of poster child for delinquents everywhere, smoking a cigarette and passing furious glances onto onlookers. Old ladies clutching walking sticks like weapons were scuttling past like crabs giving him odd stares and gossiping relentlessly to each other as they piled out of small, ugly cars.

He didn't mean for his harsh eyes to fall over the Ottawan population, but his mind was overrun with what to say to the man he was stupidly enamoured with that he didn't have the energy to change them.

After Chiron's harrowing ordeal it was organised that he would be staying overnight at a bigger animal hospital in Ottawa, which Harris and Troy had driven him to. Ilya naively assumed that Shane would have a moment after saving the dog's life where Ilya could apologise profusely and, hopefully, maybe, make out with him. Instead, Shane revealed he had another consult and another *surgery* before he was officially released from the day.

Even Yuna had gone with the others to organise Chiron's overnight stay, so only Ilya was left at the clinic like some kind of lovesick idiot waiting for Shane to emerge.

Ilya found that strangely, he didn't mind at all.

He'd talked to the nurses, got Dr Landry (or Rose, as she made him call her) a coconut Redbull and casually flirted with Becca. She'd found him hilarious, as most normal people did, and asked him to lift a few heavy boxes of deliveries around the clinic to the shocked expression of clients.. Now he was just waiting, and the drafts of an apology in his notes app were hot in his phone and warm on his tongue. He was ready.

“You know those things kill people, right?” He startled at the sound of Shane’s voice, whipping around to see he man stood next to him, back towards the wall, facing out onto the courtyard and the pharmacy on the other side. The dark green scrubs pulled at his arms and the stethoscope hung loose around his neck painted a tantalising shape of his chest.

“Live for long but boring time, or short and exciting, yes?” He countered, trying to weave a nonchalant edge into his voice as he felt Shane’s arm brush against his.

“I’d prefer if you lived a long, boring life,” Shane muttered, “not that I have any right to tell you what kind of life to live, obviously, I’d just…”

Ilya could see him looking up towards the sky and breathing heavily. He closes his eyes, as though the sight of Ilya is painful.

“I’d like it if you could live a long, boring life… with me.”

He took the cigarette from his lips and let the smoke drift into the cool air. “I could not, Shane. A life with you would not be boring, it would be the most interesting thing ever.”

He puts out the cigarette on the wall and turns to face the man, a mixture of relief and confusion is painting his features and the faint blush is making his freckles practically glow, even under the cloudy skies.

Ilya places a hand on his shoulder, watches his face as he slowly moves it up and up, past the junction of his neck and to his jaw where he caresses gently with his thumb. He watches entranced at the gentle pull of skin against the perfect bone. It’s witchcraft, how something so simple and obvious bewitches Ilya with such strange intensity.

“This is okay?” He asks.

Shane nodded, the pounding in Ilya’s head increases when he feels the motion through his fingers. He draws his other hand up to his waist, feeling the light curve of his body, and leans in.

The man’s lips are soft, but dry. Ilya doesn’t kiss chastely, he kisses with tongue and teeth and fervor, yet he presses his cold lips against Shane’s warm ones with a reverent respect he didn’t realise he was capable of. His hand moves back to cradle his head as Shane moves closer, putting both of his hands on Ilya’s hips to pull their bodies together. Ilya uses the hand on his jaw to tilt his head, so that their lips can slide deeper.

Shane makes a high pitched noise in the back of his throat, a sort of pleased whine, before they hear the clinic door clatter shut behind Shane. Ilya pulls Shane back as slowly as he think the situation permits, watching his dark eyes widen and expand as he takes in Ilya’s probably sappy expression.

“You two want a standing ovation or something?” Rose questioned with a scowl, already marching out towards her car. Becca pushed through the door as well, locking it with a pleased grin.

“Got one spare, Ilya?” She asked the man, who passed her a cigarette through long fingers. Shane looked slightly horrified and narrowed his eyes aggressively at the man he’d been kissing just seconds prior.

“Not my fault that I’m a nice guy,” Ilya defended with a toothy grin, Shane’s expression remained stony and for a moment Ilya’s heart completely froze, but then the other man leant sideways into him with a small smile.

“Thanks, love,” Becca wandered off with a cheery wave in the direction of her car, turning around just before the steps to offer the two a thumbs up.

When she’d disappeared Shane snapped back to Ilya, grabbing his waist and leaning in once again to smash his lips into the other man’s.

Ilya was now pushed up against the hard brick wall as Shane melted into him with candle wax, hot and luxurious against his hold.

He regrettably ran a hand through black hair, pulling gently to extract Shane from his space. The other man gave him an angry look dulled entirely by the adoration swimming in his eyes.

“What?” He questioned, muffled in his confusion.

“I think it’s best if we move this,” Ilya pointed out, turning Shane’s head slightly with a hand on the jaw to show him the small gathering of old people waiting outside the pharmacy who were ogling the men.

“Oh,” Shane muttered, scowling at the group who’d ruined his fun. Although making out with Shane Hollander felt like snorting stardust, Ilya knew that once Shane had escaped the haze of the kiss he’d be horrified with the thought of performing in such a lustful scene outside of his place of work. Ilya just smiled at his expression, taking his wrist to pull him away from the clinic and towards the road. Shane instinctively began to lead him towards an old beaten up range rover, one of the ones with bars on the top and peeling paintwork. He stopped a little short of the car, staring at Shane with a newfound sense of realisation.

“Hm?” Shane asked in confusion, tilting his head in a doglike way, “you good?”

Ilya had the belated realisation how far removed Shane was from his world, how different he was from the sports cars and expensive family SUVs that lined hockey players garages. He realised how much he loved him.

“Fine,” he offered a wide smile, feeling his cheeks ache with the force of it.

Shane opened the door for him, cackling at Ilya’s affronted scowl and the mutter of ‘I am not a princess, Hollander,’ before revving up the engine with a dangerous grating noise and an even more dangerous smile.

Being driven by Shane felt disgustingly domestic. He felt inserted into the man’s life, as though he were wrongly injected with a needle into Shane’s existence, the thoughts made him

feel tight inside until Shane rested a hand casually on his thigh and squeezed lightly. His smile tugged at his eyes when he turned to glance at him.

“I’m sorry,” Shane blurted out suddenly, “I didn’t mean to imply that you or any of your friends were stupid, it’s my own ridiculous experiences with stupid kids, not even real hockey players… and yeah, so please don’t… think you’re stupid.”

“It’s okay,” Ilya placed a hand over his, rubbing over knuckles with his thumb, “I *was* being stupid.” He pauses, forgetting the carefully drawn out apology and feels his heart yelp in panic. “I shouldn’t have been so annoying, I should’ve stopped. I’m sorry, Shane. I know that I made you uncomfortable. I’m so *so* sorry.”

He stops his manic babbling for a moment to inhale sharply, tears blooming like petals in his eyes. Shane stills next to him, hand not moving from being casually rested on his thigh.

“I’ll forgive you, for a price.”

“Anything.”

“A kiss?”

They pulled up at an intersection, Ilya leaned against the dash to press his lips lightly to Shane’s. He hummed with approval, leaning back and staring at the man’s soft smile. His hair was still messed up from Ilya’s hands, he fought the urge to destroy it even more.

“Who’s got Anya, then?” He asked with red tinged cheeks as they pulled away.

Ilya swiveled his head around in horrific realisation.

He whips his phone out of his pocket, noticing Shane’s entertained grin, and immediately checks the Cen’s group chat. There’s a photo, a damning photo, a horrendous and disgusting

photo.

Anya with an ugly green cowboy hat placed crooked on her gorgeous ears.

He gasped, truly affronted. “The rookies have kidnapped my dog!” Because of *course* they had, they were probably feeding her cheap dog treats and running her wild, getting their grubby little hands all over her.

Shane just laughed, mocking him in this terrifying moment. The licensed veterinarian seemed deeply unconcerned about the dog’s welfare. “She’s fine then, where’s she at?”

Ilya began directions, winding down the old windows with a painful judder. When an awful noise emerged from the door, Shane just slid him a sly grin and shrugged casually like the imminent threat of his car collapsing wasn’t a problem. Ilya decided not to comment as they slid through the roads together.

Bood’s house felt oddly foreign when Ilya entered with a spare key with Shane following close behind. Nothing in the house had changed, but the handsome man who gently pushed at Ilya’s shoulderblades and the light tapping in his heart was enough to make the ordinary hallway feel like alien lands.

Bood was home, as well as a few of the WAG’s and the rookies, who had descended on the recently purchased massive television to watch something about gay mormons.

Anya launched herself off the couch like a furry bullet when she saw him, using Holmberg’s thighs as a human launchpad. She slid herself into Ilya’s legs and hopped around him making adorable little yapping noises as her ears flopped around with the excited movements. Then, she spotted Shane standing awkwardly behind the Russian in the doorway and descended on him. He chuckled at her as she attempted to leap further and further up his body, until he took pity and grabbed her midair to curl her into him and scratch at her ears.

The rookies had turned off the show and were looking at Shane with confusion, whereas Gen and Caitlin who were gossiping in the corner of the couch were fixing him with a glance that echoed Anya at dinner time.

Ilya took it upon himself to make the obviously needed introduction. “This is Shane, er, he is Yuna and David’s son. He saved Chiron’s life today.”

“Ilya!” The man hissed under his breath, balking at the sea of raised eyebrows in front of him. Lapointe, bless him, began a small round of applause that was soon taken up by the rest of the party. Ilya turned to see Shane’s face lit up in spectacular colours as he looked with horror at the scene in front of him.

“You want something to drink after all that, Shane?” Cassie offered with a warm smile once the appreciated murmurs had died down. She got up from the couch where she had been perched next to Bood, “god knows I need one with all these lot.”

“No, no thank you,” Shane threw up his hands with an anxious expression, “I’m driving.” She gave him a friendly nod and disappeared into the kitchen.

“Hmm.” Gen muttered, “I’m sure Ilya can drive you back after that whole ordeal.” She gave Ilya a scathing glance before whispering into Caitlin’s ear with dramatic fervor. The other woman glared up at Ilya before nodding at whatever she’d said in agreement.

“I would have heart attack trying to drive his ‘car’,” Ilya pointed out, feeling a sense of victory when Shane punched him lightly on his arm, the contact seeping into his skin and making him preen. *God*.

“At least come and watch these mormons,” Bood suggested, shuffling over to make room for the two men, “I think they’re fucking each other.”

“Little ears!” Ilya chastised as he sat down, guiding Shane, who was still clutching Anya like a lifeline, onto the couch.

“Anya can’t speak English.” Hayes muttered absently.

“The rookies can, *barely*.”

“Oi!”

Shane was watching with wide eyes but a small smile was taking over his face as he watched them bicker. Ilya pressed his leg further into his, their knees knocking together casually under one of Anya’s paws.

They nestled closer together as the noise raced around them like waves and Shane cackled and laughed at the jokes and made comments with Gen about the soda drinking mormons, and Ilya felt the rolling tides of joy as Anya pushed a wet nose into one hand and Shane held a loose grip on the other and rested soft hair on his shoulder.

Later, driving to Ilya’s with Anya asleep in the backseat, a boring song was playing through the old range rover’s radio. A boring song was crooning from the speakers as Ilya wrapped his fingers through Shane Hollander's hair and kissed his gentle lips.

A boring song was weaving them together as Ilya poured his apologies into loving touches, and Shane wove his into the kindest hands Ilya had ever known.

Chapter End Notes

this feels slightly unfinished as it was meant to be part of a series i kind of drifted off from
thank u for reading!! <3

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