

Unmaking Heart

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](https://archiveofourown.org/works/75552531) at <https://archiveofourown.org/works/75552531>.

Rating:	Mature
Archive Warning:	Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings
Category:	M/M
Fandoms:	Game Changers Series - Rachel Reid , Heated Rivalry_(TV)
Relationship:	Shane Hollander/Ilya Rozanov
Characters:	Shane Hollander , Ilya Rozanov
Additional Tags:	Alternate Universe - College/University , Harvard University , Fluff , Romance , Angst , Humor
Language:	English
Stats:	Published: 2025-12-10 Completed: 2025-12-29 Words: 46,665 Chapters: 8/8

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by [alwaysonyourleft](#)

Summary

Ilya Rozanov thought he had Harvard figured out: smart friends, good connections, and a life that balanced privilege with humility. But all of that changes the moment he meets Shane Hollander—his best friend's younger brother.

Shane is nothing like Gray Hollander: kind, talented, and effortlessly brilliant, with a charm that makes Ilya rethink everything he thought he knew about friendship, attraction, and ambition.

Notes

Hi! Gosh, it's been awhile. Thanks to Heated Rivalry for resurrecting me back from a deep slump. Just like anyone of you, my obsession with the series is beyond curable so I decided to write a story out of love for Ilya Rozanov and Shane Hollander. I hope you guys enjoy it and please leave your thoughts ;) See you again

Chapter 1: Wrong Impression

Ilya Rozanov woke to a headache that felt like someone had wedged a drumline behind his eyes and set it to “experimental jazz.” His mouth tasted like he’d slept with it open in a sandpit. Unfortunately, judging by the state of Grays’s townhouse, that wasn’t far from the truth. Last night’s party had turned the place into a crime scene of spilled liquor, abandoned heels, scattered jackets, and at least three unconscious finance majors passed out in the living room like decorative corpses.

Typical Thursday.

Ilya blinked up at the ceiling of the guest room, still half-tangled in the sheet, and felt the warm, slow exhale of the girl next to him fanning across his chest. Her name was... shit. Something with an L. Lila? Lana? Whatever. Ilya had introduced her at around midnight, and an hour later she’d had her knees pressed to Ilya’s shoulders while moaning like she was auditioning for opera. Good times. Great technique. But Ilya, as always, was already forgetting the details.

His eyes drifted to the nightstand.

Right. The condom.

Used. Tied. Carelessly tossed over a stack of books.

Not just any stack—one thick, blue hardcover right at the bottom with S. HOLLANDER written on a label on the spine.

He squinted.

Hollander?

Before he could sit up, shuffle the condom away, or even pretend to be decent, the guest room door shoved open.

“Sorry, I just need my—”

The voice cut off.

Ilya froze.

The guy standing in the doorway looked like he’d sprinted from the river straight into a house fire he did not expect—sweat still clinging to his collar, black hair damp from an early

rowing practice, duffel bag hanging off one shoulder. His eyes landed directly on Ilya.

Then the girl.

Then the condom.

Then the book under it.

And the way his face slowly did this mortal horror meets what-the-fuck expression nearly finished Ilya off right there.

“Oh,” the guy said, voice tight. “Oh, great. Perfect.”

Ilya scrambled upright, dragging a pillow strategically across his lap. “Hey, uh—hi. Good morning?”

The stranger just stared, jaw flexing like he was trying not to scream or laugh or throw the book at Ilya’s head.

“You’re... Shane?” Ilya guessed, because who else would that initial belong to? And Gray did have a younger brother he never shut up about—usually accompanied by an eye roll or some grudge that made zero sense.

The guy—Shane—dragged a hand down his face. “Yeah. That’s me. Shane Hollander. And that—” his voice pitched higher, “—is my book.”

Ilya followed his line of sight.

The condom glistened like it had been placed there exclusively to ruin mornings.

“Oh. Shit. I’m—sorry.” Ilya reached over, grabbed the condom between two fingers, and launched it blindly into the trash can like it was radioactive. “Sorry. Really sorry.”

Shane approached, muttering under his breath, stepping around discarded clothes like he’d entered a biohazard zone. Up close, he was... well, unfairly attractive for someone who

looked like he'd been awake since five. Lean, tall, broad shoulders from rowing, sharp cheekbones, eyes too bright for this hour.

And annoyingly familiar.

Ilya realized why. He looked exactly like Gray—but without the arrogance. Softer. Warmer. Everything pleasantly rearranged.

Shane picked up his book, inspecting the cover like checking for contamination. “God. Whatever.”

Ilya ran his fingers through his hair, trying to piece together words that didn't sound like a disaster. “Look, I didn't know this was yours. Or that you'd be coming back. Gray didn't mention—”

“He never mentions me,” Shane said flatly. “Especially when it might prevent something like —” he gestured vaguely at the bed, the girl, Ilya himself, “—this.”

Ilya offered a lopsided grin. “Well... I promise I'm usually more dignified.”

Shane snorted. “Are you?”

The smile widened. “On good days.”

Their eyes held—brief, charged, a spark slipping into the mess of the morning.

Shane cleared his throat, backing toward the doorway like escaping radiation. “Okay. I got what I needed. You can... go back to whatever.”

The girl stirred beside Ilya, stretching. “Mmm. Who's yelling?”

Shane looked mortified.

Ilya couldn't help it—he laughed. “No yelling. Just an unexpected wake-up call.”

Shane fought the urge to roll his eyes but he took one last look—at Ilya, not the girl—and something flickered across his features. Curiosity? Annoyance? Interest?

Then he turned and walked out.

Ilya let out a low whistle.

Gray's brother.

Shit.

He hadn't expected much from the morning.

But he definitely hadn't expected Shane Hollander.

And definitely not the way his stomach had flipped like someone had just rearranged the gravity in the room.

—

Harvard's campus was almost offensively perfect in the morning—cold air, clean bricks, students pretending they weren't half-asleep. Ilya walked beside Gray across the Yard, hands shoved into the pockets of his hoodie, sunglasses shielding his hangover. Gray, per usual, was all pressed blazer and business-student arrogance, phone glued to his ear while charming some potential client with the same smooth tone he used on donors and unsuspecting freshmen.

“Yes, Martin, we can have a preliminary deck ready by Monday. Absolutely... yes, the numbers check out... mmhmm... Ilya's running projections now—”

Ilya made a face.

No, he wasn't.

He kicked a pebble and let it bounce away. Gray kept talking, slicing a hand through the air like the client could see every motion. Ilya waited, patient for about eight seconds before leaning closer.

“Hey.”

Gray kept walking.

Ilya tried again, louder this time. “Gray.”

Nothing.

He sighed dramatically and bumped Ilya with his shoulder.

Gray glared and slapped a hand over the phone’s mic. “Ilya. Not now.”

“It’s important.”

“Is it important to our upcoming \$40k contract?”

“...Possibly.”

Gray gave him a look that said he doubted that very much.

Ilya stepped in front of him, forcing him to stop walking. “Gray, I met your brother.”

Gray blinked once. Twice. Then, with the casual confidence of a man who compartmentalized his entire life into neat folders, he went back to the phone call. “Yes, Martin, sorry—someone almost ran into me. No, no issue.”

Ilya stared.

Gray talked for another forty seconds before finally ending the call with a too-slick, “Talk soon,” and slipping his phone into his pocket. Only then did he give Ilya a flat stare. “What about my brother?”

Ilya smiled, satisfied he had the man’s attention. “So... Shane.”

Gray groaned immediately, pinching the bridge of his nose like Ilya had just said IRS audit or group project.

Ilya raised both brows. “Why didn’t that he’s... you know... a person who exists?”

“He shows up. Unannounced. Like a stray cat but with better GPA scores.”

Ilya snorted. “He came for a book.”

“He would,” Gray muttered. “He’s obsessed with his coursework. Or rowing. Or pretending he’s not a disaster.”

Ilya shoved his hands deeper in his pockets, replaying the moment Shane had walked into the room—wet hair, rower shoulders, that sharp, startled look that was way too pretty for someone catching him naked in bed with a stranger.

“Your brother’s... not what I expected,” Ilya admitted.

“What did you expect? A smaller, more polite version of me?”

“Honestly? Yeah.”

Gray barked out a laugh. “Not even close.”

They started walking again, weaving between students. Ilya followed him, still half-distracted by the memory of Shane’s flushed ears and the way he’d muttered under his breath like the world personally offended him.

“You don’t like him much,” Ilya observed.

“It’s not that,” Gray said, which obviously meant it absolutely is that. “He just... does whatever the hell he wants. He doesn’t follow plans. He’s all—” he gestured vaguely, “—earnest.”

Ilya grinned. “God forbid.”

“You’d think he does it on purpose. Ruining the image. Ruining schedules. Ruining—”

“Your vibe?”

Gray glared again. “My life, Ilya.”

Ilya felt a laugh spill out. “Come on, he seemed fine.”

“You saw him for literally one minute.”

“Yeah, but it was an unforgettable minute.”

Gray stopped dead and turned to him very slowly. “Why are you smiling like that?”

“Like what?”

“Like you just found a new hobby.”

Ilya shrugged, trying not to give away too much. “Your brother’s interesting.”

“No,” Gray said immediately. “He is not interesting. He is annoying. And if you’re thinking about recruiting him for something or dragging him into anything we’re doing—don’t.”

“I’m not dragging him anywhere. We just... met.”

“That’s enough danger already.”

Ilya laughed again, the hangover easing with every step. “Relax. I’m not planning on corrupting your brother.”

“Good,” Gray said firmly.

I’m definitely thinking about him, Ilya thought. But he didn’t say that part out loud.

They reached the Science Center plaza, wind sweeping across the concrete. Gray still looked tense, muttering something under his breath about Shane being a distraction. Ilya tuned him out.

Because right across the courtyard, like fate had perfect comedic timing, someone in a navy rowing jacket walked out of Lamont Library holding a coffee and a folder of papers.

Shane.

Freshly showered. Hair pushed back. Clean clothes. Still annoyingly gorgeous.

He looked up at the same time Ilya saw him.

Their eyes met.

Shane stopped mid-step, nearly spilling his coffee, like the universe had done him dirty twice in one morning.

Ilya couldn't help it—he lifted a hand in greeting, a small wave.

Shane stared.

Then, slowly... reluctantly... he lifted his cup in return.

Not friendly.

Not hostile.

Just wary. Curious. And very, very flustered.

Gray followed Ilya's gaze, saw who it was, and groaned so loud two freshmen turned to look. "Oh, for fuck's sake," Gray muttered. "No. No. Absolutely not. We're leaving."

Ilya grinned. "Why? He seems nice."

"He is not nice."

"Looks nice."

"He literally hates you."

"And yet he waved at me."

Gray pointed a threatening finger at him, “Ilya.”

Ilya lifted his palms innocently.

Gray sighed, dragging him away toward their economics building like he was hauling a misbehaving dog.

But Ilya couldn’t resist glancing back one more time.

And Shane—yeah, he was still watching him.

Not looking away.

Not pretending he hadn’t seen.

Just... watching.

Ilya’s pulse jumped in his throat.

The campus air suddenly felt way too crisp, way too sharp.

Way too alive for a morning dewed of wrong first impression.

Interesting, he thought.

Chapter 2: Sanity Shaken

Chapter Notes

Hey, it's me again. I didn't expect that many of you enjoy reading Unmaking Heart. Thank you so much for loving it and all the lovely feedback. I decided to post a longer chapter so that you can enjoy a lot more. This au is certainly would be around here for a bit so do expect more chapters in the future.

Anyway, what do you think of Gray Hollander so far? Do you guys want to see more of him? His dynamics with both Shane and Ilya? Please leave your thoughts. Happy reading and thank you so much :) Have a good day.

By late afternoon, the common hall outside Widener had settled into its usual rhythm—pages flipping, laptops tapping, the occasional burst of laughter from a group project that was obviously going to implode by midterms. Shane offered the room a soft kind of calm: headphones around his neck, pencil between his fingers, a textbook cracked so wide the spine probably cried.

In front of him sat evidence of a long day: an empty plate scattered with turkey sandwich crumbs, two drained coffees, and a water bottle with bite marks on the cap from when he'd tried not to scream during a problem set.

He muttered something about supply curves under his breath as he scribbled notes in the margin.

“Hey—this seat taken?”

Shane didn't even look up as he replied, “No, go ahead,” and immediately reached to clear the space—shoving his rowing jacket to one side, tugging his duffel under the table, brushing off the bench with his palm.

“Sorry, sorry—give me a sec—”

Then he turned.

And froze.

The universe had a sick sense of humor.

It was him.

Used-condom-on-my-textbook guy.

Ilya Rozanov—looking maddeningly composed, hair messy in an intentional way Shane hated on principle, hoodie soft and worn, grin lazy like he was having a good day and Shane was about to make it better.

“Thanks,” Ilya said, sliding onto the bench beside him. “Didn’t wanna assume.”

Shane swallowed. His face went warm. Then hot. Then hotter.

He dragged his eyes back to his notes like they’d save him.

Ilya leaned his arms on the table, close enough that Shane could smell his cologne—clean, masculine, a little expensive but not obnoxious. “So,” Ilya said lightly extending his hand to the athlete, “guess we should do this properly. I’m Ilya. Ilya Rozanov.”

Shane stared at the offered hand. He debated ignoring it. Pretending he didn’t see. Pretending his heart wasn’t thudding loud enough to power a rowing machine.

He took it.

“Shane Hollander,” he said.

“Yeah,” Ilya smirked, “No shit.” Casually nodding at the textbook, he continued, “How’s the crime scene? Squeaky clean? It’s not slippery to get it off huh?”

Shane groaned and hid his face in his palm, “Please don’t call it a crime.”

Ilya leaned closer, “What should I call it, then?”

“I don’t know—just not that.”

“Fine,” Ilya tapped his chin, “An incident?”

“Stop.”

“A tragic accident?”

Shane let his head fall onto his folded arms.

“A... misplacement of personal items?,” Ilya offered.

Shane peeked sideways at him between his folded arms, “Are you done?”

“I can be,” Ilya said, grinning.

Shane exhaled slowly, pulling himself upright. “Look. No slippery or whatever—no harm done. I cleaned the cover with sanitizer wipes.”

Ilya winced, “Ouch.”

“Yeah. My poor book.”

They sat in a brief silence that wasn’t quite awkward. More like... charged. Curiously warm.

Ilya rested his chin on his hand, “So. You knew who I was?”

Shane snorted, “Everybody knows who you are.”

“That good or bad?”

Shane turned a page, pretending to read the paragraph he absolutely wasn’t processing, “Depends who you ask.”

“And you?”

Shane hesitated for a beat. Then shrugged, “You’re the only one in my brother’s circle who doesn’t act like he’s allergic to normal human behavior.”

Ilya laughed—low, pleased, “I’ll take that as a compliment.”

“It’s a relative compliment,” Shane corrected.

“Still counts and trust me,” Ilya said, stretching an arm along the back of the bench, shoulder brushing Shane’s, “I got that impression.”

Shane leaned away entirely on instinct. Then regretted it instantly. Because Ilya’s warmth was distracting, sure, but the absence of it was worse.

He cleared his throat, “Gray exaggerates.”

Shane lifted a brow, “About what?”

“About me being annoying.”

Ilya's lips twitched. "I didn't say he said that."

"He didn't have to."

Ilya tapped his fingers lightly on the table, eyes on nothing but searching for Shane's face, "You're not annoying."

"You've known me for literally thirty seconds."

"And in those thirty seconds," Ilya said, voice warm and playful, "I've concluded you're perfectly tolerable."

"That's the nicest thing anyone from your group has ever said to me."

Ilya grinned, "Tolerable?"

"Yeah. I'll cherish it."

Ilya turned so he was fully facing Shane, elbow on the table, "So what are you working on? Looks intense."

"Econometrics."

"Hard?"

"Yes."

"You good at it?"

"Unfortunately," Shane muttered, "Otherwise I could drop the course and run away."

Ilya nodded, amused. "Want a break? You've crushed two coffees. Your handwriting looks like it's begging for mercy."

Shane glanced down. His entire notes page was a battlefield of equations and irritated commentary. "That's just my handwriting," he said.

Ilya studied it. "It's cute."

Shane blinked. Begging for mercy? Nothing cute about that. Shane may be learning runes before he did the math. His brain short-circuited for a whole two seconds. What's worse than squeezing his tiny little brain other than mathematical equations? Reading another tiny little brain.

“Sorry,” Ilya added with a shrug, “Blunt. Comes with the hangover.”

“It’s...,” Shane swallowed, “It’s fine.”

Ilya watched him like he was collecting reactions. Like every twitch, every flustered inhale, every glance was an answer to a question Ilya hadn’t even asked aloud.

“So,” Ilya said softly, “am I bothering you?”

Shane looked at him—really looked.

Ilya’s smile was crooked, inviting, a little stupid in a charming way. He didn’t sit like he owned the room, the way Gray did. He sat like he was genuinely happy to be here. With him. “No,” Shane said, “You’re not bothering me.”

Ilya’s smile deepened, “Good.” He wished his face was pleasurable enough to rub off the awkwardness between them but he preferred that they were getting there, “Well,” Ilya murmured, “I’m glad we’re... acquaintances now.”

Shane narrowed his eyes. “Acquaintances?”

“Temporary label,” Ilya said, “Until something better fits.”

Shane twitched hard enough to make him dizzy, whose blood he had to spill over to avenge the crime of the suspect who was definitely standing on business. Oh, slippery thoughts. “Let’s not get ahead of ourselves,” he whispered.

Ilya only smiled wider which already charmed enough passing librarians and spiralling students at this point if Shane was being cute, “Why not?” But it was a question for another day.

—

The sky outside the hall had shifted from a lazy afternoon glow into that dim, warm gold that always reminded Shane he had somewhere to be. Practice. River. Pain. Sweat. Peace.

He closed his textbook, the heavy thump echoing across the nearly empty space. A few students glanced up; most didn’t care. Ilya, though—Ilya always noticed things.

Well, Shane wasn’t charmed enough by how amazing the teeth or the smile was so he started packing: pens capped and tucked into the side pouch, textbooks slid into its sleeve, water

bottle clipped off the edge of the table. His duffel bag was embarrassingly overstuffed—rowing clothes, shoes, extra hoodie, protein bar wrappers, the usual chaos of someone who lived in perpetual motion.

Ilya, who had been lazily twirling a pen between his fingers, paused and turned toward him, “You heading out?”

Shane nodded, “Practice in twenty minutes.”

Ilya hummed, low and thoughtful, watching Shane shove a pair of socks deeper into the bag like he was annoyed at their existence. “Rowing practice?” he clarified, just so that the athlete would differentiate his tone apart. Shane could do the math.

Bold enough to make prediction out of the meeting room, Ilya doesn’t came any close to none but Shane throwing him a reading-stock-market-turn-you-blind look and asked, “What else?” Guess the younger brother judged him twice harder. Noted.

Ilya smirked, “Could be a secret job. Or a cult meeting.”

Shane slung his duffel shut with a sharp zip, “If it was a cult, I wouldn’t be running my mouth to you.”

Ilya laughed, “Fair enough.” He watched Shane swung the bag over his shoulder, adjusting the strap to sit comfortably across his chest. His leg slid out from under the long bench, and just as he stood, Ilya’s voice followed him.

“Hey, can I ask something?”

Shane hesitated. Just a beat. “What?”

“You don’t live with Gray?”

Shane’s jaw tightened instinctively—just for a second, but Ilya caught it. He always caught things. That was the irritating part.

“No,” Shane said simply, “I don’t.”

Ilya raised a brow, leaning forward on his elbows, pen tapping softly against the table. “But the townhouse is huge. Like—luxury hotel huge.”

“Exactly,” Shane said.

“That’s... the reason you don’t live there?”

Shane didn’t answer immediately. He inhaled, eyes flicking toward the hallway as if calculating how long this conversation might take. Then he looked back at Ilya “Gray doesn’t really... associate with me,” Shane said, “We do our own things.”

Ilya frowned slightly, “You’re only a year apart.”

“Uh-huh,” Shane said, half-amused and half-sour. “And because of that, people thought we were twins when I was born. You’d think that would’ve brought us closer.”

“Didn’t?”

Shane’s lips quirked—not quite a smile, not quite sadness. “Gray came out polished. Fit the mold. Perfect CEO material. And I...” he shrugged, “didn’t.”

Ilya tilted his head, “You don’t think you fit his vibe.”

“I know I don’t,” Shane corrected, “I’m not... whatever that world is. Yours. His. The parties. The circles. The games. It’s not me.”

Ilya’s mouth drew into a slower smile—gentle, curious, “You really hate our scene that much?”

“I don’t hate it,” Shane said, “I just don’t belong there.” He tightened the strap across his shoulder, “Besides. That townhouse? No offense, but it’s not exactly livable.”

Ilya snorted, “None taken.”

Shane raised a brow, judging strikes again. “There were three people passed out on the living room floor this morning.”

“I know,” Ilya said proudly, “That means the party was good.”

“It smelled like tequila and the apocalypse.”

Ilya laughed so loudly another student shushed him.

Shane rolled his eyes, “Anyway. I prefer the dorms.”

Ilya’s eyes slid over him thoughtfully, “So you’d rather pay extra for on-campus housing and smelly socks,” he said slowly, “than live in a massive townhouse owned by your billionaire older brother?”

Without hesitation, Shane said, “Yes.”

Ilya leaned back like that was the most interesting thing he’d heard all day. “Huh.”

“That’s it?,” Shane asked, “Just—huh?”

“What do you want?” Shane asked. “A lecture? I think it’s kinda... refreshing.”

Shane blinked, forgetting how a few seconds ago he had a place to go, things to tick off his list, “Refreshing?”

“Yeah,” Ilya smiled, softer now, “You don’t take the easy route just because it’s there.”

Shane chewed the inside of his cheek. Compliments always felt like unstable ground—especially coming from Ilya, whose voice had this annoying habit of sounding sincere even when he was teasing.

Conversation was hitting too close to home, surely hours of talk about rowing couldn’t be more intense than whatever this was about to become. So, Shane Hollander dodged. He stepped out from the long bench fully, ready to go. His hands found the strap of his duffel again, adjusting it for something to do with his hands and not his mouth.

Ilya stood slightly too, turning a little toward him. “Hey, before you go—”

Shane paused.

“Can I get your number?”

Shane stared at him.

Ilya waited—which Shane didn’t think Ilya Rozanov was even capable of being.

Shane swallowed, “Why?”

Ilya shrugged but his eyes stayed locked on him, “So I can text you. Maybe hang out sometime. Maybe apologize again for the book. Properly.”

Shane exhaled slowly, the air catching in his throat. After a long beat, the athlete said, “I don’t... give my number out easily.” That ran simple.

Ilya didn’t react—no disappointment, no pressure. Just a calm, steady look. “Fair enough,” he murmured.

Shane nodded once, then finally stepped away from the table, “See you around, Rozanov.”

Ilya leaned back, watching him go. “See you, Hollander.”

Shane walked out of the hall before his pulse could betray him—fast, purposeful, hiding the fact that his breath was uneven and his chest felt like something had just shifted dangerously inside it. He didn’t give Ilya his number.

But damn it, he kinda wanted to.

—

The campus basketball court was buzzing with evening energy—sneakers squeaking, laughter echoing off the backboards, the faint smell of sweat and damp leaves drifting through the cool air. Ilya dribbled lazily, spinning the ball on his finger while Gray adjusted his sleeves like they were about to have a board meeting instead of a one-on-one game.

“Are you ready,” Gray asked, tying his shoe for the third time, “or are you planning to warm up until sunrise?”

Ilya snorted and took the ball to the arc, “I’m ready. I just thought I’d go easy on you for once.”

“Oh, please,” Gray scoffed, “The last time you ‘went easy,’ you sprained my ego.”

Ilya grinned, took the shot—clean, smooth, nothing-but-net.

Gray’s eyes narrowed, “Asshole.”

Ilya shrugged, “Talent.”

They played for a few minutes, exchanging light trash talk, easy layups, rougher rebounds. Sweat built up. The rhythm was familiar—comfortable, like all the years they’d spent

orbiting each other in a world full of privilege, ambition, and ridiculous expectations.

Then Ilya—casual as hell—dropped the bombshell, “So I asked your brother for his phone number yesterday.”

Gray actually missed his shot.

Didn’t just miss it—he airballed it.

The ball bounced weakly against the base of the hoop and rolled away.

Ilya pressed his lips together to stop the grin.

Gray turned slowly, like a man preparing to read someone his will, “... excuse me?”

Ilya shrugged, dribbling while walking backward, “You heard me.”

Gray blinked at him like he’d just announced he was switching majors to interpretive dance. He did love to see his best friend waddle through the mud though but he had seen enough, “Why—in God’s name—would you need Shane’s phone number?”

Ilya shrugged again. “So I can talk to him?”

“About what?!”

“I don’t know. Life? Books? Coffee preferences? The fact that he somehow manages to look adorable even when he’s annoyed?”

Gray’s face went through four different stages of shock: horror → confusion → denial → bargaining. His name would speak for himself if Ilya kept going, “Ilya. No. Absolutely not. Yes, he’s annoyed but he’s not adorable. You do not need his number.”

Ilya raised a brow, bruised because he refused to brush it off this time, “Why not?”

“Because!,” Gray gestured wildly, “He’s... Shane.”

“That’s not an argument.”

“He’s a Hollander, Rozanov!”

“So do you.”

“Who are you talking to?”

“My best friend.”

“Oh fuck you, Ilya! He ignores social expectations!”

“Speak for yourself.”

“He’s unpredictable!”

Ilya laughed, “That’s what makes him interesting.”

Gray stared, mouth slightly open, like Ilya had just said he wanted to marry a raccoon. An adorable one precisely. You’re joking,” Gray said.

“Nope.”

“You actually tried to get his number?”

“Yeah.”

“Did he give it to you?”

“No,” Ilya smirked, “But it wasn’t a hard no. It was more like a... stubborn, flustered no.”

Gray dragged a hand down his face, “Jesus Christ.”

Ilya tossed him the ball, “What’s your problem with him?”

“You know my problem,” Gray muttered, bouncing the ball angrily. “He does whatever he wants. Always has. He doesn’t listen. He doesn’t follow the rules. He—”

“He’s not you,” Ilya finished softly.

Gray froze for half a beat—just enough to reveal the truth. Then he scowled. “That’s not it.”

“It absolutely is.”

“It’s not,” Gray insisted, but his voice lacked conviction, “We just don’t... click.”

“You don’t click with anyone who doesn’t kiss your ass.”

Gray pointed at him, offended, “You don’t kiss my ass.”

“I’m the exception,” Ilya said easily, “And he could be too.”

“Ilya,” Gray said with a warning edge, “Stay away from Shane. He doesn’t need chaos.”

Ilya raised a brow, “I am not chaos.”

“Last night you woke up in a stranger’s bed with a headache, no shirt, and one functioning brain cell.”

“...okay, but that was just Thursday.”

“Exactly.”

Ilya snorted, “You act like he’s some fragile little thing who can’t handle me.”

“He’s not fragile,” Gray said, suddenly serious, “He’s... different.”

Different.

Ilya repeated that in his head.

Different.

Different in the way he smiled without trying.

Different in the way he blushed when flustered.

Different in the way he looked at Ilya like he wasn’t sure if he wanted to run or stay.

Different in the way Ilya couldn’t stop thinking about him.

Ilya’s voice softened, “Look... I’m not trying to date your brother.”

Gray gave him a side-eye that said I don’t believe that for a second.

Ilya sighed, “I’m not. I just... like him.”

“Like him how?”

Ilya shrugged. “I don’t know yet.”

Gray threw the ball at Ilya’s chest. If his best friend kept shrugging like that, Gray might as well throw it at his head but the last thing he wanted was to lost over a lawsuit but

importantly not their friendship, “Well figure it out far away from him.”

Ilya caught it easily, “He’s an adult, you know.”

“He’s my brother.”

“And I’m your best friend.”

“That’s why this is a nightmare. A bad one. Enough to shit myself.”

Ilya laughed. Then—because he couldn’t resist—he said, “Also, you should know Shane called me ‘the only non-prick’ in your circle.”

Gray looked personally injured, “He what?!”

Ilya nodded, dead serious, “His words. Verbatim.”

“He’s such a little—,” Gray groaned, pacing like he was being haunted, “I swear he gets this from my mother. Always so—so—so—”

“Honest?”

Gray tossed his head back like he’d been stabbed, “Since when your English this good? Do you know what English should sounds like? Not torturing!”

“Ah, be careful now. You’re being stereotypical,” Ilya leaned against the fence, twirling the basketball in his hands, “Relax. I just asked for his number, not his hand in marriage.”

“You’re not getting either.”

“We’ll see.”

“Ilya.”

“Gray.”

They stared each other down.

Then Ilya smirked. “You know I’m gonna talk to him again, right?”

Gray let out a long breath, defeated, “I hate everything about this.”

Ilya’s grin widened. “You’ll live.”

“Barely.”

“Come on,” Ilya said, stepping back onto the court, “Your turn. Don’t miss again.”

Gray huffed, grabbed the ball—and promptly missed by a solid three feet.

Ilya burst out laughing.

Gray pointed at him furiously, “This is your fault! I’m mentally destabilized!”

Ilya just kept laughing, letting the ball roll away as he wiped sweat and amusement from his eyes. Shane Hollander had no idea he was the reason behind the worst shot Gray Hollander had ever taken in his life—and the reason Ilya Rozanov couldn’t stop smiling.

—

The rowing facility showers were a fogged-out hellscape of steam, sweat, and exhausted groans echoing against tile. Practice today had been brutal—Coach had apparently decided that the upcoming regatta meant everyone should suffer equally, legs screaming, lungs burning, arms shaking like cheap scaffolding in a hurricane.

Shane felt every muscle complain as hot water pounded across his shoulders. He braced a hand against the wall, letting the heat loosen the knots in his back. Sweat washed off him in rivulets. He closed his eyes and exhaled, finally relaxing—

Footsteps.

Too close.

Too deliberate.

Shane cracked one eye open, saw a figure standing behind his shower stall through the steam—and nearly slipped.

“Jesus Christ—Gray?!”

He spun halfway, one hand going instinctively to cover himself even though the water was already doing a good job of blinding both of them.

“What the fuck is wrong with you?,” Shane barked, heart pounding, “You’re way too rich that you’re playing Batman now? Doing dramatic entrance shit just to see me naked?”

Gray crossed his arms, completely unfazed, “If I were Batman, I wouldn’t have a brother who showers with all the drama of a dying Victorian poet. But I appreciate the resemblance.”

“Get out,” Shane hissed.

“No.”

“Yes!”

“No.”

Shane grabbed a handful of water and splashed it into Gray’s face. Useless—his brother didn’t even blink. God, what had his brother turned into. Still disturbingly unbothered Gray Hollander.

He waited until Shane was done glaring before speaking with that clipped, purposeful tone he reserved for emergencies or major inconveniences, “Did Ilya try to talk to you?”

Shane groaned loudly enough the guys two stalls over paused mid-shampoo. He dragged both palms down his face, water dripping from his fingers, “Are you seriously doing this now?”

“Answer the question,” Gray insisted, voice low.

Shane turned the shower off with a sharp twist and stepped out, dripping wet. Gray handed him a towel—at least he had that level of decency.

Shane snatched it, wrapping it around his waist before meeting his brother’s gaze, “Yes,” the athlete said flatly, “He tried to talk to me.”

Gray stared.

“And he asked for my number.”

Gray’s jaw clenched.

“And no, I didn’t give it.”

Gray exhaled, relieved, “Good. Stay that way.”

Shane raised a brow, “What the hell does that mean?”

“It means,” Gray said, adjusting his tie—because of course he wore a tie to ambush someone in a shower—“Ilya is... Ilya. And you should stay focused on your own life. Stick to that older girlfriend of yours who works full time at a bar.”

Shane froze mid-rub with the towel. Then slowly—very slowly—turned to stare at his brother like he’d just grown antlers. “She has a name,” Shane said.

Gray blinked, confused. “Who?”

“Alice.”

“Oh.”

“And we broke up four months ago.”

Silence.

Steam rose around them like mist in a battlefield.

Gray blinked again, “Right. I... forgot.”

“Did you forget,” Shane asked quietly, “or did you just not care enough to remember?”

The question hit harder than any sprint their captain had ordered today. Even through the layers of steam, even with the echo of running water behind them, that landed sharply—too sharply.

Gray opened his mouth, closed it, opened it again like he couldn’t decide between being defensive or pretending he had an excuse.

Shane shook his head, towel around his neck now, hair dripping onto his shoulders, “You act like you know everything about me, but you don’t know shit, Gray. You don’t even ask.”

“I—” Gray cleared his throat, voice tightening, “I didn’t realize you two broke up.”

“Yeah,” Shane muttered, “You wouldn’t.”

Gray's eyes narrowed with something complicated—guilt, irritation, defensiveness, all tangled up and unfamiliar. “You should’ve told me,” he said stiffly.

“I did,” Shane shot back, “I told you at Thanksgiving. You were too busy pitching your new NFT startup.”

Gray frowned. “That was an important—”

“Pitch,” Shane finished for him, “Yeah. Everything’s important when it’s about you.”

Gray's posture stiffened, like being accused of selfishness was a personal attack on his whole identity.

Shane grabbed his gym bag from the bench, still dripping water as he pulled on shorts under his towel. “I’m not interested in Rozanov,” he said without looking up, “Or anyone right now. I’m just trying to get through school, okay?”

Gray didn’t say anything. He didn’t want to. He rather ruined his reputation than those who he protect but not love loudly.

Shane slung the bag over his shoulder and finally met his brother’s stare, “And if you’re here to police who I talk to—don’t. You don’t get to do that.”

Gray’s jaw tightened, “I’m trying to look out for you.”

“No,” Shane said softly, “You’re trying to control me.”

They held each other’s gaze—two brothers who shared a bloodline, a last name, a history... but not the same world.

Shane stepped past him, the smell of steam and chlorine still clinging to his skin. “If Ilya talks to me again,” he said as he walked away, “that’s between him and me. Not you.”

Gray didn’t stop him.

He didn’t follow.

He just stood in the steam, brows drawn tight, looking like someone had just told him the rulebook for his entire life was wrong.

And for the first time in a long time, Shane didn't feel guilty walking away.

—

Ilya Rozanov's penthouse looked like the kind of place people rented out for music videos—floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the city, minimalist furniture, a half-finished takeaway dinner on the coffee table, and a giant TV currently playing a movie he absolutely wasn't watching.

The lights were off except for the screen's glow. Ilya lay sprawled across the giant sectional, hoodie unzipped, hair damp from a shower, a beer bottle resting against his thigh.

And in his hands?

His phone.

Specifically:

Shane Hollander's Instagram profile.

Which had taken him two entire hours to find.

Ilya had started simple—typing "Shane Hollander" in the search bar.

Nothing.

"Shane. S Hollander. Hollander S. S.Hollander94. SHollander1410."

Nothing.

He'd almost texted one of those shady social media investigators he sometimes used for business networking recon. Almost. He'd even hovered over the "message" button.

Then—pure luck.

He'd pulled up the Harvard Rowing Team's official page, scrolling through their latest regatta photos, pretending he wasn't checking every face like a deranged detective.

And there he was.

Second photo in a carousel—Shane standing by the river, uniform unzipped halfway, chest rising with exhaustion, hair plastered to his forehead, freckled face flushed, looking unfairly beautiful after obviously suffering for hours.

Tagged:

@rowan.theory

Ilya had whispered, "What the hell kind of username is that?" Then immediately clicked it.

Which brought him here.

Now he scrolled with a level of concentration usually reserved for financial contracts and bad decisions.

Shane's profile wasn't private—thank God—but it also wasn't... obvious.

A soft, minimal feed.

Muted colors.

Sparse captions.

Mostly pictures of:

- Books
- Rowing practice
- The Charles River at sunrise
- Strange artsy shots of campus architecture
- Coffee cups with short cryptic captions like "Trying."

- A side-profile photo of him wearing a hockey jersey with number eighty-one on it.

Ilya squinted.

A friend?

A something?

His stomach twisted unpleasantly at the possibility.

He kept scrolling.

Photos over the summer: Shane on a bike trail. Shane with two dogs (neither his, judging by the caption “Not mine. I wish.”). Shane wearing sunglasses too big for his face, not smiling, just blinking at the camera like he’d been ambushed.

Then a photo Ilya had to stop at.

Shane sitting on the steps behind Winthrop House. Knees pulled up, arms draped over them, hair pushed back by the wind. His shirt wrinkled. Expression soft. Vulnerable in a way Ilya hadn’t expected.

The caption: “Quiet is good.”

Ilya’s chest did something stupid. A slow pull. A tightening. “This is bad,” he muttered to himself, “I’m officially a degenerate. And not even the fun kind.”

His movie continued playing—a scene with explosions or car chases or something equally loud and irrelevant.

Ilya zoomed in on Shane’s face.

He looked thoughtful.

Alone.

Unaware someone like Ilya would ever stare at him like this.

A notification pinged on Ilya's phone.

A text from Gray:

“Don't do anything stupid.”

Ilya stared at it. Then locked the screen, tossed the phone onto the couch cushion beside him, and groaned loudly into the empty room.

“Too late, man,” he muttered. “Way too late.”

He scrubbed a hand over his face, exhaled, and reached for the phone again—because self-control clearly didn't exist tonight. He opened Shane's profile again. Then—dangerously—tapped the message button. For once, Ilya wanted to be impulsive.

A blank chat box opened.

Ilya typed:

“Hey.”

Then deleted it.

He tried:

“It's Ilya. Didn't get your number so I'm resorting to war crimes.”

Deleted.

Typed:

“Didn’t know you’re into architecture? What else could you get into?”

Deleted.

He tossed the phone face-down again, grabbed his beer, and took a long drink. “This is pathetic,” he muttered. Ilya lay back on the couch, staring at the ceiling.

He was Ilya Rozanov—he didn’t chase people.

People chased him.

Or wanted things from him.

Or used him for networks, connections, or fun.

He’d never spent an evening stalking someone’s Instagram like a teenager nursing a crush.

But Shane?

He was different.

He didn’t want anything from Ilya.

He didn’t flinch around him.

Didn’t flatter him.

Didn’t soften himself to fit into the circle.

He just existed—quiet, brilliant, stubborn, real.

Ilya exhaled, his voice barely above a whisper, “I want to know you.”

A moment passed. Then, giving in, he flipped his phone again, opened Shane’s profile, and scrolled one more time—slowly, carefully—memorizing details he had no business memorizing.

The way Shane tilted his head just a tiny bit in photos.

The freckles Ilya did noticed.

The ink smudge on his fingers in a study picture.

The subtle sadness in a few shots where he looked away from the camera.

Ilya wasn't just looking.

He was learning him.

Reading him.

And he knew—

This wasn't going away.

Not anytime soon.

Chapter 3: Good Company

Chapter Notes

Episode four!! How do you guys feel about it? I ate it up for sure. Connor and Hudson were amazing as well. The expression, the eyes-talking, the shaky voice. But I really have to respectfully admire the effort that Jacob Tierney put to stick with the reading material. It's not an easy work. There's a lot of consideration involved to create a safe space before and afterwards. I'm also excited for season two and I just started picking up *The Long Game* as well as the third book in the series. Anyway, I hope you enjoy this chapter. Please leave your thoughts too. Happy reading.

Ilya was cutting across the Quad toward the business school, coffee in hand, hoodie half-zipped, earbuds in but with no music playing—classic move for eavesdropping without looking like he was.

The autumn air was sharp, leaves cracking under his sneakers, the late-afternoon sunlight turning everything warm and deceptively peaceful.

He wasn't expecting drama.

He definitely wasn't expecting Shane-related drama.

But fate had a way of throwing Shane Hollander in front of him the same way gravity kept throwing things toward the ground—inexorable, unstoppable, and deeply amusing.

Two girls were walking ahead, both bundled in Harvard gear, chatting loudly enough that Ilya caught the tail end of their conversation.

"...did you see the announcement?," one whispered with the energy of someone holding sacred gossip, "Shane's rowing in the charity match again this year."

Ilya's eyebrow lifted.

He slowed.

The second girl squealed softly, "Oh my God, yes. And that means—"

"Tights."

They both broke into barely contained giggles.

Ilya blinked.

Tights?

The girl continued in an excited hiss, “Every single year he wears those ridiculous compression leggings and acts like it’s nothing.”

“He looks like he’s sculpted out of ethics and suffering,” her friend agreed dramatically, “Honestly, it’s rude.”

Ilya nearly choked on his coffee.

Shane.

In tights.

Rowing.

On purpose.

He kept walking—slowly enough to stay within hearing range.

The first girl laughed, hugging her textbooks to her chest, “He’s just so casual about it. Like he has no idea everyone goes insane the moment he steps onto the dock.”

“Of course he doesn’t notice. He’s the nice Hollander.”

“God, yes. So much nicer than his brother.”

Ilya snorted softly.

They were not wrong. He hadn’t been working hard enough to witness his best friend shrunk smaller to no one but his own blood until this day.

“And he’s cute,” the second girl added in a dreamy sigh. “Like, stupid cute. Like you want to pinch his face and then make him blush.”

“Ugh, yes. Imagine dating someone like him.”

“I’d die. He probably smells like books and laundry detergent.”

Ilya nearly laughed out loud.

He had, in fact, smelled like that the morning in Gray’s townhouse—clean, warm, a hint of citrus shampoo.

The girls kept going, spiraling like they were planning a shrine.

“Gray’s attractive in the terrifying way,” one said, “But Shane is attractive in the please marry me and let’s read poetry in bed way.”

“His ex was lucky,” the other whispered, “Whoever she was.”

Ilya’s smile faded.

So they knew.

And if they knew, plenty of others did.

He walked faster before he started listening too hard and became the kind of person who analyzed random students’ opinions for intel. But the universe wasn’t done.

The girls kept talking—and Ilya’s brain betrayed him, slowing enough to catch one last line: “Do you think he’s single now?”

“Maybe. I heard Alice dumped him months ago...”

“God. Whoever dates him next is the luckiest person alive.”

Ilya stopped.

Mid-step.

Right in the middle of the path.

Coffee in hand.

Heart thudding like he’d just sprinted.

Whoever dates him next...

He didn't know why those words hit him so fast—sharp, unexpected, stupid. He didn't even know what he was feeling.

Possessiveness?

Jealousy?

Curiosity so intense it felt physical?

He barely knew Shane. But the idea of some random student swooping in—someone who already had his number, who already understood his quiet softness, who maybe sat next to him in lecture...

Ilya swallowed.

This was a problem.

A very annoying unprofitable problem.

He resumed walking, earbuds still useless and coffee growing colder.

His brain was full of tights.

And charity games.

And Shane laughing with someone who wasn't him.

And girls calling him "cute" like he wasn't—whatever the hell he was.

Ilya should've been annoyed at himself. Instead?

He was smiling.

Smiling like a man who'd been shown a puzzle piece that suddenly made the whole picture clearer.

Shane Hollander—reserved, brilliant, infuriating, accidentally charming—wasn't just interesting. He was wanted. And Ilya Rozanov didn't like being late to the game.

He took another sip of coffee.

“Charity rowing match, huh?,” he muttered to himself, “Yeah. Guess I’m free that day.”

And for the first time since meeting Shane, Ilya didn’t question the instinct. He just followed it.

—

The riverbank looked like a festival had exploded. Hundreds of students crowded the sidelines—cheering, waving banners, snapping photos for Instagram stories. There were food stalls, a DJ blasting remixes no one asked for, and an energy so loud it practically vibrated off the water.

Ilya strolled straight into it with a cup of overpriced campus coffee, sliding into the bleachers like a man who had absolutely no business being this early to a rowing match he’d never cared about before.

He sat.

Stretched his legs.

Sipped his drink.

And answered his ringing phone.

“Where the hell are you?,” Grays’s voice snapped through the speaker.

Ilya smirked. “Good afternoon to you too.”

“Ilya,” Gray sounded pissed. Always a good sign, “The guys are already at the house. We’re hitting the fundraiser party in twenty minutes and you’re—what—ghosting?”

Ilya glanced at the river.

At the still-empty dock.

At the crowd buzzing with anticipation.

“Busy.”

“Busy with what?”

Ilya casually leaned back, crossing one ankle over the other, “Charity event.”

There was dead silence on the other end.

Then:

“You’re at the rowing match?,” Gray hissed, “Why?”

Ilya shrugged even though Gray couldn’t see it, “Supporting the community.”

“Cut the shit, Ilya.”

Ilya grinned, “Fine. Supporting your brother.”

Another silence.

A dangerous one.

“Are you serious?,” Gray asked, “Bud, we talked about this. You’re not fuck—“ But Gray’s voice faded from Ilya’s awareness. Because something—someone—walked into his line of sight.

Shane fucking adorable Hollander.

With his teammates behind him, bags slung over their shoulders, all heading toward the docks. And Ilya forgot to breathe for a full two seconds. The girls from earlier were right. The tights were insane.

Black compression leggings clinging to Shane’s legs like a second skin, highlighting muscles Ilya definitely shouldn’t be staring at in public. His rowing uniform top hugged him tight, outlining the lean, carved lines of his torso. His hair was damp—fresh from warm-ups. His jaw slightly red from the cold.

A duffel bag hitched over one shoulder.

But the kicker?

The thing that made Ilya's brain short-circuit?

Shane Hollander was wearing glasses.

Thin black frames.

Simple.

Smart.

Unfairly attractive.

Since when the fuck...?

Ilya sat up straighter without meaning to.

"Ilya?" Gray barked in his ear, "Are you even listening?"

Ilya didn't answer.

Not when Shane was right there—pushing his glasses up with two fingers, adjusting his waistband (unholy), joking with his teammates, looking more relaxed than Ilya had ever seen him. The audacity to look nervous but not as him being the error.

Gray's irritation crackled louder. "Don't tell me you're—"

"Hold on," Ilya muttered, standing just a bit to get a better view. Shane laughed at something a teammate said—head tilting, eyes crinkling behind the lenses. He moved so naturally, so effortlessly... like he belonged on water. Like he didn't realize half the women—and a surprising number of men—were eyeing him like a dessert platter. Ilya felt something hot crawl up the back of his neck. He swallowed.

Gray was still yelling. "Ilya, answer me!"

Ilya finally placed the phone back against his ear and said flatly, "Your brother wears glasses now?"

"What?"

"Glasses. On his face."

Ilya squinted. “Since when?”

Gray groaned loud enough to distort the speaker. “Oh my God. Are you actually—Ilya. Are you checking out—”

“I’m hanging up,” Ilya said calmly.

“Don’t—”

Click.

Phone in pocket.

Coffee gripped tighter.

Focus zeroed in.

Shane was close enough now that Ilya caught the faint, light scent of some clean, subtle soap still clinging to his skin. He tugged off his jacket, revealing his uniform completely. No, the girls cloaked it wrong. Citrus the fuck not.

Ilya exhaled slowly.

This was becoming a problem.

A big one.

Shane wiped his forehead with the hem of his shirt, revealing a hint of toned abdomen, then tugged his glasses slightly higher again, the motion unconscious.

Ilya was absolutely, one-hundred-percent doomed. Not a single spreadsheet could tell.

Shane didn’t see him at first—too caught in whatever pep talk his captain was giving. But then his gaze flicked toward the bleachers, probably scanning for familiar faces.

His eyes landed on Ilya.

Stopped.

Blinked.

His expression shifted into something halfway between surprise and “oh god, why are you here?”

Ilya lifted his coffee in a small salute.

Shane's brows tightened behind the glasses.

Almost a frown.

Almost a smirk.

Something in-between—like he wasn't sure whether to ignore Ilya or walk over and demand an explanation. One of his teammates nudged him, teasing him for zoning out.

Ilya grinned—slow, shameless, and just a little wicked.

Shane rolled his eyes. And walked toward the dock like he wasn't rattled at all.

He was. Ilya could see it. He leaned back in his seat, heart beating harder than the charity event warranted. If a micro expression could get Ilya this worked up, imagined the best possible way to lose his goddamn mind.

Glasses.

Tights.

And Shane Hollander being obliviously magnetic.

The match hadn't even started.

And Ilya already knew:

He was in deep.

And getting out would take a miracle, not like he's planning to.

—

By the afternoon, the crowds were already thinning, the sky edging into gold, and the adrenaline of the charity match still hung in the air like static. Shane walked with the deliberate pace of someone whose body was exhausted but whose mind refused to slow down.

His duffel bag was slung casually over one shoulder, his uniform jacket zipped halfway, the black tights still hugging every line of his legs—far too distracting for anyone sanity but he had been practically wearing it merely to enhance repetitive motion and muscle endurance. Shane’s glasses now dangled from a thin strap around his neck, catching the light every time he moved.

Ilya saw him heading toward the rowing facility and didn’t even pretend to resist the instinct to follow. He fell into step beside him with the kind of confidence only someone with absolutely no shame—and maybe too much interest—could pull off.

Shane didn’t stop walking.

Didn’t even look irritated.

Just... aware. Sharply aware.

But his voice was calm when he said, “You’re not about to pitch me a business idea, right?”

Ilya grinned. “No business pitch.”

Shane hummed skeptically.

“Unless,” Ilya continued, “you consider convincing you to give me your number a business model.”

Shane snorted—actually snorted—and shook his head, a tiny smile tugging at his lips, “You’re persistent, Rozanov.”

“Thank you,” Ilya said, tone proud.

“It wasn’t a compliment.”

“I took it as one.”

Shane’s mouth quirked. “Of course you did.”

They kept walking, footsteps in sync, the river breeze cooling the sweat on Shane’s skin. He adjusted his glasses strap with a thumb, eyes forward but since Ilya was doing this, why not just have the conversation. “You know,” Shane said lightly, “Gray’s not going to be happy about this.”

Ilya raised a brow. “About what?”

“You and...” Shane gestured vaguely between them. “This.”

Ilya pretended to look confused, “Walking?”

Shane exhaled a laugh, shaking his head again, “You’re his friend and business partner. And he’s my brother. Not exactly ideal.”

Ilya waved a hand, “He’ll live.”

“He’s dramatic,” Shane said.

“You’re telling me.”

“You didn’t hear the lecture he gave me,” Shane remarked, rolling his eyes, “He basically ordered me not to... entertain you.”

Ilya’s eyebrow shot up but grimace walked harder, “Did he threaten to kill you?”

“I wish,” Shane murmured.

Ilya laughed. The brothers actually resembled each other so much but Gray made it seem like they were disgustingly different.

Shane continued, “No, he just showed up at the facility earlier this week. First time in months.” There was a soft, almost bitter edge to that. But he kept the smile anyway, “It was... nice. Rare. But nice.”

Ilya filed that away—quietly, without letting it show.

They approached the tall doors of the rowing facility, the echo of distant voices inside, the scent of chlorine, rubber, and river water drifting out. Shane stopped at the entrance and turned, one hand loosely gripping the strap of his duffel. “Alright,” he said, nodding toward the building, “This is as far as you go. It’s members-only.”

Ilya stepped back half a pace but didn’t move away entirely, “Rules. Tragic.”

“Some of us follow them,” Shane teased.

Ilya tapped his coffee cup against his palm, “Just one thing before you disappear into your shower fantasy land.”

Shane blinked, "... my what?" He regretted asking already.

"You know. Steam everywhere. Tights half-off..."

Shane gave him the flattest, most exhausted, most your unbelievable stare Ilya had ever seen.
"You're impossible."

Ilya smiled. Warm. Easy. Dangerous but how it would be if he just shoot his shot, "Have a drink with me tonight."

Shane's breath hitched—subtle, but Ilya caught it. Luck, perhaps.

"At the bar on Cambridge Street," Ilya continued, "My treat."

Shane's fingers tightened on the strap of his bag. "I don't think that's a good idea," he said quietly.

"But you're thinking about it," Ilya countered.

Shane looked away.

Down.

Then up again.

"Maybe," he admitted.

Ilya stepped back, giving him space he hadn't realized he was taking. "Seven o'clock."

Shane hesitated.

Long enough that Ilya knew something was happening behind those eyes—some tiny war Shane didn't want anyone to see.

Finally, the athlete said, "I'll see."

Not yes.

Not no.

Just—I'll see.

And for Shane Hollander?

That was practically a confession.

He turned, pushing open the heavy door, pausing only to add over his shoulder: “Don’t wait for me.”

Ilya grinned, “Too late.”

Shane’s ears flushed.

He disappeared inside.

And Ilya Rozanov stood outside the facility, coffee in hand, heart pounding harder than it had during the entire match—exactly like a man who’d gotten all the confirmation he needed.

—

Ilya got to the bar obscenely early.

Not because he was nervous.

Not because he cared too much.

Not because waiting made him restless.

(That’s what he told himself, anyway.)

The truth:

He needed a drink.

Maybe several.

The bar was dim and warm, all amber lighting and low music—Harvard’s unofficial hangout spot for people who were too tired to be civilized but too classy to get hammered in a frat basement. Ilya sat at the counter, elbow on polished wood, nursing a whiskey glass already half-empty.

He wasn't drunk.

He wasn't even tipsy.

But he was frustrated—eyes glued to the stock market chart tanking like it had personally offended him.

His phone kept vibrating with Gray's incoming messages.

GRAY: Did you SEE the drop???

GRAY: Rozanov I swear to god if you're ignoring me during a crash—

GRAY: WHERE ARE YOU

GRAY: ANSWER ME OR WE'RE SELLING EVERYTHING

Ilya took a long drag of whiskey.

Typed back:

ILYA: Calm down.

ILYA: We're not selling anything.

ILYA: Also I'm busy.

Immediately:

GRAY: BUSY?? BUSY WITH WHAT WE ARE LOSING MONEY

GRAY: we need a plan

GRAY: WHERE ARE YOU

Ilya smirked, thumbs moving lazily:

ILYA: Out.

ILYA: Having a drink.

ILYA: Without you.

ILYA: On purpose.

Gray typed like his fingers were knives:

GRAY: YOU SON OF A—

Ilya locked his phone and slid it face-down on the bar at perfect timing because the door swung open and a cool wave of night air slipped inside.

Shane Hollander walked in.

Right on time.

And Ilya forgot all about stocks, whiskey, and stray business panic.

Shane paused in the doorway, scanning the room. He was showered, hair still a little damp, falling onto his forehead in softer waves. He wore a navy-blue sweater, sleeves pushed up to his forearms, and dark jeans that fit him indecently well.

No glasses tonight.

Fuck.

Beggars can't be choosers.

Ilya wasn't prepared for how clean his face looked without them—unshielded, sharper-jawed, more adult than the sweet academic vibe the frames gave him. Shane looked... good. Too good that he sat up straighter without meaning to.

Shane didn't took look enough to spot him.

His posture changed—shoulders tightening, then relaxing, then tightening again—as if arguing with himself about turning around. But he didn't. He walked straight over.

Ilya's lips curled, slow and warm, "You made it."

Shane slid onto the stool next to him, placing his duffel bag down, “I said I’d see. Not that I’d come.”

“But you came. My English is good, you know?,” Ilya said, voice low, a little smug.

Shane shot him a sideways look. “Don’t make it weird.”

“No promises.”

Shane shook his head but Ilya caught the tiny smile tugging at the corner of his mouth.

The bartender approached. “What can I get you?”

“A beer,” Shane said, eyes still on Ilya, “Whatever’s cold.” Good taste.

Ilya drummed his fingers against his own glass. “Rough day? Thought athlete don’t drink.”

“More like rough teammates so I’m giving myself a slip,” Shane rubbed the back of his neck, “I swear half of them think I’m a therapist disguised as a rower.”

“You kind of look like one,” Ilya teased.

Shane lifted an eyebrow, “Because of the glasses?”

“Those too,” Ilya admitted, leaning closer, “But mostly because you have this... calm, thoughtful thing going on. Like you’re always five steps ahead.”

“I think you’re projecting,” Shane said dryly.

“Onto what?”

“Someone who doesn’t think about you nearly as much as you think about him.”

Ilya laughed—genuine, unbothered, amused, “Ouch. You wound me.”

The bartender returned with Shane’s beer. The athlete took a sip, watching Ilya over the rim, expression unreadable.

Then:

“You didn’t need to come early,” Shane said, setting the glass down, “I’m not worth that.”

Ilya blinked once.

Then twice.

He turned fully toward Shane.

“You think that’s why I came early?” Ilya asked softly.

Shane shrugged like he didn’t want the weight of whatever this was, “Why else?”

Ilya slid a thumb along the rim of his whiskey glass, “Because I wanted to.”

Shane’s breath caught—barely—but Ilya saw it. He looked away, staring at the shelves of liquor bottles as if they were suddenly fascinating, “You shouldn’t.”

“Probably not,” Ilya agreed.

“And Gray definitely wouldn’t approve.”

“Definitely not.”

“And I’m—” Shane hesitated, searching for the right word. “...difficult.”

Ilya’s voice dropped lower, “Try me.”

Shane’s eyes flickered to him.

Cool.

Tired.

Something else underneath.

“You really don’t know what you’re asking for,” he murmured.

Ilya leaned in, just enough to brush the edge of Shane’s space but not invade it, “Then explain it to me. I could handle difficult. Side gig’s hazard.”

Shane swallowed, the tension in his throat visible, “I don’t do... this.”

“Drinks at a bar?” Ilya teased lightly.

Shane shot him a deadpan look, “No. Whatever you’re trying to do.”

Ilya softened—just barely, “I’m not trying anything.”

“That’s a lie.”

“Okay,” Ilya corrected, “I’m not trying anything you don’t want.”

Shane exhaled—a small, reluctant sound—and took another sip of beer.

They sat for a moment.

Music humming.

People talking in the background.

The space between them warm, charged, uncertain.

Finally, Shane asked quietly:

“So... what now?”

Ilya smiled—not cocky, not arrogant, but honest in a way he rarely allowed himself.

“Now,” he said, “we drink.”

“And after that?”

Ilya held his gaze.

Steady.

Unflinching.

“After that,” he murmured, “we see what you’ll let happen.”

Shane didn’t react at first. Then he looked down at his beer, a tiny self-conscious smile appearing before he could hide it, “Don’t get ahead of yourself, Rozanov.”

Ilya’s grin widened. “Too late.”

And this time Shane didn't tell him to stop either as the night settled into that warm, buzzing rhythm where the bar lights softened, the music dimmed into something smoother, and conversations thickened with honesty—or the closest thing to it.

Ilya wasn't drunk and Shane definitely wasn't drunk either but they were both comfortably softened, simmering under the edges of the alcohol.

Ilya glanced down between their stools and nudged the duffel bag lightly with his foot, "You came straight from campus?"

Shane followed his gaze, nodded, and took another slow pull of his beer. "Yeah. Team celebration. Coach wanted to 'honor a good season.'" He made quotation marks with two fingers. "Translation: they wanted an excuse to drink away the trauma."

Ilya snorted, "You deserve it. You've had a hell of a year don't you?."

Shane blinked—surprised by the compliment. Then he scoffed lightly, "You sound like one of my so-called fans."

Ilya tilted his head. "You really don't think you have any?"

"I don't," Shane said firmly, twirling the glass in his hand, "They're just people with nothing better to do than overreact to compression tights."

Ilya coughed into his whiskey glass, trying not to laugh, "Oh, pretty sure they'd riot if you said that in public."

"They'd survive."

Another sip.

Eyes down.

Shoulders relaxing.

Meanwhile, Ilya's phone kept vibrating on the bar counter—ever so slightly. Face down. Light flashing against the wood.

Shane didn't notice.

Or chose not to.

Good.

Ilya ignored it like it didn't exist. There's a variation of punching bag in the war room. Gray should be fine. The least his best friend could do was to fire someone he set his eyes on first. He leaned an elbow on the counter, chin angled toward the athlete, "So. Tell me something."

Shane narrowed his eyes suspiciously, "That tone of yours always means trouble."

"Maybe I'm just making conversation."

"You're always making conversation. Doesn't make it less dangerous."

Ilya grinned. "What are you studying?"

Shane stared at him for a second as if trying to figure out the trap. When he couldn't find one, he answered, "Applied mathematics. And a minor in cognitive sciences. Econometrics on the side."

Ilya blinked. "Wow. Ambitious."

"Not really," Shane shrugged, "Math felt natural. Brains felt interesting."

Ilya opened his mouth. Closed it. Then opened it again, "You are... terrifyingly smart."

Shane laughed—quiet, low, warm. "Please. You and Gray took econ and computer science, built a ridiculous startup at nineteen, and became accidental billionaires. Don't pretend I'm the scary one."

Ilya gave him a lazy, amused look but it sounded good that he's considering a second time, "You think what we did was impressive?"

Shane hesitated. Then said, "I kinda see why it worked."

Ilya straightened—just a little.

Tone lighter, but attention razor-sharp.

"Yeah?" he asked, "What do you see?"

Shane lifted his glass, rubbing the condensation with his thumb, thinking. His eyes had that hazy post-practice, post-beer softness—the kind that made him unfiltered.

Or honest.

He finally spoke. “You’re... likable,” Shane said, as though admitting the sky was blue, “Annoying as hell. But likable.”

Ilya smirked, “I’ll take it. For now.”

“And Gray,” Shane continued, “is... well... a genius who pretends he isn’t. He overthinks everything. You balance that. He grounds you. You push him.”

Ilya listened closely.

This wasn’t casual talk anymore.

This was Shane revealing how he saw the people around him.

“You two are opposite disasters,” Shane said, staring into his drink, “but it works. I can see why you became—whatever you are now. Friends. Partners. Something in between.”

Ilya let the words sink in.

Shane looked up briefly—eyes catching Ilya’s, clear and unguarded—and there was something there that hadn’t been before.

Recognition.

Understanding.

Maybe even admiration.

Ilya leaned forward a little. “And where do you think you fit into that equation?”

Shane blinked fast.

Looked down.

Took another sip to avoid answering, “I don’t,” he said after a moment.

“You sure?”

“Yes.”

“Positive?”

Shane’s jaw ticked, just once, “Ilya, you don’t have to... include me in whatever world you two created.”

Ilya’s chest tightened—strange, unexpected, uncomfortable in the best way. He felt the urge to show the athlete that inclusion was never out of the question but to feel safe, he needed trust. Perhaps more. Greed breed necessary results.

“Hey,” Ilya said quietly.

Shane finally looked at him again.

“You’re interesting,” Ilya said.

Shane’s breath caught. Barely noticeable unless someone was watching him too closely.

Ilya was.

“And I want to know you,” Ilya added, shamelessly direct.

Shane’s fingers tightened around the glass. “You really don’t,” he whispered.

Ilya tilted his head, “Why not?”

Shane’s laugh came out quieter this time. Sadder. Softer. “Because I don’t fit your world either.”

Ilya’s eyes sharpened. “Let me decide that.”

Shane inhaled sharply—like the words pushed too close to whatever line he’d drawn for himself.

He didn’t move away.

He didn’t leave.

He didn’t shut down.

He just stared at Ilya with those dark, thoughtful eyes, caught between curiosity and self-preservation.

And for the first time that night—he didn't try to hide it.

For a moment, neither of them moved.

The bar noise faded into a soft hum—glasses clinking somewhere in the distance, low laughter from a corner booth, the bartender wiping the same spot on the counter for the third time. Ilya and Shane just... stared.

Not hostile.

Not uncomfortable.

Just locked in some private, tense little bubble that felt more like a held breath than anything else.

Finally, Shane exhaled—slow, controlled—and leaned back slightly. “That’s a great pitch, Rozanov,” he said quietly.

Ilya blinked. “Pitch?”

Shane gave him a tiny, crooked smile that felt too honest for the dim bar lighting, “Whatever you were trying to do just now? Yeah. Solid. Very... persuasive.”

Ilya huffed an amused breath, “You make it sound like I’m selling you something.”

“You’re a businessman. Everything you do sounds like a pitch.”

Before Ilya could answer, Shane planted his hands on the counter, slid off the stool, and bent down to grab his duffel bag.

Ilya watched him—slowly, unhurriedly—lifting the bag, slinging it over his shoulder, adjusting the strap across his chest. His sweater sleeve slipped down his forearm, and Shane rolled it back up absently, revealing lean muscle and veins faintly visible under the low bar lights.

Ilya lifted an eyebrow. “You’re leaving?”

“I am,” Shane replied.

“It’s early,” Ilya said, half challenging, half disappointed.

Shane raised his brows like he couldn't believe Ilya of all people was applying pressure, "That sounded suspiciously clingy."

Clingy. That's new which also means Shane was definitely in the game. Trust, baby, trust. Ilya smirked, "Or maybe I just want to keep talking."

Shane's expression softened—just a hair. "I can't."

Ilya tilted his head, "Why not?"

"Curfew," Shane said, tapping the strap of his bag. "Dormitory, remember? Some of us don't live in houses full of naked guests doing the walk of shame at nine in the morning."

Ilya snorted, low and amused, "You could've texted me if you were running late, you know."

Shane gave him a look, "I didn't have your number."

"...You could've fixed that tonight," Ilya said, leaning forward on his elbows.

Shane shook his head, and that soft smile from earlier flickered back—brief, small, but real, "Don't push your luck."

Ilya opened his mouth. Closed it.

He liked that smile more than he should.

"Thanks for the drinks," Shane said, stepping back, adjusting his bag again.

"You sure you don't want one more?," Ilya offered, "Water? Dessert? My company?"

"Definitely not the last one," Shane said dryly, but his voice had warmth behind it. He started toward the door, weaving through the crowd with that quiet, deliberate ease he had—like he didn't realize people always looked twice when he walked past. Ilya watched him go.

At the entrance, Shane paused with his hand on the door, glancing over his shoulder. His voice carried across the bar, "By the way, Rozanov?"

Ilya straightened. “Yeah?” Change of mind?

“You look like shit.”

Ilya froze, “...What?”

“You should get some rest,” Shane said, tone way too casual for someone delivering mild emotional homicide, “Seriously. You look like you haven’t slept since Tuesday.” Ilya opened his mouth to defend himself.

Shane didn’t let him, “Good night.”

And then—without waiting for a response—he pushed open the door and walked out into the cold night air. The door swung shut behind him with a soft thud. Ilya stared at the empty space where Shane had stood. Slowly.

Very slowly.

He leaned back in his seat, tossed back the rest of his whiskey, and muttered to absolutely no one:

“...I do not look like shit.”

His phone buzzed again.

Probably Gray. Probably a crisis. Probably the world falling apart. Ilya didn’t check it.

He just ordered another drink. Not because he needed it. But because for the first time in a long time someone had walked away from him. And Ilya Rozanov wasn’t sure how the hell to feel about that.

Chapter 4: Saved Deal

Chapter Notes

Hello! I hope everyone's having a good day. First of all, thank you so much for all the love. I'm glad all of you enjoyed this fanfic . It really made my day. In this new chapter, the award bathroom scene was inspired from my favourite scene of the show. I hope you guys will enjoy it as well. Please leave your comments and feedback. I read every single one. Happy reading!!

Shane woke to a mouth on his, the slow, lazy kind of kissing that only happens when the sun's barely up and neither person's in a hurry to acknowledge the real world. The duvet was a tangled mess around him and the warm weight on top of him. The girl—Clara, the French major from last night—murmured something soft against his lips and tugged him closer.

His roommates were gone, so the place was quiet, warm, and—for once—private. Shane smiled into the kiss, bracing a hand beside her head and leaning over her when the door slammed open like a SWAT raid. The athlete jerked back so hard he nearly elbowed the wall.

Clara squeaked, grabbing the duvet and pulling it to her chest.

And there, in the doorway, stood Gray.

Unbothered.

Uninvited.

And absolutely dressed like he'd just stepped off a GQ cover.

Shane threw his hands up, “For fuck's sake—What are you doing?!”

Gray's gaze swept the room in one bored, surgical movement.

Bed.

Girl.

Shane.

Bra hanging from the lamp.

The whole tragic scene.

He didn't react. Didn't even blink.

He simply pushed the door wider with his shoulder and stood there, body angled with intentional precision—blocking the hall, blocking escape, blocking sanity—until Clara took the very obvious cue to leave. “Um,” she whispered, eyes wide, “I should—go.”

“Yeah. Sorry,” Shane said quickly, “My brother has no concept of knocking even seven gates of hell wouldn't see him coming.”

Gray gave her a polite nod, like she'd just handed him a quarterly report, not... slept with his brother in a dorm room. When she slipped past him and disappeared down the hall, he closed the door behind her with a soft click. Then he turned and crossed his arms, “Sex in a dormitory,” he said flatly.

Shane rubbed his face, “Don't do this.”

“You have roommates.”

“They're gone.”

“They could've returned early.”

“They didn't.”

“You don't know that.”

“I do,” Shane said, grabbing his briefs from the floor and stepping into them without shame, “One's camping in Maine. The other's at a robotics convention. They're more likely to walk in on a bear or electric vacuum than me.”

Gray pinched the bridge of his nose, “Still—”

“It’s fine,” Shane said, tugging the briefs up and grabbing a shirt, “Nobody’s traumatized. Nobody’s pregnant. Nobody died. That’s basically a win.”

Gray shook his head and sat on his brother’s desk, crossing his arms again like a judgmental gargoyle. “You’re leaving with me,” he said.

Shane paused mid-smoothing his shirt, “...What?”

“We’re flying to New York.”

“For what purpose? You hate New York.”

“There’s an entrepreneur award ceremony this weekend.”

Shane stared, “I’m... not an entrepreneur.”

“No, genius,” Gray said dryly, “but your older brother is. And our parents will be there.”

Shane froze.

Ah.

There it was.

The real reason.

His throat dried up just at the thought of being forgotten and abandoned.

Gray pressed on. “And,” he said, tone softening in that dangerously subtle way he reserved only for family, “I want my little brother there too.”

Shane looked at him—really looked.

Gray meant it.

Which was... rare.

But still.

“Since when,” Shane asked slowly, “do you drag me to business ceremonies?”

“Since I felt like it,” Gray said, sliding off the desk and standing straight, “Pack something decent. We leave in an hour.”

Shane’s jaw tightened. “An hour? I have practice.”

“No, you don’t.”

“You can’t cancel my schedule—”

“I didn’t,” Gray cut in, “Your captain did. The coach owes me after I funded their equipment last semester.”

Shane blinked.

“Are you serious?”

“Very.”

The athlete exhaled and ran a hand through his hair, half annoyed, half resigned, completely baffled. “Why are you doing this?” he asked finally.

Gray didn’t answer immediately. Then—“Because,” he said, voice low but certain, “you’re part of the family too. Whether you feel like it or not.”

Shane’s throat tightened—just a little before he covered it with sarcasm instantly. Built in defence mechanism, generational talent, “Wow. Sentimental at eight in the morning. Did Rozanov spike your coffee?”

Gray scoffed more of the attitude than his brother casually throwing his best friend’s name, “Get packed.”

Shane grabbed his duffel bag from under the bed, “Fine. But I’m not wearing a suit.”

“Yes, you are.”

“No, I’m not.”

“Yes,” Gray repeated, walking toward the door, “you absolutely are.”

Shane muttered something very rude in French under his breath.

Gray smirked, “I heard that.”

“You weren’t meant to.”

“I heard it anyway.”

Shane pulled on jeans, grabbed his toiletries, shoved clothes into the bag without folding them, and followed his brother out of the room. Half annoyed. Half amused. And absolutely unprepared for the fact that Ilya Rozanov was about to be in New York, too. But that was a problem for later.

—

New York hit Shane like a brick. The sharp air. The noise. The neon signs screaming at his retinas. The fact that he’d slept a grand total of forty minutes on the flight because Gray kept shoving spreadsheets in his face “for entertainment.” By the time they reached the city, his soul had left his body.

And yet his brother—annoyingly immortal, apparently immune to fatigue—walked like he’d woken from a spa retreat, not a private jet. Shane followed him out of the hotel and down the sidewalk, duffel bag strap cutting into his shoulder, sweater sleeves pushed up, hair still messy from the plane.

“Where are we going?” he muttered.

“A bar,” Gray said, perfectly crisp.

“I’m jet-lagged.”

“You’ll survive.”

“You know I have the endurance of a Victorian child.”

“That’s dramatic.”

“It’s accurate.”

Gray didn’t even look back. “You’re being bratty.”

“Jet lag makes me honest,” Shane countered. Still, he trailed after his brother—because that’s what he did. Because for all the irritation and sarcasm and absolutely chaotic familial dynamics, he knew Gray rarely asked him for anything. And when he did... Shane showed up.

The bar was upscale, low lighting, warm wood, jazz humming in the background—exactly the kind of place billionaires in their early twenties pretended wasn’t their natural habitat. As soon as they stepped inside, Shane heard it.

Gray’s tone shifted into that social-business hybrid he used only with people he respected. “Ilya,” Gray called out. And Shane’s stomach dropped through the floor.

Oh.

Oh fantastic.

Of course.

Of course his brother dragged him to meet the one person he’d spent the past few weeks trying very, very hard not to think about.

Ilya Rozanov turned in his seat at the corner booth, whiskey in hand, blonde hair pushed back, shirt sleeves rolled to his forearms like he’d been born in business casual. His eyes landed on Gray first. Then flicked to Shane. And paused. Just long enough that Shane felt the weight of it.

The athlete exhaled through his nose.

“Well,” Shane muttered under his breath, “there goes my will to live.”

Gray didn’t hear him—or ignored him—which was basically the same thing.

“Glad you made it,” Ilya said as they approached, standing to greet Gray with a casual clap on the shoulder. Then he looked at Shane. Not up. Not down. Directly at him.

And damn it, it was too warm. Too knowing. Too aware of the night they’d shared drinks and tension at the bar.

“Hollander,” Ilya said, voice lower now, “Didn’t know you’d be coming to New York.”

“I didn’t either,” Shane replied dryly, sliding into the booth before either of them could comment, “Surprise kidnapping.” Gray shot him a look which Shane ignored it—because survival required some level of self-preservation.

Ilya sat next to him instead of across the booth. And Shane felt every inch of that choice. Great. Perfect. Fantastic.

Now he was sandwiched between a controlling older sibling and a charming startup billionaire he absolutely was not interested in.

Nope. Not at all. Zero interest. Zilch. Negative interest, even.

“So,” Ilya said casually, setting his drink down and leaning back, arm stretching across the top of the booth behind Shane’s shoulders—far too close but technically not touching, “How’s your week been?”

Shane shot him a sharp look. Do. Not. Start. “Fine,” He said quickly, gaze forward, “Busy.”

“Rowing?” Ilya asked.

“Yes,” Shane replied.

Gray raised a brow. “Do you two talk now?”

“No,” Shane snapped immediately.

Ilya smiled, slow and soft. “Not really.”

Gray’s eyes narrowed, “Define ‘not really.’”

Shane wanted to sink into the floor. He wanted to teleport. He wanted a meteor to hit the bar, preferably right where he sat. He forced a calm breath and said, “Rozanov bought me a drink a few weeks ago. That’s it.”

Gray stared between them. Suspiciously.

“Do you stay long?” he asked.

“Yes,” Shane insisted.

Ilya coughed once. Quietly.

Shane kicked him under the table.

Ilya coughed louder.

“Fine,” Shane hissed, “Curfew but yeah kinda I guess.”

Ilya smirked.

Gray folded his arms, “Is there something else I should know?”

“No,” Shane said.

“No,” Ilya echoed.

A beat.

“Good,” Gray said finally, though the tone made it very clear he didn’t believe either of them.

Shane rubbed his temples, “Can we not do whatever this is? Please? I’m tired.”

Ilya glanced sideways at him, voice softer. “Jet-lagged?”

Shane nodded.

“You look good for someone who’s dying inside,” Ilya murmured.

Shane didn’t blush.

He did not.

He absolutely did not.

He only glared at him—and maybe his ears got warm—but that was just the bar lighting. Obviously.

Gray exhaled, long and frustrated. “I swear, dealing with the two of you at once is going to give me an ulcer.”

“Hey,” Ilya said, “at least only one of us is your problem.”

Shane’s lips twitched—barely.

Ilya caught it.

Of course he did.

Gray groaned. “I regret everything.”

Shane muttered, “Welcome to my life.”

And that was how the afternoon began:

Shane exhausted,

Gray irritated,

Ilya amused—and all three of them stuck in a booth, pretending this wasn’t the exact combination of people that could spark absolute chaos if left alone long enough. Which, unfortunately...they were.

They were behaving to each other at least for a moment until Gray left the booth with the kind of purposeful stride that meant he was going to “take a call” but really needed to yell at someone outside where witnesses couldn’t hear. Once he was out of sight, the booth felt quieter—too quiet.

Which was exactly why Ilya stretched his arm comfortably across the back of the booth again, behind Shane’s shoulders like he had never moved it in the first place. The athlete pretended not to notice.

Ilya waited.

Shane waited harder.

And finally, Ilya cleared his throat.

Shane sighed. Loudly. “What now?”

Ilya smiled, “I’m making a deal.”

“Oh god,” Shane muttered, eyes fixed on the polished wood table, “Is there any formula involved? Because I didn’t pack my calculator.”

Ilya snorted. “No formulas.”

“That’s new for you.”

“I’ve simplified the pitch since the last time,” Ilya said, straightening like he was about to present at a board meeting, “So. Here’s the deal.”

Shane didn’t look at him. At all. But his jaw tensed slightly—the tiniest tell that he was listening.

“If Gray and I win Entrepreneur of the Year this weekend,” Ilya said calmly, “you give me your number.”

That made Shane turn. Slowly. Very slowly.

He stared at Ilya like he’d just said, hey, I’m planning to launch myself off to the moon for fun. “What?” he asked.

Ilya leaned in a little, “Simple terms. We win? I get your number.”

Shane blinked. Twice. Then leaned back and asked, dead serious:

“Why in god’s name would I do that?”

Ilya grinned. “Because I did the math.”

Shane shut his eyes briefly in secondhand embarrassment, “Don’t ever say that sentence to me again.”

“Too late,” Ilya said. “The math checks out.”

“Ilya Rozanov,” Shane muttered, rubbing his forehead, “Gray is going to kill you.”

“He can’t,” Ilya said easily.

“He will.”

“He can’t,” Ilya repeated with irritating confidence, “We have NDAs. And board seats. And a legal team. Also, I’m too valuable to the company.”

Shane gave him the flattest stare known to mankind. “You’re unbelievable.”

“And yet you’re still sitting here,” Ilya said with a smug little shrug.

Shane elbowed him lightly in the ribs for that—just enough force to register his annoyance. Ilya took it like a victory.

Shane folded his arms. “Fine. If—if—you two win. I give you my number,” he paused, then narrowed his eyes, “But what do I get if you don’t win?”

Ilya didn’t hesitate.

Didn’t blink. Didn’t even breathe wrong. “I’ll leave you alone,” he said softly.

That finally made Shane sit still. His breath caught in his throat—just slightly—because something about the way Ilya said it wasn’t dramatic or manipulative or performative. It was sincere.

Shane swallowed, “You’ll stop bothering me?”

“Yes.”

“You’ll stop showing up out of nowhere?”

“Promise.”

“You’ll stop... whatever this is?” Shane motioned vaguely between them.

Ilya’s smile faded into something smaller, “If that’s what you want.”

Shane stared at him.

Really stared.

Dark bar lighting. Whiskey on the table. Ilya's arm casually draped behind him. A deal hanging heavily in the air.

"What are you getting out of this?," Shane asked.

Ilya met his eyes, "A chance."

"A chance for what?"

Ilya didn't look away.

"You."

Shane's breath hitched—but he masked it well, lowering his gaze, hiding behind his hair as he looked down at the table. "You're ridiculous," he murmured.

"And yet," Ilya said softly, "you haven't said no."

Shane ran a hand over his face, groaned under his breath like the universe personally hated him, and muttered:

"Fine. Deal. But I'm not cheering for you two. I'm only doing this so you'll shut up."

Ilya's grin was immediate and devastating, "Great. I love your support."

"That wasn't support."

"Felt supportive."

"It wasn't."

"It felt like it."

Shane nudged him again—this time harder.

Ilya laughed. And the athlete hated—hated—that he could feel the sound travel through the booth, through the seat, through the small space between them... all the way into his chest.

He leaned back, eyes closed briefly, mentally preparing for the disaster this weekend would become.

Ilya watched him.

Quiet.

Warm.

Curious.

Trying—desperately—not to touch him more than he already was. “Hollander?,” Ilya called eventually, “You really going to stick to the deal?”

Shane cracked one eye open.

“Absolutely,” he said. “If you win, I give you my number. If you don’t, you disappear.”

Ilya took a slow breath, nodding once, almost like he’d been waiting for that clarity. “Then I guess,” he said, voice low and confident, “we better win.”

Shane exhaled.

And whispered, barely audible:

“God help me.”

—

The Hollander family estate outside of New York was the kind of place that made people assume royalty lived there: sprawling lawn, trimmed hedges, windows that stretched to the sky. Shane always liked coming home—mostly because it was quiet. Stable. Predictable.

And predictable was good.

Predictable didn’t stare at you across a bar like he was memorizing your face.

Predictable didn’t make deals with you for your phone number.

Predictable didn’t grin like trouble in a tailored shirt.

Predictable was *not* Ilya Rozanov.

Which was exactly why Shane had stuck to his word and stayed far, far away. At least... that's what he told himself.

The pool was warm despite the chill in the air. Shane cut through the water in long, smooth strokes, clearing his head, letting jet lag dissolve into the steady rhythm of swimming. Until he heard footsteps. Heavy. Sharp. Purposeful. The kind that screamed older brother with an agenda.

Shane surfaced, pushing his wet hair back, blinking chlorinated water from his eyes. And there stood Gray.

Loafers.

Suit.

Tie still knotted.

The man looked like he'd slept in fiscal reports and woke up in a board meeting.

Shane groaned, "Jesus, Gray. You look like a tax audit."

Gray didn't even smirk.

Which meant trouble.

Big trouble.

"Did you suck Ilya's dick?," Gray asked without preamble.

Shane choked on air, "WHAT—??" The echoes filled the space immediately, enough to startle the math out of him that he doesn't know how that the word suck and dick could sound so terribly terrifying good together. Ignoring the fact that Ilya Rozanov's dick was the real deal.

Gray's jaw was tight in a way that meant he wasn't joking, "He is worked up about something. Ilya. The man who doesn't get worked up about stock crashes or lawsuits. He was practically vibrating at 3 a.m. And you're the only variable."

Shane stared at him.

Then stared harder.

Then dragged himself out of the pool with the slow, controlled exasperation of someone trying not to explode.

Water streamed down his body.

Drops hit the stone tiles.

Shane grabbed a towel, wrapping it around his waist. "First of all," he said, voice flat, "you need to stop asking me obscene questions like that."

"So it's a no?," Gray pressed.

"Yes it's a no!," Shane snapped, toweling off his hair, "I don't even want to know why you're imagining that scenario."

"I'm not imagining it," Gray said, "Ilya clearly is."

Shane shut his eyes.

Counted to three.

Opened them again.

"Gray," he said, pointed fingers stabbing the air, "you told me—explicitly told me—to stay away from him. And I did. I have done everything short of restraining-order levels of avoidance. I've done exactly what you wanted."

Gray folded his arms.

Shane kept going, heated now, frustrated beyond belief, “So whatever’s happening with Rozanov? Not my fault. Not my problem. I am not responsible for your partner’s emotional instability.”

“He’s not unstable.”

“He’s latching onto me like a badly trained golden retriever.”

Gray’s eye twitched, “Did you encourage him?”

Shane threw the towel onto the chair, “Are you even listening to me? I haven’t spoken to him since the bar. Not a word. Not a text. Not even a glance. I did what you wanted.”

Gray’s expression didn’t change.

Of course it didn’t.

Because Gray Hollander listened to people the same way a CEO listened to weather forecasts—casually, selectively, and mostly when it affected his schedule.

Shane forced a breath through gritted teeth.

“Look,” he said, calmer but sharper, “I appreciate you dragging me here. I appreciate you forcing me into this stupid award weekend. But don’t talk to me like I’m some liability you need to control.”

Gray blinked.

Shane stepped closer—close enough to tower, if only slightly. Close enough that Gray actually raised his chin in response.

“I’m not a kid,” he said lowly, “And I’m not a problem. I’m not here to embarrass you or get in the way of whatever business romance you and Rozanov have going on.”

“It’s not a—”

“And if Rozanov has something bothering him? Maybe you should talk to him, not me.”

Gray's mouth opened.

Shane wasn't done, "You want to yell? Fine. Yell at the person causing the issue. Not the person following your damn rules."

For a moment—just one—Gray actually looked thrown off. A raw flicker of something crossed his face.

Maybe guilt.

Maybe confusion.

Maybe realizing he had, in fact, chosen the wrong way to interrogate. Putting words into his mouth, not entirely his heart.

Shane lifted his chin, ready for round two.

Then—"Boys?," Their mother's voice floated across the patio.

Both brothers froze like guilty teenagers.

She stepped out from the house in a soft sweater, hair pinned back, holding a tray with lemonade like someone who believed her sons were incapable of conflict, "Everything alright?"

"Yes," both brothers said simultaneously.

Shane forced a smile.

Gray's was slightly better rehearsed.

"Good," she said warmly, "Lunch is ready. And Gray, darling, take off that suit before it wrinkles. You look like you haven't slept."

Shane's smirk was instantaneous.

Gray glared at him.

Their mother returned inside.

The moment she was out of earshot, Shane threw the towel over his shoulder and muttered:

“This conversation isn’t done.”

Gray straightened his tie. “It never is.” He watched his younger brother walked past him toward the house. But as he did—he said, quieter this time:

“...I’m not trying to be your enemy, Shane.”

Shane paused.

Didn’t turn around.

“Then stop acting like one,” he said softly.

And he kept walking—leaving behind chlorinated water, unanswered questions, and a brother who finally, maybe, wasn’t so sure he had the whole picture.

—

The sun had long dipped below the treeline, leaving the estate glowing under warm garden lights and the soft blue shimmer of the pool. The air smelled like cut grass, chlorine, and late summer.

Shane sat stretched out on a long pool chair, laptop balanced between his bent knees, a thick textbook spread across his lap. His glasses—those thin, round frames he rarely wore if it doesn’t served practical use—rested low on his nose. He was muttering something under his breath about simulation errors, squinting at the screen as if daring it to misbehave.

Of course he was studying.

On his break.

At almost ten at night.

Because that was Shane:

Chaos on the outside, equations on the inside.

Gray spotted him from the terrace door, paused, and rubbed a hand down his face. This kid. This stubborn, brilliant kid he kept mishandling like a defective contract. It doesn't took a whole village to find him out here.

The CEO in him wanted to bark orders, tell Shane to go inside, sleep, stop working.

The brother in him knew that would only push the athlete further away. So Gray took a breath and walked toward him. His loafers clicked softly on the stone path.

Shane didn't look up. Not even when his older brother stood directly beside him. Instead, he just turned a page, scribbled something in the margin, and said, without emotion:

"You're leaving."

Gray exhaled. "Yes."

"Good."

Gray resisted the urge to roll his eyes, "Can we not start like this?"

Shane didn't answer. He highlighted a line of text with the quiet ruthlessness of someone ignoring an entire human being beside him.

Gray cleared his throat, "Shane..."

"Hmm?," didn't lift his gaze.

"I came to check on you."

At that, Shane stopped highlighting.

Paused.

Then slowly closed his book.

He didn't look up yet.

Not quite.

But his shoulders softened—just a millimeter.

“That’s new,” Shane said, voice soft but edged, “You checking on me.”

Gray sat on the chair beside him, elbows on his knees, hands clasped. “I deserved that.”

“No,” Shane said, finally meeting his brother’s eyes, “You deserved worse.”

Gray huffed and nodded once.

Took it.

Didn’t argue.

“I went too far earlier,” he admitted quietly, “I shouldn’t have... accused you of anything.”

“Of sucking your business partner’s dick?” Shane asked. Gosh, such a casual use of words between them. But his older brother started it first, so he’s more than happy to see Gray winced, “Yes. That.”

“Or blaming me for Rozanov’s mood?”

“Yes.”

“Or barging in like some kind of malfunctioning Avenger—?”

“Yes, Shane, I’m aware.”

The athlete leaned back, satisfied, “Good.”

They sat like that for a moment—pool lights reflecting off the water, the night hum of crickets filling the silence until Gray’s deep breath filled the void between them, “I worry about you.”

Shane blinked. The unexpected honesty cracked something in him. “You don’t have to,” he replied, voice softer now, “I’m doing fine.”

“I know,” Gray replied, “But... I don’t know how to be your brother sometimes. I only know how to be a CEO. And you’re not a problem I can optimize.”

Shane huffed a small, sad laugh. “Yeah, no kidding.”

“I’m trying,” Gray added.

“I know,” Shane murmured.

Gray ran a hand through his hair, “I just... saw Ilya’s mood and assumed you had something to do with it because—”

“Because what?” Shane asked gently, “Because your life revolves around Rozanov and the company?”

Gray stopped.

Looked at him.

Really looked.

“That’s unfair.”

“It’s true.”

Gray didn’t argue.

And Shane didn’t press.

A quiet truce.

Finally, Gray nodded toward the laptop, “You should take a break. You’re on vacation.”

“Studying is relaxing,” Shane insisted.

“Yeah so do taking a shit. No, it’s not.”

“It is for me.”

“Of course it is,” Gray muttered and pushing himself to his feet, “Come back with me to the hotel. It’ll be easier to get to the ceremony tomorrow.”

“I’ll go in the morning,” Shane answered, “I want to stay here tonight. Mom’s making breakfast.”

Gray hesitated.

Then nodded.

“Just don’t overwork yourself.”

“You say that while running three companies.”

“Do as I say, not as I do.”

Shane lifted a brow. “Hypocrite.”

“Brat.”

Shane smirked faintly.

Gray turned to leave but paused halfway.

“Shane.”

“Yeah?”

“Ilya... he’s not who you think he is.”

The athlete looked up, cautious. His older brother rarely had opinions unless it mattered for him to give it away. “Meaning?”

“Meaning,” Gray said, adjusting his cufflinks, “if he’s behaving strangely, it’s because he genuinely cares. He doesn’t get excited about people. Almost ever.”

Shane froze.

“Don’t read too much into it,” Gray added quickly, “I’m not saying anything is happening. Just... Ilya cares about loyalty. About honesty. And clearly, something you said or did struck him.”

Shane swallowed.

Avoided eye contact.

Pretended to type something just to keep his hands busy.

“That’s his problem,” he muttered.

Gray studied him.

Not with judgment.

Not with condescension.

With understanding.

For once.

“I’ll text you when I’m back in the city,” he said finally. “Don’t stay up too late,” he ended as he walked out, taking no for answers.

“Can’t promise that,” Shane yelled out, enough for his older brother to flip him over his shoulder before the athlete let out a slow, shaky breath the moment the door shut behind him.

He closed his laptop, glasses still perched on his nose, the night air cool against his damp hair. And he whispered to himself:

“...Why the hell does Ilya Rozanov care at all?”

—

The hotel ballroom was still roaring with applause, flashes of cameras, and murmurs of “well-deserved” when Shane slipped away. He didn’t tell anyone. Didn’t need to.

He ducked into the upstairs restroom, closed the door behind him, and finally let the emotions choke their way out of his chest.

Shane gripped the marble counter, head bowed, eyes burning. Of all the things he always expected from Gray—criticism, lectures, pressure—that wasn’t it.

His older brother’s speech had been polished, decisive, perfect as always.

But then—

“...and lastly, to my brother, Shane Hollander. You don’t know how much you keep me grounded. Every bad day, every doubt—your existence reminds me why I’m building a world worth living in. Thank you.”

It hit him harder than any rowing sprint ever could. Shane swiped at the tears with his thumb—impatient, annoyed, but hopelessly overwhelmed. The damn things clung to his lashes anyway. “Fuck,” he muttered under his breath, sniffing, shaking his head as if that would make the wave recede, “Stupid.”

The athlete bent forward, cupped his hands, and let cold tap water fill his palms before splashing it over his face. The chill shocked him back to coherence.

When he finally straightened, he checked the mirror—eyes pink-rimmed but manageable, hair damp, expression mostly stabilised.

Mostly.

That’s when the bathroom door clicked open.

Shane glanced over and his stomach dropped.

Ilya Rozanov walked in like the universe personally summoned him.

He didn’t speak.

Not at first.

He just stopped inside the doorway, looked at Shane, and that slow, smug, I-won-and-I-know-it smile curled on his lips.

Then, with a lazy confidence Shane absolutely did not want to find attractive, Ilya leaned his arm against the wall beside the sinks—half-blocking the athlete in, half-caging the space without touching him.

“You crying over us?,” Ilya asked softly.

Teasing.

But not cruel.

Shane's eyes narrowed, "Shut up."

Ilya's smile deepened anyway, "You look good."

"You look insufferable."

"And yet," Ilya drawled, "you ran away right after we won."

"I needed water," Shane snapped, grabbing a paper towel, "And quiet."

"Touching speech, wasn't it?"

Shane froze for a fraction of a second before scoffing, "Can't believe he wrote it down."

"Gray only wrote the parts he care about," Ilya said—and damn him, he said it too pointedly that Shane turned away, tossing the paper towel, avoiding those light, focused eyes.

Ilya didn't let him. He pushed off the wall and stepped closer—not touching, but close enough that Shane felt the warmth, the gravity of him. "So," he said quietly, "I'm here for two things."

Shane clenched his jaw, despite all his attempts to mentally and physically prepare himself for the inevitable moment, "I'm not in the mood, Rozanov."

"First," Ilya continued, ignoring the half-hearted protest, "I want my congratulations."

Shane hissed under his breath, rolling his eyes—then sighed.

Fine.

He looked up at Ilya—reluctant but sincere.

"Congratulations," he said softly, "You guys deserved it." The air shifted between them—warm, intimate, almost too much.

Ilya's expression softened just the slightest bit. "Thank you." However, he's not done yet.

"And the second thing," he added, cocking his head, "is our deal."

Shane blinked fast. Faster than he ever had. “Oh god, you’re serious.”

Ilya lifted a brow, “I won the award. That was the agreement.”

“Rozanov—”

“You owe me.”

Shane huffed, rubbing the back of his neck. “It was a stupid bet.”

“It was our bet,” Ilya corrected, stepping closer, “And I intend to collect.”

Shane swallowed. Hard and he’s only lying to himself if he said he didn’t want to know the absolute truth again. Ilya Rozanov’s words always shaken his whole existence. “Why do you even want my number?” he finally muttered.

Ilya didn’t smile this time.

His voice lowered.

Went quieter.

Smoother.

“Because I want to talk to you,” he said simply. “Without waiting to bump into you. Without hoping I catch you between rowing practice and classes. Without negotiating with Gray like some hostile dictator.”

Shane’s breath stalled but Ilya held his gaze—direct, determined, almost annoyingly earnest.

“So,” Ilya murmured, “are you keeping your word?”

Shane looked at the floor.

Then the sink.

Then the mirror.

Then—finally—Ilya.

Slowly, reluctantly, he reached into his pocket, pulled out his phone, and held it up halfway. “Give me your phone,” he said under his breath.

Ilya’s grin spread instantly—bright, victorious, irresistible. He pulled his phone from his suit pocket and placed it in the athlete’s palm like he’d been waiting all night for that moment.

Shane typed his number in.

Saved it.

Handed the phone back with a warning glare. “Don’t be annoying,” he muttered.

Ilya stepped close enough that the athlete had to tilt his chin up to keep eye contact.

“No promises,” Ilya whispered. He turned toward the door, pausing just before he exited.

“One more thing,” he said without looking back, “That speech? Gray meant it. So don’t hide in bathrooms next time someone tells you you’re important.”

Shane’s throat tightened again. He blamed himself for it.

“Goodnight, Hollander.” And Ilya walked out—leaving the athlete standing by the mirror, chest tight, face warm, his number saved in Ilya Rozanov’s phone.

—

Ilya unlocked the penthouse door with his elbow, practically dragging his bag behind him and the trophy heavy in his hand. The moment he stepped inside, silence hit him like a wall. Not the comfortable kind. The kind that reminded him he’d built a life of boardrooms, deadlines, Gray’s voice in his ear, and the constant buzz of something—people, deals, noise.

Tonight?

Nothing.

Ilya let the door click shut behind him and exhaled. “God,” he muttered, placing the trophy anywhere close that he could possibly reach, “I actually miss the yelling.” He kicked off his shoes and walked straight to the couch, collapsing onto it face-first. The cushions swallowed him whole. He could’ve stayed like that forever, but his jet-lagged brain was already drifting to the only interesting part of the award:

Shane.

Shane’s voice.

Shane’s side profile in the bathroom.

Shane pretending he wasn’t flustered every time their eyes locked.

He rolled onto his back with a sigh. “Torture,” Ilya muttered further, “Actual torture.”

Ilya sat up, stripped off his polo sweatshirt with one irritated motion, tossing it somewhere near the coffee table, and walked to the mini bar. Something strong. Something that would knock the flight numbness out of his system.

As he unscrewed the bottle cap, he pulled out his phone with his free hand. He didn’t think. Didn’t strategize like he always did. He just typed.

ILYA:

You make it back to the dorm?

...

Nothing.

Ilya poured a drink. Leaned against the counter. Stared at the phone.

ILYA:

Or did Gray hire a search party to drag you home?

...

Nothing again.

Ilya rolled his eyes. “Unbelievable.”

The athlete was definitely ignoring him. Or asleep. Or both. Jet lag might hit Shane harder. Well, it kinda did to everyone. He’d probably face-planted into his pillow the second he walked in.

Still—

Ilya drummed his fingers on the marble.

Waited.

Nothing.

He typed again.

ILYA:

You alive?

Or should I call the campus police?

...

Shane stayed silent.

Ilya groaned, grabbed his drink, then set it down again because suddenly the silence felt personal. And stupid. And irritating. “Alright,” he muttered, “You want to ignore me? Fine.”

He hit CALL before he could talk himself out of it.

The phone rang once.

Twice.

Three times.

Ilya frowned. He had just decided Shane wasn’t going to answer, and maybe he actually was asleep—

Then:

Click.

A rush of noise hit Ilya's ear.

Water.

Echoes.

Wet tile acoustics.

And the athlete's voice—breathy, faintly annoyed, but unmistakably Shane Hollander:

“Rozanov... what do you want?”

Ilya blinked.

Blink. Blink.

“You're in the shower?”

Out of frustration and unanswered texts.

A small, irritated huff crackled through the speaker. “Obviously.”

Ilya's mouth curved, slow and dangerous. “You answered my call in the shower.”

“You wouldn't stop ringing,” Shane muttered, breath brushing the microphone, “I thought someone died. Praise the Lord if it's not me.”

“Well,” Ilya answered lightly, “my patience did.”

There was a short pause—Shane probably scrubbing shampoo out of his hair or contemplating drowning himself to escape this call. Another breath against the mic. “Rozanov...”

“Yes?”

“I'm literally naked.”

Ilya closed his eyes, head falling back with a soft groan he didn't let escape fully. "Okay," he managed, "Was not prepared for that but thank you."

"You called me," Shane shot back immediately.

"Yeah, but I didn't expect you to pick up while—," Ilya cut himself off, pacing now because his brain was starting to supply visuals he absolutely did not need, "Okay. I get it. You're in the shower. Noted."

Water pattered louder, likely Shane adjusted the nozzle. "What did you want?," the athlete asked.

Ilya rubbed his forehead, suddenly losing half the swagger he walked in with, "I wanted to check if you got back safe."

Shane didn't respond right away. Just the sound of running water and the faint movement of his hand brushing against the phone.

Then, softer:

"...I did."

Ilya exhaled. Relief punched him harder than expected. "Good."

A moment of silence settled—warm, charged, weirdly intimate considering one of them was dripping wet and Ilya was fully dressed in his kitchen.

Shane finally spoke again. "Is that all?"

Ilya hesitated.

He should say yes.

He absolutely, definitely should say yes.

Instead:

"How tired are you?"

Shane snorted, “I’m in the shower at midnight.”

“So... pretty tired.”

“Yes, Rozanov.”

Ilya swallowed, leaning on the counter again, voice dropping almost unconsciously. “Okay. Then go to sleep after. I just... wanted to hear you.” He regretted it instantly. Too honest. Too open. Too—

The water shut off.

Straight, abrupt silence.

Ilya straightened, “Hollander?”

He heard movement—wet feet stepping carefully on tile, towel rustling, Shane adjusting the phone between damp fingers.

When the athlete spoke again, his voice was lower. Steady. A little too calm.

“You’re weird,” he said.

Ilya smiled. “Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

A pause.

Then Shane breathed out, almost quiet enough to miss:

“...Call me tomorrow.”

Ilya froze. Heat shot through him before he could reel it back. “Yeah,” he murmured back, “I will.”

“Goodnight,” Shane said, voice tired but warmer than Ilya expected, “And try not to call me next time I’m half-dead and slippery.”

“No promises,” Ilya whispered.

Click.

The call ended.

Ilya stared at his phone for a long moment. Then he laughed under his breath—slow, disbelieving, absolutely gone—and downed his drink in one swallow. “God,” he muttered to the empty room, “I’m in trouble.”

Chapter 5: Solved Equation

Chapter Notes

Hi, it's me again! I repost the chapter again because of some mixup during the edit. Thank you for those who spotted the problem. I hope you guys enjoy it. Please leave your thoughts and feedback in the comments section. Happy reading :)

Ilya pushed through the lecture hall doors with the confidence of a man who absolutely did not belong in an academic building at 10 a.m., yet refused to acknowledge it. He slid into a seat halfway down the center section, sprawling like he owned the row.

Behind him, Gray followed with all the enthusiasm of someone attending a tax seminar voluntarily. “You know,” he muttered, adjusting the lapels of his suit like the mere presence of chalkboards offended him, “I did not agree to this.”

Ilya lifted the steaming, painfully expensive artisan cup he'd procured on the way in, “You literally did. Right after I handed you this.”

Gray glared at the cup like it was blackmail material—which, to be fair, it was. “You bribed me.”

Ilya grinned. “You accepted it.”

“Tired,” Gray corrected sharply, “Slightly hungover. And you shoved this under my nose until the caffeine hit.”

“Semantics,” Ilya said, leaning back, “Drink up. You'll need it.”

The lecture hall buzzed with students from every department—economics kids, engineering students in oversized hoodies, a few arts majors who looked like they simply wandered in here by accident. Everyone was here for the inter-departmental fair, but right now the main stage was setting up for a mathematical forum.

Specifically—

Shane's match.

Ilya's knee bounced once. Twice. He forced it still. He was not nervous. Totally not.

Gray sipped his coffee, grimacing at how good it was, "Tell me again why we're watching this? I specifically told you: I do not do my brother's academic events. They... stress me out."

Ilya smirked, "What, afraid he'll outshine you?"

Gray shot him a look, "He always outshines me. That's the problem."

Ilya snorted, "You're the one giving keynote speeches that make people cry."

"And Shane," Gray snapped softly, "is a terrifyingly good student even when he's not trying. I don't like watching it. It makes me emotional. And I refuse to be emotional in public."

"You're literally drinking a small-batch Peruvian roast right now," Ilya said, "Too late. You're halfway to soft."

Gray elbowed him hard enough to jostle Ilya's ribcage, earning him a laugh—and fail attempt of trying to bury the laugh in a cough when he narrowed his eyes.

A moment passed before Gray seemed to remember something, "By the way. How do you even know Shane's participating? He didn't tell me. And he tells me when he signs up for things like this."

Ilya didn't blink.

Didn't flinch.

Didn't even twitch.

He just leaned back with the smoothness of a man who absolutely prepared a lie while driving here. "I'm friends with a second-year kid who's in his class," he said casually, "He mentioned your brother was competing." The truth was he had been exchanging texts non stop and simply schedules slipping into the conversation.

Gray gave him a slow, suspicious look—CEO mode fully activated.

“What second-year kid?”

Ilya shrugged, “You don’t know him.”

“Mhm,” Gray sipped his coffee again, “And do enlighten me why would a second-year math student talk to you?”

Ilya smiled with all the innocence of a fox caught holding feathers in its teeth, “Charisma?”

Gray snorted, unconvinced, “You did a terrible job hiding that lie. Just FYI.”

Ilya didn’t respond. Couldn’t. Because right then, movement near the stage caught his eye. Shane walked in with the competitors. Hair pushed back. Glasses on. Button-down sleeves rolled to his elbows. Expression laser-focused in a way Ilya had only seen during rowing or—well, talking back to him. A folder under one arm.

Sharp. Bright. In his element.

Ilya’s spine straightened before he could stop it.

Gray caught the reaction immediately. “Oh my god,” he muttered, “You’re hopeless.”

“Shut up,” Ilya whispered.

Shane didn’t see them—not yet. He talked with the faculty lead, nodded at something, adjusted his glasses. Calm. Collected. Razor-sharp brilliant. That same little electric twist hit Ilya somewhere under the ribs.

Gray sighed like a man witnessing a car crash in slow motion, “You’re staring.”

Ilya kept staring. “Observing.”

“You’re gawking.”

“It’s academic interest.”

“Ilya,” Gray said flatly, “you’re sweating.”

Ilya wiped his forehead, “This room is warm.”

“It’s Harvard,” Gray snapped, “Every room is freezing. It’s in the brochure.”

Ilya ignored him.

A few seats over, some second-years were whispering excitedly—

“That’s Shane Hollander.”

“He’s competing again?”

“He never loses.”

“He’s scary good.”

Gray groaned, “This is exactly why I don’t come to these. He gets this look in his eyes and I remember he could’ve done literally anything with his life if he didn’t inherit my family’s chronic overachievement.”

Ilya arched a brow, “But instead he rows and studies and sleeps.”

Gray hissed. “Please shut up.”

Ilya smirked.

And then—

Shane finally looked up.

His gaze swept the hall, searching for something—or someone—and then froze the second it landed on Ilya.

Not his older brother.

Not the lecture hall.

Not anything else.

Shane’s expression flickered the moment he was greeted with a smallest wave. A mix of surprise, mild annoyance and something softer but he immediately crushed down as he pressed his lips together and looked away.

Gray groaned behind his hands, “I’m leaving.”

“Nope,” Ilya said, gripping his sleeve, “You’re staying.”

“I don’t want to see him do math aggressively,” Gray whispered harshly.

“Too bad,” Ilya whispered back, “We’re in this together.”

“Why?”

Ilya didn’t even pretend this time. “...because I want to see him,” he admitted quietly.

Gray froze.

Then sighed.

Deep. Heavy. Very big-brother-ish. “Ilya,” he murmured, “you’re going to complicate my entire life, aren’t you?”

Ilya’s mouth tilted, “I already did.” Before Gray could respond, the moderator announced Shane’s name through the microphone, and the hall erupted into applause.

Ilya leaned forward, eyes locked on the stage. And Gray—despite himself—leaned forward too. The forum was starting.

And the athlete was already stepping into the spotlight.

The moderator clapped twice, called both competitors up, and the entire hall shifted into a quiet, anticipatory hush. Shane stepped to the blackboard on the left. The third-year opponent took the right. Two chalk sticks. Two sets of papers. One ridiculously intense silence.

Then—

The timer beeped.

And Shane moved.

Ilya’s breath caught because the kid didn’t hesitate. Not once. He wrote like the chalk was an extension of his damn pulse—smooth, sharp, elegant strokes cutting across the board in lines

of pure logic. His wrist rolled with practiced ease, flipping between pages in his folder without losing pace for even a second.

The third-year kept up—barely—but his movements were choppy, panicked around the edges.

Shane?

Shane was cold-blooded.

Focused.

A machine wrapped in a Harvard sweater and glasses.

The only sound in the hall was the frantic grit of chalk on slate and pages rustling as both competitors pulled references from their folders. Ilya didn't blink. Didn't breathe.

Didn't move.

He'd seen high-stakes negotiations, forty-million-dollar pitches, mergers that required months of prep—and yet none of that hit him the way watching Shane do math like it was oxygen did. Beside him, Gray pretended to drink his artisan coffee. Except the cup was empty. And his hand trembled.

Ilya raised a brow, "Are you—sweating?"

Gray hissed through clenched teeth, "Shut up."

Ilya grinned. "You're rooting for him."

"Of course I'm rooting for him," Gray whisper-barked, "He's my little brother."

"He's also terrifying," Ilya murmured, eyes back on Shane.

Shane had switched to a different section of the board. His handwriting tightened—dense strings of integration, substitutions, a step-by-step derivation that looked like a foreign language to most of the audience. The third-year paused once. Twice. Glanced over.

Shane didn't even notice.

He was already three steps ahead.

Ilya exhaled, low, "Jesus."

Gray risked a quick peek, "Don't curse in front of him."

"He can't hear," Ilya pointed out.

"I can hear you," someone in the row behind them muttered.

Gray ignored them. His eyes drifted back to his younger brother and softened in a way he would absolutely deny until the day he died.

"That's him," Gray murmured, "That's the version of him no one sees. Just... Shane. No expectations. No cameras. No business. No money. Just his brain." A pause, "God, I wish I could get him to join the company sooner."

Ilya blinked. "You what?"

Gray kept watching Shane, voice quieter than Ilya had ever heard, "He's in my will, you know. I'm planning long-term," he continued simply, "If I ever step down, if something ever happens... I want Shane to take my place."

He tapped the coffee cup against his knee, "He's the only person smart enough. Disciplined enough. Neutral enough to run it without ruining it. And the only one I'd trust."

Ilya stared at him. "You never told him."

"Of course not," Gray scoffed. "He'd run away from the country."

Ilya snorted—but his gaze returned to Shane.

The athlete was flipping a page again, sliding a new sheet into place, tapping his chalk once against the board before continuing. His expression didn't break once. Completely unbothered. Completely in control. But god—he looked nothing like the billionaire sibling sitting beside Ilya.

Same eyes.

Same bone structure.

Same raw potential.

But Shane was just... softer around the edges. More grounded. Human in a way Gray never got to be.

Shane Hollander, second-year student, hair slightly messy from focus, sleeves rolled to his elbows, glasses slipping down his nose—

looked absolutely fucking beautiful in his element.

Gray whispered through tight lips, “He’s so much like me it’s unsettling.”

Ilya shot him a look. “He’s so much not like you it’s comforting.”

Gray elbowed him again.

Ilya elbowed back.

On stage, Shane stepped back from the board, reading through his own steps with sharp eyes. He erased nothing. Didn’t need to. His opponent frantically rubbed out half a line and rewrote it.

Ilya’s smile spread slow, “He’s winning.”

“He better,” Gray muttered, “I don’t have the emotional stability to handle a loss today.”

Ilya tilted his head at him, “You know he can’t hear you.”

“He might sense weakness,” Gray grumbled.

The timer counted down.

5.

Shane capped the chalk neatly.

4.

He stacked his papers in perfect alignment.

3.

He pushed up his glasses.

2.

He glanced once at the third-year beside him—

1.

—and nodded. Respectful. Calm.

The timer buzzed.

The hall erupted in applause.

Ilya clapped once before saying under his breath, “Holy shit.

Gray was clapping too. More than he should’ve. Harder than he meant to. And because Gray Hollander was constitutionally incapable of expressing feelings in a normal way, he leaned toward Ilya and whispered—

“If you breathe a word of this, I will end you.”

Ilya grinned, “Is this the part where I tease you or the part where I pretend not to notice you’re tearing up?”

“I am NOT—”

Ilya slid him a napkin.

Gray snatched it. Then wiped the corner of his eye anyway.

Onstage, the athlete gave a polite bow of his head as the moderator announced the scores—
third-year: respectable

Shane Hollander: nearly perfect

Gray let out a shaky exhale. “Show-off.”

Ilya smiled softly as he sat back against his seat, heart doing something it absolutely shouldn’t, “Yeah.”

His eyes stayed locked on Shane— The man who didn’t know he was brilliant.

Who didn’t know his brother planned to hand him a billion-dollar legacy.

Who didn’t know Ilya Rozanov couldn’t look away if he tried.

“Yeah,” Ilya repeated under his breath, “He really is.”

The lecture hall emptied in a buzzing wave of chatter and footsteps, but Ilya and Gray took their time walking down the stairs—Gray with his empty artisan cup like it was a trophy, Ilya with both hands shoved in his coat pockets, trying not to look too eager.

Shane was still at the front, gathering loose papers with that efficient, almost surgical neatness of his. He slid each page into the folder like the world would collapse if something bent. Glasses pushed high on his nose. Jaw tight with leftover adrenaline.

Gray was already smiling.

Ilya could tell.

It was the stupid, proud older-brother smile he pretended didn’t exist.

Shane looked up just long enough to see them approaching. Then groaned. Loudly.

“Oh my god,” he muttered to his older brother, “You clapped way too loud earlier.”

Gray froze mid-step, “Excuse me?”

“You embarrassed me,” Shane said, shouldering his duffel bag and snapping the folder closed, “It was like you were trying to summon a demon.”

Ilya choked on a laugh.

Gray didn’t bother arguing.

He simply lunged.

Shane barely had a second to react before he was pulled into a headlock.

“GRAY—” Shane yelped, folder half-crushed against his chest, “GET OFF—”

Gray dragged his knuckles through his younger brother’s hair like he was twelve, not a mathematical prodigy with washboard abs and a dangerous brain.

Shane tried to twist out, tried elbowing his brother’s ribs, but Gray just tightened his hold, messing up his perfectly neat hair even more.

“Don’t talk back to me,” Gray said, wrestling him with pure older-brother energy, “I can clap however loud I want.”

“YOU WERE CLAPPING LIKE AN AIRPLANE ENGINE—”

Ilya leaned against the nearest desk, arms crossed, watching with a grin he couldn’t hide. He’d never seen his best friend look younger than this moment—no suits, no meetings, no boardroom persona. Just a guy messing with his brother like he finally remembered he was allowed to be human.

It made sense.

All that protectiveness.

All that tension whenever Ilya mentioned Shane.

This was his soft spot.

His real soft spot.

And Ilya felt something warm pull tight in his chest. He cleared his throat—loudly—so he wouldn’t get caught staring like a lovesick idiot.

Both brothers looked over.

Shane's hair was a wreck.

His glasses were crooked.

His chest was heaving.

And he looked seconds away from throwing his older brother out the nearest window. Ilya couldn't remember the last time someone looked more perfect.

"Lunch," Ilya announced, straightening, "My treat."

Shane blinked. "Why?"

"Because I said so," Ilya replied.

Shane shot him a suspicious glance, "You don't do anything without a motive."

"That's not true."

Shane pointed at him, "Every single time, Rozanov."

Ilya shrugged, "My motive is that you both deserve a break. And that I'm hungry."

Gray nodded firmly, smoothing Shane's hair in a failed attempt to fix what he demolished, "We're going. All of us."

Shane made a face. "I have a paper—"

"It can wait," Gray said.

"And practice—"

"You already look like you bathed in sweat earlier. You get one meal."

"And I—"

Ilya cut in, smiling, "Stop trying to get out of this."

Shane looked between the two of them, realization dawning that he'd been cornered.

Not by force.

Not by threats.

But by two extremely persistent, extremely irritating men who refused to leave him alone. He exhaled slowly, defeated, “Fine.”

Gray clapped him on the back, “Atta boy.”

Shane glared at him, “Touch me again and I swear—”

Gray ruffled his hair one more time.

Shane lunged but Ilya quickly stepped between them, laughing way too hard, “Okay, let’s keep the murder for after we eat. C’mon. I already picked the place.”

Shane paused at that. “Wait,” he said carefully, “Since when do you know places around Harvard?”

Ilya didn’t blink.

Didn’t flinch.

He lied smoothly, again. “I Googled.”

Sow a thought, and you reap an act; Sow an act, and you reap a habit.

Shane narrowed his eyes—not quite believing Ilya but too tired to question it. “Fine,” he said, slinging the duffel bag strap higher over his shoulder, “But if this place sucks—”

“It doesn’t,” Ilya assured.

“If it does—”

“Still doesn’t.”

“I’m going home.”

“You’re not.”

Shane exhaled sharply.

Gray groaned.

Ilya grinned.

The three of them walked out of the hall together—a billionaire, his exhausted genius brother, and the problem Ilya had absolutely no intention of letting go. And for the first time in weeks, Shane didn't walk ahead. He matched their pace. Even if he pretended he hated it.

—

The restaurant Ilya picked was one of those cozy Cambridge spots with exposed brick walls, warm lighting, and servers who pretended not to recognise Harvard legacies when they walked in.

Shane liked it immediately—mostly because it looked like the kind of place billionaires didn't hang out in. He sat across from Ilya, diagonally from Gray, and tore into his plate the second it hit the table. He ate like someone who burned seven thousand calories a week.

Ilya kept sneaking glances, half amused, half charmed but mostly out of concern, enough to urge the athlete to slow down, while Gray scrolled through something on his phone with the poise of a man who couldn't shut off his CEO brain even if threatened at gunpoint.

Only after Shane was halfway through his dish did Gray break the peace. “So,” he said, leaning back, tone casual in the most performative way possible, “I’ve been thinking—Shane should start dating someone more... suitable.”

Shane didn't look up from the greasy sad looking potato on his plate. He didn't need to anyway since someone already did the favour for him. “Suitable how?” Ilya asked with a raised brow.

“You know,” Gray said, waving his fork vaguely, “female billionaires. Founders. Heirs. Trust-fund geniuses. Women with vision and intellect who don't spend their nights working at a bar or studying French verb conjugations.”

Shane paused mid-chew but didn't speak.

Not yet.

Ilya glanced at him, curious. “And what about Shane? What’s his type?”

Before Shane could open his mouth, his brother answered for him. “Shane,” Gray scoffed, “has a specific taste. Alice, for example. That bartender. And now? A French girl. God bless whoever she think she is.”

Shane finally looked up, glare sharpened, jaw tightened. “Her name is Clara.”

“Right,” Gray said, completely unmoved, “Casserole. Anyway—see? Specific taste.”

Shane set down his fork. Slowly. “Are you done?”

“No,” Gray said cheerfully. If he couldn’t read yellow well then red read right, “I’m making a point. You date down. Way down.”

None counts as Shane’s eyes went flat, “I hate billionaires.” One sentence—clean, quiet, and surgical—cut straight through the conversation like a blade. It shut Gray and Ilya up so fast the silence physically echoed.

Then—because Gray Hollander did not like losing—he went down the absolute worst route imaginable. “Oh, please,” he said, scoffing through the tension, refusing to take the hit, “You’re dramatic. And you’re lying. If you hated billionaires, why the hell were you letting that French girl climb you like a tree when I walked into your dorm?”

Gray continued—because he couldn’t stop himself. Because he thought humiliation was the same thing as affection. “And he didn’t even lock the door,” he told Ilya like it was a fun anecdote, “Bra on the lamp. Sheets on the floor. I nearly needed holy water—”

“Gray,” Ilya warned, voice low.

“Honestly, Ilya, you should’ve seen him—”

“GRAY,” Ilya tried again.

But Gray plowed forward, eyes gleaming with older-brother righteous chaos. “And did you hear him just now? ‘I hate billionaires.’ He mimicked his brother’s tone horribly. “He’s saying that while sitting across from two billionaires. My god, the irony—”

Ilya swallowed, “Gray—seriously—enough.” He turned to face Shane so fast that he knocked his elbow out against the side of the table, “He doesn’t mean all of that.” But it was too late.

Shane pushed away from the table with a deliberate, quiet scrape of wood on tile. He set his napkin down with too much precision and stood. He didn’t look at Gray. He didn’t look at Ilya.

His face wasn’t angry. Or flushed. Or emotional. It was blank. And somehow that was worse. “I’m leaving,” Shane finally said.

“Ell—” Gray tried at last.

Shane’s voice tightened. “Don’t, Gray.”

Gray froze. The tone was one he’d heard maybe twice in his life—the tone his brother always used right before shutting a door permanently.

Shane adjusted his glasses. “You asked why I hate billionaires?,” he said calmly, eyes locked on the table, not the people, “This is why.”

Ilya felt the words punch right through his ribs but it gutted Gray more than he deserved. He who wore the palest shades yet he stuck out like a sore thumb.

And Shane walked out. No dramatics. No yelling. No storms of anger. Just... leaving.

Because he was done.

Ilya let out a long breath and scrubbed his hands over his face, “Fuck.”

Gray swallowed hard, “I didn’t— I wasn’t trying to—”

“I know,” Ilya said quietly, “But you did.”

Gray stared at the empty chair his brother had left behind. Just a crease between his brows and a look that resembled something dangerously close to guilt. Words braced him from nothing but enemy’s wrath.

Ilya stood, tossed some bills on the table, and grabbed his coat. “I’ll go after him.”

Gray didn’t move. “Ilya,” he said, voice rougher than usual, “tell him—” He paused to take a breath and continued heavily, “Tell him I didn’t mean it like that.”

Ilya gave a small nod, “I’ll try.” He stepped away from the table and followed Shane’s exit, already knowing the athlete had probably slipped out of the restaurant faster than anyone could track. But he still tried. Because someone had to.

Ilya Rozanov wasn’t chasing Shane because of a deal, or curiosity, or attraction. He was chasing him because Shane didn’t deserve to walk out feeling small.

Ilya caught sight of Shane half a block away—jacket half-zipped, head bowed like he was trying to walk the humiliation off his skin. He walked fast. The athlete always walked fast.

Ilya jogged the first few steps, then forced himself to slow, breath leveling out, not wanting to spook him like some feral animal fleeing a trap.

“Hollander.”

No reaction.

Ilya tried again, louder. “Hollander.”

This time, the athlete’s shoulders tensed—but he didn’t stop. Ilya reached him anyway, long legs matching stride until they were side by side, Shane still pointedly facing forward.

“I’m not in the mood, Rozanov.”

“Yeah,” Ilya panted softly, “I figured.”

Shane’s jaw tightened, defending his walls. “So go back. You two can finish making jokes without an audience.”

Ilya winced. “That wasn’t—”

“I said I’m not in the mood,” Shane kept walking, stubborn, furious in that quiet way of his, the air around him hardening like winter frost.

Ilya didn't grab him. Didn't touch him. He just stayed there, matching pace, letting the silence settle for a few heavy seconds. "You okay?" he asked finally, stealing glances.

Shane exhaled, sharp and incredulous, "Do I look okay?" Wetness still lined his lower lashes — leftover from frustration, not tears, yet unhindered from the cold air.

"No," Ilya admitted, "You look pissed. And hurt."

Shane snorted. "Congratulations, Sherlock."

"You don't have to talk," Ilya said, voice softer now, "Just... don't walk away alone."

That broke Shane's stride. For a second—just one—his pace faltered, the smallest stumble in his breath. Then he stopped. Abruptly on the sidewalk with people streaming around them like they were rocks in a river.

Shane didn't look at Ilya. Not yet. He stared ahead at nothing in particular, shoulders lifting and falling in a slow, steady rhythm—like he was controlling every emotion by force.

"You two are assholes. "It came out flat. Tired. True.

Ilya nodded, "We are."

"Billionaire assholes."

"We are that too."

Shane let out a humorless laugh, scrubbing a hand through his hair. "God. I don't know why I expected anything different."

Ilya felt the sting of that. Hard. The delicate heart always graced with brutal truth. "Gray didn't mean it," he said quietly.

Shane rolled his eyes, "He never means it. That's the problem."

Ilya hesitated. Then chose honesty. "He's scared," he said, "And when Gray's scared, he... talks himself into a hole."

Shane finally looked at him. But it wasn't anger in his eyes. It was exhaustion. Bone-deep exhaustion. "Scared of what?" he asked, "Me dating people he doesn't approve of? Me having a life? Me breathing around someone he doesn't want near me?"

Ilya swallowed, "Scared he's going to lose you."

Shane blinked. Just once.

Ilya continued, "He wants you safe. So he gets protective. And then he gets... stupid." A dry smile. "Very stupid."

Shane looked down at his shoes, "He humiliated me."

"I know."

"In front of you."

"I know."

"And I'm not twelve. He doesn't get to treat me like—like I'm some kid who needs to be put in his place."

Ilya's voice warmed, "No. He doesn't."

Shane nodded once, throat working as he swallowed something heavy. "Good. At least someone gets it."

Another beat of silence.

Ilya studied Shane—the tense jaw, the folded arms, the way his glasses hung low on the bridge of his nose. The athlete was hurt. But he was also embarrassed. And the worst part? He shouldn't have been.

"You didn't deserve that," Ilya said quietly.

Shane's eyes flicked up like it was the only thing he waited for the whole time—softening just a touch. “Thanks,” he murmured as a small gust of wind blew between them. His hair shifted, falling a little into his face. He brushed it back without thinking.

Ilya watched that movement far too closely, intentionally.

“What?” Shane muttered.

Ilya looked away, clearing his throat, “Nothing. Just... wanted to make sure you didn't walk off thinking you had to deal with that alone.”

Shane's breath hitched at the edges—a tiny, almost imperceptible shift. Then he exhaled, tension bleeding out of his shoulders. “...I'm so tired,” he whispered.

Ilya nodded softly, “Yeah. I know.”

Shane fixed his glasses again, “I hate him sometimes. No shit.”

Ilya laughed quietly, “He hates himself sometimes too.” It got the smallest curve of the athlete's mouth. Barely there. But real. No one humour Shane Hollander more than the people he loves.

“I'm still leaving,” Shane said, straightening.

Ilya nodded. “I wasn't trying to stop you,” he said, “Just didn't want you walking off thinking no one was on your side.”

Another pause.

Then Shane looked at him, truly looked at him. “Rozanov,” he said carefully, “why are you on my side?”

Ilya opened his mouth. Closed it.

Shane's gaze sharpened, “Be honest.”

Ilya inhaled once, slow.

“...You know why.”

Shane swallowed. His eyes flicked to Ilya's mouth for one dangerous second before he caught himself and looked away. "I have to go," he said quietly, stepping back.

But Shane did one last thing before turning away—something small, something quick, something he probably didn't even realize he was doing. He reached out—two fingers brushing Ilya's wrist, barely a touch, barely pressure. A silent thank you. Then he walked off. Not fast. Not running. Just... leaving. But not like before.

Ilya let out a breath he didn't know he'd been holding. "Fuck," he murmured to himself. Because the truth hit him all at once—Shane hadn't just stopped walking away. The athlete did let him catch up.

—

Shane had been staring at the same line of a differential equations problem for twenty minutes, and his brain had finally revolted. He hadn't took a proper break since the mathematical forum he took part in two days ago.

He rubbed his temples, leaned back in his chair until it creaked dangerously, then stretched his arms high over his head, vertebrae popping one after another like bubble wrap. "Jesus," he muttered. "I'm gonna die in here."

His dorm room was quiet—his roommate still gone for the week—and the desperation for oxygen, food, or just something not math made him grab his phone.

A few notifications blinked up at him. Three texts from Ilya. From over an hour ago.

Shane frowned and swiped them open.

ROZANOTODAY:

You buried in books again?

I found another bar with killer whiskey near campus. Thought of you.

If you're free, let me know. If not, I'll just assume you died at your desk.

Shane snorted, shaking his head. What an idiot. An annoyingly charming idiot.

He carried the phone with him to the bathroom, setting it on the sink while he took a piss and replaying the texts in his mind because apparently his brain needed a 3x review before processing anything tonight. Shane washed his hands, dried them on his shirt like a menace, and was about to text back when his phone lit up.

Incoming call.

ROZANOTODAY

Shane literally jumped. “Jesus—” he hissed and snatched the phone up, answering before the second ring hit. “What?” he said breathlessly.

Ilya’s voice slid through the speaker, warm and far too amused, “Well, hey there, champ. Didn’t mean to scare you.”

“I’m not scared,” Shane lied instantly.

Ilya hummed like he didn’t buy a single syllable, “You free?”

“No,” Shane said on reflex, even though he absolutely was.

“I’m outside your dorm,” Ilya said casually.

Shane froze.

Completely still.

Like he’d been unplugged from reality.

“...What?” he managed.

“Out front,” Ilya repeated, tone low and smug like this was the most normal thing on earth, “Figured I’d call instead of knocking and traumatizing you.”

“You’re at my dormitory,” the athlete said flatly, like repeating it would make it less insane.

“Mhm.”

“Why?”

“Thought I’d ask you out for a drink,” Ilya said, “Since texting didn’t work and I didn’t really feel like waiting until next week to see you.”

Shane stared at his own reflection in the tiny bathroom mirror.

Hair messy.

Glasses sliding down his nose.

Shirt wrinkled from studying.

Still barefoot.

He looked like someone who absolutely should not be seen in public with a billionaire CEO who could make airport sweats look like runway fashion. And someone who had not a single idea of next week. He cleared his throat, “You did not come all the way here just for that.”

Ilya laughed—low, warm, and annoyingly confident, “I did, actually.”

“That’s—” Shane blinked, “That’s insane.”

“Probably,” Ilya agreed, “You coming down?”

Shane hesitated, pacing the narrow bathroom floor like it could help him think. “It’s late,” he said the best he could do.

“So? I’m not trying to marry you,” Ilya teased, “Just a drink.” And of course, the athlete wasn’t going to make it easy. Shane had million reasons but not a “no.”

“My head hurts.”

“All the more reason to stop thinking.”

“I have class tomorrow.”

“And it’ll still be there if we grab whiskey for an hour.”

“You’re ridiculous.”

“You like it.”

Shane groaned into his hands, because the worst part was—He did like it. Ilya’s persistence. His shameless confidence. His way of showing up without warning but never feeling dangerous, just... disruptive in a warm, electric sort of way. “Fine,” he muttered finally.

“Yeah?” Ilya perked up instantly.

“But I’m not staying out late,” Shane warned.

“Curfew yeah. I’ll have you home by midnight, Shanderella.”

“Shut up.”

Ilya laughed again, “Come down. I’m parked right in front. Black Porsche.”

Of course he was.

Of course it was.

Shane hung up before Ilya could smug himself into another sentence. He splashed water on his face, flattened his hair, grabbed a jacket, shoved his feet into sneakers, and tried very hard not to think about how fast his heart was going.

He walked out of the bathroom, out of his dorm, down the stairwell, opened doors—and there he was. Ilya leaned against the sleek Porsche like he owned the entire sidewalk. Dark jeans, black coat, hands in pockets, eyes already locked on Shane as if he’d been waiting weeks instead of minutes. “You took your time,” Ilya said, smirking.

“I was washing my hands,” Shane said defensively.

Ilya’s gaze flicked down, amused, “Good. Would’ve been awkward if you didn’t.”

Shane rolled his eyes, stepping closer despite himself, “So where are you dragging me this time?”

Ilya pushed off the car, opened the passenger door with a little flourish, and gave him a look that should’ve been illegal on campus property. “Someplace quieter this time,” he murmured, “Thought we could actually talk.”

Shane raised a brow.

“And if I say no?”

Ilya’s smile deepened, softer than usual. “Then I’ll take you right back upstairs. I can walk you up,” he said, “No pressure. Ever.”

The warmth in Shane’s chest was immediate and annoying. “...One drink,” he muttered, sliding into the seat.

Ilya shut the door gently—too gently for someone who usually slammed car doors like they owed him money—and circled around to the driver’s side. The engine purred to life.

“You sure you’re not being stalker-ish right now?” the athlete asked as Ilya pulled away from the curb. “Oh, I’m absolutely being stalker-ish,” he said with a grin, “But I’m pretty, so it balances out.”

Shane snorted. God help him. He was actually starting to enjoy this.

—

The bar was low-lit, warm, all amber and brass. A soft hum of conversation floated around them, but their corner felt private—like the rest of Harvard had melted away for the night. Second round of whiskey was already halfway gone.

Ilya sat angled toward Shane, elbow on the table, thumb brushing absently around the rim of his glass. The athlete, on the other hand, was slouched in a way he didn’t normally allow himself to be—shoulders looser, glances softer than ever. It was the whiskey, sure. But it was also the company.

Ilya tapped his fingers once, thoughtful, before speaking. “So,” he began lightly, “did you actually mean it? The whole... hating billionaires thing.”

Shane paused mid-sip.

Set the glass down.

Took the tiniest breath.

Then he glanced over at Ilya with an expression somewhere between guilty and resigned. “... Not really,” he admitted quietly

Ilya lifted a brow.

Shane huffed and scratched the back of his neck, “I mean billionaires can be assholes—but I didn’t say it because of you. Or Gray—well, okay, fine, partly because of Gray—but I wasn’t trying to stab either of you in the chest.”

Ilya’s mouth curled, “That’s comforting.”

“Shut up,” Shane muttered, “I said something stupid because I needed him to stop humiliating me. My brother can be... a lot. And I didn’t know how else to get him to shut the hell up except throwing a punch made of words.”

Ilya’s gaze softened, “And you think you hurt me or your brother for having opinions?”

Shane looked down at the table, fiddling with the napkin between his fingers.

He didn’t immediately answer. That alone told Ilya more than any words could.

Finally, Shane exhaled, “Yeah. I’m sorry if I acted like a prick. I didn’t mean it that way.”

Ilya tilted his head, “You’re apologizing? To me? Voluntarily?”

Shane shot him a flat look, “Don’t ruin this moment, Rozanov.”

Ilya lifted his hands in surrender, smiling.

Shane went on, slower now, choosing each word with a care Ilya rarely saw him use but he's getting closer. "My brother is a billionaire. And no matter how much he pisses me off, I'm proud of him. Nobody can deny what he built. He's brilliant, even when he's driving me insane. And Gray doesn't mean any shit he says. We're just—" He let out a breathy, humorless laugh, "We're messed up separately and even worse together."

Ilya's chest tightened with something warm, "You love him."

"Oh, for fuck's sake," Shane groaned, throwing his head back slightly, "Yes. Obviously. Doesn't mean I don't want to throw him off a yacht sometimes."

"Understandable," Ilya murmured into his glass.

"We're just... different people," Shane said more softly, swirling his whiskey. "Always have been. Gray's good at what he does. I'm good at what I do. And eventually, we stop fighting long enough to remember we're family. That's sort of our system. Fucked up, but it works."

Ilya nodded slowly, studying him. The athlete rarely let himself be vulnerable—at least not consciously. Seeing him talk about family like this, unguarded and genuine, made something warm unfold in his chest.

"So..." Ilya leaned back, eyes glinting. "What were you two like as kids?"

Shane snorted, instantly defensive, "Why?"

"Curiosity," Ilya shrugged, "Research, even. Understanding the product lineage of the Hollanders brothers."

"You're so annoying."

Ilya smiled—wide, expectant, leaning just a little closer, "Come on. I want the real stuff. The embarrassing stuff."

Shane sighed dramatically, like he was being tortured. “Fine,” he muttered, “But only because I’m drunk enough to ignore your face.”

“My face is the best part of this night.”

“Debatable.”

Ilya just grinned and waited patiently.

Shane slouched deeper into his seat, running a hand through his hair, considering where to start. “Gray was... quiet,” he said finally. “You wouldn’t think so now, but when we were little? He barely talked. Always reading. Always memorizing shit. He was the kind of kid who corrected the teacher. Which is apparently genetic,” he pointed at himself.

Ilya laughed.

“And me?,” Shane continued with a shrug, “I was chaos. Not, like... bad chaos. But I broke everything. Bikes. Furniture. My arm twice. A window once because I tried to throw a football and somehow launched it backwards.”

Ilya blinked, “Backwards?”

“Don’t ask.”

“I feel like I should ask.”

“You really shouldn’t.”

Ilya lifted his glass, amused, “So you were the disaster child.”

Shane nodded, “Yup. And Gray was the disaster manager.”

“That tracks.”

“Shut up.”

Ilya leaned his cheek on his fist. “And were you close? Back then?”

Shane hesitated, then nodded slowly. “Yeah... yeah, we were,” he said. “Different, but close. He watched out for me. I followed him everywhere. Like some annoying shadow. He hated it but also—” A soft laugh, “He let me. He always let me.”

Ilya’s eyes softened, “You still do. Watch out for each other.”

Shane looked away, eyes low, “Even when we’re bad at it.”

“Families are allowed to be messy.”

“Yours messy too?,” Shane asked, curious.

Ilya shrugged, lips twisting, “A different kind of messy. Less love, more... expectations.”

Shane hummed, thoughtful, respectful.

Another moment passed.

Quiet, warm, steady.

Then he nudged Ilya’s knee with his foot under the table. “Hey,” he muttered. “For what it’s worth... you’re not the kind of billionaire I hate.”

Ilya’s head tilted. “Should I be flattered?”

Shane shrugged with one shoulder, cheeks warming despite the dim lighting. “You’re... you,” he said simply, “And that’s fine by me.”

Ilya stared at him for a long beat, something deep and slow unfurling behind his expression. He lifted his glass. “To being fine by you,” he murmured. The athlete clinked his glass against his without breaking eye contact. And if his grin afterward was a little too pleased—well, Shane didn’t comment on it. He just took another sip of whiskey

and let the night get warmer.

—

The cold night air hit them the second the bar door swung shut behind them—crisp, sharp, a cleanse after all the amber heat inside. Streetlamps glowed against damp pavement. Cars

hummed faintly in the distance. Harvard at night always felt like a campus pretending to sleep.

Ilya shoved his hands in his coat pockets, falling into step beside Shane as they crossed the small patio outside the bar. “You good?” he asked, voice low, warm, “Or are you drunk?”

Shane didn’t slow. If anything, he walked faster, hands tucked into his jacket, shoulders stiff like he was trying to outrun gravity. Then—halfway down the block—he stopped abruptly, pivoting on his heel to face Ilya. “I could be,” he said, tone light but his eyes a little too bright for someone who “could be” anything.

Ilya blinked. Oh yeah. Shane Hollander was absolutely tipsy. Not sloppy. Not out of control. Just... softer. Looser. A little breathless in the cold. Which was honestly worse for Ilya.

Shane turned back around and kept walking. Ilya trailed behind him, hands in pockets, watching the powerful easy gait of someone who lived inside their own body like it was a finely tuned instrument.

He let Shane have the lead for a moment.

Let him breathe.

Let him shake off whatever that little emotional pit stop inside the bar had stirred up.

But then—

“Hey,” Ilya called, picking up his pace until he matched the athlete’s stride, “You want to stop by my place?”

Shane didn’t answer immediately.

He slowed.

Turned again.

Physically angled toward Ilya with that small, suspicious tilt of his head—like someone checking for traps in an exam question.

His voice came quiet, but sharp enough to land. “If I say yes,” Shane asked, “is it going to be another business pitch? Or another one of your deals?”

Ilya laughed—soft, warm, a little breathless.

Because Jesus Christ, this man always knew how to land a hit right where it mattered. He stepped closer, close enough that Shane had to tip his chin slightly to maintain eye contact.

A smile pulled at Ilya’s mouth. Not smug this time—something closer to wicked, but gentle around the edges. “It could be,” he murmured.

Shane blinked, breath hitching just enough for Ilya to catch it.

Ilya leaned in—not touching, not crowding—just near enough that the athlete could feel the warmth radiating through his coat. “Come with me,” he finished quietly, “and you can do the math.”

It took a full two seconds before Shane exhaled. A shaky, involuntary laugh. Like the joke hit in the exact place he didn’t want it to. “God, that was terrible,” he muttered.

Ilya grinned, “Best I could do.”

“You’re impossible.”

“Accurate.”

Shane shook his head, stepping back like he needed space to think—or breathe. He looked down the street, swallowed hard, then looked back at Ilya with that particular brand of annoyance he always wore when he was tempted but tugged his jacket closer to his body, and turned to walk again.

Ilya followed—silent, patient, just a step behind until the athlete slowed enough for their arms to brush. “I don’t hear you say no am I?,” he asked into the quiet, his voice softer than the streetlights.

Shane didn't stop walking. Didn't turn. But Ilya saw the way his shoulders lifted with a long inhale and dropped again with a resigned exhale. Finally—

“...Yeah,” the athlete said.

Quiet.

Careful.

Honest.

“Yeah, fine. I'll go.”

Ilya felt the grin spread slow and uncontrollable across his face. God, his jaw had been doing amazing job lately. “Good,” he murmured, “I was hoping you'd say that.”

Shane didn't look at him—because if he did, he knew his expression would give too much away. Instead he muttered, “If this ends with you trying to pitch me something again, I'm throwing myself out the window.”

Ilya smirked as he walked beside the athlete. “If I pitch anything tonight,” he said, “it won't be business.”

Shane's step faltered. Just slightly. Just enough for Ilya to feel the hit. But the athlete recovered fast—rolling his eyes, muttering something about billionaires being menaces, and picking up the pace again.

And the night stretched ahead of them—quiet, cool, and charged like a wire waiting to be touched.

—

Ilya flicked on the hallway lights the moment they stepped into the penthouse—warm pools of amber that spilled across the clean hardwood and the minimalist living room beyond.

The skyline glimmered through the floor-to-ceiling windows, all steel and stars and the kind of luxury the athlete never found impressive. So, his first words were exactly what Ilya

expected.

“Jesus Christ,” Shane muttered, kicking off his shoes before he even fully stepped inside, “You and Gray really do have the same taste.”

Ilya smiled faintly, shutting the door behind them, “Mmm. What gave it away?”

“The... everything,” Shane said, waving his hand in a loose circle, “Dark floors, stupid big windows, furniture that looks like it belongs in a magazine, the fridge probably stocked with like, artisanal butter.”

Ilya snorted, “I do actually have artisanal butter.”

“Of course you do,” Shane sighed, already sounding half-defeated and half-amused.

He didn’t wait for Ilya to offer him a seat.

Didn’t wait for any kind of polite host gesture.

He walked straight to the couch, turned his body, and just... fell. Full athlete sprawl. Limbs everywhere. Head tipped back against the cushions. A long exhale leaving his chest like he’d been carrying tension for hours.

Ilya watched him for a beat too long.

Because drunk—or tipsy—Shane Hollander was a hazard. Not sloppy. Not messy.

Just softer, warmer, disarmed in ways Ilya was almost definitely not mature enough to handle responsibly.

When Ilya finally walked forward, Shane cracked one eye open, squinting at him with a lazy suspicion.

“Rozanov?”

“Mm?”

“Does Gray know,” Shane said slowly, lifting a finger toward him, “that his best friend asked me out?”

Ilya opened his mouth—then closed it. Because somehow, that question landed right in the center of his ribcage, still it doesn’t cost him anything to reassure. “Define ‘asked out,’” he said carefully.

“You literally asked me to come over.”

“Not a date.”

“Isn’t it?” Shane challenged.

That little spark—tipsy, bold, unfiltered—hit Ilya like a punch. He ran a hand through his hair. A small groan left him, one he tried to hide behind a laugh. “I can’t deal with you like this,” he muttered, losing more than just his sense of humour.

“Like what?” Shane asked, sitting up slightly.

Ilya didn’t answer at first. He walked over to the minibar, grabbed a bottle of water, and tossed it lightly toward the couch. The athlete caught it like it weighed nothing.

“Tipsy,” Ilya said plainly, “And asking dangerous questions.”

Shane frowned. “Dangerous?”

“For me,” Ilya clarified. He immediately regretted saying it based on how the athlete sat all the way up now, elbows on his knees, hair slightly messy from the couch cushions. The water bottle dangled from his fingers.

“Why dangerous?” Shane asked, voice quieter and somehow worse than before.

Ilya leaned back against the bar counter, crossing his arms, “Because you’re not really thinking about what you’re saying.”

“I am.”

“No,” Ilya said gently, “you’re thinking like someone who’s warm and tired and full of whiskey.”

Shane stared at him.

And then:

“You still didn’t answer my question.”

Ilya inhaled sharply, “Right. Gray.”

Shane nodded. Waiting. That sharp athlete focus cutting through the haze.

Ilya took a moment, choosing his words. “He doesn’t know you’re here.”

“Okay.”

“And he definitely doesn’t know I…” Ilya hesitated. “...asked you out.”

Shane’s mouth twitched. “So you admit it.”

Ilya let out a low laugh into his hand. “You’re impossible tonight.” Surprised how fast the table turned around.

“Just tonight?”

“Always,” Ilya amended, “But drunk you? Completely unmanageable.”

Shane leaned back, shoulders sinking into the couch again, “You’re avoiding the real point—would Gray freak out if he knew I was here?”

Ilya didn’t answer immediately. He walked over, took the armchair across from the couch, and sat down slowly, elbows resting on his knees. His gaze locked on Shane’s—steady, unreadable, a little too intense. “He wouldn’t like it,” he admitted, “He’d jump to conclusions.”

Shane huffed, “He always jumps to conclusions.”

“Yeah,” Ilya murmured, “but with you...? He jumps farther.”

Shane looked away at that.

Eyes dropping to his hands.

Jaw tightening.

Ilya felt something pull in his chest. “But,” he added softly, “I didn’t invite you here because of Gray.”

Shane looked back up.

“I invited you,” Ilya said, voice steady, “because I wanted you here.”

Shane swallowed. Once. Hard. “...Right,” he murmured, rubbing the back of his neck.

Silence stretched between them—charged, heavy, warm.

Ilya let out a slow breath. “You should drink the water.”

“Yeah,” Shane unscrewed the cap, took a long sip, then leaned back into the couch again. His eyelids drooped slightly, his posture loose, his gaze softening in that way that made Ilya press his tongue against the back of his teeth in restraint.

There were a thousand things Ilya could say. A thousand he wanted to. But the only one that felt safe was—“You can stay a while. Rest. I’ll drive you back later.”

Shane watched him quietly. Then nodded once, settling deeper into the cushions. “Okay,” he whispered.

Ilya exhaled through his nose, sinking back in the armchair. Dangerous, indeed. Because if the athlete stayed like this—

tipsy, warm, soft-edged—Ilya wasn’t sure he trusted himself not to want more.

And Shane?

He was already drifting into that dangerous in-between space neither sober nor truly drunk—the place where honesty slipped out too easily.

Ilya rubbed the back of his neck. It was going to be a long night. And for a while, the penthouse stayed quiet.

Not awkward quiet—just the kind of silence that settled when both of them knew if they spoke too loudly, something would break. Something fragile, unnamed, sitting between them on the living room floor like a barely-touched glass.

Shane remained sprawled on the couch, half reclined, half melted into the cushions. Ilya sat forward, elbows on his knees, fingers laced. Watching. Thinking. Wanting.

Until Shane shifted. Not a dramatic move.

Just a turn of his head against the couch cushion, slow and deliberate, his eyes finding Ilya across the dim room.

Ilya felt it immediately. That tug under his ribs. That warning.

Shane looked at him too long... long enough for Ilya to set his water glass aside, long enough to straighten a little, long enough for his pulse to step up its pace.

And then Shane spoke—quiet, slightly hoarse. "...I did the math in my head."

Ilya blinked. His brows pulled together. "What?," he asked.

Shane's eyes didn't waver. Didn't blink.

Didn't shy away. Just softened. "I said," he murmured, voice low, "I did the math."

Ilya opened his mouth to ask again—until he watched Shane's gaze flicker downward. Not to the floor. Not to Ilya's shirt. Not to the water glass on the table. To his mouth. And he felt the shift—clean, electric, decisive. Like something inside him finally clicked into place.

Ah.

That math.

“Hollander,” Ilya called, voice suddenly rough.

“Yeah,” Shane whispered, a faint hitch under the word.

Ilya didn’t think after that. Didn’t weigh consequences, or Gray, or the risk, or the late hour, or anything remotely responsible.

He moved. One step. Another. Slow, like approaching a wild thing you didn’t want to scare off.

Shane didn’t move away. He leaned forward, just barely, just enough.

Ilya sank onto the couch beside him, one knee braced, one hand lifting—hesitant for half a second—before cupping Shane’s jaw with the gentlest pressure.

The athlete inhaled sharply.

That was all the permission Ilya needed.

He leaned in—slow at first, giving Shane time to pull back but the athlete did that.

Their breaths collided before their mouths did. Then— Ilya kissed him. Not rushed, not desperate, not sloppy from whiskey.

Just... deliberate. Intentional. Like something he’d been holding back for too long.

Shane’s hand came up immediately, catching Ilya’s wrist—holding, anchoring, grounding—his thumb brushing just once against Ilya’s skin as if testing the reality of it.

Ilya’s fingers slid along Shane’s jaw, tilting his head slightly to deepen the kiss, letting it grow warmer, firmer, just shy of losing control.

Shane kissed back with the same slow fire—unhurried, sure, pulling Ilya in without even moving an inch. His lips parted just enough for Ilya to taste whiskey and warmth and something uniquely him.

Ilya made a low sound at the back of his throat—half surprise, half relief—and Shane’s fingers tightened around his wrist like he felt it too.

The kiss unraveled into something softer.

Their foreheads brushed.

Breaths mingled, uneven.

Ilya pulled back a fraction, just enough to see Shane’s face—eyes slightly glazed, lips flushed, expression equal parts dazed and certain. “Are you—” he began quietly. “Are you sure?”

Shane swallowed. Still holding Ilya’s wrist.

Still close enough that their noses nearly touched.

“I told you,” Shane murmured, voice rough but steady, “I did the math.”

Ilya exhaled—something like a laugh, something like surrender. “Yeah?” he whispered.

Shane nodded once, slow. Sure.

Ilya’s thumb brushed Shane’s cheekbone, lingering, taking him in—the flushed skin, the loose hair, the vulnerable tilt of his mouth. “Okay,” he breathed, “Then so did I.”

And he kissed him again—slower this time, deeper, a quiet promise threaded through it—while Shane reached up and slid a hand into the front of Ilya’s shirt, pulling him just a little closer, just enough to erase any doubt about where the night was heading.

Not reckless.

Not drunk.

Not a mistake.

Two people who had passed the threshold of pretending, finally letting themselves cross the line they'd been circling for weeks.

And this time?

Neither of them pulled back.

Chapter 6: Unspoken Conditions

Chapter Notes

Hi guys! It's me again! I just want to say thank you so much for those who are still here. I really appreciate it. I hope you guys enjoy the new chapter. Next chapter will be updated next Thursday. Please leave your thoughts in the comments section. Have a good day :)

The first thing Shane heard was the ringing. Loud. Sharp. Relentless. He groaned, rolled over and immediately realized he wasn't in his own bed. The sheets were unfamiliar. The room too big, too bright. The air carried the warmth of the night before.

The athlete blinked hard through the hangover thudding behind his eyes. For a second, he honestly thought he'd dreamed everything until he pushed himself up to sit and felt every inch of his body remind him that, no, it definitely wasn't a dream.

His phone kept ringing.

"Fuck—fuck, where—" he muttered, dragging a shaky hand through his hair as he scanned the room.

His jeans were on the floor. Shirt, too. Jacket somewhere near the foot of the bed.

Great. Perfect. Exactly the kind of crime scene his morning needed.

He stumbled off the mattress—still naked—nearly stepping on his own sneakers as he bent to snatch up the jeans. He dug a hand into the pocket until he found his phone and answered breathlessly, "Yeah?"

"Dude, where the hell are you?," his roommate snapped, "Class started ten minutes ago. Are you sick? Did you die? What—"

"I'm coming," Shane muttered, pinching the bridge of his nose, "I overslept."

"Overslept? You don't oversleep. You're like a machine. Did you hit your head?" No, his hamstring muscles were on fire.

Shane pulled his jeans on one-legged, hopping a little to yank them up. “I said I’m coming,” he repeated, trying not to sound like he didn’t outperformed himself. He shoved the phone between his ear and shoulder as he grabbed his shirt from the floor.

Then the door opened.

Ilya stepped in, hair still damp from a shower, a towel slung over his neck, wearing sweatpants and a shirt he clearly grabbed without thinking. He froze when he saw the athlete halfway dressed, phone pressed to his ear, eyes sharp and bleary at the same time.

Shane froze too while his roommate was still rambling on the phone.

Ilya’s voice was quiet, tentative. “Morning.”

The word hit Shane like a bucket of cold water. He nodded once in acknowledgment and turned slightly away to answer his roommate. “No, I’m not hungover,” he lied immediately. He definitely was, “I’ll be there in... twenty minutes. Maybe thirty. Shut up—just go save me a seat.” He hung up before the roommate could keep interrogating him.

Silence settled between him and Ilya. Not tense—just painfully aware.

Ilya leaned against the doorframe, arms crossed loosely. He didn’t look smug or teasing or even flirty. He just... looked at him. Like he was taking inventory of the Shane’s mood, checking if the athlete regretted everything. “You’re running late,” he said gently.

Shane pulled his shirt over his head, “Yeah.”

“How bad?”

Shane stepped past Ilya to grab his sneakers off the floor, “Statistically? Catastrophic. My roommate thinks I’m dead.”

Ilya huffed a quiet laugh, rubbing the towel along the back of his neck. His eyes followed Shane, always tracking him, but soft. Careful. “You should slow down,” he observed.

“Yeah, no shit,” Shane muttered, tying his shoelaces.

“And...” Ilya paused, choosing his words, “you okay?”

Shane hesitated halfway to the door. He remembered last night’s heat, Ilya’s hands on him, the way they kissed like neither of them wanted to stop until the world stopped with them. His ears warmed immediately. “Yeah,” he said quietly, “Just—hungover.”

Ilya nodded once. No pressure. No assumptions.

Shane reached for the doorknob.

“Hollander.”

The athlete stopped.

Ilya had stepped forward, close enough that Shane could feel the faint warmth of him, but not close enough to corner him.

“If you need anything,” Ilya said, voice low but steady, “or if you... want to talk about last night—”

“I don’t,” Shane said quickly. Too quickly.

Ilya blinked but gave the softest smile, “Alright.”

Shane swallowed hard, trying to figure out what was sitting in his chest. It wasn’t regret. It wasn’t guilt. It was—complicated.

He pushed the door open.

“I’ll text you,” Ilya said behind him.

Shane paused without meaning to. Then he nodded once and slipped out the door, the warmth of the room still clinging to his skin.

He didn’t look back. But he felt Ilya watching until the doors slid shut.

—

Shane sat in the lecture hall, pencil in hand, notebook open, professor already halfway through some derivation he normally would've absorbed instantly. And he heard nothing. Not a single word.

He sat there, staring at the blank line on his paper like it was supposed to tell him how the hell he was supposed to function after last night.

His heartbeat thudded in his ears. His face felt too warm. His stomach felt like it was still somewhere inside Ilya's penthouse.

He blinked slowly, once, twice, trying to focus, trying to pull himself together, but every time he inhaled, there was a flash—

Ilya leaning over him.

Ilya's mouth on his neck.

Ilya's breath against his ear.

Ilya pulling him closer, closer, closer—

Shane pressed the pencil tip so hard into the paper it nearly broke. God. He wasn't supposed to think about that. Not here. Not in a lecture where the biggest thrill should've been solving a limit expression faster than anyone else.

He exhaled slowly through his nose, rubbing his thumb against the edge of the desk. But his brain kept circling back to one thought:

Gray is going to kill me.

Because... yeah.

Gray's ridiculous, dramatic, absolutely uncalled-for accusation? It was now technically — painfully — ironically — true.

Shane shut his eyes tight for a second. Of all the things to actually happen. Of all the paths the universe could've taken.

And here he was, in a lecture hall, hungover, sore in ways he was definitely not going to think about, and trying to pretend he hadn't crossed a line that his brother would burn a city

over.

Someone nudged his elbow. Shane blinked and turned. A classmate raised an eyebrow,

“Dude. You good? You look like you saw the ghost of finals week.”

Shane forced a breath out. “Lack of sleep.”

“You? Lack of sleep?,” his classmate scoffed, “Right. And I’m the next Einstein.”

Shane stared at the board, completely lost. “What are we even on?”

“Chain rule,” the classmate whispered, “Which you already mastered last semester, so stop looking like you’re about to fail.”

Shane nodded mutely, eyes drifting back down to his notebook. His pencil hovered above the paper. He forced himself to write something—anything: *A derivative that even a child could compute*. His handwriting looked shaky.

Ilya’s mouth flashed in his mind again.

The way Ilya said his name.

The way he responded without restraint.

The way he let himself want.

Shane’s jaw tightened. He shoved a hand through his hair and dropped his head onto his forearm for a moment, hiding his face. He wasn’t supposed to let that happen. He wasn’t supposed to *want* it. He wasn’t supposed to be thinking about those hands on him while sitting in the middle of a hundred students.

He definitely wasn’t supposed to be thinking about how good it felt. He swallowed hard. *I am so screwed*. He didn’t know which was worse:

The fact that he’d slept with his brother’s best friend,

or

The fact that he couldn't stop replaying every second of it.

And somewhere in the back of his head, one more thought whispered in:

Ilya is definitely going to text me.

Shane closed his eyes. He was doomed.

—

Three days. Three entire days. That's how long it had been since Ilya had last heard from Shane. And now he was sitting in the glass conference room of the New York headquarters — panoramic skyline, a table big enough for twelve executives, and a projection screen filled with charts about market expansion and projections for Q3.

None of which he was actually absorbing. Not even remotely. Ilya sat stiff-backed in his leather chair, suit crisp, tie perfect, the picture of a polished CEO who totally had his head in the game. Except he absolutely did not.

Because under the table hidden neatly between his legs — his phone screen was lit up brighter than the projection at the front of the room.

SHANDERELLA

Delivered

Delivered

Delivered

All unresponded.

Ilya exhaled through his nose quietly, scrolling again through the messages he'd sent — nothing dramatic, nothing alarming, nothing that should've scared anyone off. Just things like:

“Are you busy with rowing practice?”

“Are you alive?”

“You missed your chance to make fun of me today.”

“Hollander?”

He typed another message, erased it. Typed again, erased it harder.

Next to him, Gray was sitting with his arms crossed, laser-focused on the director speaking at the front. His attention never wavered. His knee bounced faintly — his tell for impatience — but he was attentive, sharp, taking in every number and projection.

Ilya envied that. He couldn’t even pretend to focus. He flicked his eyes up from his phone when Gray shifted, pretending he hadn’t been staring at his screen the whole time.

“Something the matter?” Gray murmured under his breath, not looking away from the presenter.

Ilya almost dropped the phone. “No,” he replied quickly, shoving his expression back into neutrality, “Just reading the doc you sent me last night.”

Gray nodded, satisfied.

Ilya wasn’t sure whether he deserved an Oscar or a psychiatric evaluation.

The director continued droning on about supply chain efficiency. Ilya blinked once. Twice. His knee bounced under the table.

His phone lit up again. For a heartbeat — a hopeful, stupid, reckless heartbeat — he thought it was Shane. It wasn’t. Just his CFO asking a question no one cared about.

Ilya’s jaw flexed. He rubbed the back of his thumb across the side of the phone, checking the athlete’s read receipts again. Nothing.

He half-wondered if he’d imagined the entire night — imagined Shane’s breath hitching under his mouth, imagined the way Shane had dragged him closer, imagined the soft, stunned little noise Shane made when Ilya whispered into his throat.

Ilya inhaled sharply. No. Definitely not imagined. He remembered every damn second too clearly for that. Hell, he still had faint nail marks on his shoulder.

He coughed once, low, trying to clear the heat suddenly curling under his skin. He needed to get a grip. He needed to act normal. He needed to be a functioning adult in a functioning meeting involving billions of dollars.

Gray glanced over briefly again at his best friend. “Seriously, you alright?,” he asked quietly.

Ilya nodded, the most convincing lie he’d delivered all week, “Just tired.”

Gray huffed. “You party again without me?”

Ilya almost choked.

“No.”

And then— as if the universe wanted to taunt him — Gray’s phone buzzed, and the older Hollander glanced down briefly.

Ilya watched from the corner of his eye. Please not Shane. Please not some psychic sibling intuition. Please god don’t let him know anything happened. But Gray just typed something quick back, unfazed.

Ilya swallowed. His fingers hovered over his own keyboard, and before he could stop himself, he typed another text.

ILYA:

Hollander.

Just tell me you’re okay.

He hit send. His heart thudded like it was trying to escape his ribs. He lowered the phone again, palms suddenly warm against the metal. His whole body felt wired, restless, on edge.

Ilya stared straight ahead, pretending to listen, nodding in the right places, making the occasional noncommittal “mhmm” but his mind wasn’t anywhere near the meeting.

It was in Cambridge. In a dorm he’d never been inside. With a second-year student who hadn’t texted him in three days.

Ilya tightened his grip under the table until his knuckles whitened. It wasn’t rejection.

Couldn’t be. The athlete wasn’t the type to ghost someone out of malice.

He glanced down. Still no reply. His stomach tightened with a weight he didn’t want to name. Ilya Rozanov felt genuinely unsure of the next move and he always hated the chalky taste of failure.

—

Shane pushed open the bathroom door with one hand, towel scrubbing through his damp hair, his mind still halfway on the probability set he’d been reviewing before his shower. Then he froze. Dead. Still.

Because sitting on his desk — his desk — legs casually crossed, arms folded, in a perfectly pressed black button-down and slacks like he owned the place, was Ilya Rozanov. Inside his dorm room. Waiting.

Watching. Looking too calm for someone who definitely should not be here.

Shane blinked once. Twice. His towel slipped halfway off his head. “...What,” he said flatly, voice still scratchy from steam and soap, “the hell are you doing here?”

Ilya raised one eyebrow, that deceptively relaxed, CEO-smoothed expression softening just enough to look amused. “Hi to you too,” he answered evenly.

Shane didn’t dignify that. He walked straight past him — ignoring the way Ilya’s gaze followed him — and went to his closet. He yanked the doors open a little harder than intended.

“And where are my roommates?” Shane added, because the silence in the room was suspicious, “They were literally here.”

Ilya shrugged like it was nothing, “I asked them to give us the room.”

“You *asked*?”

Ilya’s mouth curled. “Bribed,” he corrected, completely unashamed, “They were very cooperative.”

Shane turned, towel hanging around his shoulders, hair dripping onto the collar of his t-shirt. His glare was sharp, irritated, and— yes— just a touch flustered.

“Rozanov,” Shane said, exasperated, “you can’t just... march into my dorm like you own Harvard.”

Ilya leaned back in Shane’s chair, crossing his arms again, voice low and maddeningly steady. “Apparently I can,” he admitted smugly with a shrug, “but I’m lazy.”

“Rozanov.”

“Hollander.”

The athlete closed his eyes for a second, counting to three, because his pulse was doing that annoying thing where it tried to climb up his throat whenever Ilya used his serious tone.

He grabbed a clean sweatshirt from the closet and tugged it on over his damp shirt, refusing to look. “You can’t keep bribing people,” Shane muttered, “It’s weird. And illegal. And morally wrong.”

“I didn’t ask them to commit treason,” Ilya replied, “I gave them a hundred bucks each and told them to go get dinner.”

“You— what— Rozanov— that’s—”

Shane groaned into his towel, “That’s so invasive.”

Ilya didn’t apologize. Not even slightly. “Three days, Hollander,” he said quietly instead.

That made Shane freeze. His hand paused mid-hair-dry, chest tightening in a sharp, complicated way. He turned, slowly, reluctantly.

Ilya wasn't smiling now. He looked... tense. More tense than Shane had seen him in weeks.

"You disappear for three days," Ilya continued, softer, "and don't answer a single text. Didn't even leave a 'busy' or 'alive' or 'stop texting me, Rozanov, I regret everything.' Something. A... thing."

Shane's jaw clenched as he dropped the towel on his bed. He walked across the room, stopped a few feet in front of the CEO perched on his desk, and crossed his own arms. "You shouldn't have come here," he murmured.

"Maybe not," Ilya's gaze didn't waver, "But I did."

Silence stretched. Tight. Thick. Electric.

Shane shifted his weight, anxiety twisting under his skin. Because Ilya looked like a man who had driven all the way here with a single thought: get answers. And the athlete wasn't sure how to give any without revealing too much.

"Look," Shane finally said, voice low, "I wasn't ignoring you because.... because I hated that night or something."

Ilya blinked—the smallest relief flickering through his eyes like a light turning on. "Then why?" he asked. Quiet. Controlled.

Shane swallowed.

"You're Gray's best friend."

Ilya's jaw ticked.

"And?" he pressed.

"And," Shane continued, rubbing the back of his neck, "my life is already complicated with him. He barely lets me breathe sometimes. If he ever found out—" He stopped himself. He

didn't need to finish that sentence.

The CEO stood slowly from the desk, the movement unhurried, deliberate. He stepped closer, closing some of the distance. Shane didn't back away— stupidly, stubbornly— even when Ilya was close enough that Shane could feel the warmth off his shirt.

Ilya's voice dropped to something that wrapped around Shane's ribs. "He's not here," he murmured, "And you don't owe him control of what you do with your life."

The athlete's breath hitched almost imperceptibly. Ilya noticed. Of course he did.

"You don't owe me anything, either," he added, softer now, "But you could've at least told me you needed space, Hollander."

Shane's eyes flickered away, jaw tight. "I wasn't trying to hurt you," he said quietly.

Ilya exhaled finally, tension leaking from his shoulders as if that one sentence mattered more than it should have. "I know," he replied, and his voice dropped into something warm, honest. "That's why I'm here."

Shane blinked, startled. "You— drove all the way from New York for this?"

"I would've flown if I thought it'd make you open the damn door faster."

Shane's ears went pink.

Ilya's stare didn't soften— if anything, it sharpened with something heavy, something unsaid. "You can avoid me," he murmured, "But I'm not going to pretend that night didn't happen."

Shane's heart pulsed hard in his chest. "That's exactly why I needed time," he admitted, "I didn't want to screw anything up."

Ilya looked him over— slow, deliberate— as if he could read every thought behind that. Then, quietly:

"You didn't screw anything up."

Shane's breath caught. A beat. Two.

Ilya's hand lifted barely stopping short of touching the athlete. "Tell me to leave," he said, "And I will."

Shane opened his mouth. Closed it. Opened it again. The words that came out were not the ones he meant to say. "...My roommates better not be gone for long," he muttered, looking away too quickly.

Ilya's exhale was almost a laugh—almost. "I'll take that as a no," he murmured.

Shane rolled his eyes, but his pulse was hammering.

Ilya stepped back just enough to give him space, leaning one shoulder against the athlete's desk. "So," he said, voice back to its smoother, teasing cadence, "are you going to actually talk to me now?"

Shane stretched his towel over his shoulder like a barrier and huffed. "Don't push your luck," he muttered. But he wasn't walking away. And Ilya saw that win for exactly what it was. He didn't rush him. Didn't demand answers.

He just stood there leaning against the desk—arms loosely crossed, eyes fixed on him like he had nowhere else to be. Like an entire New York board meeting wasn't waiting for him. Like nothing mattered except whatever Shane was about to say.

Which made it ten times harder to breathe normally.

Shane moved to sit on the edge of the bed, elbows on his knees, staring at the floor like it suddenly held the solutions to every complex equation in his life. "Okay," he muttered, exhaling slowly, "We should... talk."

Ilya's tone softened, low. "That would be ideal."

Shane shot him a look, "Don't do the CEO thing with me."

Ilya raised both hands, amused. “Alright. No CEO voice.” Then, annoyingly, he added under his breath, “Just the man you slept with.”

“Rozanov.”

“Sorry.”

Shane scrubbed his palm down his face. He’d survived physics finals without sweating half as hard as he was sweating now. “Look,” he began, choosing his words slowly, “what happened... happened. I’m not pretending it didn’t. I’m not saying I regret it. But—”

Ilya stiffened the second that but dropped.

Shane lifted his eyes and finished quietly:

“—I need to figure out what it means.”

Ilya didn’t speak at first. His jaw flexed—that tick Shane had learned to recognise. The one he did whenever he was trying to stay calm. “Okay,” he said finally, “Then let’s figure it out.”

Shane blinked, “Just like that?”

Ilya stepped forward. Not too close. Not crowding him. Just enough that the athlete could feel the attention, the weight of it, the sincerity woven into it. “I don’t do casual confusion,” he said, “If I want something, I’m straightforward about it.”

“And... you want me?,” Shane managed despite his tightening chest.

Ilya’s answer was immediate, “Yes.”

No hesitation. No smirk. No joke. Just truth.

It made the athlete’s breath stutter that Ilya took a small, careful step back to give Shane room, as if the honesty itself might overwhelm him if he didn’t.

Shane swallowed around the knot in his throat. "...I want you too," he admitted, barely above a whisper.

Ilya closed his eyes for one long beat, like that did something to him. When he opened them, they were darker. Thicker. Focused. "Good," he said, voice lower now, "Then we're on the same page."

Shane lifted a hand, stopping him before he could take another step, "But this—whatever it is—can't get out."

Ilya's brows pulled together, hands waving in the air, weaving for a better understanding, "You mean can't get out publicly or can't get out to Gray?," he asked.

Shane shot him a flat, incredulous look.

"Rozanov, if Gray finds out, he'll act like I've committed federal treason and slept with the Secretary of State."

Ilya blinked.

"...That's a very specific analogy."

"Because it's accurate."

Ilya rubbed the back of his neck, glancing away. "I know he can be... dramatic."

"Dramatic?," Shane scoffed, insulted by the choice of words, "He accused me of sucking your dick."

Ilya coughed on nothing.

Then cleared his throat.

"That—wasn't on my bingo card. But he wasn't wrong."

Shane gave him a tired, lopsided glare. "Yeah, well, now it's prehistoric history. And he cannot know the actual truth."

Ilya nodded slowly, "So you want to keep this discreet."

“Extremely discreet.”

Ilya ran a thumb along his jaw, studying the athlete like he was mapping out the logistics of a corporate merger. “We can do that,” he said.

Shane blinked, “What, just like that?”

“You forget,” Ilya said, looking at him fully now, “I’m very good at keeping secrets when I want to.”

“Except from Gray.”

Ilya winced.

“That’s... terribly accurate, yes.”

Shane dropped back onto the bed, legs stretched out, head tipping back as he groaned, “This is insane.”

Ilya gave a small, lopsided grin. “Most great things are.”

Shane glared.

“Don’t make this poetic.”

“Noted.”

Silence lingered for a moment, calm but charged. Then Shane exhaled. “What do you want out of this?” he asked quietly, “Besides bribing my roommates and showing up in my dorm.”

Ilya stepped closer this time—slow, deliberate until he was in front of Shane, close enough to touch but not quite touching. “I want more than one night,” he said.

Shane’s breath caught but Ilya wasn’t done yet.

“I want to see where this goes. With you. Without pressure. Without rushing. Without Gray sticking his nose into it.”

Shane swallowed hard, “And you’re really okay with keeping it secret from him?”

“If that’s what you need,” Ilya said, “yes.”

Shane sat back up, eyes locked on Ilya’s.

“...I need that.”

Ilya nodded once, firm.

“Then that’s what we do.”

Shane exhaled, some of the tension in his shoulders easing for the first time in days. “...So what are we now?” he asked cautiously.

Ilya smirked, slow and infuriatingly confident. “We’re two adults,” he murmured, “figuring it out.”

Shane snorted. “That’s vague.”

“It’s intentionally vague,” Ilya corrected. “Flexibility is important in early-stage ventures.”

“Are we a startup now?”

“Depends,” Ilya said, voice low, “Are you planning to invest?”

Shane shoved his shoulder.

Ilya laughed, quiet but genuine.

Shane felt the smile tug at his lips before he could stop it.

Then, quietly:

“...So we’re doing this?”

Ilya's expression softened.

"We are."

"And we keep this under wraps."

"Absolutely."

"No more barging into my dorm."

Ilya paused.

"...Mostly."

"Rozanov—"

"Da, I'll work on it."

Shane rolled his eyes but didn't move away.

Ilya hesitated, then asked—carefully:

"Can I kiss you?"

Shane swallowed.

Then nodded.

Ilya leaned in—slow, not like the heated chaos of the penthouse night, but something gentler, deliberate, steady. His hand slid to the side of the athlete's jaw, tilting his face up. Their lips brushed. Just once. Soft. Measured. Intimate in a way that made Shane's stomach flip hard.

When they pulled apart, Shane murmured,

"...This is a bad idea."

Ilya kissed him again. "Probably," he agreed against the athlete's mouth, "But it's ours."

The Harvard gym echoed with the thud of a basketball hitting the court and the rhythmic squeak of sneakers. It was late afternoon, the sun slicing through the high windows in orange beams, and Gray Hollander was unsurprisingly sweating like he was auditioning for a Gatorade commercial.

Ilya caught the rebound and passed it back, expecting his friend to drive in but Gray didn't.

Instead, he just stood there, dribbling lazily, staring at Ilya with that damn grin. The one that meant trouble. The one that meant he had clocked something and was gearing up to pounce.

Ilya wiped the sweat from his brow.

“...What?”

Gray's grin widened, “Nothing.”

Ilya narrowed his eyes, “That's not a ‘nothing’ face.”

Gray actually laughed, shaking his head, letting the ball bounce on its own between his legs. “You've had this look,” he said. “For weeks.”

Ilya blinked, “What look?”

“The dumb look.”

Ilya's mouth fell open. “Excuse me?”

“You know,” Gray continued cheerfully, “the look you get when you've had sex. Proper sex. The kind that melts your brain for several business days.”

Ilya choked on air.

“What— I don't— Gray, for the love of God—”

“No, seriously,” Gray leaned his weight on the ball, “Did you get laid?”

Ilya coughed, grabbed the ball from him, and tried to walk toward the free-throw line like a normal man whose best friend wasn’t interrogating him about his sex life.

Gray followed, relentless.

“Who is she?”

“There’s no she.”

“Aha,” Gray pointed aggressively, “So there is someone.”

Ilya closed his eyes, inhaled deeply, and told himself not to panic.

Gray wasn’t suspicious.

Gray had no idea.

Gray was just being Gray, annoying and nosy with a dash of older-brother energy he didn’t even realise he radiated.

So, Ilya schooled his face, “I’ve been busy with the expansion.”

Gray scoffed, “You’re not that busy. Even when we launched in Tokyo you still found time to sleep with that movie producer.”

Ilya scrubbed his palm over his face. “Gray.”

“I’m right, though,” Gray pressed, stepping closer, “You’re acting different. Relaxed. Distracted. Less bitchy at meetings.”

Ilya stared at him, “Less what again?”

“Bitchy,” Gray repeated, “Like you’ve been de-stressed. Which usually means sex. So.”

He clapped Ilya on the shoulder, “Whoever she is, good for you.”

Ilya opened his mouth, then closed it because absolutely nothing appropriate would come out. Not when his friend was smiling proudly, arms crossed over his chest like he had solved a murder case. Well, speaking of murder.

“Is she one of the new female innovators?” Gray asked. “From the conference? The brunette with the AI startup? Or wait”

His eyes lit up.

“That VC founder from Belgium? Ilya, tell me you didn’t actually charm her—”

“There is no girl,” Ilya snapped a little too quickly.

Gray’s eyes narrowed with suspicion so sharp Ilya felt it like a physical threat but Ilya wasn’t prepared for what would come out of his friend’s mouth.

“...So it’s a guy?”

Ilya’s soul left his body. He stared blankly at Gray like an idiot caught in a lie he hadn’t even lied about yet.

Gray’s jaw dropped.

“Ilya. Did you—are you—since when—”

Ilya raised his hands. “It’s not— I mean— That’s not— Gray, Jesus—”

Gray shook himself, the shock fading quickly. “Okay. Okay. Hey. I don’t care. I just—” Yet, he blinked, so much talk of not being pushy, “Who?”

Ilya’s heartbeat tripped. Why would he signed up to get torture not just one but two Hollander.

Gray stepped closer, studying him with that unnervingly perceptive gaze he only used on people he cared about. “You like this no girl guy?” he asked quietly.

Ilya swallowed, “Gray, I told you... It’s... complicated.”

Gray huffed a laugh, “Ilya. Everything with you is complicated. Like I haven’t know you for ages.”

Ilya couldn’t even argue with that.

Gray folded his arms again, “So? Who is he?”

Ilya inhaled through his nose. Calm. Steady. Lie. Kind of. “No one you know,” he said smoothly.

Gray sighed, respectful enough not to pry further. “You’re allowed to have a private life,” he said simply, patting Ilya’s back as he picked up the ball again, “Just don’t fall in love with someone who’s going to bankrupt the company, or worse, embarrass us on Twitter.”

Ilya snorted, “That’s your biggest fear?”

“Public humiliation and financial ruin?” Gray said, “Absolutely.”

Ilya rolled his eyes, “I’ll keep that in mind.”

Gray bounced the ball once more, then shot it from the three-point line. It swished cleanly. He didn’t look at his friend as he said: “Whoever he is, if he makes you happy... good.”

Ilya’s chest tightened unexpectedly.

The ball bounced away forgotten, but not the promise he made to Shane. He felt guilty for not being truthful to his friend but what he wanted the most at the moment was to keep both people he cared about safe. Sometimes lies minimised the risks.

“Don’t get mushy, Ilya,” Gray warned, already jogging after the ball, “Let’s go. First to thirty wins.”

Ilya stood there for a moment, heart steadying, the knot of anxiety loosening just a little. Because Gray wasn’t close. He wasn’t suspicious. He thought it was someone else. He exhaled in relief.

Then—

“Ilya?” Gray called over his shoulder, spinning the ball on his finger. “If this guy breaks your heart, I’ll kill him.”

Ilya blinked but quickly covered it up by forcing a laugh. Masking final boss but for sure it does shook him off. If only Gray knew. “Yeah,” he said, “I’m sure you will.”

Gray smirked, “Thirty—ten point handicap for you.”

Ilya groaned, grabbing the ball.

“You’re ridiculous.”

“And you’re in love,” Gray countered lightly, grinning when he wasn’t supposed to.

Ilya missed the next shot entirely.

Hell, he was. Thanks for the great observation.

—

The rain came down in sheets, hammering the roof of Ilya’s Porsche until it sounded like the whole sky was shaking loose. The diner’s neon sign flickered pink and blue off the wet asphalt, turning the interior of the car into a dim, pulsing glow.

And Shane? He was pressed back against the passenger seat, breath warm and fast against Ilya’s mouth, arms looped around the man’s torso like he was trying to pull him closer than physically possible. Figuring out makes everything seem countless.

They hadn’t got the opportunity to meet up because of their clashing schedules. Shane with his classes and rowing practice, Ilya with him travelling back and forth between attending Harvard and running the company.

Texting and phone calls had been the closest way they could get to know each other for the past few days. So, opportunity like this was hard to pass on. It’s either hugs or kisses. Nobody said it couldn’t be both.

Ilya braced a hand on the headrest behind the athlete's head, the other sliding under the soft cotton of the sweatshirt, palm spreading over warm, pale skin. He had been chasing the plump lips for the last fifteen minutes, unable to stop himself, unable to get enough.

He's helpless with the way Shane kept pulling him in, murmuring against his mouth, the kind of sound that burned straight into his spine.

Their kiss turned messy, mouths parting, noses brushing, rain hammering harder. Shane tilted his head just right, letting Ilya sink in deeper, and Ilya let out a quiet, low sound he didn't know he'd made. The time stretched out to unfold possibilities until Ilya's phone shrilled loudly from the center console. It kept ringing. Loud. Insistent. Impossible to ignore.

Ilya didn't bother turning his head. He dipped back down to the athlete's jaw, lips grazing skin, whispering, "Ignore it."

Shane huffed a shaky little laugh, hand sliding up Ilya's back, but he turned his face away when the ringtone persisted. "Rozanov," he murmured, pushing lightly the CEO's shoulder, "Just pick it up."

"I don't want to," Ilya muttered against his throat. God, he wished he didn't have to stop. Can Christmas come early? He shut his eyes eventually, "... Fuck."

Shane's fingers gently tugged his hair, keeping the grip loose so Ilya could reach for the phone. His lips were still parted, still kiss-bitten red, breath still uneven.

Ilya wanted to kiss him again so badly he could taste it. But he forced himself upright.

Caller ID: Gray Hollander.

Of course.

Ilya swallowed, exhaled through his nose, and tapped the green button. "Yeah?" he said, voice rougher than he meant.

"Where the hell are you?," Gray snapped on the other end, background noise of typing and footsteps echoing, "I called twice."

Ilya pressed the back of his wrist against his mouth, hiding whatever expression was threatening to break through. Did he ever missed? Well, a good company does great things together. “Out,” he answered, tone steadying slowly, “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing’s wrong, Ilya,” Gray said, still sharp, “We just had a board update and I wanted to run something by you, but apparently you’ve vanished.”

Ilya glanced at the athlete who on the other hand sat very still, chest rising and falling, listening without looking like he was listening. Shane quietly wiped his lips, raked his hair back, shoulders curling inward so he wouldn’t breathe too loud.

“I’m not far,” Ilya replied, “What’s the update?”

“Tomorrow’s meeting got moved to eight a.m.,” Gray said, “And the Zurich team sent another revision you should look at.”

Ilya hummed, pretending to care because he was distracted by the athlete’s sweatshirt that had ridden up, revealing a stripe of warm skin; he hated how badly his fingers twitched for it. “Got it,” he said, the best he could.

There was a pause.

Too sharp.

Too perceptive.

“...Ilya,” Gray said slowly, “Are you alone?”

Ilya didn’t blink, “Yeah. Maybe.”

“Why do you sound like that?”

“Like what?”

“Like you’re out of breath.” More of out of words.

Shane silently mouthed—*Seriously?*—like he couldn’t believed that his brother was capable of holding longer conversation.

Ilya forced a cough, “I’m at the gym. Ran a bit.”

“You ran? At this hour?” Gray sounded deeply, cosmically unconvinced, “Voluntarily?”

Ilya glared at nothing, “It’s possible.”

“Barely.”

Ilya’s jaw ticked, “Is that all, Gray? Cause what else can I do as a single lonely man living in a big penthouse at this hour? Uh jerking off?”

“Fine, fine.” Gray groaned, brain rotten with overloaded unnecessary information, “Look, just clear off your schedule for tomorrow meeting. I want you there. And Ilya?”

“What?”

“Stop sounding like you’re dying.”

Then the line clicked off.

Ilya let the phone fall into the console and slumped back in the seat, rubbing both hands over his face.

Shane burst into a quiet laugh, head tipping back against the headrest. “You’re terrible at lying.”

Ilya dropped one hand to the athlete’s thigh, squeezing lightly, “In my defense, you kissed me before the phone rang. Hard to recover from that.”

Shane’s laugh faded into something softer, eyes dropping to Ilya’s mouth again. “You sure you’re not in trouble?” he murmured.

“With Gray?” Ilya shrugged, “He’s suspicious of everyone except me. He won’t put two and two together unless you walk into the house wearing my shirt.”

Shane arched a brow.

“But not because I’m naked?”

Ilya grinned, sliding closer again. “Yeah. He notice only the obvious.”

Outside, the rain softened to a steady patter meanwhile inside the car, the air hummed with heat all over again. Shane hooked a finger in the hem of Ilya’s shirt, “Where were we?”

Ilya leaned in, breath brushing the athlete’s lips. “I was thinking about revisiting the part where you made that little noise—”

Shane shut him up with a kiss, pulling him back in, rain drumming a steady rhythm on the roof while the Porsche fogged up all over again.

By the time Ilya pulled up to the curb outside the dorm building, the rain had settled into a soft mist, the streetlights haloed in gold. The windshield wipers slowed, then stopped. The world outside felt suspended—quiet, blurred, almost too gentle compared to the heat they’d left fogged up in the car.

Shane unbuckled, sweatshirt a little crooked from where Ilya’s hands had been all over him minutes ago. His lips were still swollen pink, his hair a mess he didn’t even bother fixing. He reached for the door handle but his wrist was caught before he could push it open.

Shane paused, hand still on the handle, turning his head slightly. “What?” he asked softly.

Ilya didn’t answer at first. He just looked at him, really looked. The athlete, flushed from kissing, still breathing a little unevenly, eyes dark in the low light. God, he was addictive. Ilya felt it like an ache in his chest.

Shane caught the stare and raised a brow, “Don’t tell me you’re getting sentimental on me.”

Ilya exhaled a laugh, “If anyone’s allowed to accuse someone of being sentimental, it’s definitely not the guy who kissed me until the windows fogged.”

“That’s not sentimental,” Shane murmured, “That’s hormonal.”

Ilya snorted, tugging gently at his wrist until the athlete leaned back toward him. “Same difference but don’t take back your words,” he said, voice low.

Shane shook his head, fighting a smile as he leaned closer, “Rozanov, I need to get inside before my roommates start thinking I’m dead in a ditch.”

“They know you’re not.”

“You bribed them once. They might think you kidnapped me now.”

Ilya grinned, “If I kidnapped you, you wouldn’t be heading back to the dorm, Hollander.”

Shane’s breath hitched, “You’re not helping.” He’s getting cold or warm again and he really needed to leave. So, he tried to turn again but Ilya’s hand slid to his jaw, thumb brushing gently across his cheekbone.

A man winning by the slightest measure.

“Come here,” Ilya whispered.

Shane’s eyes softened at the tone he clearly wasn’t expecting, and he leaned back in without a word as his lips were met halfway, the kiss slowed this time. Not rushed. Not desperate. Just... wanting.

The athlete melted into it immediately—fingers curling into Ilya’s shirt, pulling him in by the fabric who tilted his head, deepening the kiss, savoring it. Trying to store it. Trying to keep him for just another second.

Shane eventually broke away, barely, lips brushing Ilya’s as he breathed out a laugh. “You really can’t stop, can you?”

“No,” Ilya admitted, brushing their noses together, “I’m not even going to pretend. You’re a good kisser.”

Shane swallowed, gaze flicking down to Ilya’s mouth again like he was weighing whether he should just give in for another round. He did. One more kiss. Quick, warm, addictive. He had nothing to regret later.

Then Shane forced himself back, breathing out against Ilya’s cheek. “Okay. I’m really going. For real.”

Ilya's fingers trailed off the athlete's jaw down to his chin, "Text me when you're upstairs."

Shane huffed, "Rozanov. It's two flights. I won't die."

"I know."

"Then why—"

"I want to know you made it in," Ilya said, quieter, eyes softer than he meant.

Shane froze for half a second. That... hit him. More than he probably realised that he could. Since when it's always this easy. He cleared his throat, "Fine. I'll text."

Ilya smiled in satisfaction, letting him go.

The athlete opened the door and stepped out into the misty air after adjusting his sweatshirt. Before he shut the door, he leaned back in, resting one forearm on the roof, "Goodnight, Rozanov."

Ilya leaned slightly toward him, "Goodnight. And Hollander?"

"Yeah?"

Ilya's smile widened, crooked and impossible to read, "You taste like vanilla and trouble."

Shane scoffed, cheeks going hot, "Shut up."

He closed the door before he could actually tasted it in his own mouth, shaking his head as he headed toward the dorm entrance.

Ilya watched Shane—watched the way he smoothened the back of his jeans, watched the way he paused at the door to glance back over his shoulder once.

Their eyes met through the dim. The athlete lifted two fingers in a lazy goodbye. Ilya tapped the steering wheel twice in return, just in time for the athlete to disappear inside. Yet, he waited.

His phone buzzed less than a minute later.

SHANDERELLA: Upstairs. Alive.

Ilya grinned at the screen.

ILYA: Shame. I had plans.

Another buzz.

SHANDERELLA: Go home, Rozanov.

Ilya put the car in gear, still smiling to himself as he pulled away from the curb.

He couldn't get enough of the athlete. Not even close.

—

Shane stood in front of his brother's townhouse, bouquet of white orchids cradled awkwardly in one arm, and he was already questioning every decision that had led him here. He blamed his mother.

She'd said "Talk to your brother, sweetheart."

Ilya had texted "He's sulking. Fix it. I can handle his constant not-very-suspicious-of-my-sex-life-interrogation but I can't deal with his meltdowns."

Like it's not already worse enough that Gray didn't reach out to him at all to apologise. Of course he thought sending him flowers to his dorm would be a great idea.

Big ones.

Expensive ones.

Signed "– Goose."

Like some Victorian gentleman courting him after a scandal.

So Shane marched over. He unlocked the door with his spare key—big mistake—and stepped inside. “Gray?” he called out. No answer, only the faint hum of the fridge. He took three steps into the kitchen and— “OH MY FUCK—”

Gray stood there.

Milk carton in hand.

Naked.

Naked naked.

Not towel-around-the-waist naked.

Not grabbing-a-robe naked.

Just... CEO in the wild.

National Geographic deleted scenes.

Shane whipped around so fast he nearly slapped himself with the orchids. “What the hell—GRAY!”

“What?,” Gray asked casually behind him, “It’s my own house.”

“That doesn’t mean I need to see your—your whole portfolio!”

Gray snorted at that, unbothered. “Then knock next time.”

Shane squeezed his eyes shut, “I DIDN’T THINK I NEEDED TO KNO—PUT SOME CLOTHES ON!”

A sigh. A fridge door shutting. Bare footsteps. Then finally the rustle of a robe.

“Okay,” Gray said, “You can turn around.”

Shane did—not because he trusted him, but because he could sense the smug older-brother energy radiating even with his back turned. He shoved the orchids out like a peace offering or a weapon, “Flowers? Really, Gray? The best apology you could come up with was flowers?”

Gray crossed his arms, robe thankfully secured. “What’s wrong with flowers?”

“You sent five bouquets,” Shane said, deadpan. “One arrived in the middle of my study group. They thought I was being wooed by someone unhinged.”

“You were. By me.” Gray shrugged, “They’re orchids. They’re classy.”

“Five bouquets.”

“Yes, I know how to count. Do you?”

“What am I supposed to do with five bouquets?! I have roommates. God forbid none of them have allergies,” Shane shot back, “And YOU are dramatic. Which is why I am here before you send me a sixth one and suddenly it’s my funeral.”

Gray looked at the orchids Shane brought back, “And what am I supposed to do with this?”

“I don’t know. Shower with them? You look insane, Gray.”

“How that even suppose to work?”

“Google, genius.”

Gray blinked over a dead beat before clearing his throat, “I know I screwed up.”

Shane’s brows lifted, “Which part? Publicly embarrassing me? Telling Rozanov about my entire sex life? Treating me like I’m a kid?”

“All of it,” Gray admitted, rubbing a hand over his face, “I was... I don’t know. Worried. Protective. Pick any word from the ‘overbearing older brother’ dictionary.”

“You think I can’t handle myself,” Shane muttered.

“No,” Gray corrected softly, “You’re grown but I haven’t figured out how to stop acting like you’re not.”

Shane stared at him. This was the annoying part: his older brother's sincerity always came with zero warning. "You hurt my feelings," he finally said.

Gray's shoulders lowered. "I know."

"I'm not some fragile charity case. I'm not stupid. I'm not irresponsible."

"I didn't say you were."

"You implied it! Loudly!"

Another breath.

Then Gray stepped forward and placed a hand on Shane's shoulder, "I'm sorry."

The athlete blinked.

Once.

Twice.

"Like... actually sorry?"

"Yes."

"Genuine sorry?"

"Yes."

"No billionaire conditions attached?"

"No," Gray paused, "Well, except maybe don't have sex in the dorm room again."

"Oh my God—"

"Kidding," Gray said quickly, "Kidding."

Shane sighed, fighting a reluctant smile, "You're a menace."

Gray's expression softened, "And you're my little brother."

The hug came fast—Gray pulling him in with those excessive older-brother arms. Shane froze. Not from emotion. From the horrific realization that Gray's robe wasn't tied that securely, "Oh my GOD—GRAY—WHY—NO—"

"It's a hug," Gray said, offended.

"IT IS SKIN-TO-CLOTH CONTACT AND I AM TRAUMATIZED—"

Gray pushed him away, "You're so stingy. You know I can't buy a hug."

"You're NAKED UNDER THAT ROBE!"

"It's my house!"

Shane shoved the orchids back into Gray's chest, "Here. Take your stupid symbolic flowers. I accept your apology. I love you. Please, for the love of God, put on underwear."

Gray laughed—the loud, unguarded one that he knew his younger brother always pretended to hate, "Fine. Stay for lunch?"

Shane hesitated but he remembered what Ilya had urged him about in between texts. So, he chose to listen, "Okay. But clothes. Actual clothes."

"I'll consider it."

"GRAY."

"Okay, okay."

As Gray turned toward the hallway, tightening the robe (thank God), the athlete let himself breathe. They were good again. Not perfect. Not fixed forever. But good. And for the first time since the blow-up, Shane felt the tension in his chest loosen. However he couldn't help but wonder if Ilya played a role in convincing his older brother to be the better version of himself.

—

The shower room was still echoing with the hollow rush of water when Shane leaned both palms against the tiled wall, letting the heat loosen his muscles. Morning rowing practice had been brutal, his arms still trembling faintly from the last sprint. He shut his eyes and tilted his head back, steam curling around him.

Then—

ping.

His phone.

Left on the bench just outside the stall.

He ignored it.

ping.

...ping.

ping.

Shane groaned under his breath. Whoever it was needed to calm down. He shut off the water, slicking his hair back with one hand before pushing open the stall door. Water dripped down his chest, his neck, the sharp ridges of his stomach as he crossed the room, grabbed the towel, and snatched his phone off the bench.

Ilya.

Of course.

ROZANOTODAY:

Are you alive?

You better not be ignoring me.

I'm outside.

Hollander?

Shane blinked. Outside? Outside where. A drop of water slid right across the screen. Then—his phone buzzed again.

Incoming call: ROZANOTODAY

Shane stared at it for half a second, then answered because if he didn't, Ilya would probably break into the building. Before he could say anything, Ilya's voice came through low, clipped, impatient:

"Are you seriously going to ignore me? I've been out here for ten minutes freezing my ass off."

Shane's brows shot up, "Rozanov—what the hell are you doing here?"

"Waiting for you," Ilya replied like it was the most obvious answer in the world, "Thought you could sneak me in for five minutes."

Water dripped from Shane's hair onto the floor, splattering around his bare feet. He dragged the towel across his chest, jaw tensing, "You—Rozanov, you can't just show up at the rowing facility."

"You say that every time I show up places," Ilya said, unbothered. "Hasn't stopped me once."

Shane sat on the bench, towel loose around his hips, breath still uneven from practice, "Rozanov. I'm literally half-naked. I just got out of the shower."

Silence. Then Ilya's voice dropped a shade deeper, "Oh."

Shane sighed, rubbing the towel into his hair harder than necessary, "Not like that. Stop—whatever you're thinking."

"I wasn't thinking anything."

A pause.

"...At first."

“Rozanov,” Shane warned, even though his own lips twitched.

Ilya exhaled a faint laugh through the speaker, “Okay. Come on. Let me in.”

“For what?”

“You’re flying out tomorrow. I’m not going to see you for a week,” Ilya’s tone gentled, quiet but firm, “I wanted to say goodbye.”

That one landed lower than Shane expected. Warm, unwelcome, addictive. He cleared his throat, “Rozanov, half the team is still here.”

“You expect me to care?,” Ilya shot back, “Just open the door. Please. I’ll behave.”

Please? He’s too expose to die today. Shane pinched the bridge of his nose, “You’re unbelievable. You’re lucky you’re likeable.”

He muttered the rest under his breath he hoped Ilya didn’t catch, then stood, tying the towel properly around his waist before heading toward the exit. Water still dripped from the ends of his hair as he pushed the facility door open and there Ilya was.

Leaning casually against the building in a wool coat, hands in pockets, hair slightly mussed from the cold wind. The kind of handsome that annoyed Shane on principle.

Ilya looked him up and down—wet hair, bare chest, towel. His lips parted, “Oh. Wow.”

“Shut up,” Shane said immediately, tugging the towel higher on his hips.

Ilya stepped closer, not even pretending he wasn’t staring, “I would’ve brought you a jacket if I knew you were going to walk out looking like—”

“Don’t finish that sentence,” Shane warned.

“—like someone who should not be left unattended in public,” Ilya finished anyway, smirking.

Shane rolled his eyes and crossed his arms, not realizing until Ilya's gaze flicked down what that did to his shoulders and chest. He quickly dropped them again.

Ilya softened then, the teasing melting into something quieter, "You really leave tomorrow?"

"Early morning," Shane nodded, "Whole team's flying out for training camp."

Ilya leaned in a little more, voice low, "Let me walk you back to the locker room."

Shane blinked, "Rozanov. I'm wearing a towel."

"I'm aware," Ilya's eyes flicked down with zero shame, "Unfortunately aware."

"Rozanov—"

"Relax. I'm not going to do anything," He brushed his knuckles lightly against the athlete's temple, "I just... wanted to see you before you left."

Shane's pulse kicked hard. "Five minutes," he muttered, stepping back inside, "Wait here."

Ilya nodded, hands sliding back into his pockets, eyes warm but hungry. "I've got time," he said softly, "Take your five minutes."

Shane turned away, towel clinging to him, heart pounding in a way training never managed. Ilya was trouble. Calculable trouble. Bad-for-him trouble. Unavoidable trouble.

And the athlete was already walking back inside, already grabbing his clothes with shaking fingers, already wondering what Ilya would say—or do—when he came back out dressed. He hated how much he wanted to know.

When Shane stepped back out into the cold corridor, hair damp but clothes on, Ilya straightened instantly—like he'd been waiting at attention the whole time. The athlete didn't even give him a chance to speak; he grabbed Ilya's wrist, fingers firm, and tugged him inside.

Ilya followed with a quiet, startled laugh.

"Whoa—okay. Aggressive. I like—"

“Shut up,” Shane muttered, dragging him down the short hallway until he pushed the locker room door open with his shoulder.

It was empty now. The showers still running faintly in the background, steam drifting lazily along the ceiling. The athlete didn’t let go of Ilya’s wrist until they were fully inside—then he shut the door behind them.

Ilya leaned one hand against the metal lockers, looking around with unabashed interest, “Now this is a fantasy I didn’t expect to be checked off today.”

“Rozanov.”

“Sorry,” Ilya said—unconvincing, amused.

“So what’s the plan, athlete? You dragging me in here for some last-minute quality time before you leave the country?”

Shane shot him a flat look, “Absolutely not.”

Ilya spread his hands innocently, “Then clarify. Because the last time you dragged me somewhere private—”

“Don’t finish that sentence,” Shane warned again, cheeks warming. He didn’t know how much longer he could actually held onto his own words and rules.

Ilya’s grin widened, “So that is why we’re here.”

Shane exhaled sharply, crossing his arms. “No. I just didn’t want you standing like a weirdo outside the damn building in the cold.”

“That’s sweet,” Ilya murmured, stepping closer, “You dragged me inside to keep me warm.”

“That is not what I said.”

Ilya reached up and flicked a drop of water off Shane’s jaw, eyes dark, “It’s what you meant.

The athlete grabbed his wrist before he could cup his face. Firm. Unmistakable. “Rozanov. The team is still around. Half of them might walk in any minute.”

Ilya's mouth tipped into a slow, wicked smirk, "So you're saying if they weren't here..."

"No." Shane glared. Then, after half a beat: "Maybe. But no."

Ilya laughed under his breath, like Shane had just handed him a gift. "So that's a maybe—"

"It's a no."

"Mathematically," Ilya said, leaning closer, "a no delivered with that expression has about a 0.78 probability of being a yes."

Shane groaned and pinched the bridge of his nose, "You can't do math like that."

"I can when the subject of study drags me into a locker room," Ilya countered.

Shane shoved him in the chest, "Rozanov. I am not doing anything of that sort in a facility full of my teammates. I'm not dropping to my knees. You're not dropping to your knees. Nobody's dropping anywhere."

Ilya blinked once. Twice. A very slow, very interested smile slid onto his face, "I didn't even mention knees yet," he said quietly, "You did."

The athlete went still immediately as Ilya tilted his head, eyes sweeping over him—his flushed ears, his still-damp hair, the tension in his shoulders. "God," he whispered, stepping closer until Shane's back hit the lockers with a soft metallic thud, "you're killing me."

"Rozanov," Shane warned again—but his voice wasn't steady this time.

Ilya's hands didn't touch him. Not yet.

He just hovered, close enough the athlete could feel the heat through both their clothes. "When you come back," he murmured, low enough to vibrate in Shane's chest, "you're not getting away with a five-minute goodbye again."

Shane's throat bobbed.

"And I'm going to take my time," Ilya leaned in, lips brushing just barely against the corner of the athlete's mouth without kissing him.

Shane exhaled shakily. “Rozanov, I swear—”

“You can kiss me,” Ilya whispered, “or you can make me leave. But you have to pick one.”

Shane hated choices. Especially ones like that mostly because Ilya wasn’t an option for him either. He grabbed the front of Ilya’s coat—not pulling him in, not pushing him away. Just holding on. “Rozanov,” he said, barely audible, “I leave tomorrow.”

Ilya kissed that corner of his mouth he’d been ghosting over. Soft, slow, devastating. “I know.”

Shane didn’t kiss him back. Didn’t push him away either. Just stood there breathing him in, head buzzing, body too warm for a post-shower chill. Finally, he muttered, “You need to go before someone catches you in here.”

Ilya didn’t move for a moment. Then he stepped back, smoothing his coat down, trying and failing to look unaffected, “Fine.”

Goodbye wasn’t a word either of them wanted to say. He simply turned toward the door, lifted a hand in a lazy half-wave, and murmured: “Text me when you land.”

Shane didn’t answer but Ilya smiled like he already knew he would.

Chapter 7: Bruised Floors

Chapter Notes

Hello, it's me again! I hope you guys are doing well wherever you are. I decided to post the new chapter a day earlier since we're getting the last episode of Heated Rivalry in less than two days. I'm so excited yet so sad that the show is coming to an end. Anyway, I hope you guys enjoy this chapter. Please leave your thoughts in the comments section. Thank you so much. Happy reading!

The sun was high over the private golf course, bright enough to make the trimmed grass gleam. Tokyo air was cool, clean, and quiet—except for Gray Hollander's voice. He watched his best friend line up his shot, tongue pressed against the inside of his cheek in concentration. But he noticed the first time in *days*, Ilya wasn't checking his phone. Which meant his suspicion radar was fully, gloriously back online.

Gray narrowed his eyes, "So... you're not getting married anytime soon, right?"

Ilya froze mid-swing. Then he straightened, turning his head just enough to stare at him. "Marriage?" he repeated, flat, "Are you out of your mind?"

Gray casually adjusted his glove like they were discussing weather patterns, "I don't know, Ilya. You're smiling at walls. No, you're smiling at everything except me. Laughing at texts. You even turned down the hostess last night. And she was *into you*, man."

"Gray, I turned her down because she was flirting with the both of us at the same time—"

"Which means more opportunity," Gray deadpanned, "But you had that *no thank you, I have someone waiting for me look*."

Ilya stared, somewhere between deeply offended and terrified, "I do not look like that."

"You did." Gray retrieved his ball from the grass and smirked, "And you've been glued to your phone every five minutes. Except now, suddenly, you're letting it sit in your pocket for once. Whoever this no-girl guy you're with, you're down so bad. You're leashed, *baby*."

Ilya internally swore meanwhile the subject of their conversation was probably eating breakfast across the world, blissfully unaware his older brother was one centimeter away from unraveling *everything*.

Gray leaned his weight onto the club, posture casual, eyes sharp as hell, “So.”

Swing. Thwack. The ball soared down the green. “You’re back in your dating era?”

Ilya exhaled through his nose, forced himself to place his ball on the tee like he wasn’t being interrogated by an unhinged billionaire sibling for the millionth time. “No,” he said smoothly, “I’m not dating anyone.”

“Mm.” Gray’s tone said *liar liar pants on fire*, “So you’re... what? Just hooking up with this person seriously enough to check your phone every thirty seconds?”

Ilya lifted his club, breathed, and swung.

Perfect shot. Clean, strong, annoyingly graceful. “Gray. I’m not dating. I’m not marrying. I’m not... whatever you think this is.”

Gray squinted at him. Hard. “You sure?,” he asked slowly, “Because you’ve got the face.”

“What face?”

“*The I’m thinking about someone’s mouth face.*”

Ilya almost choked on air.

Gray lifted his club and pointed it at him, “Yeah you’re definitely screwed. I can see it. You’ve got this tortured, constantly turned-on thing happening.”

Ilya forced a laugh, wiping his palms casually on his slacks. At any point from now, he’s going to swim in his own pool of sweat. “I’m fine.” He bent to pick up the club, buying time, forcing himself to keep his face neutral. “Your observational skills are garbage by the way,” he added.

“They are *excellent* when it comes to my best friend,” Gray shot back, studying him another beat—long enough for his Ilya to feel sweat collecting under his collar—then shrugged.

“Alright,” he said, exhaling. “Fine. Don’t tell me. Just... don’t get married without warning me first. I need time to prepare a speech.”

“There is *no one*,” Ilya insisted again.

Gray smirked, mimicking his best friend’s response in soft mumble, and said,

“If you say so, lover boy.”

Ilya gripped his club so hard he almost bent the metal, “Stop calling me that.”

Gray only grinned wider, “You’ll slip one day. All idiots in love do.”

Ilya’s phone buzzed in his pocket. He moved faster, pulling the phone out before Gray even inhaled. Too fast. Way too fast. He turned away, pretending to check business emails, even though the notification was clearly from Shane.

Gray folded his arms, “Tell me you didn’t just sprint for your phone.”

“I didn’t sprint.”

“You did a *micro-sprint*.”

“That’s not a thing.”

“With you, it is.”

Ilya considered faking a medical emergency. Or throwing himself into the nearest pond. Instead, he swallowed, shoved the phone back into his pocket, and said tightly—

“Can we finish the hole, please?”

Gray laughed, full-bodied, delighted. “Oh yeah,” he said, “We’re going to finish a lot of holes today.”

Ilya muttered, “That’s disgusting.”

“You’re the one in love, man. You’re disgusting.”

“I’m not in—I’m not disgusting!”

—

By the time they were done playing, both men were already drenched in sweat from the blazing heat. Ilya sank deeper into the backseat of the golf cart as it rolled off the green, Gray up front beside the driver, still lecturing him about swing angles and “emotional stability” like he hadn’t spent the entire morning interrogating his love life.

Gray talking meant one blessing: he wasn’t *looking* at him right now. Ilya angled his body just slightly, shoulders turned toward the open side of the cart, letting the wind hit his face as he palmed his phone under the edge of the seat. He felt like a teenager sneaking texts during class.

Not a CEO. Not a billionaire. Just a man trying to text someone he wanted too much.

He opened his messages.

SHANDERELLA:

Made it to the hotel pool lol my teammates are fighting over sunscreen.

Ilya’s lips tugged up before he could stop it. He typed fast.

ILYA:

you didn’t tell me you were already done with practice

SHANDERELLA:

I sent u a pic of my view an hour ago didn’t you get it?

Ilya’s eyes widened. Pic? He scrolled up.

There. A shot Shane definitely meant to be innocent, but wasn’t. Because the athlete didn’t do innocent.

A sunlit view of the pool deck, yes.

But Shane's legs were in the shot too. Bare calves stretched out on a lounge chair, beads of water on his skin, towel slung low near his hips, sunglasses pushed into his hair.

Ilya dragged a thumb over the photo like an idiot. An idiot in love material. He typed:

ILYA:

you trying to kill me?

A bubble appeared instantly.

SHANDERELLA:

That was unintentional you narcissist.

ILYA:

sure. completely unintentional that you angled the camera like that

SHANDERELLA:

I'm in shorts Rozanov what do you want me to do? crop my legs out?

Ilya bit down a laugh, glancing up to check on Gray. Still distracted. Still safe. He lowered the brightness just in case.

ILYA:

I want you to warn me next time before you send something like that

SHANDERELLA:

Why? You at the office?

Ilya hesitated, thumbs hovering. The truth would blow up the cart.

ILYA:

golfing with Gray. still in Tokyo

There was a longer pause this time. Like Shane was processing what that meant.

SHANDERELLA:

You texting me while you're with him??

Ilya smiled.

ILYA:

desperate times

SHANDERELLA:

You're gonna get caught one of these days. I'm not hiding this from him when he eventually found out. We just cleared things up.

Ilya's stomach tightened. Not out of fear. Just nerves. Complicated ones. He typed slower.

ILYA:

I know. I got you. we'll figure out that part when it comes

Another pause.

SHANDERELLA:

...Miss you, kinda.

Ilya's chest warmed so fast he almost reacted out loud. *Fuck*. He typed carefully, thumb hovering, heart thudding like he was twenty and stupid again.

ILYA:

just kinda?

SHANDERELLA:

Don't push it.

Ilya laughed under his breath, hand over his mouth to cover it.

ILYA:

miss you too, period

The moment he sent it, he looked up straight into Gray's eyes reflecting off the side-view mirror. My sweet sweet God. His best friend was turning into his worst fucking nightmare and Ilya was slowly drying out of dodgeball.

Ilya nearly launched his phone into the trees. He sat up fast, clearing his throat, forcing every muscle into neutrality to quickly get himself out of the swampy situation. "No one," he explained immediately, "Work."

Gray squinted, "Why are you smiling at work emails?"

Ilya continued lying effortlessly, "Because we just closed Tokyo. And because we're opening a fourth branch. I'm allowed to smile at our success, Gray."

Gray wasn't convinced, not even a little.

He adjusted his seat, scanning Ilya like a hawk before leaned over the seat, pointing a finger at him. "One day," he warned, "I'm going to find out who."

Ilya forced the calmest expression known to mankind, "Good luck."

—

Ilya barely remembered dropping his bag. He barely remembered the elevator ride up, the sharp click of his shoes down the hallway, or even punching in the code to the penthouse door. Everything in him was thrumming — agitated, restless, pent-up in a way that had his heartbeat pulsing in his throat.

Six days of torturing phone calls and texts and Gray breathing down his neck in Tokyo. Six days without Shane's voice anywhere near his ear. Six days without his mouth.

The door swung open. Ilya stepped inside and stopped dead.

Shane was standing by the floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the skyline, body relaxed into one hip, one hand tucked into the pocket of his grey sweats, the other holding a heavy glass of whiskey. His rower's shoulders were outlined under a plain black tee, hair slightly damp like he'd showered not long ago, the chain he wore glinting against his collarbone.

The athlete turned his head slowly, eyes landing on him with a look that wasn't casual. It was deliberate. Calculated.

Like he knew exactly how he would react.

And oh, Ilya reacted.

"Hey," Shane greeted, lifting the glass to his lips, voice low and maddening, "You look—"

He didn't finish. Ilya didn't let him.

The door didn't even finish swinging shut before Ilya was crossing the living room, fast, one hand already reaching, the other grabbing Shane's waist as he hauled him off the ground. The

athlete's breath punched out of him, legs instinctively curling around Ilya's hips as the whiskey sloshed dangerously close to spilling.

Shane's arm shot up behind the CEO's head, steadying the glass with surprising discipline. "Careful—!"

"No," Ilya growled against his mouth, "I'm done being careful."

Their lips crashed, teeth, heat, six days of quiet desperation bursting into it. Shane's free hand gripped the back of Ilya's neck, pulling him closer, kissing him back with the same bite of pent-up want that had been simmering between them since New Zealand and Tokyo.

Ilya walked them straight back into the glass, pinning Shane to the window with a low grunt, fingers digging into his hips like he was anchoring himself.

The athlete took one hand away long enough to set the whiskey glass onto the small side table beside them, barely looking as he did it. The second it made contact with the surface, Ilya grabbed his jaw again and kissed him harder.

"Jesus," Shane breathed into his mouth, voice trembling, "I thought you had classes all day."

"I left early," Ilya kissed down his jaw, hungry, breath rough, "Professor was boring. And I was done waiting." Taking in the way the athlete's fingers were curled into his shoulders, grip tightening.

Ilya leaned back just enough to look at him — lips kiss-swollen, pupils blown wide, still pressed between him and the window. "You were waiting too," he said quietly, knowing it, feeling it.

Shane didn't deny it. He huffed a breath, tilting his forehead against Ilya's, "You have no idea."

Ilya smiled — that slow, sharp, devastating one Shane hated because it made the athlete weak. "I do," he murmured. His hand slid up under his shirt, palm hot against the ribs. "And now," Ilya said, voice low and dangerous, "I'm getting all of it back."

Shane laughed under his breath, breathless, wrecked, already giving in, "Then close the blinds, Rozanov."

The storm of the reunion burned itself out slowly. Kisses turning soft, touches easing into something quieter, warmer. At some point they made it to the bed, sheets a half-tangled mess, pillows kicked toward the headboard. Now they lay half-covered, half-wrapped around each other, bodies still humming but no longer desperate.

Ilya was lying on his back, one arm under Shane's head, the other lazily stroking his side. The athlete's was stretched partly on top of him, cheek resting on his chest, breathing evening out after everything. For a while, neither spoke.

The room was dim, only the soft glow of a lamp illuminating Shane's profile and the faint rise and fall of his shoulders.

Ilya exhaled, long and tired but content, "Gray's killing me."

Shane blinked up at him, head shifting slightly, "Killing you?"

"With questions." Ilya dragged his hand up, brushing a few strands of Shane's hair back, "Interrogations might be the better word. It's like he's trying to solve some kind of murder I committed."

Shane's eyes softened, guilt slipping in like a shadow, "Rozanov..."

"He's been asking," Ilya continued, staring up at the ceiling, "if I'm seeing someone. If I'm in trouble. If I'm planning to elope." His mouth twitched, "He even checked my calendar to see if I'd booked a secret wedding venue."

Shane huffed a weak laugh but it didn't reach his eyes. The guilt was louder now, sitting heavy in his chest. Ilya could feel it in the way the athlete's hand stalled where it rested against his ribs.

Before Shane could speak, Ilya glanced down at him. "Don't," he said quietly.

Shane blinked, "Don't what?"

"Don't go there. You're about to."

Shane swallowed. "He's my brother, Rozanov."

“I know.”

“And I’ve been lying.”

Ilya’s thumb swept slow circles along Shane’s arm, “Me too.”

“Yeah, but...” the athlete voice tapered, jaw tightening, “He trusts you. You’re his partner, his—everything. You two built a damn empire together.”

Ilya only hummed, pressing a kiss to Shane’s hair but the guilt didn’t leave. It sat heavy, and he could feel the athlete sinking into silence again. So he shifted, nudging Shane’s chin enough to make him look up.

“You know,” Ilya murmured, “there’s an option you never consider.”

“Which is?”

“Getting your own place,” Ilya raised an eyebrow, “Instead of hiding in dorms and locker rooms and whatever broom closet Gray hasn’t renovated yet.”

Shane blinked, surprised. “...What?”

“I’m serious.”

“You’re suggesting I move out?”

“I’m suggesting you stop living like a fugitive,” Ilya teased softly, “You’re an adult, Hollander. You have money. You have scholarships. Hell, you have access to a trust fund big enough to buy half of Cambridge.”

Shane gave him a look, “Yeah, I know. But the whole point was not to use it.”

“And that’s admirable,” Ilya said sincerely, “It is. But you’re not doing it for the principle anymore. You’re doing it because of him.”

Shane frowned lightly, chest tightening. “That’s not—”

“Hollander,” Ilya nudged his forehead gently to his, “You deserve space. Your own. Not a dorm room with roommates who disappear every time I bribe them.”

Shane snorted at that, finally cracking a real smile. “You did bribe them.”

“Oh, I absolutely did.”

They lay in quiet for a moment. Shane’s fingers traced patterns idly across Ilya’s chest, mind clearly running circles.

Ilya spoke again, softer this time, “Look, I’m not telling you to move into a penthouse,” he said. “And I’m not saying you need to hide from Gray forever. But... having your own space means you get to decide who walks into your life. Who you let in. Who you keep out.”

Shane bit the inside of his cheek. “And you think that’ll make this—” he gestured between them, “—easier?”

Ilya gave a small shrug, “I think it’ll make you breathe easier. And that’s enough.”

Shane stared at him—really stared—like he was searching for a catch. A joke. A typical Ilya Rozanov twist. There wasn’t one. “...You’re being weirdly reasonable,” he murmured.

Ilya smirked. “Don’t get used to it.”

Shane let out a breath he didn’t realize he was holding and lowered his head back to Ilya’s shoulder. He let the quiet fill in again. Slower this time. Softer. He curled an arm over his waist, giving in to the warmth pressing against him from every side.

The guilt didn’t win. Not tonight. Not while they were tangled in the dark, where the world felt quieter and nothing outside the room existed.

—

Shane was trying—*really* trying—to keep his cool for the last couple of weeks. But standing in the middle of Apartment #12, listening to an overly enthusiastic estate agent ramble about

“east-facing natural light ideal for productivity,” while next to him Gray Hollander quietly radiated suspicion like a nuclear reactor... Yeah. His patience was already thin.

The agent gestured grandly toward the floor-to-ceiling windows, “And as you can see, the view overlooks the Charles. It’s very popular among young professionals—”

“Uh-huh,” Shane muttered, hands shoved in his pockets.

Gray didn’t even pretend to be subtle. He leaned close to his brother’s ear and whispered, *too loudly*, “Since when do you care about natural light? You only wake up when you’re yelled at or when someone tragically drops a protein bar.”

Shane elbowed him, “Gray, for the love of God, shut up.”

The estate agent spun toward them with a bright smile, “Any questions so far?”

Shane beat Gray to it, “Yeah. Does it come with a mute button? For him?”

The older Hollander smiled politely at the agent and then hissed under his breath, with his hands shoved into his pockets, “You’re hiding something.”

“And you’re being paranoid,” Shane replied, scanning the apartment, pretending he wasn’t internally screaming.

It was nice. Too nice. Modern kitchen, wide open living room, balcony overlooking the city. A dream for someone his age. And yet—

Gray folded his arms. “You barely care about anything except for smelly socks and squeaky bed. And now suddenly you’re interested in—what did you call it?—having a space to ‘grow independently’?” His voice dripped with suspicion, “Who fed you that line?”

Shane almost choked on air, “No one *fed* me anything.”

“Mhm.”

“Jesus, Gray.”

“I’m just saying—people don’t wake up one day and say, ‘You know what? I think I need my own man cave.’ Unless they’re either A) hiding a criminal, B) running from a cult, or C) definitely sleeping with someone.”

The estate agent blinked, smile wavering. “Um... the master bathroom is through here if you’d like to—”

“Yes,” Shane said quickly, marching toward it just to escape. His brother followed, obviously. You couldn’t never outrun Gray Hollander.

The master bath was pristine white marble, rainfall shower, unnecessary number of mirrors. The athlete was mid-admiring when Gray stepped in front of him, blocking his path. “Okay, talk,” he poked Shane in the forehead, “Why are you moving?”

Shane slapped his hand away, “Because I’m tired of living with two dudes who think showering is optional. And smelly socks, and squeaky bed.”

“I know that. I figure that part first before you.” Gray’s eyes narrowed, “What’s the *real* reason?”

Shane clenched his jaw and crossed his arms, “That *is* the real reason.”

Gray stared. Shane stared back.

They had the exact same stubborn face, just different versions of it—Gray’s sharper, older, more polished; Shane’s younger, more expressive, annoyed-as-hell.

Finally Gray let out a sigh. He’s not having another stupid argument with his younger brother. Not today. “You know, Shane... if you’re in trouble, you can tell me.”

“I’m not in trouble.”

“You secretly dating someone?”

Shane froze.

Gray’s brows shot up, “Aha. A pause. That was definitely a pause.”

“It wasn’t a pause.”

“It was one hundred percent a pause.”

Shane dragged a hand down his face. “Gray—”

“Who is she?” Gray demanded, “Is she older? Younger? Does she go to Harvard? Does she have a criminal record? She’s pregnant isn’t she? Shane, if someone’s pregnant—”

Shane groaned and walked out of the bathroom.

Gray followed at his heels like a persistent shadow, “You can tell me! I’m very supportive!”

“You are the opposite of supportive!”

“I’m extremely supportive!”

“You interrogate people for breathing near me!”

“That’s protective!”

“That’s psychotic!”

The estate agent watched them bicker across the living room with a frozen smile, as if unsure whether she should call security or start recording for entertainment.

Gray caught up and grabbed Shane lightly by the wrist, “Hey.” His voice softened, “I just... don’t want you making a big life decision because someone pressured you. You’re my kid brother. Let me worry about you.”

Shane looked at him. For all the suffocating energy, for all the overbearing big-brother nonsense, the concern was real. Genuine.

And it made his chest twist. He swallowed just so that his voice would be heard, “I’m moving because I want to, Gray. Not because of anyone else.”

Gray searched his face again, like he could read the truth straight off his brother’s skin.

After a long moment, he nodded—slow, cautious.

“...Okay.”

He exhaled. “Okay, Shane. If this is what you want, I’ll help you set everything up.”

Shane’s shoulders loosened a fraction, “Thanks, Gray. You have been a great help.”

“Though,” Gray added, tone returning to that familiar suspicious edge, “if I meet this mystery girl you’re definitely hiding, I’m running a full background check.”

Shane muttered under his breath, “God help whoever she is.”

“What was that?”

“Nothing.”

The estate agent approached again, hands clasped, “So—should I prepare the paperwork?”

Shane hesitated but Gray nudged him not as someone who had been investing in multiple properties but as a brother who only wanted the best, “If you like it, take it. It’s the best one we’ve seen.”

The athlete looked around the space. Looked at the windows. The balcony. The kitchen he would probably never use. But mostly—he remembered Ilya telling him he deserved a place of his own. A space where *he* had control. “... Yeah,” Shane said quietly, “Let’s do it.”

Gray grinned proudly, throwing an arm over Shane’s shoulders like he’d just signed him to an NBA team, “That’s my boy.”

The athlete rolled his eyes—but didn’t pull away. He was moving out. And if Gray ever learned *why*? He’d probably burn the building down.

—

Shane jingled the new silver keys in his hand as he unlocked the apartment door for the first time as an official tenant.

It still smelled faintly of fresh paint and lemon-cleaner—the “new place smell” that felt too grown-up, too adult, *too holy shit this is my place*. He stepped aside for Ilya to walk in first.

Ilya did, hands in the pockets of his dark slacks, eyes sweeping over the bare living room—white walls, echoing floors, sunlight cutting in from the east-facing windows the agent wouldn’t shut up about. The place was empty, but somehow it already felt warmer with Ilya standing inside it.

Shane stayed by the door, watching him, waiting.

Ilya took a slow turn, chin lifting, assessing everything in that annoyingly composed billionaire way. The athlete braced for some comment about layout or architecture or furniture. Then he turned around.

And the moment their eyes met, Shane didn’t even get to blink.

Ilya crossed the room in three long strides, grabbed him by the waist, and lifted him clean off the floor.

Shane half-laughed, half-gasped as his feet left the ground, “Rozanov!”

But Ilya wasn’t listening. He was kissing him. Everywhere. Cheeks, jaw, nose, the corner of his mouth—quick, messy, overjoyed kisses like he couldn’t decide where to land first. Like the excitement was physically spilling out of him.

“You—” Ilya kissed his temple.

“Got—” the cheek.

“Your *own* place—” another kiss, hotter this time, right at the mouth—

“And you didn’t even tell me until this morning?”

“You were in class!” Shane protested, laughing breathlessly, hands on Ilya’s shoulders.

“I would’ve skipped,” Ilya murmured against his skin, kissing down toward his throat.

“You can’t skip class,” Shane said—weakly, because Ilya’s lips were finding his pulse point.

“Watch me.”

Shane huffed, half flustered, half melted. “Put me down.”

“No,” Ilya said immediately, a grin ghosting against the athlete’s neck, “Absolutely not.”

Shane’s fingers curled into the back of Ilya’s shirt. “You’re ridiculous.”

“And you,” Ilya murmured, lifting his head just enough to look at him—eyes warm, hungry, stupidly soft—“are incredible.”

That did something to Shane’s stomach. Something awful and good and warm all at once.

Ilya finally lowered him, but only enough for the athlete’s back to hit the wall behind him, his hands still firm on his hips. “How do you feel?,” he asked.

Shane looked around the empty apartment again, arms tightening around Ilya’s neck. “Nervous,” he admitted. “And excited. And...” He shrugged, “Like an imposter adult.”

Ilya’s smile went crooked, “You look like someone who just leveled up in life. Kinda hot.”

Shane rolled his eyes—but his cheeks betrayed him with a flush.

Ilya leaned in, kissing his warm cheek.

“You deserve this,” he whispered, “All of it.”

“You’re being sappy.”

“Can’t help it.” Ilya kissed him again, slower this time, “You make me sappy.”

Shane groaned into the kiss, pretending to suffer. “Gross.”

Ilya smirked. “Shut up.”

Shane didn’t. Ilya kissed him until he did.

After a while, Ilya eased back, glancing around again with new purpose. “So,” he said, “first order of business: furniture.”

Shane deadpanned, “Do NOT suggest buying me a penthouse’s worth of furniture, Rozanov.”

Ilya raised both hands, “I would never—”

“You literally just considered it.”

“I didn’t say anything,” Ilya defended, while clearly trying not to grin.

“You don’t have to,” Shane muttered, “Your face said it.”

Ilya grabbed his chin lightly and kissed him again, “Fine. We’ll do it your way.”

“Thank you.”

“But I’m still buying the mattress.”

“No.”

“I’m buying the mattress.”

“Rozanov.”

“Hollander.”

Shane sighed, defeated. “We’ll talk later.”

“We will,” Ilya said, smug as hell.

They walked deeper into the apartment—kitchen, hallway, bedroom with Shane pointing out where things *might* go while Ilya made little approving noises that absolutely meant he was internally planning an entire remodel the athlete would not allow.

In the bedroom doorway, Ilya stood behind him, arms wrapping around Shane's waist, chin resting on his shoulder as they looked at the empty room together. "This is where your bed will go," he murmured.

Shane hummed, "Yeah."

"And right here..." Ilya's lips brushed the shell of the athlete's ear, "...is where I'm going to kiss you every time I visit."

Shane swallowed, heat pooling low in his stomach, "You're full of lines today."

Ilya kissed down his neck, slow and deliberately sinful for someone standing in an unfurnished apartment. "I've been storing them," he admitted. "For this exact moment."

Shane turned in his arms, fingers sliding up Ilya's chest, and kissed him slow and deep until the CEO's hands tightened at his hips.

"Rozanov," he murmured against his lips, "I think you like this place more than I do."

"No," Ilya breathed, forehead against the athlete's, "I like what it means."

"What does it mean?"

Ilya kissed him again before whispering,

"More time with you."

Shane felt that all the way down to his bones. He didn't say anything—didn't need to. He just kissed him again, letting the empty apartment echo with the soft sound of their mouths, their breath, their laughter when Ilya bumped him into a wall on accident and apologized way too quickly.

It wasn't just a new chapter. It was a new place to write all of it. Together.

The light looked different now. Maybe because Shane's vision was still a little hazy.

Maybe because he was still trying to catch his breath. Or maybe because he was lying flat on his back on the floor of his new apartment with Ilya behind him — legs tangled around his, arms wrapped firm and warm across his chest, the billionaire's chin tucked on top of his shoulder like he was afraid to let a single inch of him go.

The air was thick with the kind of silence that meant everything had changed.

Shane let his head fall back against Ilya's shoulder. His hair was damp with sweat and Ilya's palm slid absently up and down his ribs, grounding him, steadying him, keeping him close.

For a minute, neither spoke. Just breathing.

Just the weight of the moment settling in.

Then Ilya shifted — just enough for the athlete to feel him smile against the side of his neck.

"So," Ilya murmured, voice low and amused, "you gonna tell me how a billionaire's dick felt like?"

Shane let out a sharp, breathless snort that made Ilya before the athlete elbowed him lightly in the ribs. "You're—" he breathed out, still half-laughing, "—such an ass."

Ilya only hugged him tighter.

Shane tried not to smile, tried not to think too deeply about how natural it felt to lean back into Ilya's chest, how easily his fingers found his arm and rested there, how right it felt to be held like this. It terrified him. And it made his heart hurt in the best way.

"It's big as your ego," Shane finally muttered.

Ilya barked a short laugh against his ear, "Oh, please. That's a compliment and you know it."

Shane snorted again but didn't push him away. Didn't pretend he wasn't melting a little. Didn't pretend he wasn't still feeling all of it.

The billionaire shifted, sliding a hand up to cup the athlete's jaw, turning his face just enough so he could kiss him — slow this time, nothing rushed, just lips brushing lips until Shane's breath caught and his pulse jumped.

Ilya stayed close, their mouths barely apart as he whispered against Shane's lips, "Be my boyfriend."

The athlete froze — not in fear, not in panic, just a clean, unmistakable jolt that shot straight through his chest.

Ilya didn't pull back. He wasn't uncertain.

He wasn't embarrassed. He said it like he'd been holding onto the words for weeks and finally let them out.

"I want you," he murmured, thumb brushing Shane's cheekbone, "Not just in secret. Not just when we can steal time." Another kiss — soft, sure. "You want that too. I know you do."

Shane swallowed. Hard. Because Ilya wasn't wrong. He'd wanted to ask. He'd wanted something real. He just didn't know if he was allowed to want it especially with everything at stake, especially with Gray's shadow hanging over both of them.

Shane's voice came out quiet, rough, a little shaky, "Rozanov..."

Ilya touched their foreheads together, breathing him in. "It's you," he whispered, closing his eyes, "It's been you for a while. I just— I want to make it real. You and me."

Shane let out a breath he didn't realize he'd been holding. His fingers curled around Ilya's wrist. His heartbeat rocked hard in his chest, not from nerves, not from uncertainty but from the terrifying relief of hearing what he already knew.

He didn't answer right away. Not because he didn't know the answer. But because he was too full of heat, of emotion, of the weight of Ilya's arms wrapped around him like a promise.

Finally, Shane turned his head enough to kiss him back — slow, certain, lingering. He pulled away just enough to breathe, “I want you too,” he whispered, “Yeah. Okay. Yes.”

Ilya made a sound — low, warm, almost like a laugh pushed through a breath and kissed him again, longer this time, one hand sliding into the athlete’s hair with something like relief breaking through the composure he always carried.

Shane leaned into him, letting Ilya hold him, letting the moment settle over them like the final piece of a puzzle snapping into place. They didn’t get up. They didn’t move to the bedroom. They stayed on the floor, tangled, skin against skin, the lamp casting a warm glow over the new beginning they had just spoken into existence.

And Shane thought quietly and secretly that maybe he wasn’t just building a new apartment or a new life. Maybe he had someone to build it with. Someone who’d just kissed him breathless and asked him to be his boyfriend. Someone who was still holding him like he wasn’t planning on letting go anytime soon. And it felt right.

—

The morning started the same way it had for weeks now. A slow kiss slipped under the duvet. Shane’s bare thigh hooking over Ilya’s hip. Ilya laughing softly into Shane’s neck because his boyfriend had dragged him down by the jaw with that sleepy, hungry grip he always used when he wanted him *now*.

The sun barely made it past the curtains.

The whole room warm. Comfortably dim.

Shane’s breath catching as Ilya rocked into him again under the blankets, both of them lost in each other, both of them completely unaware of the front door opening.

The grocery bag hit the floor before either of them heard footsteps.

“—WHAT THE FUCK.”

Shane froze mid-breath. Ilya ripped back from him like he'd been electrocuted. The duvet jerked up over the athlete's waist just as they both whipped their heads toward the doorway.

Gray stood there. Silent. Eyes wide. Chest tight. Fury rolling off him so violently the air felt charged.

The grocery bag he'd dropped lay split open on the hardwood — oranges rolling toward the sofa, a bottle of sparkling water wobbling in place.

For a full second, nobody moved. Then Ilya swallowed and stepped carefully off the bed, palms up, voice unsteady. "Gray, I can explain. Just—just stay calm, okay? *Please*."

Gray didn't stay calm. The older Hollander took one step forward, shoulders tense enough to snap. "Explain?" he hissed, "EXPLAIN WHAT, ILYA? That you've been SLEEPING WITH MY LITTLE BROTHER when I told you NOT TO? That you've been LYING TO MY FACE for MONTHS?"

Ilya tried again, "Gray, please." But it only encouraged his best friend to lunge at him but Shane moved faster.

"Gray, no!," the athlete scrambled out of the duvet, grabbing his brother before Gray's fist could connect. And he wasn't at full strength, not with the way his body was still sore and sensitive from moments ago but adrenaline kicked in like survival instinct.

Shane slammed his arms around his brother, chest pressed against his brother's, tightening every muscle he had to keep Gray locked around him, "Stop! Gray, please. Stop!"

Gray fought the hold, teeth clenched, eyes locked on Ilya with murder written in every line of his face, "Let me go, Shane!"

"No! Just listen to me. Listen," the athlete's voice cracked, forehead pressed to his brother's shoulder blade as Gray struggled beneath his grip, "It wasn't him keeping this from you, okay? It was me. I asked him. I made him. Gray, please, just hear me for a second."

Gray didn't hear a thing. He couldn't.

He was too livid, too betrayed, too blindsided to breathe, let alone think. "You," he spat over Shane's shoulder at his friend, "you absolute *fucking* traitor. You went behind my back. You told me nothing! You—"

Ilya flinched hard like every word hit him square in the chest. His voice cracked too when he tried again, “Gray... I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. I tried. I didn’t want to lie to you. You know me.”

Gray surged again and Shane tightened his arms, jaw clenching, “Gray, stop! Please. Just let me talk to you.”

“No, Shane.” Gray snarled, jerking against the hold, “He lied to me. He promised me. He swore he wouldn’t go near you like that and he—he—”

“He didn’t *go near me*,” Shane shot back, frustration breaking through the desperation, “I went near *him*! I’m the one who wanted this! I’m the one who told him not to tell you because I knew you’d freak out exactly like this!”

Gray didn’t even look at his brother. His eyes stayed locked on Ilya. And they were devastating. Quiet. Cold. Wounded in a way his fiend had never seen before. Finally, with his voice low and dangerous, he pointed at the door, “Get. Out.”

Ilya’s entire posture stilled. His breath stopped, “Gray—”

“Get the fuck out of my brother’s apartment before I break your jaw. Don’t make me repeat myself.”

Shane’s grip faltered just slightly, a reflexive ache hitting his chest.

Ilya didn’t argue. He didn’t fight. He didn’t defend himself again. He only looked at his boyfriend, really looked as if trying to memorize every detail of him in the half-second they had left. Eventually, he whispered, low and raw, “I’ll text you later.”

“Rozanov—” Shane breathed back, half-step forward instinctively but his brother jerked in his arms again, and he had no choice only to tighten his hold to keep him from lunging.

Ilya didn’t risk another second. He grabbed his shirt off the floor, pulled it on crookedly, and backed toward the door without taking his eyes off Shane. Then he slipped out. Silence crashed over the apartment as the door shut.

Gray’s breathing was sharp. Shaking.

His brother's grip stayed firm around his body, forehead pressed between the shoulder blades of the man he'd spent years fighting with but never like this.

Shane swallowed hard, "Gray..." Soft. Pained, "Please. Talk to me."

But Gray didn't say a single word. He only stood there, trembling with anger and betrayal as his brother held him tight. And the apartment felt too small for the three hearts still beating inside it. Even if one of them had just walked out.

The silence stretched so long that the athlete didn't remember how much he had explained to his brother and if he's doing a great job. He wished his boyfriend was still here with him. He would have known better.

Shane sat on the edge of the bed, sheet bunched uselessly in his fists, duvets pooled around his lap. His hair was still mussed from Ilya's hands. His lips were still pink. His whole body still ached with the reminder of what his brother had just walked in on.

And Gray stood several feet away like he hadn't decided whether he wanted to sit down or put his fist through a wall after hearing everything that came out of Shane's mouth. His jaw kept clenching. Unclenching. Clenching again.

The athlete finally dared to lift his head but his brother still wouldn't look at him. Gray was staring at the floor, hands braced on his hips, chest rising and falling too sharply, like each breath hurt.

And when Gray finally spoke— God. His voice wasn't angry. It was *broken*, "You were seeing each other for eight months."

Shane flinched. His lashes trembled, still wet, "Gray, I... yeah."

"Eight months," Gray repeated it like he was tasting poison, "And dating for three."

Shane nodded weakly, throat tight.

Gray gave a low, disbelieving laugh, the kind that had no humor in it whatsoever. "And you kept that from me? You two, both of you. Every single day, acting normal. Acting *fine*."

Shane's voice cracked from bracing the rage, "We didn't want to hurt you."

"Hurt me?," Gray finally snapped his gaze up. Raw, wounded, too sharp to meet, "Shane, you didn't trust me."

Shane's chest seized, "That's not. Gray, that's not why—"

Gray shot a hand up in frustration, pacing a tight line at the foot of the bed, "I told you not to entertain him. I told you Ilya wasn't— that I didn't want him— I didn't want him—" His voice started to shake, "—with you. And you still—"

Shane cut in, voice trembling, "I know. I *know*. And I still—" His breath caught. The memory of the morning still clung to his skin in ways he couldn't hide, "Gray, I'm sorry—"

"Don't," Gray spun toward him, "Don't apologize."

Shane blinked hard, tears clinging to the corners of his lashes. His shoulders curled inward, instinctive, like he was bracing for another hit of disappointment. But his brother's voice softened, barely like a tremor in a storm.

"This isn't about you apologizing," Gray said, lower now, breath harsh, "You don't need to apologize to me for... for who you love."

He dragged a hand through his hair, pacing again, muttering curses under his breath as anger and fear warred across his face. "It's just—," Gray exhaled sharply, "I didn't want you involved with someone who lives the way Ilya lives. Who works the way he works. Who burns out the way he does. I didn't want you to get... sucked into the shit he and I deal with every day."

Shane watched him, eyes softening even through the sting, lips trembling.

Gray scrubbed a palm over his face, "And Ilya—" he hissed, "—that idiot promised me. PROMISED."

"He didn't break it," Shane's voice was barely above a whisper, "I kissed him first."

Gray froze. For a moment he didn't breathe.

Shane looked down at the duvet, fingers twisting the fabric, voice trembling, “I wasn’t listening to you. I wasn’t supposed to. I know that. But, Gray... I really like him.”

The silence that followed was thick. Painful.

Gray’s eyes softened, not much, but the crack was there. Of course it hurt. Of course it felt like betrayal. He’d spent years protecting his brother from the world he lived in. And now Shane had walked straight into the arms of the one person Gray trusted most but also feared most for him.

Shane swallowed hard. He brushed at the tears still sitting stubbornly on his lashes, “I didn’t mean to make you feel like we were shutting you out. I just... didn’t want you to think I was stupid. Or reckless. Or—”

“Shane,” Gray cut in, voice rough, “You’ve NEVER been stupid.” He stepped closer, finally, the tension in his shoulders dimming, not gone but shifting, “You kept it from me because you knew I’d react badly.” He exhaled, “And congratulations. You were right.”

A shaky laugh escaped Shane’s chest, equal parts relief and pain.

Gray sighed heavily and finally sat down beside him on the bed. His brother didn’t hesitate. He leaned into him immediately, just like when they were younger when fights ended in exhausted, wordless leaning rather than apologies.

The older Hollander rested a hand on the back of Shane’s neck, thumb rubbing slow circles without thinking. “Don’t apologize,” he repeated softly, “You didn’t do anything wrong. Not to me.”

Shane nodded into his shoulder, voice small. “Are you... mad at me?”

Gray’s arm tightened around him. “No,” he said honestly, “Just scared.” He swallowed again, jaw shifting like he hated how vulnerable the confession made him, “I don’t want anyone, not even Ilya breaking your heart. That’s all.”

Shane’s breath hitched. He turned his head slightly against Gray’s shoulder, “He won’t.”

Gray didn’t answer. Not yet. He wasn’t ready to accept that. Not ready to trust it.

Not ready to forgive Ilya. But Shane? His brother always forgive. After a long moment, he let out a quieter breath and murmured, “I’m still kicking him out of the building if I see him today.”

Shane actually laughed, watery, soft, exhausted. And for the first time in the last thirty minutes, so did Gray. The worst of the storm had passed. But the sky outside the windows still looked like more trouble was coming.

They stayed like this for a long stretch, both of them breathing like they were coming down from different kinds of storms. Eventually, Gray exhaled, long and slow, cheek brushing his brother’s hair. “God... Shane,” he muttered, voice muffled, “Of all the people in the world.”

“Out of EVERYONE,” he continued, “You HAD to choose a billionaire.”

Shane snorted. A soft, breathy, almost tired laugh escaped him as he hugged his brother properly this time, arms sliding around Gray’s torso, pulling him in tight.

The older Hollander huffed like he’d been waiting for that. Like he hadn’t wanted to admit he needed it.

“You hate billionaires,” Gray continued, shaking his head. “You’ve spent your whole life telling me to stop buying you shit you didn’t ask for. You wouldn’t even let me get you a damn toothbrush because it was ‘unnecessarily expensive.’ And then—”He pulled back just enough to look at his brother with narrowed eyes, “*Ilya Rozanov.*”

Shane lifted a brow, mouth twitching, “What about him?”

Gray gestured wildly, as if that alone explained everything. “He’s— he’s Ilya. He’s... Loud. Dramatic. Too confident. Too charming for his own good. Won’t shut up. Thinks he can get away with everything. Does get away with everything. Sleeps with hurricane-level risk like it’s a f— like it’s a pillow. Shane, he’s not even CLOSE to your ‘type.’”

Shane snorted again, rubbing a hand down his face, “I didn’t know I had a type.”

“You do,” Gray muttered. “And it wasn’t *that*.”

The athlete cracked a lopsided, tired smile.

Gray stared at him. Squinted. Tilted his head. Then groaned, “Oh my God. You’re happy.”

Shane’s breath slipped out, small, confessing. Relieved that he doesn’t have to hold everything back anymore, “...yeah.”

Gray dropped his head back, staring at the ceiling like he needed divine intervention, “This is unbelievable.”

Shane wiped at his still-wet lashes, “It’s not that bad.”

Gray scoffed, “You sucked his dick and he was so blown away he manipulated you into getting an apartment.” Of course, he would say that. He wouldn’t let his brother breathe easy.

Shane choked on a laugh, “What— that’s not—”

Gray shot him a look, “Shane. You got an apartment three months into dating. THREE. You know what? You’re balled, you’re screwed, you’re fucked.”

“That wasn’t entirely his intention.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Gray snapped lightly, “He’s a billionaire. They’re built to manipulate people into real estate purchases.”

Shane wiped his face again, shoulders shaking with quiet laughter.

Gray sighed heavily, dramatic, exasperated, but softer than he’d been all morning. “God, I’m going to *religiously* hate him,” he muttered, “At least for a while.”

Shane finally sat up properly, spreading his legs at ease. “You won’t,” he said quietly.

“You don’t know that.”

“I do,” Shane looked up, eyes still tired but warmer now, “Because he loves you too.”

The words caught Gray off guard. He knew his brother saw the way he froze, the way his breath stuttered. He knew Shane trusted him to at least try. He eventually scoffed, uncomfortable and defeated, “Yeah, well, he’s still an asshole.”

Shane smiled, nudging him lightly with his shoulder, “He’s your best friend.”

Gray rubbed a hand down his face, palm dragging along his jaw as he muttered, “I swear to God, if he hurts you, Shane, I’ll bury him under a golf course.”

Shane didn’t doubt it. Not even a little. And despite how much of the morning felt like it cracked something in all three of them. Sitting here, holding each other, letting the dust settle. The hurt wasn’t as sharp. Not gone. But shifting. Slowly.

It felt like maybe, just maybe, they weren’t broken. Just shaken and on their way toward something that might eventually make sense.

Chapter 8: Victory Worthy

Chapter Notes

Hi! It's me!! I hope everyone of you are doing fine during this holiday season. We're getting close to entering 2026. I wish good luck to everyone for your upcoming adventures and journey.

This will be the last chapter. I hope you guys enjoy it. Thank you so much for all the loves and support for this au. I really appreciate it. Please leave your feedback in the comment section. Happy reading and happy new year!!

Shane breathed, slow and steady, letting himself rest there. Until his phone on the nightstand buzzed, loud in the quiet room.

The athlete reached for it.

Gray tilted his head, not subtle at all as he peeked at the screen. "Ilya?" he asked.

Shane nodded.

Gray sighed like this was both expected and annoying.

Shane opened the message.

ROZANOTODAY:

I'm terrified I ruined everything

I didn't mean to lie to him

I didn't mean to hurt you

I think I just lost both of you

The athlete's chest tightened a little. Not painfully, but in that warm, heavy way affection sneaks in. He knew Ilya would put the blame entirely on himself. He always felt so much for the people around him. With all the wealth he had, Ilya would always choose life. He glanced at his brother.

Gray wiped his face once, then breathed out, "Go on."

Shane blinked. "What?"

"Reply," Gray said, nodding once, "Don't look at me. You know what to do."

Shane stared at his brother. No. He doesn't know what to do. Not after everything. He promised himself that he would deal with the fallout without hurting Gray any further. What can get more wrong than this? He should know better since dealing with siblings doesn't come with a manual book. Of course he's not prepared with his own brother who had a brain in the size of a green pea.

"No, screw him. Scare him," Gray added dryly, "Tell him I asked you to break up with him."

"Gray."

"He deserves it."

"No, he really doesn't—"

"He would cry for sure," Gray grinned wider, "Maybe piss his pants a little."

"Gray."

Gray leaned back, smug as sin, crossing his arms like some vindictive deity on a cloud, "What? He's been emotionally constipated about you for almost a year. He can handle being tortured for ninety seconds."

Shane stared at his older brother, the same older brother who had just tried to body-tackle Ilya ten minutes ago. Now encouraging psychological warfare with the enthusiasm of a proud coach.

"You're unbelievable," Shane muttered.

Gray shrugged, “You love me.”

The athlete turned back to his phone. Typed. Paused. Typed again.

Gray watched him like a hawk, whispering, “Make it dramatic or don’t do it at all.”

Shane rolled his eyes but couldn’t stop the slow smile spreading at the corner of his mouth. His brother was a menace. A protective menace. But still his. And after the morning they had, the weight between them felt just a little lighter. Even if Ilya Rozanov was probably dying on the other side of the city.

Gray muttered under his breath, “Let the billionaire sweat.”

Shane shook his head but his fingers kept typing anyway. He sat cross-legged on the bed, duvet gathered around his waist while his brother planted beside him like a judgmental gargoyle.

The older Hollander hovered way too close as the athlete typed. “Let me read,” Gray muttered, leaning in until Shane shoved him with an elbow.

“Stop breathing on my neck.”

“Stop typing so slow.”

Shane shot him a glare but kept writing.

He read it once, exhaled, then pressed send.

SHANE:

Gray thinks we should stop seeing each other.

He asked me to end it.

I don’t know what to do.

Gray slapped a hand over his mouth, shoulders shaking as he tried not to cackle.

“You’re evil,” Shane said.

“I’m a brother,” Gray corrected proudly, “It’s a sacred duty and he’s a pussy. No pun intended.”

Shane groaned, “He’s going to panic.”

“Oh, he’s going to combust,” Gray grinned. Having the time of his life.

As if summoned by black magic, the athlete’s phone lit up again. Not a text. A call. The older brother flinched, then whispered, “Don’t pick up. Let him marinate.”

Shane stared at him, “You’re deranged.”

“Oh, my condolences,” Gray said flatly, “You’re the one who decided to date him.”

The call didn’t stop. Then the buzzing became louder, and louder, until Shane realized that the sound didn’t just come from the phone itself but from the door.

Gray’s eyebrows shot up, “Already? Holy shit, he did sprint.”

Shane scrambled off the bed, grabbing the duvet around himself like a toga. “Gray, you did not think this through!”

“I absolutely did. You underestimate how pathetic your boyfriend is.”

The pounding on the door intensified.

“Baby. Please, open up,” Ilya’s voice cracked through the hallway. Desperate. Breathless.

Yet, Gray’s eyes lit up with warfare. Of course he was. “Oh, let me open it,” he said, squeezing the juice out of his own devilish act till the last drop.

“No. Gray—” Too late. Gray was already storming toward the door, hair messy, expression carved into pure older-brother wrath. He yanked it open.

Ilya stood there panting, eyes wide, hair windswept like he sprinted from another zip code. His suit jacket was half-buttoned wrong. He'd clearly forgotten how clothing worked, "Gray. I can expla—"

Gray didn't wait for Ilya to finish. He slammed his fist straight into his best friend's face.

Ilya reeled back with a grunt, grabbing the doorframe to keep upright.

"GRAY!" Shane shouted.

"Don't worry," Gray snapped, "I only aimed for the pretty part."

"That is the pretty part!," Ilya hissed, touching his cheek.

"Exactly," Gray said, "I wanted you to feel it."

Ilya blinked hard, steadied himself, then tried to speak despite the shock. "Gray, listen. I never meant—I didn't want Shane to hide anything. I was trying to keep things clean between us," he explained.

"Oh, clean?" Gray mocked, stepping forward until Ilya had no choice but to stumble backward into the hallway, "You've been dating my little brother behind my back. You lied to my fucking face. You looked me in the eye while playing golf in Tokyo and talked about some mysterious 'no-girl.' MY bad, Ilya, but you're an idiot."

Ilya opened his mouth, but Gray held up a finger, "No. Shut up. I'm not done."

Shane ran over, duvet trailing behind him as he stood between them, one hand on Gray's chest, one on Ilya's arm. "Please. Can we just—"

"No," Gray said.

"Yes," Ilya said.

They glared at each other.

Gray jabbed a finger at Ilya, "You want to date my brother? Fine. But you face my wrath."

Ilya swallowed, “Okay.”

“You agree to everything I say?”

Ilya blinked, “...Define ‘everything.’”

Shane groaned, knowing exactly where this was going, “No. Don’t agree to anything—”

“YES,” Gray barked, “Say yes.”

Ilya, still holding his bruised cheek, nodded quickly, “Yes.”

Shane nearly dropped the duvet. Gosh, he should had put something on at least. “Ilya—no—”

“Good,” Gray said with villainous satisfaction, “Things are moving in a healthy direction.”

“Gray.”

“Shane, hush. Adults are negotiating.”

“You punched him!”

“One punch,” Gray shrugged. “Soft one. Love tap.”

Ilya muttered, “It was not soft.”

“Shut up. You deserved it.”

Ilya closed his mouth immediately.

Gray exhaled deeply, then looked at his best friend. This idiot, traumatized billionaire who kept looking at his younger brother like he hung the moon. His voice finally softened. “I’m furious,” he said, “I feel betrayed. But... I know you care about him.”

Ilya’s eyes flicked up. “I do,” he whispered.

“I know,” Gray said, “You wouldn’t have sprinted thirty blocks because of a text if you didn’t.” He pinched the bridge of his nose like he was ninety years old.

“Just—don’t hurt him,” he continued, “Because if you do? Forget stock market crashes, board meetings, lawsuits—none of that will save your ass from me.”

Ilya nodded instantly, “I won’t. Ever.”

Shane breathed out, shoulders finally easing.

Gray sighed and pointed toward the interior of the apartment, “Come in before the neighbors call security on you. We’re not doing PR damage.”

Ilya glanced at Shane, sheepish, still red-cheeked from both sprinting and emotional destruction. He smiled wider when his boyfriend took his hand to pull him back inside the apartment. But not without hearing the older Hollander mumbled, half under his breath, “And stop fucking at eight in the morning. Jesus Christ. Have you guys heard the concept of breakfast?”

—

The apartment had gone strangely quiet after the storm. The kind of quiet that only comes after someone cries, someone gets punched, and someone threatens several forms of homicide before breakfast.

Shane padded back into the living room with the ice pack, hair still damp from his shower, hoodie hanging loose on his shoulders while his boyfriend sat obediently on the couch like a billionaire golden retriever who’d been told to sit and not move unless he was told so.

Gray sat at the kitchen island eating Lucky Charms straight from the box like a judgmental cryptid that refused to leave. He crunched loudly. Aggressively.

Shane ignored him. “Hold still,” he murmured, tilting Ilya’s chin.

The CEO winced but didn’t complain. The bruise blooming under his cheekbone was already darkening, a perfect imprint of his best friend’s knuckles.

“You’re lucky he didn’t break anything,” the athlete muttered, pressing the ice pack gently.

Ilya gave a soft huff, “I’m lucky you didn’t let him break anything.”

“You’re lucky I didn’t break anything,” Gray interrupted from the kitchen with a mouth full of cereal.

Shane didn’t even look at his brother, “You’re not helping.”

Gray snorted, “Not trying to.” He kept chewing.

Ilya tried for a smile, but winced again when the movement tugged at the bruise. “Totally worth it, though.”

Shane shot him a look that was equal parts exasperation and affection. “What, getting punched?,” he asked.

“No,” Ilya murmured, “Coming back here.”

Gray paused mid-chew, eyes narrowing, “Are you flirting right in front of my cereal?”

Shane sighed. Not again. It’s going to be a long morning because Gray Hollander and Ilya Rozanov apparently came in a package. You can’t get rid neither of them whether he liked it or not. Well, he did loved both of them. Jokes on him. “Gray, please—,” he whined.

Gray held up a hand, “No, no, continue. Just remember I’m right here. And if he says something gross, I’m throwing the marshmallows at him.”

Ilya cleared his throat and tried very hard to sit like he wasn’t terrified and in love at the same time.

Shane put the ice pack down and ran his thumb gently along the edge of the bruise, checking pressure. Professional. Soft. Careful.

Ilya exhaled slowly. “You’re really not mad at me?” he asked under his breath.

“At you?,” Shane repeated, eyes flicking up, “No. Never was. You weren’t the one who asked to keep things from Gray. I did.”

Ilya’s face fell in relief immediately.

Gray munched louder. No body ever told him that idiots in love were annoyingly blind too. He’s right here for God sake.

“And yet I get punched,” Ilya added.

Shane glanced toward the kitchen, “Gray did you even—”

“He deserved it,” Gray said flatly, “Even you said I could punch him.”

“When?”

“Emotionally.”

“That’s not a thing.”

Gray shrugged and fished another marshmallow out of the box. Rage baiting final boss.

Shane rolled his eyes but moved on, brushing Ilya’s hair back with a tenderness he wouldn’t allow himself to acknowledge out loud with Gray watching.

Ilya melted. Literally melted. Like tension was just sliding out of his shoulders. And his best friend noticed immediately. He pointed his spoon, “Aha. That. That right there.”

Shane paused, “What.”

“That look,” Gray said, “The helpless, puppy-eyed face he makes whenever you touch him. He looks like he’s about to propose. Stop that.”

Ilya sat up straighter, “I am not—”

“You are exactly,” Gray said, “And don’t you ever eye-fuck him. I will run you over with my car.”

“GRAY,” Shane snapped.

“I’m just outlining expectations!”

Ilya lifted a hand in defeat, “Noted.”

“Good,” Gray said, shoveling cereal into his mouth again.

Shane pressed the ice pack again, softer this time, and Ilya flinched less. His hand came up hesitantly, sliding over the athlete’s knee, featherlight, almost shy which was ridiculous for someone who’s seen him naked in seven different kinds of lighting.

“Does it hurt badly?” Shane asked.

“A little,” Ilya admitted, “But like... in an affectionate way.”

Gray gagged dramatically.

Shane elbowed Ilya in the ribs, “Stop making it weird.”

Ilya smiled lopsidedly, the bruised cheek tugging, “You elbow harder than your brother punches.”

“I’ll punch harder next time,” Gray offered.

“You won’t,” Shane replied.

“You want to bet?”

“GRAY.”

The older brother finally let out a breath, set down the Lucky Charms, and leaned forward on the counter. His voice dropped the theatrics for the first time all morning, “You two really love each other, huh.”

Gray didn’t say it accusingly — just tiredly, resignedly, like he’d been watching this unfold for months and was finally letting himself accept it.

Shane swallowed hard and looked at Ilya who returned him with a look. Soft. Anchored. Certain. “Yeah,” the athlete murmured quietly. “We do,” both of them in unison.

Gray stared at both of them for a long moment, then sighed like he was carrying the world. “Fine. Okay. I’ll try,” he muttered, “Just... don’t make me regret not punching him again.”

Shane shot his brother a warning look, “Gray...”

“I’m trying. Geez,” Gray said louder, “This is me trying. Look. No fists.”

Ilya slowly raised a thumb, “Appreciated.”

Gray rolled his eyes. Then, with the most dramatic shove of the cereal box known to mankind, he stood. “Finish with the ice pack,” he said gruffly, “Then I’m dragging Ilya with me to the company for the rest of the day so he doesn’t get any bright ideas about crawling back into my brother’s bed. You don’t get to pound no meat with your procrastinate ass.”

“GRAY—”

“No arguments!” Gray clapped once, “Shane, go run an election campaign or whatever. Ilya, say goodbye in a way that doesn’t scar me emotionally. I’m growing grey hair.”

Ilya glanced at Shane who naturally leaned in, kissed his unbruised cheek lightly, quick but warm.

Gray made a disgusted sound. “TOO MUCH—TOO MUCH AFFECTION—STOP—”

He was ignored completely and had no choice but to deal with the cards. When they finally pulled apart, Gray was covering his face, “Ugh. I’m going to vomit.”

Ilya whispered, “Love you.”

Shane smirked. “Love you too.”

Gray threw the cereal box at his friend’s shin. The tension was gone. The chaos, however, was eternal.

Spring woke the Charles River in sheets of white fog and cold sun, the kind that made the river look like a battlefield and a cathedral at the same time. Crowds were already stacking along the embankment, scarves and school colors, alumni and undergrads yelling for their teams. Drums thrummed. Megaphones cracked.

Harvard rowing season. And Shane Hollander was on the men's varsity boat, tightening his oar in the bow seat while pretending not to scan the shore.

Ilya and Gray weren't subtle. They approached like two billionaire idiots at a farmer's market—coffee in hand, sunglasses on, coordinated in expensive dark wool without meaning to.

They squeezed onto the wooden spectator bench, Ilya sitting first, Gray dropping beside him with a grunt that meant I woke up too early for this but I'm here because love is suffering.

They both looked out over the river as if they weren't freezing. Ilya lifted his coffee to sip. Gray lifted his own. A beat passed. A longer one until Gray nudged him with an elbow. "Alright," he muttered, "Why Shane?"

Ilya blinked, "...Why Shane what?"

"You know exactly what," Gray said, not looking at him. His jaw worked quietly. "You dated women. Mostly. We even exchanged girlfriends once."

Ilya made a face, "Are you seriously bringing up the Eva Incident?"

"It was sophomore year. It was an experiment. She had a checklist personality. Not important," Gray fixed Ilya with that CEO stare that normally killed negotiations in their first five minutes.

"And Shane—," he paused, searching for the right phrasing, "Shane's... Shane. I just never thought he'd ever cross your mind."

Ilya inhaled and let the cold air bite his lungs. The river across from him glittered. The athletes were lining up for the next heat.

He finally said, quietly, "He got in my head before I even knew it."

Gray snorted. “That’s your explanation?”

“No,” Ilya leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees, fingers wrapped around his coffee cup. “You know how he is. You’ve known him longer than anyone. Shane walks into a room and just—,” he paused, smiled faintly and continued, “He’s the most grounded person in the building. No ego. No bullshit. Just... him. And somehow that’s louder than anyone else.”

Gray studied him carefully, “You didn’t answer the real question.”

Ilya turned toward him.

Gray held up a hand, “Don’t play dumb. Why him? Why not someone easier? Why not someone who doesn’t make me want to peel my own face off when I think about the two of you together?”

Ilya exhaled a laugh, “You really know how to phrase things sensitively.”

Gray glared, “Ilya.”

Ilya’s eyes softened immediately, “Okay. Honest answer?”

“Preferably.”

Ilya tapped his thumb against his coffee cup, a nervous habit Gray recognized instantly. “Because he makes me feel like I didn’t know myself as well as I thought I did,” he answered.

Gray turned his head fully at that

Ilya continued quietly, “I’ve never met anyone who could look right through me and not in a judgey way. He challenges me without trying. He listens when I don’t make sense. He’s... real. And not impressed by money or the company or the shit that follows us everywhere.”

“That part I get,” Gray muttered, “He hates that stuff.”

Ilya nodded, “Yeah. And he made me want to be the version of myself he thinks I’m capable of. Before we even kissed. Before the shit got complicated.”

Gray’s brow creased.

Ilya went on, “He didn’t come across my mind, Gray. He crashed into it. *Hard.*”

Gray stared at him for a long moment, coffee steaming between their knees. Finally, he asked in a much quieter voice, “You in love with him?”

Ilya didn’t flinch. Didn’t blush. Didn’t look away. “Yeah,” he said simply. “I am.”

Gray’s jaw went tight, something unreadable flickering in his eyes. Not anger. Not resentment. Protectiveness morphing into reluctant understanding. He scrubbed a hand over his face, “Jesus Christ.”

Ilya’s lips curved, “That bad?”

“It’s honestly the worst news I’ve heard all month.”

Ilya laughed, “I figured.”

“But,” Gray shifted, stiff shoulders easing a fraction, “He’s happy. Even after everything. Even after you two being idiots behind my back. He’s... lighter. I see it.”

Ilya swallowed, throat tightening.

“And I guess,” Gray said slowly, picking at the cardboard of his coffee cup, “if someone’s going to date my little brother... it should be someone who looks at him the way you just did.”

Ilya blinked, heat crawling up his neck.

Gray stared ahead at the river, “And someone who will keep him safe. Someone who won’t treat him like a phase. Or a fling. Or a guy to hide.”

Ilya’s voice was steady, “I’d never.”

“I know,” Gray said quietly, “That’s why I haven’t thrown you into the river yet.”

Ilya’s laugh cracked the tension. They let silence sit between them for a moment.

The race horn blew in the distance. Boats slid forward in clean lines. The Harvard men's varsity boat launched with perfect synchronization, oars cutting through the river in sharp silver arcs.

Shane, in bow seat, was all muscle and focus and precision — the kind of intensity that made the entire shoreline lean closer.

Ilya couldn't tear his eyes away. Gray saw it.

After a moment, he nudged Ilya again and muttered, "Just don't break his heart."

Ilya didn't look away from the river, "I'd let the company burn first."

Gray's brows shot up, "Okay, whoa—let's not say insane things."

Ilya snorted. Sipped his coffee. Settled in.

And for the first time in months, they sat shoulder to shoulder without tension. Two billionaires. Two cups of coffee. One idiot younger brother in a racing shell. And a love neither of them had planned for but raced straight toward the finish line.

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