The Other Twin

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The Other Twin

by xoxoxo333

Summary

The twin brothers Shane and Ethan are identical — so alike they're impossible to tell apart.

For years, Ethan vanished without a trace. Then, just as suddenly, he reappears with an unusual request: he wants Shane to take his place for a while.

Shane agrees, unaware that Ethan's past is filled with secrets, enemies, and danger.
Worse still, Ethan is married — to the powerful and irresistibly hot husband Ilya Rozanov.

What could possibly go wrong?

Or: What if Shane has a twin brother — one who looks exactly like him but couldn't be more different? And what if that twin brother just happens to be married to the unbelievably hot Ilya Rozanov?

Notes

hello, hello! :)

I never thought "Heated Rivalry" would bring me back to this site — but here we are!
(First SKAM, then AFTG, and now Heated Rivalry. Me and my obsessions, lol)

I once wrote this story in another fandom, and I wondered what it might look like with Ilya & Shane — and I absolutely love the vibes, omg. (I've made a few tweaks to the story) My English has improved since then, though there may still be a few mistakes. Sorry about that — I'm from Germany.

I hope you enjoy it! <33333

Chapter 1: ONE

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The call came at 1:00 a.m. and it was supposed to change his life.

Shane hung up the phone, confused. For a moment he was paralyzed. After all these years - how long had it been? - Ethan simply walked back into his life.

Shane struggled to catch his breath and tried to think. Ethan had sounded rushed and frightened, which was completely unlike him. What did he want? He had only said that he needed to meet Shane immediately and that he didn't have much time.

Something terrible must have happened for his brother to suddenly burst back into his life like this. Shane jumped out of bed. He was sweating, even though the autumn night was pleasantly cool. Memories began to swirl through his mind - provocative, tormenting, full of expectations. He was afraid, yet he still felt hope.

How often had he lain awake at night, his thoughts circling endlessly around his twin brother? How many times had he toyed with the idea of hiring a private investigator to find out where Ethan was?

But whenever he came close to doing so, Ethan would call. He would say he was in Paris or London, ask how Shane was doing, and assure him that everything was fine. These calls were rare and far apart. They were superficial and meaningless, yet they filled Shane with hope—something he could cling to, time and time again.

And now Ethan was here, in Ottawa, insisting on seeing him immediately. Never would Shane have even considered saying no. This call, unlike all the others, made it painfully clear that something was terribly wrong.

Countless possibilities swarmed through his head.

When had he last spoken to Ethan? What did he want? What had happened?

This unexpected call in the middle of the night felt like an emotional robbery. Shane didn’t know what to think or how to feel. He was scared — but by God, this time Ethan would not simply disappear from his life again.

Despite the tears burning in his eyes, Shane was determined. He would make his brother’s call a new beginning for both of them.

The KB was brightly lit and busy. Shane approached the door, his heart skipping for a moment before racing with excitement. Fear of renewed rejection made him want to turn around and run, but instead he pushed the door firmly open.

If Ethan had only wanted to rekindle his relationship with his brother, he would never have called in the middle of the night. Obviously, he wanted something else. Whatever it was, Shane was determined to give it to him—because it might bring them back together.

He took a deep breath and stepped through the glass door into the familiar café. He turned slowly, letting his gaze wander over the people inside.

Ethan stood up from a table where he had been sitting alone. When Shane spotted him, he froze.

Do I finally have a brother again?

Ethan was his brother—his twin—and Shane had never stopped loving him, even though the pain had haunted him for years.

Tears blurred his vision. But Ethan was there. He was really here.

“Shane!” Ethan smiled.

Shane swallowed, suddenly nervous as he approached the handsome young man he might have been himself.

"Hey Ethan."

Ethan quickly stepped around the table and pulled Shane into his arms.

His skin was flawless, a sign of a healthy life. His hair was perfectly styled, his body lean and muscular.

Shane, by contrast, was a bit bigger, his hair messy and unkempt.

He noticed Ethan studying him.

“You look like a teenager with that hair,” Ethan remarked with a broad smile.

“And you’re still perfect,” Shane replied.

“Do you hate me?” Ethan asked, looking him straight in the eye.

“I never hated you,” Shane said honestly. “I’m happy to see you.”

Ethan visibly relaxed. “I missed you, Shane.”

Shane tried not to sound too sad. “I missed you too.”

There were so many things Shane wanted to ask. Where did Ethan live? How did he survive? But above all, why weren’t they like real brothers — why weren’t they friends?

Their mother had died of cancer when they were still young, and their father shortly after. Ethan was the only family Shane had left.

“Shane? Why don’t we sit down? I don’t have much time.”

Shane didn’t move. “But you just got here,” he stammered.

Ethan took his hands. “I’m in trouble, and I need your help. Just for a few days.”

Suddenly, he let go and pulled a sealed envelope from his pocket.

“This letter explains everything.”

Shane felt dizzy. “What do you mean, you’re in trouble? What the hell happened? Of course I’ll help you — you know you can always count on me!”

Even as he spoke the words sincerely, anxiety crept in. Ethan was about to leave again—and far too soon. Everything was happening too fast.

“You have to take my place for two days, Shane,” Ethan said.

Shane gasped. “What?!”

“I need you to fill in for me. Like when we were kids. It’s all in the letter.”

Ethan’s brown eyes searched his face. “I have to go.”

Shane grabbed his arm. “You want us to switch places? For two days? I don’t understa—”

“Will you help me?” Ethan interrupted.

Shane looked into his eyes and saw desperate determination.

“Of course I’ll help you,” he whispered.

“Good.” Ethan slipped Shane’s backpack off his shoulders and replaced it with his own elegant Armani bag. Then he pulled a bag of clothes from under the table and shoved it into Shane’s arms.

“Just tell everyone I got a haircut,” he said sharply.

“Wait!” Shane grabbed his wrist as Ethan turned away. “I need to know what’s going on. I need to know when I’ll see you again!”

Panic flooded him—not because of the role reversal, but because he was losing his brother again.

“In three days,” Ethan replied with a tight, reassuring smile. “It’s all in the letter. I have to go now. A car’s waiting, and I’m out of time.”

With Shane’s bag slung over his shoulder, Ethan pulled him into a brief embrace and then walked through the café toward the door.

Shane snapped out of his daze and hurried after him. Only now did he realize how deep Ethan’s trouble must be. Something truly terrible had happened—otherwise Ethan would never have called, never have walked away like this.

“What kind of trouble are you in?” Shane shouted as he followed him out into Ottawa’s cool night air.

A driver waited in a Lincoln at the curb, engine running. Ethan opened the passenger door, then turned back one last time.

“Murder,” he said quietly.

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Shane had been driving along the narrow, winding road for quite some time now. Twelve hours had passed since Ethan’s call, and Shane was still stiff with worry and fear. The tension had not eased for a single moment—not since he had promised Ethan to switch places with him.

Last night, Shane had read the letter over and over again. Now his hands clenched the steering wheel. *Could he really do this?*

He stopped Ethan’s luxurious car, turned off the engine, and stepped outside. The fields stretched out before him, immaculate and peaceful. Horses grazed nearby; farther off, he could see white barns and a large house perched on a hill.

McGill.

His brother’s home. Picture-perfect.

A crushing weight settled on his chest, making it hard to breathe. He had followed Ethan’s instructions to the letter.

He had called the housekeeper, Olga Petrow, and told her he would arrive around one o’clock. He wore Ethan’s clothes—his expensive watch, Armani shoes—and carried the designer bag containing Ethan’s wallet, driver’s license, and phone.

Shane had called in sick at the university, explaining that he would be unavailable for a few days. He was a professor at the University of Ottawa. Yes. He was really going to pretend to be Ethan.

The letter had hit him like a bomb, and he still didn’t know how to deal with it.

Ethan was married. Ethan had a son — a four-year-old boy named Jan.

Ethan had been married for six years. Six years without a single word to Shane. No call. No letter.

Shane felt deeply deceived—shut out. For years, Ethan had lived only a few hours away.

He owned a highly successful company and was married to Ilya Rozanov Why keep all of this secret?

They had never been as close as other brothers, not even as children.

They were different in almost every way — different friends, interests, temperaments.

Ethan had been wild and fearless; Shane, the bookworm.

They had both loved growing up on the farm, surrounded by horses.

They had both known early on that they were gay — and they had accepted it. Ethan, perhaps, with more confidence than Shane.

After their parents died, everything changed.

Ethan partied; Shane studied.

Ethan drifted further away, while school and grades became Shane's refuge.

It hadn't surprised Shane when Ethan left university—or when rumors surfaced that he was living in New York, traveling the world.

Ethan's indifference had always hurt him. Quietly. Deeply. But now Shane was here.

He closed his eyes and forced himself to breathe. In a few minutes, he would step into Ilya Rozanov's house. Ilya was supposedly away on business, and yet Shane was terrified of being exposed.

He knew Ilya only from photographs—charity events, magazine spreads. Tall, striking, charismatic. A widower with a teenage daughter from his first marriage.

Shane pulled Ethan's letter from the bag and unfolded it again.

Shane, I have many regrets. Above all, I was never the brother you deserved. I know how much you longed for the affection I denied you. When this is over, I will make it right. We will finally have a chance to be real brothers.

Shane blinked back tears and continued reading.

I'm in serious trouble. I borrowed a large sum of money behind my husband's back to protect McGill from his creditors. I turned to the wrong people. Paul Corelli has threatened my life — and Jan's—if I don't repay him by the end of the week.

I only need two days. No one knows you exist. No one will suspect a thing. When I come back, I'll introduce you to my family. We can start over—if you want to. There's someone I haven't seen in years—someone who once meant a great deal to me — and I hope he'll be able to help me out of this dilemma.

I'm sure this will work, because I've never told anyone about you. No one knows that I have an identical twin brother, so no one will suspect a thing.

And when I come back — when I've paid Corelli his money—I'll introduce you to my family, and we can make a completely new start, if you want.

Shane was trembling. Ethan's life was in danger. So was Jan's. He had no choice.

He returned to the car and studied his reflection. His black hair were styled now, like Ethan's. His clothes were elegant, almost glamorous — so unlike his usual jeans and T-shirts.

At the role he had to step into immediately, Shane felt deeply uncomfortable—as if he had stepped out of himself and slipped into another man's skin.

He continued driving along the road, unable to understand why Ethan hadn't shared his worries with his husband. With Ilya's help, surely there would have been a way to raise the money and solve the problem.

Ahead of him, a brass sign marked the entrance to the property: McGill.

Shane was on the verge of yanking the steering wheel around and fleeing, but the final lines of Ethan's letter echoed in his mind:

Shane, I'm desperate. I would never ask this of you if I had another way out. You're my brother, my twin, and I know I can count on you.

Shane gathered his courage and forced his nerves to settle. He had to be Ethan now — charming, confident, composed.

It was almost time. He was about to meet Jan, his stepsister, and the housekeeper.

Ilya had a teenage daughter from his first marriage — Lilly.

Shane quickly reviewed the house description and the list of employees Ethan had packed for him. He was already outside the house: a brick mansion supported by tall white columns.

A Land Rover stood in front of it, the bonnet being slammed shut by a man.

Shane parked in the shadow of a massive oak tree and stepped out. The man approached him

with a deep frown — but it wasn't Ilya. Of that, Shane was certain. This man was shorter.

Cliff Marlow, Shane guessed — the newly hired mechanic and stable hand.

He forced a smile and tried not to trip over his own feet.

"Did you have a pleasant trip, Mr. Rozanov?" Cliff asked coolly. He didn't smile; his eyes were icy.

"Yes," Shane replied as pleasantly as he could. "Very pleasant."

Cliff continued to stare at him.

What happened here? Shane wondered. Was Ethan having trouble with Cliff? And why? He's just an employee—what could have gone on between them?

Shane turned to retrieve his bags from the trunk, but Cliff was faster.

"Since when do you carry your own luggage?" Cliff asked, narrowing his eyes.

They stared at each other. After a second too long, Shane realized his mistake. Right. He was supposed to be a man who was served.

"My feet hurt," he said quickly, managing a weak smile. "I want to get out of these tight shoes."

Cliff didn't react. "I'll take your luggage upstairs immediately, Mr. Rozanov."

What had Ethan done to him?

Shane pulled himself together and looked up. Someone stood beneath the porch. As he approached, he recognized a slender elderly woman in jodhpurs. Olga Petrow — the housekeeper.

She smiled politely, though with a certain reserve. Shane returned the smile, shy and uncertain.

"Mrs. Petrow, it's good to be home."

Olga nodded. "Did you have a pleasant journey? I've prepared a light meal for you."

Ethan had written that Olga had worked for the family for years — ever since Ilya had been a child.

Shane followed her inside and found himself in a spacious foyer. The furnishings were classically elegant, the windows tall and —

A deep male voice cut through his thoughts.

“I’m serious… yes. Thank you again. Well done.”

Shane froze, his heart pounding.

The man standing there was Ethan’s husband.

Ilya Rozanov.

His voice was rough, controlled, and unsettlingly sensual.

As he stepped closer, Shane noticed just how intensely blue his eyes were, framed by blond curls. His cheekbones were sharply defined, his lips full.

Wow.

“You’re staring at me like you’ve never seen me before,” Ilya said, his eyes narrowing.

Heat flooded Shane’s face. Worse, he couldn’t speak.

Ilya slid his phone into his back pocket and studied him.

“You’re back,” he said coolly. “Your hair looks different.”

That was it?

Where was the hug? The smile? The kiss?

He didn’t even seem happy to see him. If anything, he looked displeased.

“Yes,” Shane said, hearing the tremor in his own voice. “I’m back. I got a haircut. Do you like it?”

Ilya gave him a disbelieving look and turned away.

He just left it at that.

What the hell happened here?

A moment later, Ilya returned and held out an envelope.

"These are for you."

Shane met his gaze—and once again, it almost stole his breath.

“I know this may not be the best time,” Ilya said. He didn’t look guilty. He didn’t look apologetic.

He looked angry.

“What is this?” Shane asked.

“The divorce papers,” Ilya replied.

And then he smiled.

Shane felt as if a bomb had gone off beside him.

“What?” he managed, his mouth hanging open.

Ilya wanted to divorce Ethan?

“You heard me, Ethan,” Ilya said firmly.

Shane could do nothing but stare at him, speechless, as Ilya left the room.

“I’ll take your luggage upstairs now.”

Shane turned and met Cliff’s calculating gaze. Whatever had just happened between Ethan and Ilya had clearly not escaped him.

“Yes, please,” Shane whispered. “I’d like to change my clothes.”

Cliff looked surprised, almost taken aback.

Shane bit his lip. Damn it—he was being far too shy. He cleared his throat and managed a grateful smile.

“Thank you,” he said again, this time more firmly.

Without another word, Cliff turned, picked up the two bags, and headed for the stairs.

Shane leaned against the wall and rubbed his temple.

Why hadn’t Ethan told him that his marriage was falling apart? Did Ethan even know that Ilya wanted a divorce?

Shane glanced over his shoulder and saw Ilya sitting at his desk, the office door left open. Olga entered from another room and approached him.

“I’m going to pick up Jan now,” she said kindly.

“Thank you, Olga,” Ilya replied.

Shit. Ethan hadn’t left Shane any instructions about Jan—not about his routine, not about anything.

“I’ll get him,” Shane blurted out and hurried toward the office.

Olga stared at him. “Excuse me?”

Shane caught the confusion on her face — and the sharp look in Ilya’s eyes.

What had he done wrong now?

Only then did Shane realize that he didn’t even know where Jan’s nursery was.

Why didn’t Ethan write down things like this?

“I— I miss him,” Shane said awkwardly, “but I’m still exhausted from the trip. It’s probably better if you drive.”

Olga looked genuinely surprised. “You never pick him up. I pick him up every day. I always have.”

Shane didn’t believe that for a second. Surely Ethan picked his son up sometimes.

“You know what?” Shane said quickly. “I should eat something and lie down for a bit. But tomorrow I’ll pick him up myself.”

Olga hesitated, her brow still furrowed, then nodded. With brisk steps she left the house, closing the door behind her.

Shane turned back to Ilya, who had just risen from his chair.

“You never pick Jan up,” Ilya said coolly.

“Never is a very strong word,” Shane replied nervously.

“So the game has already begun, huh?” Ilya muttered darkly.

Fear crawled up Shane’s spine. He needed to speak to his brother — now.

Shane swallowed hard. “What do you mean?”

Ilya snorted in contempt.

Shane retreated quickly, fleeing back into the foyer. Ilya’s behavior was unbearable. Ethan should have warned him. What the hell was going on in this house?

Did Ilya really want to divorce Ethan? Or was he just angry? And if so — why? Or was this all one terrible misunderstanding?

Shane’s gaze fell on a wall covered in small photographs of Jan. Dark hair, brown eyes, a shy

smile aimed at the camera. In several pictures, the boy sat proudly on a pony, dressed in riding clothes.

Nearby were photos of Ilya's daughter from his first marriage. Ethan had written that Lilly was sixteen. She was blonde, blue-eyed, and beautiful. All of the pictures were portraits — no horses. Shane found that strange.

He stood there for a moment, then decided to call Ethan.

No answer.

Not even voicemail.

Great

Shane stared at the empty windowsill.

Wasn't his bag supposed to be there?

Panic surged through him. He looked toward the staircase and called out, "Cliff?"

No answer.

He made his way to the kitchen, passed through a storeroom, and ended up in the laundry room. A washing machine and dryer hummed quietly. Cliff knelt on the floor amid his tools, not looking up.

"Did you want something, Mr. Rozanov?" he asked coolly.

"I seem to have misplaced my bag," Shane said cautiously.

"Maybe you left it in the car," Cliff replied, straightening up and finally meeting Shane's gaze.

Shane didn't like the way he was looking at him.

"No," Shane said. "I brought it inside. I'm sure of it."

Cliff only snorted.

Shane turned away and headed back toward the foyer, then up the stairs.

Cliff must have taken it.

But why?

He hurried up the stairs, passed four doors, and entered the last room on the floor. He closed

the door behind him and leaned against it, suddenly overwhelmed by exhaustion.

He tried to relax — but failed.

Everything about this place made him uneasy, unwelcome.

His eyes drifted to the massive double bed dominating the room.

How am I supposed to share this bed with Ilya Rozanov?

Anger flared—at the situation, at Ethan, at everything. Shane turned sharply and entered the walk-in wardrobe, which was larger than most people's bedrooms.

Designer suits, polished shoes, jeans, sweaters, riding boots.

All of it belonged to his brother.

Shane was certain of that.

"No, I brought it inside. I'm sure."

Cliff merely snorted. Shane turned away and headed back to the foyer, then up the stairs.

Cliff must have taken his bag. But why?

Shane hurried upstairs, passed four doors, and entered the last room on the first floor. He closed the door quickly behind him and leaned against it, suddenly overwhelmed by exhaustion.

He tried to relax — but failed. Everything about this place made him uneasy, unwelcome. His gaze drifted to the huge double bed in the center of the room.

Suddenly Shane was angry at the stupid situation his brother had put him in. He hurried into the walk-in wardrobe, which was as big as other people's whole bedroom.

How was he supposed to share this bed with Ilya Rozanov?

Anger flared at the absurd situation his brother had put him in. Shane stormed into the walk-in wardrobe, which was as large as most people's entire bedrooms..
Exquisite suits, designer shoes, jeans, sweaters, riding boots.

All of them belonged to his brother—Shane was certain of that.

Ethan had insisted in his letter that Shane wear only Ethan's clothes, which made sense. Since no one would see his underwear, he had planned to keep his own. But there was nothing here except tailored trousers and expensive jeans. No sweatpants.

Shane felt helpless, tears stinging his eyes. The next two days loomed before him like a small

eternity. He pulled off his boxers and reached into his bag for a fresh pair.

“Let’s get this over with,” Ilya said.

Shane nearly jumped out of his skin. He spun around to face Ethan’s husband, barely stopping himself from instinctively trying to hide.

Ilya stared at him. “What are you doing?”

“Would you please leave me alone?” Shane said, his voice trembling. “I’m changing.”

Ilya’s gaze traveled slowly over him—his face, his mouth, his eyes — and finally down to the boxers lying on the floor.

"What happened to your underwear?"

Shane wanted to throw something at him. Instead, he grabbed a clean pair and stepped into them.

“Nothing,” he said curtly.

Ilya continued to stare, his eyes roaming over Shane’s body.

“You've gained weight.”

Shane froze. Yes — he was a little bigger than his brother.

“I wanted more bulk for you“, he said quickly. “Don't you like it?.”

At last, Ilya looked back up at his face, his eyes still sharp, still searching.

“We need to talk,” he said. “Come to the office once you’re dressed.”

Shane leaned back, meaning to brace himself against the wall — but instead collided with a rack of clothes and stumbled into it. He straightened quickly, hands shaking, cheeks burning.

Did he feel attracted to Ilya?

That was impossible. Yes, Ilya was attractive—strikingly so—but that didn’t mean Shane desired him. He was his brother’s husband. For God’s sake.

Shane sank to the floor and wrapped his arms around his knees.

“Damn it,” he muttered.

He should tell Ilya the truth—now, before it was too late. But if he did, he would lose Ethan again. Maybe for another ten years.

He had made his brother a promise. And he had to keep it.

Shane stood, pulled on a black sweater and a pair of jeans. He was sick of Ethan's tight designer shoes, so he went downstairs barefoot, trying to ignore the pull of Ilya's gaze.

And the terrifying thought that Ilya might feel it too.

No — he was attracted to Ethan, his husband.

Ilya's office door was open, but Shane knocked anyway..

Ilya immediately noticed his bare feet and frowned.

"What's the point of that?"

"My feet hurt," Shane said.

Ilya simply stared at him.

"I'm terribly tired," Shane added—and that, at least, was true.

"Well." Ilya's smile was bitter. "So am I."

Shane didn't like the way he said that.

"It's a done deal, Ethan," Ilya said quietly. "I've made up my mind."

"You can't make a decision like that on your own."

Ilya's eyes narrowed at once.

"Make it on my own? What the hell are you talking about?"

"I mean — we can try again," Shane said.

"Are you out of your mind?" Ilya snapped. "Have you suddenly changed your mind? We've talked — no, argued—about this for months."

Shane was stunned. Ethan knew this was coming and hadn't said a word?

"Why are you acting surprised now?" Ilya went on coldly. "This isn't new. You knew exactly where this was heading."

Shane didn't know what to say. Nervously, he tugged at the sleeves of his sweater. Ilya watched him closely.

"You don't throw a marriage away so lightly."

“So lightly?” Ilya’s expression hardened.

“I’m not the fool you thought I was when we got married, Ethan,” he said quietly.

Shane felt frozen in place. “I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he said honestly.

“No?” Ilya scoffed. “Oh, please. I’ve known for a long time. I just didn’t want to see the truth. I chose to look away — because of Jan. And because you’re so damn beautiful, and you know exactly how to wrap me around your finger.”

He glanced at the floor for a moment before continuing.

“Six months ago, I finally did what I should have done a long time ago. I looked at the ugly, hard facts — about us, about our marriage.”

He looked at Shane with open disgust.

Shane could only stare back at him in silence. He had no idea what Ilya was talking about.

“Now I know that for Jan’s sake, I refused to see what was right in front of me. And it took me half a year to realize that Jan would be better off without you.”

“Do you really believe that?” Shane gasped, stepping toward him instinctively. “How could he possibly be better off without me? Jan needs me as a father— I—”

“That only applies to reasonable fathers,” Ilya interrupted coldly. “And I wouldn’t necessarily call you one. Jan stays with me.”

A soft cry escaped Shane’s throat. Ilya jumped to his feet.

“What is this?” Ilya snapped. “Why are you suddenly pretending to be innocent? You know perfectly well he’s always been a burden to you. You’re too busy to be his father. You’ve never been there for him!”

The words hit Shane like a blow. He wouldn’t let Ilya take Jan away from Ethan.

“He’s my son too, Ilya.”

“If you want a decent financial outcome after the divorce,” Ilya said icily, “you’ll give me sole custody. This point is non-negotiable.”

Shane shook his head. “I don’t see it that way.”

Ilya stared at him in disbelief.

“I will get sole custody,” Ilya said sharply. “I’ll fight for it by any means necessary. And if that’s how you want it, don’t expect me to be generous with you financially.”

God — Shane had to get out of here.

“I don’t care about your damn money,” Shane hissed. “This isn’t about money—it’s about a child!”

Ilya laughed bitterly. “Since when do you not care about money? That’s a good joke, isn’t it?”

Shane stared at him, trying to make sense of the cruelty in his words.

“You’ve always been interested in me because of my money, Ethan. We both know that.”

“That’s not true!” Shane cried, horrified that Ilya could believe such a thing.

“Oh, really?” Ilya stood up. “As if you would’ve spared me a second glance if I were some poor bastard earning a few hundred a week. I should have listened to Ryan — he saw your motives immediately. But I didn’t want to hear it. My mistake. And now I’m willing to pay any price just to get rid of you.”

His eyes glittered with fury.

Shane struggled for air. For a brief moment, their eyes met.

It was unbearable. The bitterness — the hatred — in Ilya’s gaze was overwhelming.

Shane couldn’t stand it any longer. He turned and fled the room, so shaken that he nearly stumbled.

In the hallway, he wrapped his arms around himself, fighting to breathe.

Ethan might not have picked Jan up from nursery every day — but that didn’t make him a bad father.

Shane had no doubt that Ethan would fight with tooth and nail for joint custody of his son.

Hot tears blurred his vision.

Slowly, Shane straightened.

Ilya wanted a divorce. He despised his husband. Shane had seen it clearly in his eyes.

But he had seen something else, too.

Ilya didn’t just loathe Ethan.

He hated him.

And he wanted revenge.

Chapter End Notes

so... what do you think?
let me know in the comments!!

btw im on twitter @xoxo333_

Chapter 2: TWO

Chapter Notes

thank you for your feedback on the first chapter!!

yes, there's a lot going on in this universe. and it's going to stay that way ... at least for now (but it’s worth it — trust me)

enjoyy <3333

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Before Shane could fully process the situation, the front door opened. He heard Olga speaking through the half-open window.

"I baked them fresh this afternoon."

There was a brief pause.

Then a quiet child’s voice asked, “Is Dad at home?”

Jan’s voice sounded hesitant and shy. Shane’s heart twisted in his chest, and he hurried to the door.

"Jan!" he shouted.

The little boy looked up at him with wide, surprised eyes. Shane warned himself not to show his emotions too openly — he was now Ethan, who had only been away for three days and had missed his son. He wasn’t the uncle who had never met the child before.

"Hey buddy," he said in a hoarse voice.

„Dad,“ Jan said, scared, and gave a weak smile.

"I missed you," Shane whispered, kneeling down and spreading his arms. "Come here."

For a moment, Jan froze, motionless. He reminded Shane of a startled, confused deer caught in the headlights of an oncoming car.

Then Jan smiled and walked toward him. Shane held him tightly in his arms — far too tightly, perhaps — but the little boy didn’t resist. He clung to him.

Shane breathed in the scent of children’s shampoo, freshly washed cotton, and soap. Holding

Jan, he thought how lucky Ethan was. Now he realized that Ilya's accusations against Ethan must have been greatly exaggerated. Perhaps Ilya wanted nothing more than to strengthen his position in the upcoming divorce. Of course, Ethan loved the adorable child Shane held in his arms.

Shane straightened slightly.

"I have a gift for you."

That morning, Shane had bought a toy stable for Jan's toy horses, which he wanted to build together with him. Jan's big eyes studied him curiously.

"Really?" he asked, shyly smiling as his small lips trembled.

"It's upstairs," Shane said, standing and taking Jan's hand. "Would you like to help me unpack?"

How wonderful it felt to hold the little boy's hand in his own.

Jan blinked, surprised and slightly unsure. Then he nodded enthusiastically.

"Jan needs to eat something first, Mr. Rozanov," Olga interjected quickly.

Shane turned to the housekeeper and saw disapproval and dislike written across her face. Now he was certain in his assessment: Olga was jealous when it came to Jan.

Shane immediately decided to set new boundaries. He smiled grimly at the housekeeper.

"Would you mind bringing cookies and milk upstairs, Olga?"

Then he smiled down at Jan, this time more warmly.

"We can eat together while we unpack."

Ilya's hostility, Cliff's impertinence, Olga's coldness—none of it mattered to Shane compared to being with Jan.

When Olga didn't answer, Shane looked after her. The woman stared at him with deeply distrustful eyes.

Shane thought of the brother he had known before they both went to university. Ethan had never stayed home for long, had never been alone, and had always surrounded himself with numerous friends. He had almost always been seen riding horses or driving a motorcycle.

"I want to go unpack with Dad," Jan said eagerly.

"What's going on here?" Ilya asked.

Shane turned and saw Ilya standing behind him, his expression tense.

"Jan will help me unpack. Besides, his gift is in the travel bag upstairs."

Ilya’s jaw muscles tightened.

"Really?" he said, his gaze sharp and threatening.

Shane hesitated. No man had ever confused him like Ilya Rozanov.

"I’m sure you wouldn’t mind if I brought something for Jan," he said as casually as possible, forcing a smile.

"Jan must be at the stable in an hour," Ilya replied, clearly trying to control his temper. He seemed very angry.

Shane paused for a moment.

"Is he riding today?"

Ilya snorted. "He rides every day after nursery school at 4:00. You know that."

A mistake — but not a fatal one.

"Of course!" Shane called, still holding Jan’s hand.

"I just thought, since I was on vacation, we could have a little more time together this afternoon."

"I want to stay with Dad,“ Jan said immediately.

Ilya flinched as if struck.

"But we wanted to go for a ride, sweetheart. Just the two of us. You always like to ride out."

He gave Shane an ice-cold look.

"You’ve only been gone three days. You didn’t usually make a big deal out of it."

Shane knew his decision was right — for some reason, this man hated his husband.

He took a deep breath. "Ilya," he said, swallowing hard. He tried to calm him with an honest smile.

"I’ve been thinking about a lot of things lately. I think we should talk."

"Anytime," Ilya answered curtly.

Jan shook his head. Shane looked down at him and saw extreme stubbornness in his eyes.

"I want to go unpack with Dad!“

He was clearly determined.

Shane bent down to him.

"I have a great idea."

He didn’t want to confront Ilya any further.

"We have a whole hour. We can unpack, you can play with your gift and eat cookies, and then I’ll take you down to the stable to watch you ride."

Jan’s eyes widened.

"You want to watch me ride Prince?" he asked in surprise.

"Absolutely," Shane said with a grin.

He gently stroked Jan’s head and straightened. Olga and Ilya watched him, surprise and disapproval evident, and Ilya’s suspicion clear.

Shane held his gaze. He didn’t want to believe that Ethan had never watched his son ride. That couldn’t be true.

"Why are you staring at me like that?" he asked quietly, a note of fear in his voice.

Ilya didn’t answer; he simply walked out.

Olga, on the other hand, replied:

"Because you never have time to watch your son ride, Mr. Rozanov. Because you’ve never come back from a trip and acted like a completely different person."

Jan clung to Shane’s hand all the way up the stairs, and when they reached the large bedroom, he still wouldn’t let go.

The travel bag and another bag sat in the middle of the room, apparently dropped by Cliff. Despite everything that had just happened in Ilya’s office or in the foyer, Shane was happy. He decided he would think about Olga’s last remark later.

He smiled at Jan.

"Close your eyes," he said, and Jan obeyed, grinning.

Shane let go of his hand, knelt next to the travel bag, and froze. Slowly, he looked up. At the foot of the bed was a cushioned bench with his missing bag.

„Dad?“ Jan whispered.

"In a minute,“ Shane said quietly.

Hastily, he opened the travel bag and pulled out a box wrapped in gift paper.

"Here, buddy," he said with forced cheerfulness. Jan grinned happily when he saw the package.

Shane sat down on the floor and tapped the carpet next to him. Jan blinked in surprise and then sat down beside him.

Shane helped him unpack the box, but his heart was racing. Whoever had taken his bag had returned it — but why? Shane could only conclude that this was not a simple theft. He was burning to check the bag but was still fairly certain that it contained nothing suspicious.

Jan had unwrapped the paper and saw the photo of the completed stable on the box. He let out a joyful scream.

"Is this a stable for my horses?" he asked breathlessly.

"That’s exactly what it is. All you have to do is put it together, and we’ll do it together, okay?" Pure love flooded Shane’s body. It was difficult for him not to squeeze Jan the whole time, so he briefly stroked his head.

Jan tore off the plastic sheet covering the box, and Shane helped him open it. They dumped the contents onto the floor.

"Look, a fence for the willow!" Jan exclaimed excitedly. "And all white, just like Daddy’s!"

When Shane patted his shoulder, someone knocked on the open door. Shane looked up and saw Olga holding a tablet — but there was only one glass of milk and a small plate with two cookies on it.

Shane stood. "Thank you, Olga," he said warmly. "I’d like some milk and cookies too," he added with a smile.

Olga didn’t flinch as she placed the tablet on a small table. She watched Jan and his gift carefully.

"Since when do you eat sweets?" she asked.

Shane swallowed. He could never resist chocolate. Food had also been an issue Ethan had not mentioned in his letter. Shane suspected that Ethan avoided chocolate and other treats like the plague. As a teenager, Ethan had been obsessed with his body and had started dieting early,

even though it would be unnecessary.

Shane knew he could give up many things, but not chocolate. He said quickly:

"After all, today is a special day, isn’t it?" He smiled at Jan, who grinned happily.

"If this isn’t a cause for celebration, what is it?"

Olga stared at him for a moment and finally shrugged. "Good. I’ll be right back."

„Dad! You can have one of my cookies!" Jan shouted. He jumped up, hurried to the small table, grabbed a cookie, and accidentally knocked over the glass of milk.

Jan froze. Then he looked up at Shane with wide, fearful eyes, clearly expecting to be scolded.

"Don’t worry, that happens," Shane said gently, putting a hand on his little shoulders.

"We’ll just wipe it up, okay? Oh, Olga? Just bring us two glasses of milk, please."

Olga seemed completely bewildered. She turned quickly, and Shane noticed that Ilya was standing in the doorway. Immediately, Shane felt anger rising — he wanted to share his precious time with Jan alone, not with Ilya.

He gave Ilya a cold look and went into the bathroom to fetch a towel.

When he came out, Ilya knelt next to Jan and showed him how to assemble the stable. Jan gave Shane a shy look.

"I’m sorry I spilled the milk," he said.

"Never mind about that." Shane smiled and wondered how he could get Ilya to leave. That wasn’t fair, especially since he only had an hour with the little boy — he was only at McGill for a few days.

Ilya sank onto his heels and looked at him. Shane met his gaze angrily and wiped up the milk.

"See? It’s all gone already. Nothing happened," Shane said, smiling.

"I want to talk to you," Ilya said calmly, standing up.

Shane turned to him and tried to control his anger. He decided to draw the line here as well.

"I was away for three days. I’d like to be alone with my son."

Ilya’s eyes widened. "Since when?"

Shane put his hands on his hips, then realized it probably looked silly and let them fall again.

"That’s not fair," he said calmly. "Please, let us spend some time together."

"I know what you’re up to," Ilya said, his tone flat.

"I’m not up to anything!" Shane said angrily. Then he fell silent and looked down at Jan. He forced a smile.

"We’re not fighting, Jan,“ Shane said. "Honestly, we’re not."

Jan bit his lip. "But you always argue with Daddy."

Shane stared at him in horror. Ilya looked at Shane as if to say, I told you so.

Shane took a deep breath and looked into Ilya’s blue eyes.

"We can talk later. But now I want to unpack with Jan, and then we’ll build this stable together." He smiled at Ilya as kindly as possible, which was not easy under the circumstances.

"Well, then, later," Ilya said, smiling at his son. "And I’ll see you in the stable later."

Then he walked out of the room, and Shane sat down on the floor next to Jan.

"You don’t have to worry about this."

Jan looked at him thoughtfully. "Daddy’s mad at you. Really mad."

Shane twisted his face. "I know. But even Dad makes mistakes sometimes, you know?"

Jan hesitated thoughtfully. "Daddy doesn’t know you’re my new Dad,“ he finally said.

Shane froze, his pulse immediately rising. "What?"

"He doesn’t know you’re my new Dad,“ the kid said, smiling. "My old Dad — Daddy doesn’t like him."

Shane sat there, thunderstruck. Jan knew.

The little boy had noticed that he wasn’t Ethan, that he was completely different from his brother. It’s often said that children are very observant and have a kind of sixth sense. Shane had once read that children could see things adults couldn’t —ghosts, for example. Shane didn’t believe it, but Jan somehow knew he wasn’t Ethan.

He lost his words and struggled to force a smile.

„Dad’s can change too."

Jan grinned and put a hand on Shane's cheek.

"I love my new Dad very much."

While Jan unpacked the items from the travel bag and put them away, Shane hurried to the smaller bag. He still couldn't believe that Jan, of all people, had recognized the truth immediately.

He opened the bag and dumped the contents onto the floor. First, he saw his brother's phone, and then a folded note. He froze.

He had completely forgotten about this note. He had written down the car's license plate and the words Roof 3, second entrance, second row so that he could find Ethan's car when he picked it up at the airport.

Shane tried to convince himself that this note wouldn't matter to anyone — he had often written down where he had parked in one of the huge multistory car parks after failing to find his car in a large shopping mall.

But he couldn't dismiss the problem: no one writes down their own license plate as if they couldn't recognize their own car.

Fearfully, he grabbed his wallet and hoped that whoever had stolen and returned his bag — maybe Ilya — hadn't noticed the note. All his credit cards — Ethan's, to be precise — were still there. Ethan's license, too. But the cash was gone.

He sank onto the bed and closed his eyes in relief. So it had been an ordinary theft after all. It had nothing to do with the shifting roles. He opened his eyes and felt like laughing — so he laughed. Oh, goodness, his nerves were fluttering; he had just been too excited, which was why he had overreacted to every little thing.

Suddenly, he grew serious again. All of this didn't change the fact that his arrival at McGill had been completely different from what he had expected. Shane allowed himself to face the inevitable realization: Ethan had obviously upset his husband — not to mention his housekeeper and that strange Cliff Marlow. His relationship with his little son didn't seem very good or particularly loving either.

Shane wasn't stupid. At first, Jan had been anxious and hesitant around him, and he had expected Shane to scold him for the accident with the milk glass.

If only Ethan had prepared him better. But his brother had let him believe that his family life was wonderful and perfectly fine. Shane corrected himself — because that wasn't fair. Ethan hadn't said anything about his life at McGill. Shane had simply assumed it was like a fairy tale, that his brother had everything one could possibly wish for.

Shane loved his brother. He had always envied and admired him. Secretly, he had always wanted to be so popular, so brave and fearless, so sexy and glamorous. But now Shane was older and had experienced a lot — some pleasant, some unpleasant. He had grown wiser. He

still admired Ethan, but, like everyone, his brother had faults. He wasn't perfect.

Jan came out of the bathroom with a proud smile.

"I've tidied it all up," he said. "Come look!"

Shane swallowed. There was no excuse for Ethan not watching Jan ride horseback or for only rarely picking him up from kindergarten. There was no excuse for Ethan's child being scared and emotionally neglected.

"Thank you," Shane replied with a smile, feeling his heart warm. He was already very fond of his nephew. Who wouldn't be? Jan was simply adorable.

And Ilya… unfortunately, he was fucking stunning and exceedingly attractive. How could Ethan have handled such precious gifts so lightly?

"Let's see how well you did," Shane said. He jumped up and followed the little boy.

"See, Dad? I hung up your suit and cleaned up your pjamas," Jan said proudly.

"You did a great job, Jan," Shane smiled and bent down to pull the child into a hug.

Jan blushed with joy. "You smell good."

Shane looked at him. He hadn't put on any perfume — he never did. Ethan, on the other hand, always wore heavy scents of Dolce & Gabbana.

"I forgot my perfume. What you smell must be soap, kid," Shane said.

"I like this one," Jan announced. "Is there anything else we can unpack?"

Shane smiled. "I think we're done," he answered.

-

At four o'clock, Shane and Jan arrived at the stables. Jan was in his riding pants and boots. Shane had found a pair of boots in Ethan's wardrobe that apparently had never been worn.

Shane was smart enough to let Jan go ahead. In the largest of the outbuildings, he noted, there was room for two dozen boxes and a riding arena. And that's where they went.

Ilya stood in the stable aisle between the stalls, wearing brown breeches and tall boots. A white pony was already saddled, waiting for its rider. Next to it stood an older man.

A gorgeous, large brown horse with four white socks was tied up in the alley — it must have been Ilya's.

Both men turned as he entered, and Shane was flooded with a warmth he would rather not

feel. Ilya’s eyes met his, and Shane quickly lowered his gaze.

"Hello, Ethan," said the older man with a friendly smile. He had a thin, wiry frame. "How was your journey?"

Shane was surprised by the warm welcome and responded with only a muted, "Fine."

"I worked a lot with Pride so he wouldn’t get too excited for you," the man continued. "He should be quite calm when we work with him tomorrow."

Shane had to think for a moment before he realized that Pride was Ethan’s horse and that he was expected to ride tomorrow — apparently with this man, who must be a riding instructor or trainer. Ethan hadn’t mentioned in his letter that he still rode at all.

Shane smiled crookedly. He knew he didn’t ride nearly as well as his brother. Undoubtedly, this was why Ethan hadn’t told him — so as not to intimidate Shane.

"Jacob, I helped Dad unpack!" Jan proudly announced.

"Really?" the white-haired man grinned.

"And I heard your Daddy wants to take you for a ride this afternoon." Jacob grazed the pony’s bridle.

"Daddy? Dad wants to watch me ride. Please, can we ride inside today?" Jan begged.

Ilya had untied his horse and smiled at Jan but didn’t look at Shane.

"We’re going to go inside for a few warm-up rounds," he replied. "Dad can watch you do that, okay?"

Immediately afterward, Shane hung onto the gate while Ilya and Jan started riding side by side. Observing his nephew, already sitting very well in the saddle at the age of four, Shane thought that he couldn’t be anywhere better than here — at McGill, clinging to the gate, surrounded by horses, watching Jan and his father ride.

His heart jumped slightly when he looked at Ilya. He wasn’t wearing a helmet, and Shane felt worried. He knew that even experienced riders could suffer a serious fall at any time — especially since Ilya’s most reliable horse could sometimes be skittish.

Shane forced himself to look back at Jan.

"Ready for a short trot?" he heard Ilya ask. Jan nodded.

Shane watched as Ilya let his horse walk slowly, agonizingly slowly, to keep a close eye on Jan.

"You’re holding the reins too long," Ilya said. "Make them shorter, honey."

Jan obeyed, and Shane felt a surge of pride. What four-year-old could ride so well? Lost in thought, Shane asked, "When did he start?"

Jacob turned around. "Sorry?"

"When did—" Shane broke off. He felt himself blush. Fuck. Of course Ethan knew when Jan had started riding.

"I don’t remember when he started trotting so well," he improvised.

"He’s been practicing diligently for the last few months. He only recently mastered this posture before you left," Jacob explained. "Are you all right? You seem so different, Ethan."

Shane turned to him. "I was a little sick. I’m still not back to normal."

Jacob’s face darkened. "Oh, I’m sorry to hear that. Take as much time as you need."

"Yes, I think I’ll have to wait a little while," Shane said and felt stupid.

The old man studied him carefully, as if trying to read a deeper meaning in his words, but then he nodded.

For the time being, he had escaped riding.

-

Shane walked across the lawn behind the house. Jan and Ilya had left for their ride, and he felt as if a heavy burden had been lifted from his shoulders. Only now did he realize that he’d had a headache from all the stress since his arrival at McGill.

Maybe now was the time to call Ethan again. Shane looked around. The stables were behind him, the house to his left on the hill. Straight ahead, the willows stretched toward the hills on the horizon.

He was alone. There was no one around. Shane pulled Ethan’s phone out of his pocket and quickly tapped on the screen. To his dismay, he reached only the voicemail.

"It’s me," he said, turning around again. "You have to call me as soon as possible — it’s urgent. Leave a message on my — your — voicemail when you want to call, and I’ll make sure I’m free." Shane sighed and rubbed his eyes. "Things aren’t going well here," he added briefly. "I need to talk to you." Then he hung up.

He closed his eyes for a moment and immediately saw Ilya in front of him. In two days, Ilya would know the truth about who he was. When Shane thought about how much Ilya loathed his husband, he realized that he would loathe him too. After all, Shane had lied to him and deceived him from the very beginning. God, Shane didn’t want Ilya to hate him — not now

and not in the future. Ilya would be terribly angry, at both Ethan and Shane. But what choice did Shane have?

Shane sighed, took a deep breath, and looked up at the sky. He sat down in the grass, took off his shoes, and lay on his back. Completely exhausted, he fell asleep within minutes.

—

When he woke up, it was already dark. Shit. Had he really slept that long?

As he walked through the house, everything was dark as well. Shane carefully climbed the staircase, which wasn't lit either. A sound grew clearer — obviously a sitcom with a laughing audience. He relaxed a little. He had never met Ilya's daughter from his first marriage, but that sound had to be coming from Lilly's room.

Shane followed the laughter to the second door in the hallway and knocked. Nothing happened, so he knocked again. Finally, he pushed the door open slightly and stuck his head inside.

Lilly sat at her desk doing homework. She was slender, and smooth blonde hair fell down her back.

The TV was on, standing in front of her bed on the other side of the room. Lilly couldn't hear the sound — she had headphones on, and while writing in a notebook, she nodded her head in time with the music.

"Lilly?" Shane asked quietly.

When she didn't react at all, Shane crossed the room and turned down the television. Then he walked over to the girl and tapped her shoulder. Lilly turned around but didn't stand up.

"What are you doing?!" she shouted.

Shane noticed the three earrings in one of her ears. He smiled.

"Hey! How are you?" he asked.

Lilly snorted and didn't return the smile. With an annoyed expression, she took off her headphones.

"What?"

Then she noticed Shane's hair.

"You got a new haircut. Horrible."

Shane recoiled in shock.

"I’m doing my homework," Lilly explained grumpily. She turned her back on Shane and went back to her book.

Shane was stunned. So Ethan had another enemy in this house. What a surprise. But the proof was right in front of him. He tapped Lilly on the shoulder again.

"I can see that. I just wanted to say hi."

"You’re kidding, right?" Lilly leaned back in her chair and turned around again.

„What? No, I’m not kidding," Shane replied.

"Alright. You said hello, so now you can say goodbye," Lilly said and abruptly turned back to her open textbook.

Shane sighed. With a lot of goodwill, he might have blamed Lilly’s behavior on puberty and raging hormones.

"Where is everybody?"

Lilly didn’t turn around. She didn’t move at all and replied impudently, "Dad went out for dinner. With Hayden."

Shane’s heart nearly stopped. "Excuse me?"

Lilly slowly turned toward him, clearly amused.

"Hayden, you know. Your best friend. Hayden, who usually travels with you. Hayden, who spends more money than you."

Ethan had mentioned a best friend named Hayden Pike in his letter, but only briefly. Hayden had light brown hair, showed up spontaneously several times, and was married to Jackie.

"But this time Hayden wasn’t out of town with me," Shane said slowly.

"No," Lilly grinned. "Probably found something better to do around here — like having dinner with Dad."

Fuck.

"So they went to dinner together?"

Lilly sighed. "Jackie’s with them too. What do you think?"

Shane felt relieved. "Oh. Right."

"Dad doesn’t cheat on anyone. Unlike some other people," Lilly added, giving him an icy look.

Shane disliked the implication, so he ignored the comment.

"Have you eaten yet?"

Lilly stared at him in disbelief. "Have I eaten yet? I always get pizza after school." She turned away again.

"Where's Jan? And Olga?"

"Jan's in bed. It's bedtime for him." Lilly shot him an annoyed look. "What planet are you from?"

Shane realized he was blushing.

"That's enough now. There's no need to be so rude to me. I may not be the best stepfather in the world, but I think it's time for a fresh start. I think you should give me another chance."

"Of course," Lilly said, rolling her eyes and turning away.

"I want a second chance, Lilly."

Lilly didn't respond.

Shane stared at her slender shoulders for a moment, then left the room. As the door closed behind him, he heard the television blaring again. Building a trusting relationship with Lilly wouldn't be easy. A wave of fear washed over him. Farther down the hallway, one door stood open. Shane approached and saw Olga sitting on the edge of a child's bed, where Jan was snuggled beneath the blankets. Both of them looked up when Shane appeared.

"Dad! Where were you?" Jan cried, tears streaming down his cheeks.

Shane hurried over, horrified that his absence had frightened Jan so badly.

"Honey, I fell asleep outside on the grass," Shane said, pulling the little boy into his arms.

He heard Olga snort in disbelief.

"I thought you'd gone away again," Jan whispered, nearly bursting into tears once more.

"I'd never leave without telling you," Shane said softly, stroking his silky hair. Jan looked deep into his eyes.

Shane met his gaze, lost in those small green eyes.

"I'm serious. I love you very much, and I would never do that."

Jan smiled. "Today was such a beautiful day," he whispered.

"I know. And we'll have many more beautiful days like today," Shane promised.

At that moment, he froze. That boy believed he was his Dad. But Jan also knew he wasn't Ethan. What would happen if Shane tried to tell him the truth? How could he possibly explain what they had done? And how would Jan react? Shane felt sick.

"Dad?"

Shane forced himself to smile. He gently stroked the back of Jan's neck.

"Tomorrow will be a beautiful day," Shane said, swallowing hard. His voice sounded as sad as he felt.

Jan smiled and snuggled deeper into his bed.

"I'll check on you again later, okay?" Shane whispered.

Jan nodded, already half asleep.

Out in the hallway, Olga confronted him.

"I don't like this," she hissed.

"You're up to something, and whatever it is, it can't be good. I won't stand by and watch you hurt this child — or Ilya — anymore," Olga snarled. "Do you really think Ilya will change his mind if you play the good father now?"

"Did you finish dinner?" Shane asked quietly.

Olga glared at him. "I assumed you'd eat the snack you didn't touch at noon." Then she marched down the hallway and descended the stairs.

Shane let himself slide down against the wall. Did Olga really believe that? That he was using Jan to change Ilya's mind about the divorce? God damn it. What if Shane was only making everything worse?

One realization struck him hard.

He didn't want to leave. He liked Jan. He wanted everyone to be happy seeing him here — Ilya, Lilly, even vicious old Olga. He wanted to be accepted as part of this family.

But that wasn't all.

He didn't want to leave because, deep down, he wished Ethan's life were his.

Chapter End Notes

so... what do you think?
let me know in the comments!!

btw im on twitter @xoxo333_

Chapter 3: THREE

Chapter Notes

on we go!! i really like this chapter hehe (hope you are too) <33

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Shane turned around and walked down the stairs, lost in thought.

He hadn't even been on McGill for a full day, and already he found himself wanting Ethan's life.

Yes — he wanted it. And it didn't matter that Ilya hated him, because Ilya didn't really hate him as Shane. He hated Ethan.
It made him deeply uncomfortable to realize he was longing for something that belonged to his brother, not to him. There was Jan, whom he already loved like his own son. And Ilya…

But he wasn't even allowed to think that. Ilya Rozanov belonged to Ethan — only to Ethan.

In two days, his brother would come home. To McGill. To Ilya. To Jan. The thought felt strangely awkward, but it was a fact — a hard, cold fact.

No matter how fiercely they were fighting at the moment, his brother loved Ilya.

Shane went into the kitchen. He opened the fridge and stared at a plate of raw tuna which — well — looked very raw. He slammed the door shut.

Olga had gone upstairs into her private realm, Lilly had hidden away in her room, Jan was asleep, and Ilya had gone out to dinner with the Pikes. Shane had noticed a small shopping mall on the way here, along with a few restaurants. So he pulled on one of Ethan's leather jackets and hurried out to the car.

Outside, it was strangely quiet, broken only by the chorus of crickets. The darkness and silence of the rural night felt almost heavenly.

A few minutes later, he wished he could take that thought back.

Driving the fancy car down the hill in complete darkness turned out to be a challenge. The first bend was narrower than Shane remembered, and the car slipped off the small road and into a ditch.

"Fuck."

He realized that the two right wheels were stuck deep in a groove, while the left ones were still on the road. Carefully, he tried to steer the car back onto the asphalt. The car crunched and shuddered — but didn't move an inch.

Shane couldn't believe it. He turned on the interior light and opened the glove compartment. No flashlight.

He got out, stumbled over the uneven ground, and immediately saw how dangerously the car was hanging between the road and the ditch.

"Damn it," he muttered. That was the last thing he needed after today.

Then he froze.

A man was walking toward him along the road.

Shane hurried around the car and opened the trunk. He ripped up the floor cover and pulled out a large, heavy car jack. It was only about 8:30 p.m. — not exactly the middle of the night. Still, who would be walking around here in the dark? This land was privately owned and belonged to McGill.

The man neither hurried nor slowed down. Shane stood by the trunk, watching closely as the figure entered the beam of the headlights.

It was Cliff Marlow.

Shane felt a surge of relief.

"Is there a problem?" Cliff asked.

"You can see that," Shane replied, tossing the jack back into the trunk and slamming it shut.

"Could you maybe help me?" Shane sounded more scared than he liked. He hoped he hadn't damaged Ethan's expensive car.

Cliff seemed to study him in the darkness. „A nice evening for a… trip."

Apparently, Cliff found the situation amusing. Shane didn't like the ambiguity in his tone at all.

"I just wanted to get something to eat," Shane explained, trying to sound polite.

"Is there any particular reason you don't like me, Cliff?"

Cliff laughed.

"As if you didn't know damn well," he said — and Shane didn't. Not at all.

“Can’t we just bury the hatchet?”

“The hell we will. If I get your car out of the ditch, what do I get in return?”

Shane froze. “What?”

Cliff grinned. “You heard me.”

“I’m supposed to promise you something so you help me with a breakdown?” Shane was stunned.

Cliff stepped closer. He wore an open flannel shirt over a white undershirt.

“I don’t like men who turn me on and then give me the cold shoulder, Mr. Rozanov. I really don’t like that.”

What the fuck?!

Cliff was so close now that Shane could clearly see his face — and Cliff noticed the sudden skepticism in his gaze.

“What’s wrong?” Cliff went on. “Surprised I’m calling a spade a spade? I’m getting tired of you staring at me and dancing around in those skinny pants. Tired of fixing this and that for you, just so you can put on a show with your weird yoga poses.”

His face darkened, his anger growing with every word.

“And now you just accidentally drive into a ditch,” Cliff snorted.

At least Shane was sure Ethan hadn’t slept with Cliff. And the relief he felt at that realization told him how much he feared exactly that.

“Forget it,” Shane snapped, turning toward the house.

Cliff grabbed his wrist and spun him around so hard that Shane slammed into his chest.

“It’s time you finally give me what you’ve been waving in my face all this time, Mr. Rozanov,” Cliff said quietly. His beer-scented breath brushed Shane’s cheek.

“I’m not giving you anything,” Shane shouted. “And I have no interest in you — or any man other than my fucking husband!”

He raised his arm, and Cliff let go. Shane stumbled back.

“That was a test, Mr. Rozanov,” Cliff growled. “And you passed. I just can’t figure out why.”

“I’m leaving now — and I’m calling a tow truck!”

Before Shane could walk away, Cliff said softly, “I can’t wait to finally get you.”

“I can get you fired for that.”

Cliff laughed. “I don’t think so.”

Shane desperately wished he understood what was really going on.

Cliff looked at him for a moment, then turned and got into the car.

Shane jumped back. A few seconds later, the car was back on the road.

Shane was shaking when Cliff got out.

“Thanks for helping with the car,” Shane managed, his voice tight. Cliff’s eyes were narrowed with suspicion.

Shane got into the car and slammed the door shut. He didn’t feel safe here either. He knew Cliff was watching him.

Determined, he fixed his gaze on the road and drove off. A quick glance in the rearview mirror showed Cliff still standing in the middle of the road, watching him go.

No one else was out there. That was unsettling — but Shane knew his nerves were frayed after the encounter with Cliff Marlow.

He didn’t want to think about him. He drove a little faster.

He glanced at his phone. No new messages. It felt as though he were standing on quicksand, and a call from Ethan might finally give him solid ground again.

Then he noticed headlights behind him.

He wasn’t alone on the road anymore.

Shane rounded a bend and checked the rearview mirror. The car behind him stayed about forty meters back, matching his speed.

At the next stop sign, Shane turned right. The car behind him turned right as well.

His pulse spiked.

To be sure, Shane turned left at the next intersection.

So did the other car.

Shane froze.

Was he being followed?

No matter how fast or slow he drove, the car behind him kept the same steady distance.

Shane accelerated, and the car behind him accelerated as well. *He was being followed.*

But why? The answer was obvious. Right now, he was Ethan — and Ethan owed a man named Paul Corelli a lot of money. What if Corelli had sent someone after him to intimidate him? Or worse — to hurt Ilya?

His heart racing, Shane took a sharp turn, hit the accelerator, and sped down the road in the opposite direction. He glanced back. His pursuer had pulled over to the side of the road. Apparently, whoever it was had given up.

Shane began to tremble violently. He stopped at a gas station and tried to reach his brother again, but voicemail picked up. Angry and frustrated, Shane immediately switched off the phone.

…

Back home, Shane slipped into a pair of sweatpants and thick wool socks that belonged to Ilya. He opened a beer, turned on the TV, and went to bed with the pizza box. The living room wasn't comfortable enough for him — and he felt watched there. He placed his phone beside him.

Despite the pizza and beer, Shane couldn't stop thinking about the fact that Ilya would come home sooner or later. And then— what would happen?

He could barely follow the conversations on television, but after a second beer and two-thirds of the pizza, he finally relaxed. His eyes were already closed when Ilya suddenly entered the bedroom.

Shane sat up at once, wide awake again. Ilya blinked at him in surprise.

"What are you doing here?" Shane stammered — then realized how stupid the question was.

"I forgot my toothbrush," Ilya said. His blue eyes slowly and thoroughly examined every inch of Shane's body.

He was wearing a suit — clearly dressed up for dinner with Hayden and his wife. Unfortunately, he looked devastatingly attractive, like a model stepping straight out of a fashion magazine. There was something in his eyes that made Shane suspect he'd had more than a few drinks.

Shane swallowed. "Are you saying… you're not sleeping here?"

"That means I've moved everything important — but I forgot the toothbrush. I'm sleeping downstairs in the guest room. And what are you doing?" His gaze reached Shane's socks. No

— *Ilya's* socks.

"I'm eating and watching TV. But I think I'll go to sleep soon."

Ilya crossed his arms over his chest. "That's interesting."

Shane frowned. "Yeah?"

"Since when do you eat pizza? Since when do you eat in bed? And since when do you sleep in *my* socks?"

Shane couldn't stay in that bed another second with Ilya standing in front of it.

He jumped up and crossed his arms as well.

"I'm cold. I don't feel well. I might even have a slight fever." He lied.

"Really?" Ilya raised an eyebrow. "So you drink beer because it's healthy?"

"It's been a long day," Shane said quietly.

"Yes. Indeed." Ilya's gaze fell back to the bed. "Are you expecting another call?"

Shane's heart skipped a beat. He followed Ilya's gaze to the phone lying on the blanket. "Um…"

Ilya's eyes drilled into his. Shane flushed slightly. "I don't care," Ilya said, walking into the dressing room and tearing off his suit jacket.

Shane hurriedly hid the phone and thought: *He cares. He's angry. He's furious with Ethan.*

Ilya was back almost immediately, tugging at his tie. "I know what's going on here," he said harshly.

Shane flinched. "You do?"

"You've come up with a new ploy," Ilya growled, "thinking those big innocent brown eyes, the sloppy clothes, and your sudden fatherly devotion to my son would change my mind. Either that — or you're just trying to confuse me again."

Shane was shaking. "None of that is true," he whispered. "I'm cold, and you have warm socks and—"

"Stop it!" Ilya shouted.

Shane fell silent, stunned by the sudden outburst. Ilya himself seemed surprised by his fury.

They stared at each other — then suddenly the phone rang.

Shane realized he was still holding it. He flinched and stared down at it as it kept ringing.

“There’s a call for you,” Ilya said in a dangerously calm voice. “Aren’t you going to answer it?”

Shane sucked in a breath. “It’s not important—”

“Pick it up,” Ilya ordered.

Shane obeyed, rigid with fear. This was the worst possible moment for Ethan to call.

“Hello?” Shane said cautiously.

“Ethan, it’s Jackie. We missed you at dinner tonight, so I just wanted to check if everything’s okay.”

For a moment, Shane didn’t understand. He met Ilya’s icy gaze. Then it clicked — Jackie Pike. Hayden’s wife.

“You’ve got the wrong number,” Shane said hastily. He hung up and switched off the phone.

Ilya stared at him, his face so hard Shane barely dared to breathe.

“You really are the worst,” Ilya said. “Hopefully this will all be over soon.” He turned away.

Shane rushed after him and grabbed his arm.

“Please — give me chance to explain. Don’t do this to us.”

“There is no *us*,” Ilya replied. His gaze slid shamelessly over Shane’s body. “But you could try to change my mind with that hot body.”

Shane stepped back as if burned. But Ilya’s gaze and his sensual tone made his body heat up instantly.

“No,” Shane whispered, licking his lips. “That wouldn’t be right.”

Ilya laughed. “You don’t give a damn about what’s right. You never have. And we both know you’re crazy about sex.”

Shane could vividly imagine Ilya bending over him, kissing him in bed. God. He had to keep his head clear.

“I am the father of our son, and I love him,” Shane said hoarsely, refusing to be intimidated or distracted. “I know I wasn’t the best Dad before — but that’s over. I’ll start again. I swear to you, Ilya. I’ll prove it.”

Ilya's eyes widened. "Goddamn it — you never call me Ilya. What the hell is this?"

Shane flinched. He couldn't afford another mistake. If he slipped now, Ilya would realize he wasn't Ethan.

Nervously, Shane ran his tongue over his lips again. Ilya's gaze followed the movement.

"Maybe we can love each other again — like we used to."

"*Maybe we can love each other again like we used to?*" Ilya repeated, raising his eyebrows.

"We never loved each other. Or rather — you never loved *me*. There was something else that connected us, and you know it."

His anger was palpable. His gaze skimmed Shane's hips, his chest, his lips.

Shane wanted to argue — but couldn't say a word. Eventually, Ilya lifted his glittering gaze and looked him straight in the eyes.
"My decision is final," he said quietly.

Shane struggled to think. How could the mere presence of a man arouse him like this? Even though he belonged to his brother — despite the ugly fight between them?

"Never say never," Shane whispered.

Ilya's jaw tightened. "You know," he said slowly, stepping closer, "this outfit is far more seductive than those expensive clothes you usually wear."

He moved closer and closer. Shane stood rooted to the spot.

"Really?" Shane stammered.

Ilya stopped right in front of him.

"Yes." He raised his hand, brushed Shane's hard nipple with his thumb through the thin fabric, and Shane let out a soft, helpless cry.

Ilya grabbed him, pressed Shane's body against his own, and lowered his mouth to Shane's neck, tasting him with lips, tongue, and teeth.

Ilya's body felt like solid muscle. Shane's felt like cotton.

Suddenly, Ilya shoved Shane's T-shirt up, lowered his mouth, and sucked hard at his nipple.

Oh fucking God.

Shane's mind shut down. Desire surged through his veins.

He was naked beneath the sweatpants and felt Ilya's palm clearly — large, firm, warm — taking full possession of him.

Ilya began stroking him rhythmically, and Shane arched toward him, desperate for more.

"You're already ready for me?" Ilya gasped.

Shane met his gaze and saw surprise there. And then — clarity snapped back. *This is Ethan's husband.*

In the same instant, Ilya's expression darkened. He shoved Shane away as Shane pulled back at the same time.

His face was tense with desire as he stared at Shane as if he were the devil himself.

"Maybe you'd better go now," Shane said, trembling, fighting the urge to cry.

Ilya's eyes narrowed suspiciously.

"You really got me with this new scam — the big eyes, the cute hair. Looks like you won this round."

"No," Shane whispered miserably. "I'm not playing…"

But that was exactly what he was doing — and it was a horrible game of lies and betrayal.

Suddenly, Ilya grabbed his arm. "Do you think I'm stupid?" His voice shook with anger — whether at Shane or at himself, Shane couldn't tell.

"You know what? We're married. And it's been a long time since we slept together, my dear. And right now, I can't think of a better farewell."

It's been a long time since he slept with Ethan.

"How long?" Shane asked breathlessly. He had to know.

Ilya stared at him. "What?"

Shane swallowed. "Please… help me remember."

"The night after the May Ball," Ilya said. "Have you forgotten how we fucked our brains out on Sara's bed?"

Shane crossed his arms over his aching chest.

"I haven't forgotten. I just wanted to know if you remembered."

He hadn't slept with Ethan for about half a year.

Ilya's face twisted with disgust.

"Bullshit. You don't remember because you've slept with a dozen people since then." He shook his head, forcing himself under control.

"You're right — this was a bad idea."

He turned away abruptly.

"Wait!" Shane called.

Ilya stopped but didn't turn back.

Shane closed his eyes — still burning with desire, but now clear-headed again.

"I'm sorry," he said at last.

Ilya left the room.

-

He had a sleepless night behind him — mainly because of Ilya, but also because someone had followed him to the pizzeria the day before. Shane had tossed and turned, worrying about what would come next — with Corelli, with Ethan, with Ilya.

At 6:30 a.m., he got up, drank a coffee, and woke Jan.

Jan smiled sleepily, then sat bolt upright. "Dad!"

"Time to get up, little man," Shane said, stroking Jan's dark hair.

Shane had learned that Olga followed a strict routine. Jan was woken at seven and taken to nursery school at eight.

Jan grinned at him. "But what are *you* doing here?"

"I'm helping you get ready for nursery school," Shane replied, hugging him tightly.

Someone cleared their throat at the door. Shane knew that sound — it could only belong to a disapproving Olga. He put on a cheerful smile and turned toward her.

"Good morning," she said, her tone just as sunny as her expression.

"Shall I assume you plan to wash and dress Jan today?"

“Yes,” Shane replied, smiling.

Olga stared at him darkly, turned on her heel, and left.

…

Shane and Jan devoured a large plate of pancakes. Jan talked nonstop about his best friend Chris, Chris’s dog, and the fact that Ilya had apparently promised him a puppy. Jacob’s dog was going to be a father soon.

The back door slammed shut. Shane didn’t need to ask who had entered the house — he just knew. The pancake nearly stuck in his throat, and he froze over his plate.

Ilya walked into the kitchen, and Shane couldn’t help looking up. He was wearing jeans, a beige sweater, a dark blue jacket, and boots. He had clearly just come from the stables — and he looked fucking hot.

Shane tried not to choke on his pancake when Ilya’s gaze landed on him. He felt his face heat up instantly.

Ilya’s eyes were cold as ice. Then he smiled and bent down to Jan, and his expression softened — warm, gentle, full of love. Shane’s heart skipped painfully as he watched Ilya press a tender kiss into Jan’s hair.

“How are you, sweetheart?” Ilya asked.

“Dad woke me up this morning! And he helped me wash and get dressed!” Jan exclaimed excitedly.

“How nice for you,” Ilya murmured, still smiling.

Ilya was so gentle with Jan. *So gentle.*

It hurt — hurt deeply — that he loathed Shane so much. Especially since he didn’t even know him.

Ilya looked up at Shane. Shane shrugged slightly but held his gaze. Ilya smiled faintly. “I’m taking him to nursery school.”

“No, Daddy!” Jan protested. “Dad wants to drive me! You never do that. In the mornings you always work with Jacob and train the horses.”

“You know what, sweetheart?” Ilya said calmly. “I’ll pick you up later. And your father can take you this morning. That’s fair, isn’t it?”

Shane didn’t turn around, but he could practically feel Ilya’s surprise.

Jan blinked. “Really?”

Shane nodded.

“Okay.” Jan returned to his pancakes, and Ilya turned away.

Shane tried to smile, lost his nerve, and said quietly, “I have to leave.”

He fled.

…

The house felt empty once Jan and Ilya were gone.

Shane hurried out, leaving Olga behind in the kitchen to clean up after breakfast.

He pulled Ethan’s phone from the leather jacket and turned it on. No new messages. Ethan still hadn’t called back.

Shane wasn’t surprised. By now, he was fairly certain that Ethan wasn’t carrying his phone. And if Shane had survived yesterday — especially last night — he would survive today too.

He refused to think about Ilya’s touch, about his hard, aroused body. Tonight Ethan would be back — or maybe not until tomorrow morning. Suddenly, Shane found himself wishing his brother wouldn’t arrive so soon, despite the person who had followed him the night before.

He slipped the phone back into his pocket and slowly walked toward the large building where he had watched Jan the day before.

He went to the next stable, where a magnificent, glossy brown horse stood watching him through the iron bars of its stall.

“Hey there,” Shane murmured, smiling at the horse.

“Isn’t he gorgeous?” Jacob’s voice startled him.

“Oh yes. He really is,” Shane replied.

“He’s been doing well since you left.”

Shane nodded and glanced around. A nameplate hung on the wall.

Pride — Ethan Rozanov

“You’re looking much better,” Jacob observed. “Not so tense anymore.”

Shane took a deep breath and stepped into the stall. Pride snorted happily, and Shane stroked his velvety-soft nose.

“I still feel a little weak,” he muttered.

What wouldn’t he give to ride this magnificent horse? But — why not?

He turned around. “Jacob? I think I could go for a short ride. I haven’t been in the saddle for a while.”

Jacob grinned. “That’s the spirit. I kept him on the lunge while you were gone so he wouldn’t get too energetic.”

“Perfect!” Shane said and impulsively hugged him. „Ugh, thank you.“ His heart was pounding with excitement, and Jacob noticed his grin.

“I’ll be right back,” Shane said and hurried out of the stable.

Jacob laughed. “Take your time! Pride won’t run off without you!”

As Shane quickly pulled on riding breeches, a sweater, and a warm jacket, anticipation chased away some of his doubts and fears. He hid Ethan’s phone in a trash bin.

Fifteen minutes later, he returned to the stable — and was surprised to find Pride already fully saddled and bridled.

“I could’ve done that myself,” Shane muttered, patting the horse’s long neck.

Jacob gave him a curious look. “You always say that,” he replied dryly.

Yes. Shane should have known.

A few minutes later, Shane sat in the saddle, filled with a wonderful sense of safety. The saddle fit perfectly — Ethan and he were almost the same size and weight.

“See you later, Jacob,” Shane called, grinning.

“Have fun!” Jacob shouted back, turning away.

Shane rode out into the open fields between the stables and soon settled into Pride’s rhythm.

Birds circled above them, and Shane spoke softly to Pride — to calm both of them.

“Let’s try a trot,” he murmured.

Pride obeyed, and Shane worked a little to keep him at a steady pace.

He grinned with pleasure, enjoying how easy Pride was to ride, and patted his neck in praise.

Ahead of them stood a fence. Apparently, obstacles like these were scattered across the countryside for riders’ enjoyment. Shane hesitated — the fence was nearly a meter high, and

he was out of practice.

Then he urged Pride forward.

With ears pricked, Pride took the jump smoothly, clearing it as if it were nothing more than a ground pole.

“Hey — you’re incredible!”

Now Shane felt safe. In a relaxed canter, they cleared half a dozen fences.

He felt proud of himself. His seat and balance were decent, and despite not knowing the horse well, they worked in perfect harmony. Pride was clearly an excellent jumper, responsive and willing.

Ahead stood a small, red-painted chicken enclosure. Triangular in shape, it was a good ten centimeters higher than any obstacle they had jumped so far.

Shane collected Pride as they approached and silently counted the strides.

Four.
Three.
Two—

He was just about to breathe one when a shot rang out.

Pride shied violently to the left. Shane felt something whistle past his ear.

He lost his balance, flew over the horse’s neck and the obstacle, and slammed hard onto his back. His head snapped back, and for a moment everything dissolved into blurred shadows.

Then he blinked, gasped, and realized he had fallen from the horse — his head striking the ground.

The world stopped.

He had heard a shot.

Someone had fired at him.

Shane sucked in air, panic flooding him. His thoughts dissolved into fragments — *Ethan. Corelli. Murder.*

Gasping, he rolled onto his side and crawled toward the abandoned chicken enclosure.

From the corner of his eye, he saw Pride standing several meters away, staring at him.

Shane didn’t move. Someone had fired a gun. He had felt the bullet pass his cheek.

That could mean only one thing.

Someone had tried to kill him — or rather, Ethan.

Sweat burned his eyes. He crawled into the shelter of the enclosure and lay flat on his stomach. He didn’t know what to do. He was terrified to stand up — what if there was another shot?

But panic wouldn’t help him now.

Carefully, Shane sat up, leaned his back against the wooden wall, and drew his knees to his chest. Would Pride come if he called him?

Suddenly, a twig snapped — not near the horse, but farther to the right, toward the forest.

He heard rustling in the bushes.

Shane dropped to his knees, crawled through the grass to the other side of the narrow wall, and carefully peeked around the corner.

Nothing — just trees. Sweat blurred his vision. Pride snorted and stamped nervously.

“Easy,” Shane whispered hoarsely.

He crawled forward a little, then froze.

Something moved.

A shadow — dark green, pressed against the trunk of a massive oak.

The silhouette of a human.

Someone hiding. Someone as still as he was.

Shane quickly withdrew behind the enclosure.

Another branch cracked — loud enough that Shane briefly mistook it for another shot. Pride snorted and bolted, galloping away. But no second shot followed.

Still lying flat, Shane crawled to the other side of the obstacle and watched Pride flee toward the stables. Despair clenched his chest.

Another branch snapped — softer this time. Closer.

Shane ducked, then cautiously lifted his head. He scanned the forest. The silhouette was gone.

Not gone — *moving*.

Shane jumped up and ran, expecting a shot at any second. Nothing happened as he sprinted to the next obstacle.

Had it been a warning shot?

Breathing hard, Shane leaned against the fence and pulled off his helmet. His head throbbed painfully. He felt a large swelling at the back of his skull.

He looked around again. He was alone.

Enough.

He needed answers. And he needed the police.

Clutching his helmet under his arm, Shane started the long walk back.

Five minutes later, a rider appeared at the edge of the pasture. Shane stopped at once.

Ilya.

He looked at Shane with sharp concern. “Are you all right?”

Shane’s head pounded, but he nodded. “Yes.”

Ilya dismounted without taking his eyes off him.

“Pride came back to the stable alone. Did you fall?” His gaze swept over Shane’s grass-stained clothes. The answer was obvious.

Shane wanted to tell him everything. Instead, he swallowed hard and clutched his helmet.

“Are there hunters around here?”

Ilya’s eyes widened. “On my private land? Absolutely not. What the hell happened? How did you fall?”

Shane couldn’t hold it in any longer.

“Someone shot at me. We were about to jump that chicken enclosure. Pride swerved left — and I went right!”

Ilya stared at him for a moment, stunned. Then he said flatly, “No one shot at you.”

“Ilya!” Shane’s whole body shook. “I *heard* the shot — and I felt the bullet pass my cheek!” He met Ilya’s gaze, defiant and desperate.

Ilya remained silent for several long seconds.

“Are you sure it was a shot and not something else?” he asked so quietly that Shane felt like kicking him.

“Yes!!” Tears welled up in his eyes.

Ilya immediately laid a hand on his shoulder. “Relax. You’re all right.”

The warmth of Ilya’s hand worked wonders, and Shane instantly felt safer. He looked up at him. “I’m fucking scared.”

He wanted to tell him that it must have been a loan shark named Corelli. But he wasn’t allowed to do that. He had promised his brother something, and he had to stick to it for a few more hours.

“Ethan, I don’t think anyone shot at you. Why would somebody do that?”

Shane pressed his lips tightly together and didn’t answer.

“You’re not very popular around here, but I’m sure no one wants you dead.”

Ilya didn’t smile; he looked at him grimly. “At least nobody takes it so seriously that they’d actually shoot at you.”

Shane rolled his eyes. “You are an asshole.”

Ilya looked at him thoughtfully. “You have more enemies than a busload of cops put together. You could say you collect them like bees collect honey.”

Shane was appalled. “That’s not true!”

Ilya shook his head, annoyed. “Do you want to deny that men and women all over the country hate you? Have you ever heard a gunshot before?”

Why should all men and women hate him? But Shane knew what Ilya meant.

“Well, only in movies,” Shane mumbled.

“See? Then that wasn’t a shot.”

Shane grabbed his arm. “Yes, it was a shot!” The sudden movement made him dizzy, but he ignored it. “Somebody shot at me, Ilya. I saw a man hiding in the woods, and then all at once he was gone.”

Ilya’s jaw muscles tightened.

“The hunting season doesn’t start for another two weeks. I’ll call the police as soon as we get home.”

Shane looked into his blue eyes. “Do you really believe that? That someone tried to hunt on your property and accidentally shot me?”

“If there was a shot at all, I’m sure it must have been something like that,” Ilya said. Suddenly, he handed Shane the reins. “Put on your helmet,” Ilya added quietly. “And get on Anya.”

Shane couldn’t move. But there was an old rule every rider knew — if you had fallen, you had to get back on immediately, or you might never do it again.

Shane put on the helmet, winced in pain, and as he fastened the strap tightly, he met Ilya’s gaze. Ilya simply nodded and encouraged him with a faint smile.

He stood behind Shane to help him mount Anya. Right now, it would have been so easy to turn around and sink into his arms.

But Shane kept his eyes forward and didn’t look back when Ilya helped him into the saddle.

“Take a few deep breaths,” Ilya said when Shane finally dared to look down at him.

“You’ve done that jump a hundred times before. You can do the same with your eyes closed.”

Shane nodded. It felt like the right moment to tell Ilya everything.

“You don’t have to do anything except sit there and look pretty, all right?”

Ilya patted his thigh. “Sit deep,” he added warningly.

“Sure,” Shane croaked. Ilya’s gaze shot to his eyes in concern, but Shane looked away.

Nervously, he picked up the reins. The horse beneath him shook its head and grew impatient. Shane tried to relax, but with Ilya watching and that graceful horse under him, he couldn’t manage it.

The jump loomed higher and closer in front of him. Shane felt stiff, and Ilya must have noticed.

“Relax! Sit deeper! Upright!” Ilya shouted.

They were four strides away, and Shane tried to follow Ilya’s instructions. The horse beneath him moved beautifully. He could make it. He had to make it. Ilya was watching.

Two more strides.

“Hold on to the mane!” Ilya shouted sharply.

Anya took off, and Shane grabbed a handful of mane. They landed, Shane was thrown forward, and he knew he'd botched the jump — but at least he hadn't fallen.

He brought the horse down to a trot, turned him around, and halted in front of Ilya.

Ilya stared at him with that look Shane already knew. His eyes said, *What the hell is going on here?*

But then Ilya smiled quickly. "You did it. That's all that matters."

"I ended up on his neck like a miserable heap," Shane said regretfully, patting the horse's neck to thank him for his calmness and reliability.

He avoided Ilya's gaze. He probably knew something hadn't been right. Ethan would never be this tense — not even after a fall.

"Sorry," Shane muttered.

"You were scared," Ilya said. His gaze drilled into Shane's. "You were afraid of the jump."

Shane felt his confusion, his doubts. Ilya was trying to understand how Ethan — who feared nothing — could be afraid of this small chicken enclosure.

"I was expecting a bullet any second."

Ilya didn't look away. "I suppose that would explain it."

"Ilya?" The truth hovered on the tip of Shane's tongue.

"You stay on Anya. I'll walk," Ilya said, his head lowered.

They crossed the field back toward McGill. Ilya walked beside the horse. Shane's heart raced. Why had he suddenly lost all his courage? To hell with the promise. But after a while, he decided to wait until Ethan was back. Let his brother explain the deception — which had been his idea in the first place.

"Ilya?" Shane sounded frightened again. Ilya looked up at him.

"Thank you," Shane said softly, meeting his eyes, searching.

Ilya's face hardened. "That doesn't change anything."

"Why not? Now I realize that… I mean something to you." *God, how painful that was.*

"I'm only human, Ethan. A compassionate man — as you should know very well."

Shane hesitated, feeling himself blush slightly. But he couldn't stop himself.

“Last night, you felt more than compassion.”

Ilya stumbled. Then he looked up, his eyes flashing angrily at Shane.

“Do you expect me to deny that? I’m not a hypocrite. So yes — compassion was the last thing I felt last night.”

“Then why? Why insist on a divorce when there’s hope?”

“Did I say anything about hope? Sleeping with you has nothing to do with hope at all.” He sounded angry.

“Why are you so angry with me? What have I done wrong now?” Shane hissed. “Jesus Christ, someone just shot at me!”

Ilya stopped in front of him and grabbed the horse’s reins.

“That’s exactly the point!” Ilya shouted. “Those brown eyes looking at me so innocent and wounded — you hurt *me*, not the other way around. So stop pretending to be sweet and innocent!”

He let go of the reins, stomped away, and called back over his shoulder, “And no one shot at you, goddamn it!”

…

Shane locked himself in the bathroom, took two painkillers, and stood under the shower. He had just dried off when there was a knock at the door.

“Doctor Mitchell will be here soon,” Ilya said.

Another person had entered the stage, and Shane felt he could no longer cope with his role as Ethan.

“I don’t need a doctor!”

There was a short pause. “Are you all right?”

“Yes! That’s why I don’t need anyone!” Shane shouted.

“I still think it would be better if he checked on you.”

Ilya’s footsteps moved away.

Shane slipped into jogging pants and one of Ilya’s sweaters before unlocking the door and leaving the bathroom.

The bedroom door was open, and in the doorway stood a round-faced man with a friendly smile. Ilya was with him, still wearing his riding clothes.

“Hello, Ethan!” the doctor said.

Shane forced a smile. “Hello, Doc.”

The man looked slightly puzzled.

“Uh — Mitchell,” Shane added hastily. The doctor and Ilya exchanged a glance.

“Maybe he hit his head harder than we thought,” the doctor said. “It’s obvious he has a headache.”

How does he know?

Doctor Mitchell smiled at him. “Well, let’s take a look.” He went to the bed, and Ilya left the room, closing the door behind him.

Shane sank onto the bed.

“What are you doing?” Mitchell asked gently. His eyes were so kind that Shane told him the truth.

“I have no fucking idea,” Shane muttered.

Mitchell patted his shoulder. “You look like a college student with that haircut, Ethan.”

Shane looked at him. “Thank you.”

“Does Ilya like it?”

Shane sighed. “I don’t think so. But he doesn’t like me very much anyway, does he?”

Strangely enough, Shane felt the urge to confide in this man.

“Relax so I can examine you,” Mitchell said, gently placing his hands on Shane’s head.

“It’s never too late to reconcile — at least, that’s my opinion.”

Shane flinched. “Do you think it could work for us?”

He realized Mitchell was probably not only a doctor, but also a friend of Ilya’s.

“Well, that depends. Especially on you,” Mitchell said with a smile. “You’ve got quite a bump there, don’t you think?”

Shane ignored the question and asked another one instead.

“What am I supposed to do if I want to win him back?”

Mitchell finished examining his head and sat down beside him, as if to see whether Shane was serious.

“Why do you want him back — now, of all days?”

Shane swallowed. “Our marriage is important to me. And… there’s Jan.”

Mitchell stared at him in silence. “Strange words coming from you,” he said — not unkindly, just confused.

“How else do you feel?” Mitchell asked.

Shane sighed. “I have a terrible headache. And sometimes when I stand up, I get dizzy. I feel a bit nauseous too.”

“You’ve probably got a mild concussion,” Mitchell said, then paused.

“You haven’t said anything about love yet.”

“I really love him,” Shane replied, blushing despite himself.

Mitchell studied him, then stood. “I believe you. I see nothing but sincerity in your eyes. I know we’ve had our differences, but I always tried not to judge you. I admit, I had my doubts from the moment you announced your engagement.” He smiled. “I’m glad you seem to have thought about many things.”

Shane smiled faintly.

“Let’s take care of your head again. Did you throw up?”

“No. It’s not that bad — just strange.”

“That’s good. Then tell me about the fall,” Mitchell said, sitting down again.

Shane told him everything — but said nothing about the shot.

“All right. I’m confident you have a mild concussion. Still, we should get an X-ray — this afternoon or tomorrow morning. Until then, rest. Stay in bed.”

“For how long?” Shane asked.

“I’ll decide after seeing the X-rays,” Mitchell said with a friendly smile as he picked up his bag.

"I'll give Ilya a prescription for painkillers, but I doubt you'll need them until tomorrow."

Shane nodded, hesitating. "Mitchell? Do I have a chance? Or does Ilya really hate me?"

Mitchell looked at him for a long moment.

"I don't know. If I hadn't had this unusual conversation with you, I'd say no. But I think you've been thinking a lot about yourself. Once Ilya realizes you're sincere, you might be able to win him back."

Shane smiled weakly. Why wasn't he happy that there was hope for Ilya and Ethan?

There was a knock at the door, and Mitchell called Ilya in.

"So?" Ilya asked briefly.

"No arguments," Mitchell said with a smile at Shane. "Doctor's orders."

"Excuse me?" Ilya looked from Shane to Mitchell.

Mitchell put a hand on Ilya's arm. "He has a concussion and needs a lot of rest. We should talk outside."

Ilya's face tightened. "I'm not surprised."

"And doesn't he look like a student with that hair?" Mitchell grinned.

Shane knew what Mitchell was trying to do — to soften Ilya toward him. Silently, he thanked heaven for Mitchell's kindness.

Ilya glanced at Mitchell. "Yeah… nice," he said, then turned to Shane. His gaze wandered over Shane's face until it lingered on his lips.

"We'll talk later," he said quietly, then followed Mitchell out.

Shane carefully settled back into the pillows and closed his eyes. Exhaustion washed over him. Almost immediately, someone shook him.

"Ethan? Ethan! Wake up!"

Shane opened his eyes and found himself staring into the bluest, gentlest eyes he had ever seen.

With Ilya's help, he sat up. Moments later, they were sitting side by side on the bed.

"I hate to do this, but you can't sleep right now," Ilya said.

“What?”

“Mitch wants me to keep an eye on you for the next twelve hours. You need to be woken up every half hour.”

Shane stared at him. Then he understood — if his head injury was severe, he could fall asleep and slip into a coma.

“Mitch said it wasn’t that bad,” Shane replied, suddenly scared.

“He’s making us an appointment at the hospital tomorrow. I just sent Cliff to get your painkillers,” Ilya added, finally smiling.

Shane smiled back. “Thank you,” he whispered, reaching for Ilya’s hand without thinking.

Ilya looked from Shane’s face to their hands. Then he withdrew his hand and stood up.

“I have to pick up Jan now,” he murmured.

Shit. Shit. Shit. Jan was expecting Shane to get him.

“Oh my God — he’s expecting me! I have to go!” Shane cried.

Jan was just beginning to trust him. He couldn’t disappoint him now.

“You’re doing nothing,” Ilya said, staring at him in disbelief. “I’ll explain what happened.”

Tears filled Shane’s eyes. “That’s not enough. I can’t disappoint him,” he said, throwing off the blanket and jumping out of bed.

Dizziness hit him immediately. Ilya caught him, and suddenly Shane was in his strong arms.

“What do you think you’re doing?” Ilya demanded harshly.

“You’re so dizzy you can barely stand. And Mitch gave us clear instructions — we’re following them.” He guided Shane back onto the bed, where Shane sank down again.

“I’m going to pick up Jan now. Olga will take care of you,” Ilya said.

Shane nodded. His nerves were shot. Jan was only four — he wouldn’t understand.

Ilya walked toward the door.

“But please don’t scare him. Just tell him I had a small accident and that it’s nothing serious.”

Ilya stopped abruptly and turned around. Confusion and doubt were written all over his face.

“I’d really like to know what’s actually going on here.”

Shane didn’t move. “What do you mean?” he asked anxiously.

“I mean I know you pretty damn well. And this isn’t you. My husband wouldn’t give a damn about picking up Jan today — not after a fall like that. This has gone far enough, Ethan. You need to stop playing this game.” Ilya was furious.

Shane struggled to breathe. “Ilya, this isn’t a game. Not anymore. Please believe me.”

“You even got Mitch on your side!” Ilya snapped. “How the hell did you manage that?” His anger kept rising.

“I told him the truth,” Shane whispered. “I told him how I feel.”

Ilya stared at him, and Shane took a deep breath.

“Ilya? I need to ask you something. It’s about who shot at me earlier.”

Ilya flinched. “What?”

“Have you ever heard the name Paul Corelli?” Shane asked, his cheeks burning. His thoughts were racing, and he could barely grasp what he had just said.

“No,” Ilya replied. “Let me guess — one of your discarded lovers?”

Shane gasped in horror.

“Do you remember when we had those problems with the banks? When McGill was about to be seized?”

Ilya’s eyes widened. “What the hell are you talking about?”

“I’m talking about when we almost lost McGill.”

Ilya stared at him.

“What is this supposed to be now? I was never even close to losing McGill. It’s mine — no mortgages, no debts. And that has never been any different.”

Chapter End Notes

so... what do you think?
let me know in the comments!!

btw im on twitter @xoxo333_

Chapter 4: FOUR

Chapter Notes

Sorry to keep you waiting!

Enjoy reading <33

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The pain flared up again. With his head pounding, Shane stared at Ilya, who was storming out of the room and nearly slammed the door behind him.

Ethan had lied.

No one wanted to seize McGill. It was Ilya's property, free of mortgages or debts. Why would Ethan tell such a lie?

Did that mean Ethan wasn't even in debt to that Paul Corelli? Then why was Shane at McGill, impersonating his brother? And why had someone followed him last night and tried to shoot him this morning?

What the hell was going on?

Shane's first impulse was to run after Ilya, explain everything to him, and ask for his help. Instead, he held his head in his hands, sat down on the bed, and tried to think.

Ethan wasn't evil. His lies were meant only to avert trouble. Obviously, he was in trouble. There was no other explanation for the fact that he had lied to Shane so outrageously and asked him to take his place here.

Shane was appalled. He felt like a blind man trapped in a giant maze. But what could he do?

He told himself to calm down. As he inhaled and exhaled slowly and deeply, his thoughts became clearer. Ethan would come back. Shane preferred to believe that he would return as promised, after two days. That meant in a few hours — or the next morning.

Shane swallowed. He could only fear the worst. Ethan really had to be in danger. It had to be about nothing less than his life. Only a terrible threat could justify such a massive lie. If Shane revealed himself now, would he unwittingly put his brother in even greater danger?

That was hard to say, because Shane had no idea what was really going on. But if that Corelli guy didn't exist, who was after Ethan?

Ilya had said he had many enemies.

Shane fought against the rising panic. Ilya had said no one hated him enough to kill him.

Shane went into the bathroom to retrieve Ethan's phone from the trash can. He hoped — however unlikely — that Ethan might have called him back. But to his horror, the phone was gone.

Shane sat down on the edge of the bathtub, tears welling up in his eyes. How was Ethan supposed to reach him now?

He would have loved to nestle against Ilya's shoulder. But since Ethan wouldn't have done that, Shane had better not do it either. He was terribly afraid that his actions might make his brother's situation even worse. But damn it — Ethan should have told him the truth!

Shane went over to the dressing room. There had to be a clue somewhere. He searched thoroughly through every compartment and drawer, but apart from clothes and accessories, he found only a few receipts.

With his heart pounding, he began to search through Ilya's things. He shoved jeans and trousers aside, peeked beneath socks and underwear. He was scanning the floor behind Ilya's shoes on his hands and knees when he sensed that he was no longer alone.

He slowly turned around. Olga was standing in the bedroom, watching him.

Shane met her gaze defiantly. That woman couldn't stand him. Shane didn't know why, but it was obvious.

"Are you spying on me?" he asked tensely, slowly getting to his feet. Too late, he noticed that the dressing room looked as if a burglar had been there.

"Spying? I don't think so." Olga was holding a tray in her hands. "Your painkillers. Cliff brought them."

Shane stared at the housekeeper.

"Why are you staring at me like that?" Olga asked. "Did I suddenly grow horns?"

The idea that Olga might have shot him was absurd. Right?

"I don't know. Do you have any?" Shane asked, stepping into the bedroom with his shoulders raised.

"What do you mean?" Olga snapped.

Shane held her gaze. "What have I ever done to make you hate me so much?"

Olga's eyes widened. Then she put the tray down, shook her head, and turned to leave.

“Wait!” Shane shouted. “That was a serious question. I want to know.”

Olga turned back. “I doubt it. Ilya may believe that you simply fell off a horse and got hurt, but you made a fool of him from the very first moment, didn’t you?”

“I really did fall off my horse,” Shane said. “Someone shot at me, Olga.”

Olga snorted incredulously.

“You still haven’t answered my question,” Shane insisted. “You can’t hate me just for falling in love with Ilya!”

Olga crossed her arms. “You don’t love Ilya. You never did.”

Shane froze. “That’s not true.”

Ilya’s accusation — that Ethan had married him only for his money — suddenly resurfaced in Shane’s mind. It was too outrageous, too ugly for Ilya to think such a thing, so Shane had rejected it outright. But he couldn’t completely escape it. The core of the statement had lodged itself in his thoughts.

Olga’s face darkened. “You never loved him! I’ve known him since he was a little boy. To me, he’s the son I never had. I bandaged his scraped knees, gave him courage before every tournament, and sat by his side when his wife was dying. Day after day. I serve him lovingly and selflessly, just as I once served his father. That’s why I’m still here at McGill, holding everything together! And that’s why I’m not willing to tolerate your miserable games.“

Shane was terrified by the anger in Olga’s face and tried to process her words. Why hadn’t Ethan told him?

“You worked for his father too?”

“Oh, please! As if you don’t know that very well. Sergej’s wife also died young—in a tragic riding accident. Ilya was just a little boy. He needed me, just as his father did.” She glared at Shane. “I’m wondering what you’re trying to achieve with this charade.”

Shane was shaking. He knew he was on thin ice. But he was even more determined to keep covering for his brother until Ethan returned and explained everything himself.

“Someone shot at me today,” Shane said tensely. “That’s why I fell off my horse. Someone tried to kill me.”

Olga stared at him in silence. She showed no visible reaction. The woman had an iron will and almost uncanny self-control.

“Can you imagine who could hate me so much that they’d try to kill me?” Shane asked harshly.

Olga blinked. “No. I don’t know who hates you enough to kill you, Ethan. But I do know you haven’t made many friends here. And I know you have many enemies.”

Shane stared at her, unsettled. Was Olga implying that she wouldn’t be surprised if someone tried to kill him?

“Then explain to me — just for fun — who I’m dealing with,” Shane said thoughtlessly.

Olga snorted. “I have no idea,” she muttered and turned to leave.

Shane ran after her and grabbed her arm.

“Let’s say the intention wasn’t to kill me,” he said. “Let’s say someone just wanted to hurt me — or scare me.”

Olga tore herself free. “To hurt you the way you’ve hurt everyone else? I don’t know. But if I were you, I’d start counting.”

“Counting what?” Shane asked, an unpleasant feeling settling in his stomach.

“Your lovers — and their bitter, vengeful wives and husbands,” Olga replied.

So Ethan slept with women too. He had cheated on Ilya with men and women?

—

When Shane woke up, he didn’t know where he was. Bright sunlight flooded the room, as if it were early morning — but it had to be late afternoon.

He sat up, first confused, then horrified. How could it already be tomorrow? After the ugly confrontation with Olga, he had lain down immediately after taking the painkillers.

He glanced at the alarm clock on the nightstand and realized it was already eight o’clock in the morning.

He had slept through the night, and Ethan still hadn’t returned. Or had he?

He hadn’t even seen Jan yesterday, and by now the boy should be back at nursery school. A sharp pain stabbed at Shane’s chest. He hadn’t wanted to disappoint Jan — but he probably already had.

Shane got up, shaken. In the bathroom, he brushed his teeth hastily, showered, and slipped into jeans and a sweater.

Downstairs in the kitchen, Lilly was spreading a beige paste on a slice of toast. The tall, blonde girl turned around, saw him, then turned away again, focusing on her toast instead of him.

Today Lilly was dressed entirely in black — black sweater, black jacket, black jeans, and a wide black belt. She wore black sneakers as well.

Shane was relieved. Lilly behaved as if Ethan were standing in front of her — not an unfamiliar brother of her stepfather.

He cleared his throat.

“Is everyone else already gone?” he asked nervously.

Lilly didn’t answer. She carried her plate with the toast and a large glass of green juice — which looked healthy but not very appetizing — over to the breakfast table and sat down.

“Good morning,” Shane tried again, but Lilly didn’t look up. She pulled a newspaper toward herself and pretended to read the front page.

Shane hesitated, then went to the coffee machine and poured himself a cup. Today he needed sugar, and he actually managed to find the sugar bowl in one of the nearby cupboards. He added milk, then sat down opposite Lilly.

“You’re sixteen, but that’s no excuse for such bad manners,” Shane remarked.

The teenager looked up.

“Your hair is a mess,” she said dryly.

Shane smiled.

“It’s a little early for styled hair.”

Lilly frowned and stared at him — especially at his face and hair. Then she stood up.

“You look weird,” she said abruptly. “You look like an idiot.”

Shane jumped up as well and grabbed her thin arm.

“What have I done to you, Lilly?” he asked. “Just tell me.”

Lilly shook him off. “Are you kidding?”

“No, I’m not. I had an accident yesterday — or didn’t anyone tell you?” Shane was tired of being insulted all the time.

Lilly crossed her arms. “I heard,” she muttered.

“I’m not feeling well. I have a concussion, and my head hurts terribly! And on top of that, you’re being incredibly rude.”

Lilly laughed derisively.

“Did you lose your memory too? Is that why you forgot your hair this morning — and why are you drinking your coffee with milk?!”

Shane could only assume that Ethan drank his coffee black. Of course.

“I didn’t think about it. I’m hungry.” That was actually true.

“Ah.” Lilly turned to leave.

“Wait a minute.” Shane stepped in her way. “Why don’t you like me? Is it because of your mother?”

“My mother?” Lilly sounded surprised. “My mother died when I was nine. Sometimes I can’t even remember her.”

Lilly sounded sad somehow. Sad and hurt.

“But she was a thousand times better than you. And much more beautiful.”

Suddenly she turned away, drank her juice, and put the glass into the sink.

If her mother had died seven years ago, then there had been no more than a year between her death and Ilya’s marriage to Ethan. It would be understandable if Lilly had problems with her father’s new marriage, and that could explain her hostility toward Ethan.

Suddenly Shane realized that even Ilya must still have been grieving when he had met Ethan.

He didn’t like that thought. Shane was lost in his reflections and slowly sat down again.

“Are you going to pass out now or what?” Lilly asked.

“Hopefully not,” Shane said, clinging to the edge of the table. “Well, if it’s not about your mother, then what is it about?”

Lilly turned around and leaned against the sink. Her smile was spiteful.

“What this is about? That I think you’re the fucking worst.”

Shane gasped for air, but Lilly didn’t flinch and continued without any hesitation.

“If you think that just because you fell off your horse — if that’s even true — I’d forget how many times you walked into a room and completely ignored me, forget it! If you think I’d forget how many times you cheated on my father, forget it! A riding accident doesn’t change anything!”

With those words, she stomped over to the counter in the middle of the kitchen, grabbed her backpack, and hurried out.

Shane was stunned.

Then he heard footsteps and turned around. They sounded heavy. Cliff appeared in the kitchen doorway, and their eyes met immediately.

He was unshaven, his short hair disheveled, and he looked as if he had just gotten up. His eyes fixed on Shane with a cold stare. How much had he heard?

Cliff smiled at him scornfully.

“Doesn’t look like you’re very well liked around here, does it?”

Shane stared at him and suddenly knew it had been Cliff who had stolen Ethan’s phone from the bathroom. He was certain it hadn’t been a maid. And Cliff must have taken his bag as well.

It was nothing more than a feeling, but it was so strong that Shane didn’t doubt it.

Had he shot at him too?

Cliff didn’t even look like a stable hand — more like someone from the city. But why would he work so far away as an assistant at a stud farm? And for what was probably a low salary?

This man wasn’t what he pretended to be.

“And you?” Shane asked hoarsely. “What do you want?”

Cliff’s next words hit him like a punch.

“What I want?” Cliff laughed and poured himself a cup of coffee as if the house belonged to him.

He looked up at Shane.

“What I want, Mr. Rozanov, is to hunt you down.”

--

Shane’s headache was no longer bad enough to require Dr. Mitchell’s special tablets, so he decided to take a simple aspirin instead.

When he heard Cliff drive away in a battered pickup truck, Shane headed for the stables. Fierce determination pushed him forward. Cliff’s words confirmed that Shane had been right — this man was far more than he appeared at first glance, and Shane intended to find out whether *he* was after him and Ethan.

Shane had already discovered that Jacob's office was located at the back of the building and that there were several small apartments above the first stable.

Cliff lived in one of those apartments.

Shane intended to search it, hoping to find his phone and uncover who Cliff Marlow really was.

Shane felt miserable. Cliff's threat had sounded very personal. Had he meant he was going to kill him? Did this man want revenge — and if so, for what?

Shane briefly wondered whether Ethan had disappeared because he could no longer live at McGill. But he rejected the thought immediately, because that would mean Ethan wouldn't return — ever.

No one was around when he entered the stable, which also housed Pride and Anya. All the horses had already been turned out into the fields, and Shane saw only a young red-haired man cleaning out a stall. He looked like a high school student, and Shane assumed he probably lived in the village and wanted to earn some pocket money.

Shane knew he had to hurry. He had no intention of getting caught in Marlow's apartment. He reached the apartments above the stables at the back of the building.

The first one was apparently unoccupied, but in the second there were plates in the sink and the bed was rumpled. A blue shirt hung over one of the kitchen chairs, and Shane knew he had found the right place.

His heart began to pound. He stopped at the threshold and glanced around to make sure no one was nearby. Then he stepped inside, after a quick look at his watch. It was 9:30 a.m. He wanted to be gone in fifteen minutes at the latest.

Shane looked around. From the window next to the kitchen, he could see the fields stretching toward the country road. From the other window above the bed, he could see the fields where he had ridden the day before.

Apart from the bed, the kitchen table, and two chairs, there was only a large armchair, a small television, a beige sofa, and a coffee table.

Shane closed the door behind him and quickly went to the kitchen area. He opened a drawer and found office supplies. With a grim smile, he took out a handful of receipts, paper clips, pens, an empty notebook, and a pair of scissors.

The name on the receipts was Cliff Marlow. At least that much was genuine.

According to the receipts, Cliff shopped at a hardware store and a drugstore. He had also rented some videos. There was a pack of condoms in the drawer as well. Shane didn't want to think about who Cliff might need those for.

He quickly put everything back and searched the rest of the kitchen. He found pots, pans, crockery, cutlery, and glasses — everything you'd expect in a kitchen. Since there was no desk to go through, Shane turned to the wardrobe. It was twenty to ten now. He had to hurry.

Cliff's jeans lay on the bed, and half a dozen flannel and cotton shirts hung on hangers.

The wardrobe had no drawers. Shane hesitated, then searched the pockets of Cliff's shirts. He found a piece of paper — but it was just another receipt. He sighed, shrugged, and glanced at it anyway.

The receipt was dated two days ago. A taxi receipt.

Shane was one of the few people who kept their taxi receipts, and he knew the piece of paper in his hand very well. It was a receipt from Ottawa.

Exactly two days ago, he had left Ottawa and taken a taxi to the airport before driving Ethan's car to McGill.

Exactly two days ago, Ethan's phone call had woken him in the middle of the night.

And exactly two days ago, Cliff Marlow had taken a taxi ride in Ottawa.

Coincidence?

Shane began to feel seriously ill.

Did Cliff know? Did he know Shane wasn't Ethan?

Suddenly Shane had to sit down. Cliff could have followed Ethan in Ottawa — maybe he had even seen them together. Shane didn't think that was unlikely at all. And if that were the case, what kind of game was Cliff playing with him? Why hadn't he confronted him — or told Ilya? What did he want? And who the hell was he really?

Shane glanced at his watch again, panic rising. It was ten to ten. He had sworn to spend no more than fifteen minutes in this apartment. He didn't want to get caught.

Damn it — how much did Cliff know?

He was the enemy, Shane thought shakily, and he needed only five more minutes.

Shane ran to the kitchen window and looked out. He froze when he saw a pickup truck coming up the driveway, but from this distance he couldn't tell whether it was Ilya's brand-new one or Marlow's old battered truck. Both were blue, though Ilya's was much more elegant.

Shane hurried to the bed and quickly searched the two drawers of the bedside table, even though he knew his time had run out. Gasping, he tossed the pillow aside, but there was

nothing underneath it. Damn it!

He bent down and looked under the bed — and saw a suitcase.

Shane hesitated, imagining Cliff parking just outside. He quickly pulled out the suitcase and tried to open it — but it was locked.

A car door slammed shut nearby. Shane froze.

Then he lifted the suitcase and groaned. It was heavy — there was definitely something inside. The suitcase was too large to shake, but when he tilted it, he felt the contents shift. He shoved it back under the bed, jumped up, and ran to the door.

He opened it a crack and peeked out. The short, dark corridor was empty. Shane slipped out, closed the door quietly and carefully, and crept toward the stairs on tiptoe.

A voice drifted up to him — one he didn't recognize. He couldn't make out the words, but it sounded young, probably the stable boy.

Then a very familiar voice answered. Cliff Marlow said something about going out. Shane clutched the railing of the narrow staircase.

Then there was silence.

He descended one step at a time, pausing when a step creaked loudly enough to wake the dead. He stared downward, expecting Marlow to appear at any moment and ask what he was doing outside his apartment.

But he didn't. So Shane hurried down the remaining steps, turned the corner, and slipped into the stable aisle between the stalls. Thank God no one was there. He forced himself to walk more slowly, reminding himself that he had every right to be in the stable. When he reached the other end of the building, where the large gate stood open, he saw Cliff's battered pickup parked directly in front of it.

Shane hesitated before stepping out into the sunlight. Cliff and the red-haired stable boy were standing next to a tractor with a wagon full of hay bales. Cliff noticed Shane immediately and stared at him.

When their eyes met, Shane suddenly remembered that he had closed the door to Cliff's apartment behind him — when it had been open when he entered.

—

"Do you always make house calls?" Shane asked.

Mitch smiled at him after finishing his examination.

"Yes, I do. I'm a bit old-fashioned when it comes to my practice," he said kindly. "The

swelling is only half the size it was. You'll be fine."

Shane glanced around the bedroom. After Lilly had gone to school, Ilya and Mitch had come into the kitchen. It was still early in the morning, and Shane had been sitting there on edge, expecting a call from Ethan at any moment telling him he was on his way back to McGill.

Now Ilya stood in the doorway, wearing bleached jeans, leather boots, and a sweater that made his eyes look incredible. His expression was unreadable.

If he was still worried about Shane, he didn't show it.

"Any more dizziness or nausea?" Mitch asked.

Shane hesitated and glanced at Ilya. Ilya met his gaze, and Shane looked away again.

"I think I'm fine now," he said, casting another quick look at Ilya. "No dizziness, no nausea. I slept like a stone last night."

Ilya's eyes narrowed.

"Well, I'm glad to hear that." Mitch stood up. "Stay away from the horses for about a week and don't exert yourself — maybe just short walks. Otherwise, do whatever feels comfortable. We don't need an X-ray, since you're clearly feeling much better."

Ilya stepped forward. "A remarkably rapid recovery," he remarked.

Mitch looked at him. "The swelling on the back of his head is only half the size it was yesterday, Ilya. That's a very good sign."

Ilya looked at Shane. Shane noticed that now that the accident was over, Ilya had become hostile and suspicious again. He was grateful that Mitch seemed to be on his side — and he had the feeling this wasn't the first time.

"I'll walk you out," Ilya said to his friend.

When they left, Shane followed at a distance. He watched them go downstairs and heard Mitch speak.

"You don't have to judge him so harshly. He certainly didn't fake the bump on the back of his head."

"That's pretty much the only thing he hasn't faked in the course of our marriage — and you know it," Ilya replied sharply.

Shane swallowed hard. He didn't want to listen, but he crept closer to the top of the stairs anyway.

"You were pretty shaken yesterday. Did you call the police?" Mitch asked.

“I spoke to Alexei. He agrees with me. If a shot was fired at all, it was probably just a hunter trespassing on my private property and ignoring the hunting regulations,” Ilya said firmly. “As far as I know, he wants to talk to Ethan later.”

“Well, this theory seems reasonable to me. Ethan couldn’t possibly have made someone so angry that they’d shoot at him, for Christ’s sake,” Mitch replied.

Ilya laughed derisively. “You really are the kindest person I know. I hate to tell you this, Mitch, but you’re completely wrong. I can think of several men — and women too — who would love to attend his funeral.”

Mitch sighed. “Ilya, I know he disappointed you. I know—”

“Disappointed me?” Ilya repeated, stunned. “He slept with almost every friend of mine, right under my nose! He neglects Jan, and he never cared about Lilly. He’s selfish and greedy, and I’m fed up with him. Besides, I now know for a fact that he had me in his sights long before we ever met.”

“What do you mean?” Mitch asked.

“He was looking for a man to marry, and I fit perfectly into his pattern. Especially so soon after Svetlana’s death, I was very open and vulnerable. To him, I was just a bank account, Mitch. And it took me a long time to realize that.”

For a moment, Mitch stared at him in silence.

“I hope you’re wrong,” he finally said. “Still, try to be kind to him, will you? In case you haven’t noticed, he seems to have changed a lot. People really do change, Ilya.”

“Yes,” Ilya said coldly. “He got a new haircut.”

Mitch laughed. “You know that’s not what I meant.”

Shane was practically hanging over the railing when the two men disappeared from view.

He was stunned. *That’s how Ilya saw his brother?*

He was so horrified that he could think of only one thing — there would never be any reconciliation between Ilya and Ethan.

He closed his eyes and gripped the railing, realizing that part of him was deeply relieved by that fact.

Shane knew he wasn’t allowed to feel that relief. He tried to think calmly. Ethan couldn’t possibly be so cold and calculating that he deliberately chose a wealthy widower to marry purely for his money.

And as for Ilya's claim that Ethan had slept with nearly all his acquaintances — that had to be a gross exaggeration.

But Olga had hinted at the same thing. And Lilly had too.

Shane went into the kitchen, where Olga had left various vegetables on the countertop and a head of lettuce draining in a sieve. It was already lunchtime, but Shane didn't care about the time — he just wanted to hear from his brother.

Although he was extremely nervous, his stomach growled. He hadn't eaten much the day before yesterday and nothing at all yesterday.

He opened one of the two refrigerators and found sparkling water, juice cartons, and milk. He closed it and opened the other fridge.

Where was Ethan now? Was he in a taxi, heading for McGill?

With a pounding heart, Shane took wholemeal bread, a jar of mayonnaise, and some tomatoes from the refrigerator. When he turned around, he realized someone was staring at him. He looked over his shoulder. Olga was watching him, confused.

"What are you doing?" she asked, frowning.

"I'm starving. I'm going to make myself a sandwich, and then I'll go pick up Jan."

Then he remembered something and leaned against the kitchen counter.

"Did one of the maids maybe find my phone? I seem to have misplaced it."

Olga blinked, then went to a drawer at the far end of the kitchen and opened it. Shane saw that everything inside was meticulously sorted. From among neatly arranged pens, paper clips, receipts, and other items, Olga took out a phone.

Shane almost fainted. Then he nearly lunged at Olga to snatch the phone from her — but somehow he managed to remain still.

"Therese found this in the trash."

"That's mine," Shane said breathlessly. He forced a smile and reached for it slowly, though his heart was pounding wildly.

There had to be a message waiting for him.

He took the phone calmly, silently applauding his acting skills, and looked at the display. His heart sank.

No new message.

“Apparently you’re expecting an important call,” Olga observed.

Shane’s hands began to tremble. He quickly turned away from her, stunned. It wasn’t fair. Why hadn’t Ethan called yet? He should have been back at McGill by now — or at least arriving any minute. Where was he?

Shane told himself Ethan was simply delayed. It could happen. Still, he desperately wanted to know what had really driven Ethan to arrange this role switch — especially now that Shane realized Ethan had lied to him about the reason. He forced himself to stay calm. Surely he’d hear from his brother any moment.

He sensed Olga’s gaze boring into his back and turned around.

“I can practically smell your disapproval,” Shane said sharply. “What crime am I committing now?”

“I just don’t understand,” Olga replied. “You never eat sandwiches, and you usually don’t eat anything at noon. You wear your hair differently — yet you used to sleep with it styled! I can’t smell your perfume anymore, and now you want to pick up Jan from nursery school? I don’t like this at all.”

Shane didn’t know what to say. But he would continue playing Ethan’s role until Ethan himself gave the signal to stop.

“I’m still a little disoriented from yesterday’s accident,” he said slowly.

“And I’ve been thinking a lot over the past few weeks — especially while I was away. I got sick of my styled hair; I thought it made me look older and boring. Is that so strange? And that heavy perfume has just been too much lately. What’s so unusual about that? I’m allowed to change a little, aren’t I? And I really am hungry, Olga. I didn’t eat anything yesterday.”

“No.” Olga stepped closer, her angular face tightening. “You think you can fool Ilya again, don’t you? Your little seducer act failed. At some point, Ilya had enough. Now you’re pretending to be the loving father, the devoted husband, the nice boy next door.”

“I have always loved my son,” Shane hissed, turning back to the counter to assemble his sandwich. He didn’t want to lose his temper — especially not in front of Olga — but it was difficult not to.

Why couldn’t Olga mind her own business? The answer was obvious. Because Ilya and Jan truly mattered to her.

“He won’t fall for it,” Olga said firmly. “He’s too smart now. The haircut was clever — probably the cleverest trick you’ve ever pulled, aside from the way you reeled him in to begin with.”

Shane froze and turned toward her. Of course he understood what she meant by the haircut — many people had told him his hair made him look ten years younger. But what did she mean

by reeling Ilya in?

“I don’t know what you mean,” he said quietly.

“Oh no?” Olga scoffed. “Ilya was mourning his wife, Ethan. His heart was broken. He had a business meeting on a Friday when you showed up, took one look at his Rolex, his tailored suit, and his Italian shoes, and immediately knew what a catch you had in front of you. And before I knew it, he called me from Ottawa and said he was staying for the weekend. On Monday, he returned — with you at his side. That happened very fast.”

Shane lowered his gaze and gripped the counter. So that was how they’d met. A restaurant or a bar — and then love at first sight?

Who met a man on a Friday afternoon, spent the weekend with him, and immediately took him home?

Someone who had been taken advantage of…

But Shane wanted to hear this story from Ethan himself. He looked up at Olga with a grim smile.

“Have you ever considered that we might have fallen head over heels in love?”

Defending Ethan — even hypothetically — hurt him.

“No,” Olga said sharply. “Because Ilya is a very reasonable man. But at that time, he was also extremely vulnerable. And you exploited that shamelessly.” She turned away and angrily wiped down the counter with disinfectant.

Shane moved to the kitchen island and sat down on a bar stool. He sighed. He didn’t want to argue with anyone — not even Olga — but he had a terrible feeling he was sinking deeper into trouble. Too many people believed his brother was cruel. Shane didn’t want to believe them. *But where the hell was Ethan?*

He buried his face in his hands, took a moment to steady himself, then looked up.

“What would it take for you to give me a second chance?” he asked quietly.

Olga didn’t turn around. She disinfected the sink and snorted softly.

“People change,” Shane said. Mitch’s words echoed in his mind. “It happens. Some people realize their mistakes and turn their whole lives around.”

“I was going to make a salad for lunch. I’ll save it for tonight,” Olga said.

Shane stood up, suddenly exhausted, and placed his sandwich on a plate. “Thank you.”

He left the kitchen, wondering how he could possibly persuade Olga to change her mind. His

head ached. He briefly returned to fetch an aspirin, then sank into the armchair in the living room. It was as comfortable as it looked. He put his feet up on the ottoman and gazed out the large window. The wide fields and distant hills were beautiful — and strangely comforting.

“I heard you fell off your horse! How are you feeling?” a man asked from behind.

Shane turned and saw a brown-haired man wearing brown trousers, a cotton shirt, and a sweater. A large diamond ring glittered on his hand. He smiled with concern as he entered the room.

That had to be Hayden — Ethan’s best friend. Ilya had gone out with him and his wife on Shane’s first night at McGill.

“Hello,” Shane said with a cautious smile.

Hayden stopped, staring at Shane’s hair, his eyes widening in surprise.

Shane smiled. “I got a new haircut.”

Clearly astonished, the man studied him. Then he noticed the sandwich on the plate.

“Are you sure you’re all right?” Hayden asked uncertainly. “I heard you fell off your horse, Ethan.”

“I’m fine,” Shane said with a smile. “I mean, I had a bit of an accident and hit my head pretty hard, but I’m okay.”

Hayden sat down on the sofa close to Shane’s chair.

“I only found out this morning. Why didn’t you call me yesterday? I would’ve come right over.”

Shane looked into his brown eyes and thought that at least Ethan had one genuine friend.

“I’m really okay. It just gave me a fright.” He hesitated. Hayden was Ethan’s best friend. Maybe he knew what was really going on.

“You’re an excellent rider. I can’t imagine you falling off your horse! And what possessed you to cut your hair? I mean, it’s cute — but that’s not you at all,” Hayden said, looking at him in confusion.

Right. Seducers didn’t wear soft, tousled hair. Seducers wore perfectly styled hair and strong, memorable perfume.

“I must’ve lost my mind for a while,” Shane said.

Hayden stared at him, then smiled.

“Well, I like it,” he grinned. “I really like it! You look much younger! But you didn’t say anything about it.”

“It was spontaneous,” Shane murmured.

Hayden ran a hand through his own hair. “Should I change my hairstyle too?”

Shane studied his handsome face. The hair suited him perfectly. “Don’t change it.”

“Yes, I’d rather not,” Hayden said with relief. “But you really do look great with your new hair.” He hesitated. “Does Ilya like it?”

Shane hesitated too. “I have no idea.”

“Are you okay?”

Shane felt as though he’d found a friend and confidant, so he told the truth.

“He doesn’t want me anymore,” he said softly.

“What?”

“He handed me the divorce papers the moment I walked through the door,” Shane explained.

Hayden stared at him, horrified. He jumped up, paced back and forth, then asked, “How can I help you?”

“Can I win him back?” Shane asked.

Hayden froze. “What? I thought you wanted to—. You told me you were tired of the marriage — that you were finally getting out of here.”

So that was how Ethan had framed it.

Hayden lowered his voice. “I kind of felt like you might not even come back from Ottawa.”

Shane sprang to his feet. “Really?”

“Well, it was just a feeling. You never actually said that. But I know you two have been fighting for a long time. I know how angry Ilya is with you. And I know you can’t stand it when someone’s mad at you.” He shrugged. “Things were awful for you here. I would’ve understood if you’d moved out.”

Shane stared at Ethan’s friend. “I don’t know what to do,” he finally admitted.

And why was he secretly relieved that Ethan hadn’t wanted to continue the marriage either? God, he really had to get his feelings for Ilya under control.

Hayden put an arm around Shane's shoulders. "You still have Tom."

"Tom?" Shane asked before he could stop himself.

Hayden smiled confidently. "He'll always love you."

Who the hell was Tom?

Shane shuddered inwardly. He couldn't deal with any more unknown players — especially not someone who might have been in love with his brother. He tried to decide how to handle Hayden.

"Why does Ilya hate me?" Shane asked. "Does he even hate me?"

Hayden flinched, then blushed. "Why are you asking me that?"

"Because you're my friend. And if anyone's going to tell me the truth — even if I don't like it — it's you."

Hayden blinked. "You're acting really strange. That scares me."

Shane smiled quickly. "I'm under a lot of pressure right now."

And that was a massive understatement.

Hayden hesitated.

"You can tell me the truth," Shane urged.

"I don't know… No one can wrap him around their finger like you. I mean — sorry. I didn't mean it the way it sounded!"

"It's okay," Shane said seriously.

If Ethan returned, would he simply seduce Ilya again and make him fall back in love? The thought was unbearable.

"I mean, he's different from other men. And you're beautiful. Everyone falls at your feet without you even trying. All you have to do is smile," Hayden explained earnestly.

Shane blushed. "That's not true."

A question burned on his tongue, but how could he bring himself to ask it?

"Does he know about… my affairs?"

"Well… you practically paraded every single one of them right under his nose," Hayden muttered. "Why are you asking me all this?"

Shane had no answer. He just stood there, deeply shaken.

Hayden smiled quickly. “Will you come to Parker’s gala on Saturday?”

Shane knew he couldn’t. By Saturday, he would be Shane again — and the whole family would be in chaos.

“I’ll ask Ilya if he wants to go,” he said at last.

“You’re going to ask Ilya? But he always goes to Parker’s gala. He already told me he’d be there — the other night at dinner.” Hayden hesitated. “By the way, Jackie said it was a pity you weren’t there.”

Shane could hardly admit he hadn’t been invited.

“It didn’t feel right after Ilya handed me the divorce papers.”

Hayden frowned. “So what are you going to do now?”

Shane froze. “What do you mean?”

Hayden sat down. “You said you wanted a divorce. But now it sounds like you’ve changed your mind.”

There was only one possible answer — the truth.

“I have no idea what to do now or what’s going to happen next.”

Hayden looked at him seriously. “Please don’t play games with Ilya. You two used to be so happy. But a lot has happened since then. He’s a good man. He deserves to be happy, Ethan.”

Shane looked at him. “How long have you known him?”

“What?!”

Shane wished he had thought about that question before opening his mouth. He stared at Hayden in surprise and didn’t know how to talk his way out of this stupid situation.

“We grew up together,” Hayden said. “But you already know that. Ilya is like the brother I never had.”

“I know,” Shane said hastily. “I meant, how long have you known that he wants a divorce?”

“Oh, right.” Hayden’s confused expression relaxed. “Uhm. I think a few months ago or so. About as long as you have.”

Shane went to the sofa and sat down beside him. “There’s something I haven’t told you yet,”

he said.

“What?”

“I fell off my horse yesterday because someone shot at me.”

Hayden went white as a sheet. “What?!”

“Somebody shot at me, Hayden. I think someone is trying to kill me,” Shane said.

Hayden clutched a shaking hand to his chest and sat down again, his eyes wide.

“Maybe you should have been a little more discreet over the last few years.”

Finally, Shane reacted. “Discreet? What do you mean?”

Hayden watched him closely. “You never kept your many affairs a secret. I don’t know — maybe one of them has decided to take revenge on you now.”

Shane had somehow known that it would come to this. It was now clear that his brother had betrayed Ilya terribly and hadn’t even bothered to keep his affairs a secret. How could Ethan have acted so abominably and hurt Ilya like that?

“Are you all right?” Hayden asked gently. “I don’t mean to judge you, Ethan. You know I’d never do that. I always hoped you and Ilya would reconcile, until you told me it was hopeless. I just want you both to be happy. It’s terrible to see how you’re hurting each other.”

Shane turned to him. “Who do you think shot at me?”

Hayden looked worried. “I don’t know. I really have no idea who could be crazy enough to shoot at you.”

—

“Mr. Rozanov! What a surprise!”

Shane smiled at the pretty, very young blonde woman, but his gaze wandered past her to the children crowded in the hallway. Some of them were very young; the nursery school apparently also offered groups for two- and three-year-olds.

Then he spotted Jan, who noticed Shane at the same moment.

“Dad!” he beamed with joyful surprise.

Shane smiled at the young woman — whose name did not interest him — and hurried past her. He knelt down and pulled his nephew into his arms.

“Hey, sweetheart. How was your day?”

Jan smiled at him. “It was great,” he said. “I made a Halloween picture for you.”

“That’s wonderful!” Shane smiled broadly. “When can I see it?”

“It’s not finished yet.”

Shane stood up and stroked Jan’s hair. “I’m sorry I couldn’t come yesterday. I fell off my horse and hit my head. Dr. Mitchell gave me some medicine, and I fell asleep.”

“I know,” Jan said with a smile and took his hand. “Daddy told me.”

Shane hesitated for a moment.

“Were you angry because I couldn’t pick you up yesterday?”

“A little bit. But Daddy let me sleep at your place for a while. And then I saw that you were really sick,” Jan said with a serious expression.

When they left the room, Shane smiled at the young woman.

“It’s very nice to see you, Mr. Rozanov. Apparently you’ve already recovered from your accident?”

Shane stopped in surprise. Was this place so small that Ilya’s nursery school teacher had already heard about his accident?

Then he realized how she must have found out.

“Yes, I’m fine. I suppose Jan told you about it?”

“No, I heard about it at the bakery this morning.” The woman’s brown eyes lingered on Shane. Her smile suddenly seemed uncertain, her gaze curious.

Suddenly, Shane realized how small everything was here. This was classic village life. He didn’t know the exact number of inhabitants, but it could only be a few thousand. That meant everyone knew everything about everyone else.

Shane smiled at her, waved, and left with Jan.

“You have a very nice nursery school teacher,” he said.

“Ms. Harding is very kind,” Jan agreed. “She always asks how Daddy is doing. She also smiles at him every time he comes here. I think she likes him very much.” Jan grinned.

Shane stopped as if rooted to the spot. Ilya was very good-looking and wealthy, a perfect match. Undoubtedly, the whole town knew that his husband was cheating on him and that a divorce was imminent. How many people were waiting for them to split up so they would

have a chance with him? The thought was horrible.

“Dad?”

“I’m sorry,” Shane said, realizing he was standing in the middle of the sidewalk. He smiled at Jan, but one question would not leave him alone. Where the hell was his brother?

It was 2:00 p.m. Ethan had written in his letter that he would be back in two days — and that was today.

Jan interrupted his thoughts. “Dad, are you and Daddy getting a divorce?”

Shane looked into Jan’s worried eyes and felt horrified.

“What do you mean, Jan?” Shane asked calmly, though inside he was agitated and furious.

Jan looked miserable. “Daddy told me. He said that from now on, you and he only want to be friends and live in different houses. He said you still love me, but… Dad, I don’t want a divorce! I don’t want you to go away!”

Shane lifted Jan up and held him tightly against his chest. Tears filled his eyes.

“I don’t want that either,” Shane said — and then he surprised himself.

He couldn’t bring himself to let Jan go. Holding him, Shane realized that he truly didn’t want to give up his new life on McGill. The realization shocked him.

…

Three hours later, Shane and Jan were driving back to the house.

Jan spotted the police car at the same moment Shane did. He let out a childish scream, while Shane gasped for air, wondering why a police car was parked in front of the house.

Then it hit him: Ethan had returned, and they would both be arrested for fraud.

“Dad! Do you think bad people have come to our house?” Jan asked, his eyes wide.

Shane parked the car and turned off the engine, trying to calm himself. It was impossible. He hadn’t considered that what he was doing here might not only be morally wrong but also punishable by law.

He fought the rising panic. It was no longer early afternoon — it was after 5:00 p.m. Ethan was supposed to have arrived hours ago, and if he were delayed, he would have called. Something must have happened. Something definitely had happened.

Shane was frightened. Jan opened the car door.

“Uncle Alexei! Uncle Alexei!” he cried happily.

Shane watched Jan jump out of the car. Ethan had mentioned that Ilya had a younger brother named Alexei, but he hadn’t told him anything more. Why was he here now? Shane felt unable to handle another family member and more accusations. Of course Ilya’s brother would be on his side.

Jan was already running up the porch steps, and Shane got out of the car. He was hot and sweating.

As soon as he entered the house, Ilya stormed out of the living room, gripping his son’s hand tightly.

“Where the hell have you been?” he yelled at Shane.

Shane saw fear in his eyes.

“Excuse me?”

Ilya shot him an angry look and then picked Jan up in his arms. Shane was frightened, but in that moment he understood: this had nothing to do with Ethan.

“Where were you with him all afternoon?” Ilya growled.

A policeman in a black uniform, with a large gun in a holster at his waist, appeared behind Ilya, along with Olga and Cliff. Olga was white as a wall. Cliff, on the other hand, gazed thoughtfully.

“We went to the cinema,” Shane said quickly. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to—”

“You were at the cinema?!” Ilya panted in disbelief.

“Daddy, we watched *Tarzan*! It was so great! And we ate ice cream too!” Jan shouted.

Ilya immediately pressed a kiss to his forehead. “I didn’t know that,” he said quietly. “Thank God you’re all right.”

The policeman wore a badge with the imprint SHERIFF on his black uniform jacket. He had dark hair and stared gloomily at Shane. Their gazes met, and when Shane looked into his eyes, he knew exactly who he was looking at. *Ilya’s brother was the sheriff.*

Alexei turned to his brother and knocked Ilya on the shoulder.

“Well, everyone’s fine, so I’ll go. We’ve got a little argument to settle on the other side of town.”

Ilya set Jan down but kept hold of his hand.

“I’m sorry, Alexei. Sorry about the false alarm.”

Alexei was hard to read; his expression was rigid. He shrugged.

“We get false alarms all the time.” He glanced at Shane through narrowed eyes. “He’s never taken Jan out anywhere in the afternoon. You were right to call me. You couldn’t have known he’d take him to the cinema.”

Alexei never let Shane out of his sight. His gaze slid slowly and coldly over his face, lingered on his hair and eyes, then traveled from head to toe. It was anything but an admiring look.

Shane recognized a dangerous enemy the moment he saw one. Breathlessly, he stepped back, as if distance could protect him.

“Ethan, I’d like to talk to you about that shot that was allegedly fired at you. Please come to my office soon and make a statement.”

“I… of course.” Shane looked from the dark-haired sheriff to Ilya. “I’m sorry,” he murmured quietly. “I didn’t know I’d scare you all like that.”

Shane felt stupid. Of course Ethan wouldn’t suddenly go to the movies with Jan when he didn’t even pick him up from nursery school. What had he done?

Alexei said goodbye to Olga and tickled Jan under the chin. “See you later, kiddo.”

Then he looked at Ilya. “Will you walk me outside?”

Ilya nodded, and the two brothers left the house. Shane stared after them in dismay. He was sure they were talking about him.

His head began to hurt again. He pressed his hands to his temples, unable to avoid the most disturbing thought. *Did Ilya hate Ethan enough to want him dead?*

…

A short time later, Ilya returned to the house. Shane had expected him to want to talk, so he sat in the living room, enjoying the moment of silence.

When Ilya entered, Shane looked up. His face was furious.

“We need to talk,” Ilya said firmly.

“I’ve already said I’m sorry,” Shane began sincerely.

“Since when do you go to the movies with my son?” Ilya demanded. “Not to mention picking him up from nursery school. Since when, Ethan?”

Shane stared at him as his thoughts raced. Then he noticed Jan peeking around the corner into

the living room, a toy horse in his hand.

After a moment, Jan came running in. “Daddy?”

Ilya immediately bent down to him. “What is it, honey?” he asked gently.

Watching Ilya so closely, seeing how much he loved his son, hurt Shane terribly. This man was capable of great kindness and compassion.

“Dad isn’t mean anymore,” Jan said pleadingly.

Shane froze.

Ilya looked at his son in amazement and embraced him.

“Of course Dad isn’t mean,” he said kindly. “Your Dad was never mean. Dad’s aren’t mean, sweetheart.”

“No,” Jan protested, shaking her head.

Shane tried to silence the child, but when he opened his mouth, no words came out.

“Dad is a new, nice Dad now,” Jan explained confidently.

Shane thought he was going to faint.

Ilya stared at his son.

Shane stared at Ilya, speechless and sweating.

“Yes, he’s a new, nice Dad,” Ilya said, straightening up.

“Olga?” he called. “Could you make Jan something to eat?” He smiled down at his son.

“I need to talk to Dad about something else. Why don’t you go to the kitchen, sweetheart?”

Jan grinned at Shane as if to say, *See? Now everything will be all right. I told him you’re new and nice.*

Shane managed a smile back. Then he was alone with Ilya.

…

“I can’t take this anymore,” Shane whispered, appalled. “We were just at the cinema. I stupidly didn’t tell anyone where we were going, and that will never happen again. I’m sorry.”

Ilya stepped toward him, and Shane recoiled as Ilya loomed in front of him.

"*Hands off my son.*"

Shane gasped for breath. Ilya trembled with anger.

"Do you understand? I know what you're doing. I knew it the moment you came back with this loving-Dad act! I won't tolerate this any longer!"

Shane swallowed.

"I'll divorce you," Ilya said harshly, looking at him coldly. "And I'll be happy when I finally get rid of you. Jan stays with me. I'll have exclusive custody. I'll pay you a lot of money — you know that. But if you keep this up, there will be war, Ethan. And I promise you, I will win. No matter what it takes."

Shane stared into his blazing eyes, terrified. "Please calm down," he finally said. "Your anger isn't helping."

"You want me to calm down?" Ilya said incredulously. "You think my anger isn't justified? Are you from another planet? You're trying to win Jan's love at the last minute — and it's working! Then we split up and break his heart, and you expect me to stay calm?"

He was shaking all over.

"Or are you hoping the judge will let him choose who he wants to live with? That he'll choose you? Haven't you done enough damage already? Is this your final shot at me? And what about Jan? You'll hurt him terribly too!"

Shane held his gaze. He agreed with everything Ilya said. But he wasn't Ethan.

He felt an overwhelming urge to take Ilya into his arms, to comfort him and heal his wounded heart. But he couldn't. Shane closed his eyes. How long could he keep this up? Could the police protect Jan from an enemy only Ethan knew?

Should he tell Ilya everything — right now? *Fuck Ethan, where are you?*

"Well?" Ilya shouted. "Answer me, damn it!"

Shane looked into his blue eyes and said nothing. He loved Jan with all his heart, and as long as he didn't know who was threatening him, he wouldn't risk a revelation that could endanger the child. His decision was made.

"Jesus Christ," Ilya shouted.

Shane noticed a tear running down his cheek. He wiped it away and met Ilya's hostile gaze.

"I'm sorry. I've said that before, and I mean it."

“That’s all?” Ilya asked, frowning.

“I’m sorry for everything,” Shane said firmly, his strength returning.

“I regret everything I’ve ever done to hurt you and Jan. I wish we could at least call a truce.”

Ilya snorted. “Tell your lawyer to call mine, Ethan. This game is over. Better today than tomorrow. And stay away from my son.”

“What about *your* selfish behavior?” Shane asked.

Ilya’s eyes widened. “*My* selfish behavior?”

“Yes. You told Jan we’re getting a divorce. That was completely inappropriate!” Shane hissed.

Ilya stared at him. “Oh, please. Now you suddenly care about moral outrage? You can’t be serious.”

“You had no right,” Shane snapped.

“I explained it to him gently,” Ilya said. “In words a child can understand.”

“Oh, really? And what exactly were those words?” Shane shouted, struggling to control his anger.

“That we’ll live in different houses,” Ilya said. “That adults, like children, keep growing and changing. And when they change too much, they can’t stay together. That’s what I told him.”

“I’m sure he understood that perfectly,” Shane replied sarcastically.

“He’s sad. But he’ll get over it. And he’ll get over it much faster if you move out and leave him alone.”

Shane stared at him, panic rising.

“You want me to move out?”

“I think that’s best.”

The thought of leaving McGill was unbearable. Shane couldn’t stand it.

“We should try to reconcile — for Jan’s sake,” Shane said quietly. “You can’t just throw me out of the house.”

Ilya's eyes widened, then he laughed softly.

"We'll see."

He walked toward the closed door.

Shane noticed Lilly standing outside with a satisfied expression. He saw Ilya stop and exchange a few words with his daughter.

Shane didn't want to leave McGill. Something had changed decisively. He didn't want to leave — ever. And he was afraid it wasn't just because of Jan.

He watched Lilly and her father. Had Lilly been eavesdropping? Shane was sure of it. The gloating joy on her face was unmistakable.

She knew about the upcoming divorce. She knew Ilya wanted to throw Ethan out. And she seemed delighted by his suffering.

Shane went upstairs while Lilly and Ilya disappeared into the kitchen. Passing her room, he noticed the door stood wide open. He was about to close it when he hesitated — this might be his chance to take a quick look.

Lilly's room was a mess. Her desk was covered with books and CDs, two empty soda cans, a bag of chips, and of course her computer.

On a shelf beside it stood miniature horses. Shane was surprised; once, Lilly must have wanted to follow in Ilya's footsteps.

Framed photos showed a boy about her age, with black hair and a contagious grin.

A guitar and sheet music lay scattered near the corner. Her backpack lay on the floor next to a handbag.

The backpack was open, its contents half spilled out — textbooks, magazines, an old, frayed stuffed animal, and another empty bag of chips on the unmade bed.

Shane went to the wardrobe and opened the top drawer. It was full of clothes. He was about to close it when he noticed something metallic among the fabric.

His fingers touched cold steel.

What was that?

He pulled it out.

It was a gun.

Chapter End Notes

so... what do you think?
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Chapter 5: FIVE

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Shane left Lilly's room, filled with fear. His first impulse was to run downstairs to Ilya and tell him what he had discovered. But Ilya was furious with him. That probably wasn't the right moment to tell him that his daughter had a gun.

Shane gripped the stair railing and looked down into the foyer and part of the living room. His heart was pounding with fear. He couldn't stop the questions racing through his mind: Did Lilly hate him so much that she would try to kill him? Was it Lilly who had shot at him?

Lilly was tall. The shadow he had seen in the forest had been that of an adult — or at least someone as tall as one. Shane had simply assumed the shooter had been a man.

His stomach turned.

Was it Lilly?

How could he possibly voice these fears to Ilya?

He heard footsteps below before he saw him and tightened his grip on the railing.

Ilya stepped into view and watched Shane intently. Shane didn't want to argue with him — he wasn't Ethan, damn it.

Ilya turned sharply and started up the stairs. When he reached Shane, he hesitated. Their eyes met. Shane didn't move.

"What are you doing here?"

Shane ran his tongue over his dry lips. "Nothing."

Ilya raised a brow and walked past him. Shane hesitated only a second before following. Perhaps this was a good opportunity for a private conversation. Ilya seemed much calmer than he had been earlier, when he'd shouted at him about the divorce.

Shane noticed that Ilya went into the bedroom — which was more or less Shane's now.

"And what are you doing here?" Shane asked, following him inside.

"I'm going to change," Ilya replied, disappearing into the dressing room.

Shane glanced at his watch — Ethan's expensive wristwatch — and frowned. It was almost six p.m. Was Ilya going out again tonight? And if so, with whom?

Ilya emerged with his back turned to him, wearing nothing but a tight white pair of briefs. He reached for a pair of dark trousers.

“What?” he asked, turning around.

Shane stared at his magnificent, muscular chest, his flat, hard stomach, and finally lower. His legs were long, firm, and powerful.

He swallowed. He was utterly captivated.

“What the hell are you doing?” Ilya asked.

Shane’s gaze flew upward to meet Ilya’s. There was irritation in his eyes, but Shane’s mouth was so dry he couldn’t answer. An endless moment passed. The silence in the room felt heavy, and Shane could hear his own pulse pounding in his ears.

This man is so damn beautiful.

“If you keep staring at me like that, I might change my mind and claim my goodbye kiss,” Ilya said in a rough voice.

Shane was stunned. Ilya wanted him — that had become painfully obvious. Heat rose into his cheeks.

“What? Have you never seen an aroused man before?” Ilya laughed, the sound slightly wild, and let his trousers fall to the floor.

“Take your clothes off, Ethan.”

Shane was so mesmerized that his first reaction was pure, overwhelming desire. And Ilya knew it — he smiled and stepped closer.

But there was a reason Shane couldn’t do this, even though he was trembling with excitement, even though his blood burned hot in his veins.

That reason was simple: his brother.

Ilya smiled, clearly amused. His hands closed around Shane’s shoulders.

“You know what?” he whispered hoarsely. “I like this new act. I like the innocence, the soft hair, the wide eyes. I like it a lot, actually. It’s a great role.”

A great role. Indeed.

Shane fought to control himself. It was almost impossible, especially when Ilya pulled him closer, his pulse racing.

“You’re going out,” Shane managed.

“I have dinner with Mitch and Sara. But we have plenty of time,” Ilya murmured, staring deep into his eyes. “No. I’ll cancel.”

His mouth hovered close to Shane’s. “Then we can take our time.”

But then, suddenly Ethan’s phone rang.

It was in Shane’s back pocket, and he flinched in shock.

“Don’t answer it,” Ilya murmured, sliding his hands beneath Shane’s sweater. His palms were hard and slightly calloused, burning against Shane’s bare skin.

Shane jumped back and grabbed the phone. He didn’t need to check the display to know it was Ethan.

He ran to the door and glanced back at Ilya, who stared at him in disbelief.

“I’m sorry,” Shane whispered, then hurried out of the bedroom and down the hall. He answered the call. “Don’t hang up!” he whispered urgently.

Once outside in the cool evening air, under a sky that had just turned dark, he breathed out, “Thank God you’re okay. I was so damn worried.”

“Is everything okay with you?” Ethan asked dryly.

Shane walked farther from the house. He could almost feel eyes on his back, but he didn’t care now.

“Where are you? When are you coming home? Someone shot at me, Ethan! And Ilya handed me the divorce papers!”

“Calm down,” Ethan replied evenly. “I didn’t think it wise to tell you we were on the verge of divorce. You had enough to deal with already.”

“You knew? How did you expect me to handle him if he hates you that much?” Shane snapped.

“Shane. How could I not know my marriage is over?”

“That’s not funny! You have a wonderful husband and a lovely son, and you’re not even sad about the divorce!”

“I think you’re the one who’s sad about it. You’ve always been the romantic one.” There was a nostalgic smile in Ethan’s voice. Then he said something that stole Shane’s breath. “Are you in love with Ilya, Shane?”

“What?”

“I knew you’d like him. That’s why I never wanted you to meet him. I knew he’d like you too. Honestly, he married the wrong brother, don’t you think? If you ever wondered why I never talked about my husband — that’s why.”

Shane felt his thoughts scattering.

“But it’s over now. It was a mistake. You can have anything — even the man — if you want.” Ethan laughed. “And as for Jan… well…”

Shane stood near Ilya’s car, sweat on his forehead.

“What the fuck, Ethan?”

“It’s been over between me and Ilya for a long time. I’m tired of him and his moral lectures. Tired of being judged. As soon as I get back, I’m taking the papers to the best lawyer I can find.”

Shane began to tremble. “He loved you. I think he still does.”

Ethan laughed. “He hates me. But he still loves sex.”

Shane flinched.

“Are you still there?”

Shane felt the ground sway beneath him.

“Are you coming home? I know you lied about the seizure. McGill belongs to Ilya.”

Ethan sighed. “He inherited it from his father. Half belongs to his brother, but Alexei never interferes.”

“You lied to me. And someone shot at me because they thought I was you! What is going on?”

“I was afraid to tell you! I’m in trouble, Shane. Someone’s after me. I owe a lot of money. I can’t explain everything yet. Just give me a few days.”

“A few days?! No! Ilya needs the truth. We may have to call the police.”

He wouldn’t believe anything anymore without a reasonable explanation.

“I wasn’t lying when I said I was in trouble. Somebody’s after me! But I really don’t know who might have shot at you at McGill. This can’t have anything to do with my current situation. I owe someone a lot of money, Shane, but I can’t tell you why right now. And I’m sure he won’t hurt me, because he wants his money back. No one shot at you. I mean, I have

a lot of enemies in the area, but I don't think any of them has the courage to kill me." He sounded amused.

Shane grabbed the phone tighter. "Then it's true. You had affairs, didn't you?"

"I already told you I don't love Ilya. Of course I had affairs."

Shane sighed loudly. "Ethan, you're putting me in danger."

"I would never do that!" Ethan shouted. "No one shot at you! Just hang in there until the weekend. Then I'll come home and we can explain everything to Ilya. Then we won't have to go to the police anymore. I'm sure of it."

"Ilya hates you. He'll hate me too when he finds out what I did."

"He'll forgive you eventually. When he realizes what kind of person you are. When he realizes you're nothing like me. Shane, please — I'm desperate." His voice sounded pleading.

"I understand that. But you have to tell me more clearly why you're so desperate! Or I'll tell Ilya everything, Ethan. And the police!"

Ethan laughed.

"Alexei Rozanov hates me like the plague. If you go to the police, he'll probably throw you out. And you could go to jail for our little role reversal, Shane. I don't want that."

Shane stared into the darkness.

"Are you still there?"

Shane nodded, even though Ethan couldn't see him.

"It's only a few days," Ethan urged, despite Shane's silence. "And you don't have any other choice, Shane. Because if I know one thing, it's that you would never put my son — your nephew — in danger."

Those words hit Shane hard.

"So you weren't lying when you told me about the threat against Jan?"

"I would never use Jan like that. Why do you think I'm doing all this? I may not be the best father in the world, but I would do anything — absolutely anything — to protect him. I can't let him pay for my stupid mistake. You know very well that Jan is my weak spot. What if they kidnap him, Shane?!"

Shane leaned against the door of Ilya's pickup truck, tears gathering in his eyes. After a moment, he breathed:

“I’ll keep playing along, Ethan. But I don’t understand any of this.”

“You don’t have to understand anything,” Ethan said quietly, “except that I’m an idiot and that I’m now paying a terrible price for my past mistakes. And that my son may be next.”

“No,” Shane said. “We’re not going to let anyone hurt him.” Tears choked his voice.

“He is the best thing that has ever happened to me,” Ethan replied softly, and Shane could hear the faint smile in his voice. Shane wiped away his tears and tried to pull himself together.

“How should I deal with Ilya?”

“Stay calm. Be yourself.”

The image of Ilya, naked except for his underwear, suddenly appeared before his eyes.

“And if he makes advances?”

A pause. “Did he?”

“He thinks I’m you!”

Ethan laughed softly. “You’ll manage. You always do.”

Shane had to sit down, so he sank into the gravel. If he had to play Ethan for a whole month — a whole year — to protect Jan, he would do it. He was absolutely certain of that.

“Shane, I’m counting on you.”

Shane nodded, the phone trembling in his shaky hand.

“You can count on me,” he whispered hoarsely. “You know that.”

“Yes, I know,” Ethan replied. “Because we’re twins. And if I can’t count on you, who can I count on? And you can trust me, Shane.”

Shane knew the conversation would end soon. His heart felt as though it had shifted from its usual place and was now pounding in his throat, threatening to suffocate him.

“When will I hear from you again?”

“I’ll call you when I get back. At the beginning of next week.”

Shane struggled to breathe. “Ethan… I’m scared. It’s so hard. It’s hard to lie to Ilya and—”

“And what?”

“And to love Jan so much,” Shane whispered at last.

“I know. I can’t thank you enough, Shane. When this is over, everything will be as it should be. I swear. We’ll be a family again, even after the divorce. I promise.”

Shane couldn’t speak, so he nodded again.

Ethan understood anyway. The call ended.

Shane sat there in silence. He could barely breathe. He longed for nothing more than for this terrible deception to finally end — for everyone to be safe, and for him to become part of life at McGill.

He wasn’t allowed to think about Jans’s life being at stake. If he did, he would lose his nerve.

He should have asked Ethan who might have shot at him. Ethan hadn’t taken it seriously, just as Alexei hadn’t. Maybe they were right, and he was wrong.

A headache throbbed at his temples. It was time to go to bed. Then he thought about who was upstairs in the bedroom, and his heart skipped a beat.

It’s over between me and Ilya.

His brother wanted a divorce, and Shane would not interfere in their relationship. At the same time, he realized that Ilya deserved someone better than Ethan.

A voice startled him. “What are you doing?”

Cliff stood behind him.

“I got dizzy,” Shane said quickly, getting up.

Cliff pulled him to his feet. His grip was strong. They looked into each other’s eyes.

Shane didn’t like his direct gaze or his grim expression. He didn’t like the way he looked at him as if he were trying to read his secrets and lies. Shane looked away.

“Maybe you should go back inside now,” Cliff said quietly.

Shane had to meet his eyes again. He wanted to ask what he had to do with all of this and why he was so hostile toward his brother. But Shane could almost guess.

“How long have you been working at McGill, Cliff?” Shane asked.

His eyes narrowed. “What a strange question.”

Shane knew why he found it strange. It was strange because Ethan would, of course, have

known when Cliff had been hired.

“I don’t remember when you started here,” Shane said. “It must have been in the fall.”

“Yeah, maybe it was that little bump you got in that weird riding accident,” Cliff replied.

They stared at each other.

Shane couldn’t look away, and he thought that Cliff knew he wasn’t Ethan.

Cliff shrugged abruptly. “Almost two months ago. But I can see why you don’t remember exactly when I started here. During the first week, you didn’t even look at me. I might as well have been a doorknob.”

“I’ve had other things on my mind,” Shane said, his mouth dry and his temples throbbing painfully. “And I’m sorry if I’ve been rude to you over the past few weeks,” he added.

Cliff didn’t respond. He didn’t seem mocking or hostile at all. Shane gave him a weak smile, but Cliff didn’t smile back. Instead, he looked past Shane.

Suddenly, Shane sensed someone behind him and spun around.

Ilya stood on the porch, watching him. Shane felt himself blush. Surely he didn’t think there was something going on between him and Cliff, did he?

Of course I had affairs.
You can have everything — even the man.

Ilya came down the stairs, and Shane felt frozen in time and space. Of course he would think the worst of him, because Ethan had had no morals when it came to his marriage.

When Ilya reached the driver’s side of his car, Shane could finally see his face clearly. It was completely closed off. Ilya didn’t look at him. It was as if he weren’t standing just inches away.

He opened the car door and got in.

Cliff turned and walked past the car, apparently heading for the back door of the house.

Shane didn’t move.

How should he deal with Ilya?

Just be yourself.
He married the wrong brother.

Ilya started the engine, and Shane forced himself on shaky legs toward the driver’s door.

“It’s not what you think,” he said slowly.

Ilya looked up briefly. “I’m not thinking anything at all,” he replied coolly. “Would you mind…?”

His cold words struck Shane like an icy wind. He gasped for air and stepped aside.

Ilya reversed, turned the car around, and drove away.

Shane stared after the car for a long time, wishing he could tell Ilya the truth. His foolish heart was convinced that Ilya could help them. But he had promised his brother — and first and foremost, he had to think about Jan.

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Shane had taken Jan to nursery school and simply endured Olga’s disapproval and Ilya’s icy contempt.

Now he got out of the car in front of the large stable building and saw Cliff standing in the stable aisle. The big gate was open, and his truck was parked inside so he could unload.

Shane stopped. The sight reminded him of the previous night, when he had been certain for a moment that Cliff had noticed something. But if he knew Shane wasn’t Ethan, he would have confronted him or told Ilya.

And yet, the night before, Cliff’s hostility had suddenly vanished. Why? And why did he have a locked suitcase in his apartment?

Now that Shane had to hold out for a few more days, he wouldn’t relax his vigilance for even a moment. He walked toward Cliff.

“Hello,” Shane said, offering a faint smile. “Have you seen Ilya?”

Cliff nodded toward the covered riding arena.

Shane thanked him with a nod and walked past him down the long stable aisle, aware of Cliff’s eyes on his back.

He entered the arena. Ilya and Jacob stood in the middle, lunging a magnificent brown horse. Shane held on to the gate and watched as Ilya guided the horse into an even trot. If he had noticed Shane, he gave no sign of it. And it was impossible that he hadn’t seen him.

It’s over between me and Ilya.
He married the wrong brother.

Shane’s heart began to race. If Ilya were his husband, he would never cheat on him. He

would cherish every single moment.

The thought unsettled him. Shane forced it aside and focused on Ilya and the horse instead.

The horse obeyed but tossed its head impatiently.

“Easy!” Ilya said in a steady voice. “That’s it. Good boy.”

Ilya led the horse toward the gate where Shane stood, still pretending he wasn’t there.

Jacob walked beside him and smiled at Shane.

“How are you today, Ethan?”

“Much better.” Shane returned his smile, but it faded as he looked at Ilya.

Ilya pushed the gate open and led the horse through. Shane followed him, along with Jacob and the horse. Finally, Ilya handed the horse over to the trainer and walked down the stable aisle toward the exit.

Shane hurried after him. “Ilya, wait!”

His long strides slowed slightly.

“I’m busy,” he said without turning around.

Shane quickened his pace and caught up with him as they left the stable.

“I want to talk to you,” Shane said, his voice slightly shaky.

Had Ilya been punishing him? But for what? Because he thought he had caught him with Cliff last night? Or because Shane had turned him down again yesterday? Either way, he wasn’t in a good mood.

Ilya slowed down but didn’t stop.

“Can’t this wait?”

Shane grabbed his arm. “No, Ilya, it can’t wait.”

For the first time that day, Ilya looked at him properly. His gaze dropped to Shane’s mouth before he looked away. “What’s going on?”

“I don’t know how to tell you this gently, but…” Shane took a deep breath. “I found a gun in Lilly’s room.”

Ilya froze. “What?”

“Ilya, I found a gun in her room. Did you know she has one?”

“No, I don’t know anything about that. This has to be a mistake,” he said grimly. “Jesus Christ, it must be a toy gun.”

“That’s not a toy gun.”

Ilya stared at Shane. “Where is it?”

“In her dresser, under her clothes. I’ll show it to you if you want.” Shane saw that he finally understood what he was saying, because he was visibly shaken.

Ilya nodded after a moment, and they walked up the hill toward the house.

“I’m sure it’s just a toy. They look incredibly real these days.”

“Ilya, it’s not a toy gun.”

Ilya shot him an icy look, and Shane held his gaze.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t expect to find a gun in her room either.”

Suddenly, Ilya stopped, his hand already on the front door. “What were you doing in there anyway?”

Shane hesitated, but he had prepared himself for that question.

“I thought she might have borrowed my phone.”

Ilya’s blue eyes fixed him with an uncomfortably penetrating stare. “What makes you think that?”

“Because I misplaced it and couldn’t find it anywhere.”

The look in Ilya’s eyes told him he didn’t believe that excuse — not for a single moment. He went into the house without holding the door, and Shane followed him anyway.

Ilya didn’t knock, since Lilly had gone to school shortly after Shane had left with Jan.

He looked around, surprised. “What a mess,” Ilya muttered.

“Most teenagers are messy,” Shane said calmly.

Ilya gave him a grim look and nodded toward the dresser. “In there?”

Shane nodded and stepped past him. Suddenly, he wondered what he would do if the gun was gone. The thought sent a shiver down his spine as he pulled open the drawer. But the shiny metal glinted between the clothes.

Ilya stood behind him and looked over his shoulder.

“What the hell…”

Shane glanced back at him. It hurt to have to show him this.

As Ilya took out the gun, Shane noticed something else. There, among the clothes, lay a familiar sweater — a knitted one.

Shane was sure it belonged to Ethan. Their mother had made those for them. Shane used to curl up in his when he felt lonely. Why hadn’t he noticed it yesterday when he found the gun? But he had probably been too distracted by the fact that he had actually found a gun.

But why did Lilly have that sweater? She hated Ethan, so Shane was certain they wouldn’t exchange big, comfortable sweaters. She must have stolen it from his closet.

“It’s real,” Ilya said seriously.

Shane nodded. “I know. I’m sorry,” he said quietly and gently placed a hand on Ilya’s shoulder. His back was stiff as a board.

“That’s not hers. I’m sure it belongs to that damned David. He’s always getting into trouble — nothing but trouble, that guy. It’s definitely not hers.”

“Can Lilly shoot?” Shane asked carefully.

“Yes. She wanted to learn when she was about thirteen, and Alexei practiced with her a bit. At the time, we both thought it couldn’t hurt to know about weapons and to respect them, especially in this area. It’s almost normal here. She’s actually a pretty good shot—” He broke off.

A shiver ran down Shane’s spine. So Lilly could shoot. And she was good at it.

Their eyes met. Ilya’s eyes were wide, filled with pain. Did he think Lilly had done it? That she hated Ethan and had made a terrible mistake?

“I’ll take care of it,” Ilya growled. He wasn’t just upset. He was angry. Furious.

“You should really talk to her calmly. When is she coming home?”

“Who knows? I have no intention of waiting for school to end.”

Ilya checked the gun and cursed.

“Is it loaded?” Shane gasped.

Cartridges fell into Ilya’s palm. “Yes.”

His eyes flashed with anger. He slipped the bullets into his pocket and shoved the gun into the waistband of his jeans.

Shane grabbed his arm before he could storm out. “Wait. You’re far too upset. And I don’t think it’s wise to pull her out of class in the middle of the day.”

“I’ll drag her out of that fucking classroom by her hair!” Ilya hissed, his blue eyes blazing. “And I’m going to find that David too! I told her not to see him again!” he shouted.

“Please, calm down and think,” Shane said, refusing to let go. “You’re too angry to think clearly. If you go after her like this, you’ll only make her defensive. It will make everything worse.”

“Worse? How can it get worse?” Ilya asked, stunned. “We found a loaded gun — a fucking gun — in her room. And she stole your clothes.”

He had noticed Ethan’s sweater too.

Shane let go of his arm.

“Why are you trying to protect her? You don’t like her. You never did. How long has this been going on? That was your sweater, wasn’t it? Damn it.”

Ilya raged without waiting for an answer.

Shane ran a hand through his hair. “Come. Let’s sit down. Just for a moment.”

Ilya looked into his eyes, lowered his gaze, then looked at him again.

Shane saw the despair there.

“How long has she been stealing from you?” Ilya asked roughly.

Shane’s heart almost broke. He wanted to touch Ilya’s cheek — no, to caress it.

“She didn’t steal anything. She just borrowed it,” Shane said hoarsely.

“Why are you trying to protect her? I doubt she asked for your permission.”

Shane hesitated. Maybe it was better if Ilya knew the truth about his daughter. “No. She didn’t.”

“I call that stealing,” Ilya said seriously. “And minors aren’t allowed to own guns. That’s illegal.”

Shane gently pulled him toward Lilly’s bed. “Sit down, Ilya.”

Ilya looked straight at him — as if looking directly into his heart, wide open and vulnerable.

When Shane saw how much he loved Lilly — and how afraid he was — his heart went out to him. He wanted Ilya to be happy.

And now he knew that Ilya would have to leave Ethan behind in order to bring peace back into his life.

Ilya sat down and buried his face in his hands. Shane placed a hand on his shoulder, and Ilya looked up. Their eyes met.

Shane gave him a weak smile.

“We should take our time and look at this carefully. We don’t know why Lilly did this. She’s at a difficult age. My first thought wasn’t that she hates me — and that would be my fault — but that she needed attention.”

Ilya stared at him. Shane saw his expression soften.

“Since when did you become so kind?”

“I don’t know. But this isn’t about me. I think we should forget about the clothes for now.”

Ilya continued to stare at him, clearly surprised.

“You’re right.” He looked up at the ceiling and shook his head. “I never thought I’d say this to you, but you’re absolutely right.” He smiled.

Shane’s heart lifted. What wouldn’t he give to be smiled at like that forever? Then he realized what he was thinking and was horrified with himself.

Still, he managed to smile back.

“We should focus on the gun first,” Shane said.

Ilya’s face hardened again. “It must belong to that David.”

“I hope so.”

Ilya turned fully toward him. “But I can’t wait until tonight to talk to her. I can’t, Ethan.”

Shane understood. “But you’re calmer now. When you see her, you have to stay calm. Yelling won’t help. If you yell, she won’t tell you anything.”

Ilya stared at him again, just as incredulous as before. Then he stood up and looked down at him.

“Maybe it really is because you hit your head. But I swear, you’ve changed.”

Shane's heart pounded nervously as he stood up too.

"I'm still myself. But hopefully more thoughtful. Better." He hesitated. "I regret so much, Ilya."

"I don't understand," Ilya said, shaking his head. "Thank you," he whispered.

Shane melted. It frightened him how much a single word could affect him.

"You're welcome," he replied softly.

…

Shane went downstairs after Ilya had driven off. He wished Ilya had asked him to come along. But he knew it wouldn't have been a good idea. He would have stayed at McGill anyway.

He was deeply worried. The situation with Lilly was dangerous, and Ilya was extremely upset. All Shane could do now was hope it wouldn't end in disaster.

Since there was nothing else he could do, he decided to go to the stables and see if Cliff was there. Searching through Cliff's things might distract him — and perhaps reveal who Cliff really was.

Shane took a small kitchen knife and slipped it into his back pocket. He could hardly believe he was about to break into someone's private space. His heart pounded nervously.

It was a gray, almost wintry day. Shane wore jeans and one of Ethan's long-sleeved shirts. It felt wrong. Expensive, but wrong. Like wearing someone else's identity. Tomorrow, he would buy his own clothes.

Cliff's car wasn't there, and Shane's pulse quickened.

Inside the stable, he saw the red-haired stable boy alone.

"Hello. Is Cliff here?"

"Uh, no. He's in the other stable."

Perfect.

Shane thanked him and hurried upstairs. Cliff's door was closed — and locked. *Shit.*

Last time it had been open. Shane pulled the small knife from his pocket, but the tip didn't fit into the keyhole, which was nothing more than a narrow slit. He frowned. It was a simple lock — the kind you secured by turning a small lever on the inside of the doorknob.

He hesitated, then slid the knife between the door and the frame. He had never done anything

like this before, but he had seen it in movies — doors opened with nothing more than a credit card. He pushed the blade upward carefully.

Click.

The lock gave way.

Shane took a deep breath and tried to push the door open, but it didn't move.

Cliff had locked the deadbolt from the inside. He must have realized that someone had been in his apartment the other day. A surge of determination pushed Shane forward. He turned and entered the neighboring apartment, whose door stood unlocked.

Inside, the air was stale and dusty. The apartment was almost identical to Cliff's next door.

Then he saw the window. It was on the same wall as the window in Cliff's apartment, and he estimated that there were about three meters between them.

He hurried over, opened it as far as it would go, and looked down. He was on the first floor. If he fell, he would break at least one bone — if not his neck.

He leaned out farther and realized he had overestimated the distance. It was only about two meters — and Cliff's window was wide open.

A rain gutter ran along the roof of the stable building, and about a meter below the windows, a narrow ledge circled the structure. He could make it.

He had survived worse over the past three days. He wasn't going to give up now.

Shane closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and carefully climbed out of the window. He placed both feet on the narrow ledge and grabbed the gutter above his head.

His stomach pressed flat against the wall. He breathed heavily and forced himself not to think about falling. Instead, he focused on his goal. The answer to the mystery of who Cliff Marlow really was had to be inside that locked suitcase.

A moment later, Shane slipped through Cliff's open window and onto the apartment floor. He landed on his hands and knees and let out a quiet laugh. It was ridiculous, but he felt proud of himself.

He had made it.

Shane stood quickly and hurried to the bed. He dropped to his knees and pulled out the closed suitcase. Once again, he tried to break the small padlock with his kitchen knife, but it wouldn't budge.

Shane sat back on his heels and exhaled in frustration. Even after several attempts, he couldn't open it.

Damn it.

After a moment, Shane took a deep breath and pushed the knife through the fabric of the suitcase. It was surprisingly tough. He dragged the blade through it with effort until the slit was wide enough.

He slipped his hand inside — and for the second time in less than twenty-four hours, his fingers touched cold steel.

A gun.

For a moment, Shane froze in shock. Then he slowly pulled it out.

He gasped. It looked nothing like the ordinary pistol he had found in Lilly's room. This one was larger. Heavier. More dangerous.

It looked like a weapon designed for one purpose only.

To kill.

"Fuck," Shane whispered.

He carefully set the gun aside, hesitated, then slid his hand back into the suitcase as if expecting something to bite him.

This time, his fingers closed around leather. The object was long and narrow. He didn't even need to pull it out to know what it was.

A sheath.

He drew it out slowly.

It wasn't just a knife. It was a dagger — long, heavy, and unmistakably lethal.

Who the hell was Cliff Zara? And what was he doing at McGill?

Shane was certain it had something to do with Ethan — or whatever trouble Ethan was in. There was no other explanation. Cliff was no ordinary stable hand.

But whose side was he on?

A cold sense of dread settled in Shane's chest.

At first, he had hoped Cliff might be an undercover cop.

But Cliff hated Ethan.

He hated him with frightening intensity.

Shane needed to get out of here. Now. Before Cliff came back.

He pushed the dagger back into the suitcase and reached for the gun, intending to put it back as well—

Click.

The sound of a lock turning. Then the door opened.

You've got to be kidding me.

Panic flooded his body.

"What the hell are you doing here?" Cliff Marlow asked, his voice dangerously calm.

Slowly, still kneeling, Shane turned around.

He could barely breathe.

Cliff closed the door behind him and stepped forward.

Slowly. Quietly. And yet with an unmistakable threat that filled the entire room.

"What are you doing here?" Cliff asked again, his eyes dropping to the gun.

Shane was still holding it. He let it fall immediately and jumped to his feet.

What had he done? He had broken into Cliff's apartment. He had been spying on him.

Cliff crossed his arms over his broad chest.

What if he was after Ethan? What if he was the one who had shot him?

"I think I should be the one asking questions," Shane said hoarsely.

"Really?" Cliff replied calmly. "I was just thinking about calling the police."

His voice was almost mild, which made it even more threatening.

Shane swallowed and hoped he was bluffing.

"Go ahead," Shane said. "You have a gun and a dagger here. And I doubt you have a license for that gun. Aren't blades that long illegal?"

Who the hell carried a dagger like that?

Someone dangerous.
Someone capable of killing.

Cliff hadn't moved. A faint smile played on his lips.

"No," he said evenly. "The blade is perfectly legal. And I do have a license for the gun."

Shane struggled to think clearly.

"Can I see it?"

Cliff looked as if he might laugh, but didn't. Instead, he slowly reached into his back pocket and pulled out his wallet. He opened it and held it up.

The license looked real.

His photo was unmistakably on it.

"Satisfied?" Cliff asked quietly.

"No," Shane said.

Shane had to get out of here. Now.

"Why?" Cliff asked softly. "Because I caught you in my apartment, where you definitely don't belong?" His eyes narrowed. "What were you looking for, Mr. Rozanov? I assume this wasn't meant to be a friendly visit."

Shane forced a smile. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have been snooping around."

He straightened, trying to slip past him.

Cliff's hand closed around his wrist.

"What's the hurry, Mr. Rozanov?" he whispered, pulling him back and turning him around.

The smile vanished. "You look scared."

"I'm not afraid," Shane lied.

"Oh? No?"

Cliff released him, but Shane still couldn't move. It felt as if the air between them had thickened, trapping him in place.

"You still haven't answered my question," Cliff continued calmly. "What are you doing up here?"

Shane met his eyes. They were cool. Empty. No warmth. No anger. No desire. His fear deepened. Cliff wasn't losing control. He was enjoying this.

"I don't think you are who you say you are," Shane said quietly.

Cliff laughed — not loudly, but with genuine amusement.

"No? I'm afraid I have to disappoint you. I'm just an ordinary man who lost his job. Now I work in the stables to pay the bills and keep a roof over my head."

Shane didn't believe a single word.

"And yes," Cliff added lightly, "I own a gun. Some people collect stamps. I prefer something louder."

That wasn't true either. There was nothing ordinary about him. Not the sharp, cutting intelligence in his gaze. Not the controlled stillness of his body. And certainly not the dark, unsettling current of aggression — and something dangerously close to desire — Shane had felt the first moment they met.

He hadn't imagined that. Not at all.

What if he knew everything? What if he had overheard the entire phone call with Ethan last night? What if that was the reason he had suddenly stopped looking at him that way — stopped being hostile, stopped being interested — because he knew he wasn't Ethan?

"Most people ask questions when they doubt someone," Cliff said quietly, pulling Shane out of his thoughts. "You went to quite a lot of trouble to get in here."

"Someone shot at me the day before yesterday," Shane replied. "You remember?"

"I haven't forgotten." Cliff tilted his head slightly. "But you've stirred up strong emotions in this town from the very beginning, haven't you… Ethan?"

He had never called him by his brother's name before.

The way he said it sent a cold shiver down Shane's spine.

"I've made mistakes," Shane said carefully. "I regret a lot of things. I've been thinking about that lately."

"Have you?" Cliff raised an eyebrow. "People don't usually change that fast."

"I have." Shane lifted his chin defiantly. "I regret the past. I'm sorry if I ever gave you false hope. And now I have to go. Ilya is probably already looking for me."

"Ilya went into town," Cliff replied calmly.

Shane turned toward the door. This time Cliff didn't grab him.

The relief lasted only seconds.

"Let me give you some advice," Cliff said.

Shane froze but didn't turn around.

"Lie low for a while. You may have changed overnight, but this is a small town. And small towns have long memories." A brief pause. "I wouldn't want anything to happen to a handsome man like you."

Shane spun around. "What do you know?" he shouted. "Do you know who shot at me?"

Cliff's smile was thin. Controlled.

"I know exactly as much as you do," he said. "And if I were you, I'd keep quiet."

Shane searched his face. The gaze was cold. Hard. But not cruel.

Was he wrong about him?
Was Cliff actually warning him?

"Oh — and next time I catch you snooping around in here," Cliff added lightly, "I might not be in such a generous mood."

-

Shane had barely entered the house, still shaken and confused by the encounter, when he heard a car pull into the driveway. He rushed to the window beside the front door.

Ilya's car.

Lilly jumped out of the passenger seat, slammed the door, and ran toward the house. Even from a distance Shane saw her tear-streaked face.

The front door flew open.

"Lilly, wait!" Shane called instinctively.

She spun around when she saw him. Her eyes widened.

"You!" she cried. "This is all your fault! I hate you!"

She ran up the stairs.

Shane turned slowly.

Ilya stood in the doorway.

For a moment Shane wanted nothing more than to pull him into his arms. But Ilya's face stopped him.

Rage. Shame. Fear.

Ilya walked past him into his office without a word.

Shane followed.

"How can I help?"

Ilya stood behind his desk but didn't sit down.

"You can't."

"I'm sorry."

Ilya stared at the papers scattered across the desk.

"Does the gun belong to her?" Shane asked quietly.

"I don't know." Ilya looked up. His face seemed strained, almost broken. "She said it was none of my business."

Shane stepped closer and gently placed a hand on the back of Ilya's neck.

"Can I try talking to her?"

Ilya gave a humorless laugh. "She told me it was none of my *goddamn business."*

Shane flinched. He had never seen him so uncomposed.

"I was so angry," Ilya whispered. "I yelled at her. I didn't mean to. I've never done that before."

Shane's chest tightened.

"But after what happened here — after the shooting — and then this…" Ilya sank into the chair and covered his face with his hands. "I love her, Ethan. I love my daughter. I've never screamed at her like that. It was a reflex. A stupid, stupid reflex."

"I know how much you love her," Shane said softly, rubbing his shoulder. "It's going to be okay."

"Is it?" Ilya looked up, tortured. "I humiliated her. In front of her friends. She'll never forgive me."

“She will,” Shane said firmly. “But right now we need to think clearly. There was a gun in her room. That’s serious.”

Ilya stared at him. “You’re right,” he murmured. Then he added with a strange look, “Maybe you should talk to her. You’ve become incredibly wise all of a sudden.”

Shane lowered his gaze and ignored the underlying question.

“I’ll tell you how it goes.”

“Please.”

Upstairs, the confident mask fell away.

Ilya had dragged Lilly home in front of her friends. He had shouted at her. This would not be easy to fix.

Shane climbed the stairs slowly, wishing he truly were as wise as Ilya thought.

Maybe what Lilly needed wasn’t another authority figure. Maybe she needed an ally. A friend.

He stopped in front of her closed door. His stomach fluttered nervously.

He knocked.

“Go away!” Lilly shouted hoarsely.

“Lilly, please. Let me in.”

“You’re the last person I’d talk to! Fuck off!”

The stereo blasted at full volume. He tried the door anyway. Locked.

“Lilly, please!” he called over the music. “Your father loves you. That’s why he reacted like that. He feels terrible. He didn’t want to yell at you.”

The music grew louder. Shane closed his eyes.

“My dad never yelled at me,” he said finally, raising his voice. “And I wasn’t exactly easy either.”

He hesitated. Then he began talking about his twin brother.

“When I was your age, I used to sneak out and stay gone all night. Wild parties. Boys my father would have hated.”

Ethan had been impossible back then. After their mother died, their father hadn't known how to handle either of them.

"I broke every rule he ever made," Shane continued. "But he never yelled at me. After my mother died, he barely did anything at all. I think his heart was broken. I don't think it ever healed."

He paused, thinking of the man he had loved and admired. Then he noticed the silence behind the door.

The music had stopped.

Lilly was listening.

"My father moved away when I went to college. He died a few years ago." Shane swallowed. "Sometimes I wish he had paid more attention when I was young. If I had meant more to him back then… maybe he would have."

Silence again.

"Your father yelled at you because you matter to him, Lilly."

A long moment passed.

Then the door opened.

Lilly stood there. Her cheeks were blotchy, her lashes wet, the tip of her nose red from crying.

"Did you just make that up?" she asked.

"No." Shane shook his head. "I was a mess as a teenager. And my father was so lost in his grief he didn't even notice. Your father sees you. He worries about you. He loves you very much. And you know that."

She stepped back but left the door open.

Shane followed her into the room.

She threw herself onto the bed and buried her face in the pillow. Shane stopped a few steps away.

"Ilya is scared," he said gently. "He's scared because of the gun in your drawer."

Lilly sat up abruptly. Her long blonde hair fell over her shoulders.

"He wouldn't know anything about it if you hadn't been snooping through my room," she snapped.

“You’re right,” Shane said carefully. “I should have asked you about my sweater instead of looking for it myself. That wasn’t okay.”

He was lucky he had found the sweater at all. Otherwise he would never have had an excuse.

Lilly stared at him. “That was dumb as hell.”

“Do you have to swear at me?” Shane asked quietly.

She blinked. “Why wouldn’t I? I hear you swearing all the time.”

Shane made a face, and Lilly looked at him as if she’d just discovered a new species.

“Aren’t you going to yell at me about the sweater?” she asked, more uncertain now.

He sighed. “No. We’ll talk about that another time.”

A brief pause.

“If you like something in my closet, you can borrow it,” he added. “Just ask me first.”

Her eyes widened.

“But can I ask why?” Shane said gently. “Why that sweater?”

Lilly hesitated. For a moment she met his eyes — then looked down.

“I don’t know… It’s just so big. When I feel alone or when I miss my mom, I put it on. It makes me feel… safe.”

Shane smiled softly.

“It makes me feel safe, too. My mother gave it to me.”

Lilly looked up. “Really?”

He nodded. “And you can wear it whenever you need to. If it comforts you on bad days, then please — wear it.”

Her expression changed. Suspicion crept back in.

“What do you want?” she asked quietly. “You must want something if you’re being this nice.”

The words hit him harder than he expected.

“I want to talk about the gun,” he said at last. “Why did you hide one in your room?”

She didn't look at him. "I had my reasons."

"Lilly." His voice stayed calm. "Why would you ever need a gun?"

She stared down at her feet. Fresh tears shimmered on her lashes.

Eventually she took a deep breath.

"There are some bad guys at my school. From the other side of town. They're a real gang. They call themselves the Yakuza." She lifted her chin stubbornly. "Everyone at school suffers because of them. Me too."

Shane stared at her.

"The Yakuza?" he repeated carefully. "And you think a gun is the answer? What were you planning to do — shoot them?"

Lilly shrugged, defensive. "They're dangerous. I have to keep them off my back."

"And is David part of this gang?"

"No!" she burst out, horrified. "He tries so hard to stay out of it. Even though he lives near them. They want him to join. He won't. They even beat him up—"

She stopped abruptly. Understanding settled in.

Maybe Ilya had been right. Maybe the gun wasn't really hers. Maybe it belonged to David — and maybe he thought he needed it for protection.

And Lilly was trying to protect him.

"David isn't bad," she insisted fiercely. "His dad drinks, okay? But his mom is nice. She works all the time. David has the best grades in school. Did you know that? They wanted him on the football team — he's amazing — but he can't join because he works after school." Her jaw tightened. "Dad hates him. And he doesn't even know him."

Shane saw it clearly now. This wasn't rebellion. This was loyalty.

He hesitated, then gently touched her arm.

"He sounds like a very special boy."

"You think so?" she asked, almost breathless.

He nodded.

Her face lit up. "Do you want to see pictures?"

“Of course.”

She slid off the bed, crawled under it, and pulled out a brightly painted box. Inside were photographs.

David in an oversized sweater. David behind the wheel of a rusty jeep. David and Lilly squeezed together in a photo booth, laughing. Dark hair. Light skin. Dimples.

He looked open. Kind.

“He seems nice,” Shane said honestly.

Lilly grinned. “I know.”

Then her smile faded.

“You’re not going to yell at me? About the gun?”

“No,” Shane said quietly. “Yelling won’t fix this. But what you’re describing is serious, Lilly. Not just for you. For everyone.”

She looked at him, surprised by his calm.

“It *is* serious,” she said. “They’re awful. Everyone’s scared of them. Except David.” Pride crept into her voice. “He told them to piss off.”

Brave.

And reckless.

“Lilly,” Shane said gently, “you still can’t keep a gun. That’s not the right way to handle this.”

She lowered her gaze. She knew.

“Has anyone talked to the principal about these boys?” he asked.

“No.”

“This is something the school administration — maybe even the police — need to know.”

He thought briefly of her uncle, Alexei Rozanov.

“Haven’t you ever told your uncle?”

“No.” She frowned. “I’m not stupid. I knew I’d get into trouble because of the gun. I just didn’t expect anyone to snoop through my room.” She shot him a pointed look.

“I’m sorry,” Shane said quietly. “I should have talked to you directly. Even adults make mistakes.” He paused. “But if you’re this afraid, the principal needs to know.”

She stared at him.

“If I rat them out…” Her voice faltered. “Then I don’t know what they’ll do.”

Shane felt something tighten in his chest.

“You’re really that scared of them?”

Lilly hesitated. And then tears filled her eyes again.

"We girls are the most scared."

Shane stood up. "Did they touch you?"

Lilly got up too. "Yeah, kind of..."

"Did they hurt you, Lilly? You have to tell me."

"Not really," Lilly whispered. "Just a little bit. You know what I mean. Touched us and all that."

Shane was appalled. "Your dad needs to know about this. And the principal too—"

"No! If you tell my dad about this, I'll never speak to you again!" Lilly screamed desperately.

Shane noticed that Lilly really feared this gang very much — or was she afraid of something else, something that had to do with David? But as much as he wanted to win Lilly's trust, he had to tell Ilya about it. Weapons and gangs were far too dangerous to leave him in the dark.

Lilly read the decision in his eyes. "You want to go to Dad!"

"Lilly—"

"That's mean! I trusted you!" Lilly screamed in tears.

"Listen, this sounds too serious to ignore." Shane tried again. "I don't want anything to happen to you or your friends."

"Go away!"

"Please, Lilly. I'm worried about you."

"No! Jan was wrong." Lilly sobbed. "He was totally wrong!"

Shane hesitated.

"You're not different, not at all — you’re still the same as usual, and I still hate you just as much!"

Shane breathed. "I don't hate you. On the contrary, you mean a lot to me, and that's why I have to do what I think is right and ultimately best for you."

"Get out!" Lilly threw a magazine at him.

Shane left.

…

Alexei Rozanov was expected for dinner.

Shane had told Ilya what he had heard from Lilly, and while he was picking up Jan, Ilya had called Lilly's principal and his brother.

Alexei would come by around 7:00 pm. Previously, he had been in another city, Ilya said.

Now it was almost time. Jan had already eaten and bathed, and Shane read him a story.

"And Willy thought about it thoroughly and finally realized that he had done something wrong," Shane read. "So he picked a flower and brought it to Lou, and Lou was so happy to see it that they embraced and reconciled. And to this day, Willy the Frog and Lou are best friends."

"End!!" Jan clapped.

"Do you like this story?" Shane smiled at him.

"Yes, I think th—Daddy!"

Shane, who sat with his back to the door, turned around and saw Ilya standing there. He looked stunning.

He stared at Shane under his thick lashes as if he did not recognize him.

Shane smiled warmly. It was difficult for him to control himself because his heart was racing wildly. Ilya just looked so damn hot in his elegant clothes. It looked like that shouldn’t be allowed, Shane thought.

"Willy's a great frog," Jan said, jumped out of bed, and ran to Ilya. He picked him up in his arms.

"May I have a frog?"

"No."

"But frogs are so funny, Daddy!"

"We'll get a dog, remember?" Ilya said gently, and his gaze wandered back to Shane.

Jan nodded as he was put down. Now Ilya looked directly at Shane.

"Alexei called me. He'll be here in a few minutes." Then he hesitated.

"Did you want to keep that on?" he asked tactfully.

Shane did not hesitate. After he picked up Jan from kindergarten, they both went to the mall. Shane had bought himself two pants, a few simple cotton shirts, and a green shirt with buttons. Jan had gotten two fairy tale books and a pajama.

Shane wore a sweater, dark blue jeans, and Ilya's thick knitted socks. Of course, he would change for dinner, as Ilya had apparently done before.

"I only need five minutes," Shane said quickly. He rushed to the bedroom in the dressing room. Hastily, he looked for the black trousers he had bought today. They were tight, black, and simple. Since he was a little thinner than Ethan, the pants he had been wearing in the last few days were often slightly loose. He also took the green shirt, buttoning it up to the top. He wanted to impress Ilya tonight.

Refusing to dwell on the thought, he took off his clothes and slipped into the new ones. In the bathroom, he tried not to let his black hair look too wild. He studied himself critically in the mirror. He looked like an excited teenager before his first date.

Shane reminded himself that this was not a date — Ethan would be back after the weekend, and he was only temporarily standing in for his brother. But that didn’t dampen his excitement. He was thrilled to have reached a truce with Ilya.

Looking at the clock, he saw that ten minutes had already passed — not five. He ran out and hurried along the hallway. When he reached Jan’s room, he saw Olga putting Jan to bed.

"Sleep well, sweetheart," Shane said, embracing the little boy.

"Love you, Dad," Jan mumbled drowsily.

"Love you too," Shane replied. He smiled at Olga, but she didn’t smile back.

Outside, on the stairs, Shane stopped and held onto the railing. He could hear the men in the living room.

Alexei saw Shane first. He was in his uniform, and his posture stiffened slightly when he spotted him. Suddenly, Shane’s mood vanished.

"Hello," Shane said, stepping forward. "I didn’t want to keep you waiting."

Ilya turned around and let his gaze glide over him. Shane managed a smile.

"You didn’t keep us waiting," Ilya said, with the hint of a smile.

Shane stood carefully, then turned to Alexei.

"How was your trip?" Shane asked.

Alexei crossed his arms and looked at him.

"Very nice, thank you," he said, with a strange edge of sarcasm.

Shane tensed.

Ilya went to the bar cart and poured two glasses of scotch and one glass of bourbon. He handed Shane a scotch, Alexei the bourbon, and kept the second glass of scotch for himself.

Shane didn’t like hard drinks and blinked at the amber liquid in his glass. He would have preferred beer.

"I’ve already started telling Alexei everything. But I didn’t get very far," Ilya said.

Shane nodded nervously, wishing Ethan hadn’t turned Ilya’s brother into an enemy too.

Alexei’s gaze was icy, and he didn’t take his eyes off Shane for a moment.

"Why don’t you tell him what you found out?" Ilya suggested.

Shane nodded and set his glass down. He told Alexei about the gang that had apparently been frightening Lilly and the others at school.

"You weren’t at the office to press charges," Alexei said suddenly.

Shane froze.

"I haven’t gotten around to it yet," he admitted.

Alexei nodded, though his expression remained skeptical. Shane knew that his failure to press charges made it seem like he had only come up with the idea during his ride with Pride.

"Do you have any names?" Alexei asked, abruptly changing the subject.

Shane cleared his throat. "Unfortunately, I didn’t get that far. Lilly’s afraid to talk to anyone about this — even you. Apparently, these kids are really dangerous. Honestly, I’m very worried about Lilly."

„Oh, really?" Alexei asked. "Since when is that?"

Shane tightened his shoulders and tried to curb the rising rage.

"Ever since I found a gun in her room."

"But she talked to you," Alexei mumbled after a pause. "I didn't know you were Lilly's closest confidante."

"Usually she doesn't trust me with something like that," Shane said, his voice firm. "You both know that. But such a serious situation calls for unusual measures, don't you think? And today, she really needed a friend," he added.

"So you manipulated her, and she confided everything to you," Alexei said.

"No, I didn't manipulate her!" Shane shouted. "I may be a bad person, but I don't want any teenager getting hurt — or shot dead!"

It was obvious that Alexei couldn't stand him, and the weight of that disapproval felt like another heavy burden Shane had to carry.

"And she didn't suddenly decide to confide in me. We had a long talk."

Alexei turned his eyes toward Ilya.

"I yelled at her, Alexei. I yelled at her in front of all her friends," Ilya said quietly.

Alexei looked completely baffled. "What!?"

"Lilly still isn't talking to me. That's why Ethan got this far with her, I think."

Alexei's gaze darted back to Shane. Mistrust was written all over his face.

"And you're her friend? Since when? Oh, since you and Ilya are only weeks away from a final divorce!"

Shane was shocked by Alexei's boldness — he didn't even try to hide his dislike.

"Alexei, Ethan was just trying to help," Ilya said sharply.

"Oh, really?" Alexei shot back. His temper flared, though he seemed to be trying to control it.

"Oh, right. Since you handed him the divorce papers, he's had a sudden personality change. He decided to be a good Dad to Jan, and to Lilly… oh, just the whole world, didn't he? And you fall for all of it," Alexei raged, glaring at his brother. "Damn it, is it all starting over now?"

Ilya hesitated.

"This isn’t a game. Lilly has a problem, and Ethan helped us."

"That’s how he got to you when he met you in Ottawa!" Alexei screamed. "Since then, he’s been playing you, and despite everything you know by now, you’re still falling for it!"

Ilya grabbed his brother and nearly pushed him back. Shane froze.

"I asked you here today to talk about Lilly! Not about Ethan!" Ilya shouted angrily.

"How am I supposed to watch in silence? Listen to yourself!" Alexei barked. "He has you by the nuts! And I bet I know how!"

He gave Shane a disgusted look, then stomped toward him. Shane retreated.

"When Ilya announced he wanted to marry you, even though I warned him not to — that day I decided to keep my mouth shut and try to endure this awful situation somehow. But now he’s going to file for divorce, and I’m going to make sure he doesn’t fall for you again! Is that clear?"

"That’s enough," Ilya said, grabbing Alexei from behind and spinning him around.

"How gullible can you still be? After the last six years, in which he told you one lie after another?" Alexei demanded.

Ilya was angry, but the look he gave Shane showed that Alexei was slowly beginning to rethink.

"Nothing’s changed," Ilya said. "Ethan and I agree about the divorce. But this is about Lilly, damn it! It’s about my daughter — your niece. Not Ethan and me!“

"But he’s still in the middle of it," Alexei said, calmer now.

Shane swallowed hard and gathered all his courage.
"Lilly needs a friend right now. She’s only sixteen and she’s in trouble — or at least almost! If she meant anything to you, you’d ask me about the gun and the gang instead of throwing accusations around, even though you don’t know a thing about me!" Shane shouted, outraged.

Alexei put his hands on his hips.

"Ilya gave me the gun. I’m having it checked right now." His eyes were cold. "*You* found the gun?"

Shane nodded, a bad feeling gnawing at him as he stressed the 'you'.

"In Lilly’s room?"

"Yes, in a drawer between her clothes."

Alexei's mouth twisted — not into a smile.
"Why the hell are you digging around in my niece's dresser? Ilya hasn't explained this to me yet — but there's no explanation for it anyway!!"

"What?" Shane froze.

"I want to know what you were doing in my niece's room, Ethan."

"I was looking for a sweater that Lilly borrowed," Shane choked out.

Alexei's gaze was mocking and incredulous at the same time.

"Alexei, Ethan's not on trial here," Ilya stepped in firmly. "Lilly had a gun, apparently because she was trying to protect herself — or David — from a gang of teenagers."

Alexei stared at Shane. "I just find it strange that Ethan found the gun and now he's in the center of attention again."

"I was looking for my sweater," Shane repeated. "Lilly just borrowed it, and I was sure I'd find it in her room."

Alexei jerked up a hand. "Now you're saying Lilly stole from you?"

"I said borrowed, not stolen!" Shane shouted.

Why was Alexei so intent on pushing him into a corner?

A long pause followed. Eventually, Alexei smiled — but it was an unpleasant smile.

"I'm curious to see what comes out of the gun review. Because somehow, I know this isn't about Lilly. It's about you."

"What?" Shane gasped.

Ilya set his glass down. "What the hell are you saying?"

"I want to talk to Lilly. Is she in her room?" Alexei asked.

Ilya's face hardened. "Yes."

Alexei hurried out of the living room, and Ilya followed him. Shane followed as well but stopped at the threshold. He saw Ilya grabbing Alexei by the arm.

"What was that last remark supposed to mean?"

Alexei turned, briefly acknowledging Shane in the doorway — but he didn't really look at

him, didn’t give him a meaningful glance, even though he must have noticed him.

"Am I a good cop?"

Ilya did not hesitate. "Yeah. You’re still supposed to be in homicide, you know that."

Alexei shrugged. "My instincts are screaming at me, Ilya."

Shane saw Ilya’s shoulders tense.

"And what does that mean?"

"That means don’t be an idiot over a wet cock."

Shane shrugged and clutched his arms tightly around his chest.

Ilya glanced at Shane hesitantly, then turned back to his brother.

"That was unnecessary. Ethan found a gun in Lilly’s room, Alexei. How exactly does that make me an idiot?" he asked.

"That’s what he says!" Alexei replied. "Have you lost your mind? That man has told you nothing but lies from day one! His intrigues are so complicated that no one — not even me — can see through them! And all of a sudden, he comes back from Ottawa, without the styled mane, without the perfect clothes! Suddenly he’s wearing your knitted socks and falls off the horse! And he claims someone shot at him. There was no sign of a gun being fired, Ilya. We’ve been combing the entire area. If someone had shot at him, we’d find a shell casing or something!"

Alexei had even investigated matters Shane hadn’t reported.

"Not necessarily," Ilya replied harshly, but with uncertainty.

Shane couldn’t move —he wanted to run away. He became increasingly uncomfortable, and his heart seemed to sink into his knees. He would give everything to just pack up and leave now, back to Ottawa.

Ilya stared at Alexei.

Shane turned away and sank into a big armchair. A heavy, strange weight pressed him down — the burden of despair. How much more could he take? When things finally seemed to be improving, Alexei Rozanov had to show up, bringing even more mistrust than all the others.

"I get it — he’s pulling a new scam, right? That cute hairstyle, that natural look, the nice-boy-next-door vibe. But above all, this ‘nice Dad’ thing. He’s not the fatherly type. He hasn’t changed that much. He’s up to something. I can literally smell it, Ilya. Policemen have a good instinct for that sort of thing."

"I hope you're wrong," Ilya mumbled.

Alexei snorted scornfully. "I *know* he's up to something."

"What do you mean?" Ilya asked quietly, his hoarse voice worried.

"I've established that he's deceiving you. That's all I can say." Alexei glanced at Shane and then looked directly at him. "Not yet."

Shane remained seated, stiff as a board. He was miserable, every fiber of his body weighed down by it. He wanted to yell at them, to tell them the whole truth — as far as he knew it. But that would be selfish. He couldn't reveal himself now — not until the whole thing was over, not before Jan and Ethan were safe, and it was clear there was no more danger for either of them.

"What the hell does that mean — you can't tell me?" Ilya demanded, outraged.

"Don't trust him," Alexei said, placing a hand on Ilya's shoulder. "You can fuck his brains out for all I care, but don't trust him."

Ilya swayed. "I don't trust him either, but—"

"No 'but'," Alexei interrupted harshly. He glanced at Shane, then turned away. "I'm going upstairs to see Lilly."

Once he was gone, Ilya turned to Shane and looked at him for a long, silent moment.

Suddenly, he seemed exhausted. "I must be really stupid. A stupid idiot. Alexei is right. He was right from day one."

Shane approached him — and stumbled over a bump in the parquet. He regained his balance and grabbed Ilya's hands.

"You're not stupid!"

But he couldn't deny that Alexei was partially right.

"Ilya, I swear to you, I won't hurt Lilly or Jan. I swear it," Shane said hoarsely. He wanted to add, *and you either*, but of course he couldn't.

Silently, he begged Ilya to trust him, fearing that Ethan's return would undo everything and put everyone in danger.

Ilya looked at him, and Shane couldn't turn away from the gaze. He wanted Ilya to trust him. He saw Ilya's gaze soften — but then his expression darkened, and he pushed Shane away.

"What is Alexei talking about, Ethan? What does he know about you that he won't tell me?" he asked.

Shane felt Ilya’s desperation. He was dying to explain.

He took a deep breath, thoughts flashing. What if he told him part of the truth?

"Ilya, Alexei’s right. There’s something important I didn’t tell you."

"And what the hell is that?"

Shane straightened. "I’m in a lot of debt."

Ilya didn’t say a word.

"I owe someone a lot of money. Maybe this someone is after me now."

Ilya frowned, his brow creasing. "What are you playing at now?" he asked.

"I’m not playing! You wanted the truth. I’m trying to make this right, but I can’t tell you any more."

"I pay all your bills, Ethan. Even though you’re pretty wasteful, I always let you spend as much as you want. We have no debts."

Shane’s shoulders tensed. He couldn’t reveal any details.

"I’m telling the truth," Shane whispered. "I’m really scared, Ilya."

Ilya looked at him, terrified. "Why are you doing this? Why are you still lying to me now?" he screamed.

Shane was speechless. His plan to tell part of the truth had backfired.

"I... I—" he began nervously.

Ilya stared at him piercingly. "What are you trying to hide?"

"Nothing." Shane ran a hand through his hair. He wanted to insist he was telling the truth, but no words would come.

"Why do I see fear — no, sorrow — in your eyes?" Ilya asked. "And don’t tell me you’re scared because you spent money you don’t have! Why the fuck are you acting like this? Suddenly, the perfume you wore every damn day is gone. Why don’t you style your hair? And what’s with the sudden penchant for jeans? Explain that to me, Ethan!" Ilya was screaming now.

Shane could only stare at him, speechless.

Ilya turned away, stiff with tension.

"I can’t," Shane heard himself choke out.

Ilya spun around, grim-faced.

"You know what the worst part is?" he paused. Shane shook his head anxiously.

"I *know* that I shouldn’t trust you. I think Alexei is right — I’ve been convinced of that for a while. But I *want* to trust you," he said.

Shane heard himself whisper, "You can trust me."

Then Ilya left.

-

Nobody trusted him.

It hurt that Ilya, who had already opened up a little, who had wanted to trust him, had rejected his intention again.

Shane wondered if Ilya would ever believe in him once Ethan returned, when Ilya knew who Shane really was — once he and Ethan were divorced.

He realized how much he wanted Ilya to truly know him.

Shane closed his eyes desperately. The real problem was clear:

No matter what Ethan had done — and Shane could only vaguely imagine the depth of it — he was still Shane’s twin brother. At that moment, he heard footsteps on the stairs. Shane opened his eyes and saw Alexei coming in.

Ilya had remained at the window the entire time, gazing over the hills to the horizon, now a deep purple, dotted with stars. He still held his empty glass. Then he turned.

"Lilly’s pretty messed up," Alexei said, glancing at Shane as if it were all his fault. "But she was able to give me some details about this gang. The leader is Ben Abbott, as I suspected. He’s drawn attention a few times — especially with alcohol and fights. It’s only a matter of time before he does something. He’s hard-core and unscrupulous. Nothing but trouble. I’ll stop by his house immediately, then speak with Principal Green. I’ll also make sure my people keep an eye on Ben."

"And what about Lilly?" Ilya asked.

"She claims the gun belongs to her," Alexei hesitated. "I think she has a strong crush on David Jenkins, but I also believe she’s telling the truth — the gun belongs to her. Or at least, not to him. She won’t tell me where she got it."

"The gun can’t belong to her," Ilya said. "Talk to this David. And preferably also with his father."

Alexei patted him on the shoulder. "Exactly my thought. Listen, I better skip dinner and get going." He didn’t look at Shane, as if he didn’t exist.

Ilya hesitated, then glanced at Shane.

Shane stood. "No, stay calm." He couldn’t smile. "I’m tired. I’d rather go to bed."

Suddenly, he felt like crying. He had been so foolish to look forward to a pleasant evening with Ilya and his brother. When would he finally realize what he could no longer suppress? Ethan had turned everyone in this family against him, and Shane couldn’t overcome it, no matter how hard he tried. First Ethan had to return, explain his deception, and even then, Shane might still fail.

"Have a nice evening," Shane choked out to Alexei, then hurried away.

Again, he stumbled over Ethan’s designer shoes, which were far too tight. Catching himself on the stair railing, he heard Alexei say, "Somehow, I can understand why you are falling for him again. Those brown, innocent eyes are hard to resist."

Ilya didn’t reply.

Shane clung to the railing, stopping to breathe.

"I’ve never seen him cry before," Alexei noticed.

"Neither have I," Ilya said.

-

Slowly, Shane made his way down the stairs. He was barefoot but still wore the same clothes from before. He had drunk his scotch and heard Alexei drive off. The relief was immense — he was gone.

Shane had been waiting a long time for Ilya to come up to the guest room where he was sleeping. When he didn’t appear, Shane decided not to wait any longer. He was slightly drunk, confused, sad, and incredibly hungry.

He crept quietly down the stairs, hoping Ilya was in his office. He didn’t want to see him — not now. He feared further questions, confrontations, the expression in Ilya’s eyes. Shane didn’t have the strength to lie anymore.

Though the kitchen could be reached via the hallway, the shortest path led through the living room. As soon as Shane stepped in, he sensed he was not alone.

But there was no light.

He stopped and listened intently.

A shadow at the window in the corner shifted.

"What are you doing here?"

Shane's eyes slowly adjusted to the darkness. The shadow resolved into a man — it was Ilya.

He stood at the window, a glass in his hand. Shane's heart raced at the sound of his voice before he even spoke.

He found a lamp and switched it on.

"I'm hungry," Shane mumbled.

Ilya let his gaze wander over him, pausing on his bare toes.

"I'm sorry about how the evening went."

Shane blinked, taken aback. "Thank you."

Strangely, he seemed genuinely remorseful. If only Alexei hadn't come tonight.

Ilya continued to look at him. Shane could hear his own heartbeat thundering in his ears. He swallowed, trying to steady himself.

"Something to drink?" Ilya asked, moving toward the bar cart.

Shane followed his gaze and noticed the scotch bottle was nearly empty.

He hesitated. He should say no — not just because he disliked scotch, but because it was late and he was hungry, even if he hadn't eaten much. God, he felt irresistibly drawn to Ilya.

Ilya poured a fresh glass for Shane, then refilled his own, handing Shane the drink.

"I must be drunk," Ilya said, though his voice betrayed no slur. "Because I wish you and Alexei had started on better terms years ago."

"Yeah… that's what I want too," Shane whispered sincerely.

Ilya looked up, surprised, and their eyes met.

Shane gripped his glass tightly. Thinking clearly was nearly impossible — Ilya was barely a metre away, and every detail of him seemed unbearably… hot.

Why did just his presence make Shane's heart flare like this?

“I’d rather go back upstairs,” Shane said, noticing how rough his voice sounded.

It’s over with me and Ilya. Ethan’s words echoed through his mind.

“Why?” Ilya asked, his voice just as hoarse.

Shane froze and couldn’t take his eyes off him.

“Maybe Alexei’s right after all,” Ilya said, setting his scotch aside without taking his eyes off Shane for a second.

Shane immediately realized what he meant. “What?”

Ilya took the glass from his hand. “If I sleep with you, maybe it will free me from you, and I can think straight again.”

That wasn’t a good idea. Shane had to tell him — he had to leave.

He turned away, but his voice failed him. Ilya’s big hands rested dangerously low on his hips. Shane gasped for breath. “Ilya—”

Ilya turned him around to face him. “Don’t,” he said, gripping Shane’s ass tightly and drawing him close.

Shane gasped as he felt his erection.

“Please don’t ruin this,” Ilya pressed Shane firmly against him. “I want you. I want you just like when we first met. No,” he laughed a little bitterly, “I want you a thousand times more.” His voice was raw.

“Did I tell you how much I like your new hair?” he whispered.

Shane could hardly form a coherent thought. Ilya’s hands were on his cheeks, and he pressed against him. Shane wanted to say no, but he just moaned.

“Stay right there,” Ilya commanded, and as he lowered himself toward Shane, Shane was completely bewildered.

Ilya knelt and began undoing Shane’s pants and Shane gasped softly.

God, this feels so good.

Ilya pulled the shorts down and looked at Shane with surprise.

“You’re already hard,” Ilya said.

Shane wanted to speak. Part of his mind wanted him to stop, but the rest begged Ilya to continue.

Ilya leaned in and licked with his tongue over the tip of Shanes dick and then, very slowly, he began to take the whole length into his mouth. Shane cried out, his knees giving way, his fingers clutching Ilya's hair.

When he fell, Ilya caught him, but the gentle pressure of his lips, his tongue and hands didn't let up.

Shane arched toward him. He vaguely realized he had spread his thighs, and when Ilya touched his most sensitive part on his ass and teased him, Shane reached a breaking point.

He called out Ilya's name, moving rhythmically, and then let himself collapse into Ilya's arms.

He landed softly, like on clouds. Suddenly, he realized he was on his back, and Ilya was positioned over him.

Shane slowly opened his eyes and looked down.

Ilya wasn't only over him — he rested his head in his hands and stared at Shane. His gaze was wild with desire but also confused.

Shane opened his mouth, but couldn't form a word. *Oh god.*

"What was that?" Ilya asked calmly.

"W-what?" Shane stammered. He tried to move, but Ilya gripped his hips, making it clear he wouldn't let him go. Shane felt his face flush.

"You already came in a few seconds."

"Did you time me?"

"You screamed my name."

Shane swallowed. "I'd like to get up now, please," he said, torn between tears and ecstasy.

"No. You called my *name*."

Shane licked his lips. "Please… please let me go."

"No, I'd rather not," Ilya said, teasing him further. "You scream a lot, but never my name."

Oh my goodness.

Suddenly, the pressure against his opening became stronger. Ilya's fingers began to stroke him and slowly started to work their way inward.

Shane's body tensed with desire, and he felt Ilya shudder with the same feeling. At that moment, he knew it was now or never. If he wouldn't get up now, they would sleep together.

"Ilya," Shane whispered.

His gaze met Shane's — openly hungry — just like his fingers, which gently spread wider and wider.

"Somebody might see us," Shane said in a hoarse voice.

"I don't care," Ilya replied, suddenly looming over him.

He took Shane's hand and pressed it against his erection, making Shane gasp for breath.

Ilya then opened the zipper of his trousers, leaving only the thin cotton fabric between them.

Ilya kissed Shane's neck, gently sucking at the soft skin. Shane's fingers slipped into Ilya's shorts. He felt the velvety, hot hardness in his palm and thought he might die.

Ilya was utterly glorious, and Shane had never wanted a man as much as him. From the very first moment he had crossed the threshold of McGill, he had desired him — but he had fooled himself into believing that Ilya did not excite or touch him in any way.

"Don't stop now", Ilya whispered.

Shane tore his pants and underwear off, and Ilya's free knees pushed themselves between his thighs. Shane looked up, meeting Ilya's eyes.

"Let me come in you, baby," he muttered hoarsely. "I can't wait any longer. I want to go in."

Shane felt the tip gently pressing against him. He grabbed Ilya's shoulders, trembling with excitement, and pulled him tightly against himself.

He held him, and his body bent uncontrollably toward him. Ilya penetrated deeply and irrevocably into him.

Shane screamed — not only because Ilya was so big, but because nothing had ever felt so perfect, so deep, so right.

Ilya froze. Shane felt his complete surprise, and their eyes met. Ilya stared directly into his.

He knew he wasn't Ethan. He knew.

Shane tried to think, but it was impossible while Ilya glowed hot and strong inside him.

"Ilya," Shane whispered.

Ilya's jaws clenched. He grabbed a handful of Shane's hair and looked into his brown eyes.

There was something in Ilya's blue eyes that Shane could neither understand nor describe. He understood the amazement, the excitement — but not the feeling behind it.

And then it just didn't matter anymore.

Ilya's mouth conquered his — not a gentle, cautious exploration of the lips, but a greedy kiss in which his tongue explored everything, determined to connect their mouths as deeply as their bodies.

When Shane tasted Ilya, a feeling rose in him that he recognized as love. Confused, frightened, and teetering on another explosive cliff, it shot through his head that this was more than right — this was how it should be.

Ilya pushed into him, moaning with relish. Slow, careful, long, powerful thrusts.

"Am I hurting you, love?"

"No, no," Shane whimpered. Happiness pulsed in his veins — pleasure, the beginning of ecstasy. *He had called him love.*

"Don't… too fast," Ilya wheezed, moving so slowly, so unbelievably controlled, that Shane could hardly bear it.

"Don't want… to hurt you now."

"Come," Shane whispered weakly, his mind slipping away again.

Ilya began to move faster. Shane slid over the floor, centimeter by centimeter, and Shane felt as if he had died, catapulted into another universe, another reality, an even larger, more radiant galaxy.

He clung to Ilya's shoulders while calling him love again. He asked him to wait a little longer — just a little bit… a little bit… Shane held him in his arms as he brought him back to earth, and Ilya exploded, shouting hoarsely into the night.

Tears filled Shane's eyes. He held on to Ilya, never wanting to let go again, and fear overcame him — fear and guilt.

Shane feared that he was about to fall in love.

Chapter End Notes

so... what do you think?
let me know in the comments!!

btw im on twitter @xoxo333_

Chapter 6: SIX

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Shane woke up and stretched luxuriously — then he froze. Reality paralyzed him.

He didn't know what time it was, but the sun was already up. The other side of the bed was empty, yet still warm.

Ilya had slept here.

Shane sat up and clutched the blanket against his naked body. In the bright daylight, last night suddenly seemed completely insane. It *had* been insane.

He had slept with his brother's husband. Ilya had wanted a divorce, and Ethan had said he wouldn't mind if Shane did something like that. Ilya believed Ethan had been unfaithful to him countless times. Shane felt terrible. The weight of his guilt pressed down on him like something physical.

He shivered.

Did last night mean that Ilya wanted to reconcile with Ethan?

Shane was afraid.

When Ilya pushed into him, did he realize that Shane wasn't his brother?

Shane thought he had seen recognition — and horror — in his eyes.

He was scared.

Shit, was he about to fall in love?

Shane tried to sort out his feelings, but it was impossible — he was so tense he could barely breathe.

Did he dare tell Ilya who he really was?

Ilya would be furious if he found out that Shane was nothing more than a lying little actor, part of Ethan's elaborate deception. The thought terrified Shane.

Ilya would despise him just as he despised Ethan. He would assume Shane was just like his twin brother. And would he be wrong?

Shane felt trapped. He was trapped in Ethan's life, which had now become his own.

The lie had taken on a life of its own. It had grown larger, more dangerous — a trap that offered no escape. And Ilya didn't deserve to be lied to again.

But what if he lost him?

Shane felt sick. He had already lost him, hadn't he? He should have told Ilya who he was before things went this far.

Now there was no turning back. If Ilya discovered the truth, he would have to hate him. And if he never found out, the rest of their lives would be built on a lie. Shane would hate himself forever for that.

At that moment, Ilya stepped out of the dressing room, wearing jeans, riding boots, and a black sweater. His eyes immediately found Shane. His gaze was guarded and cold.

Shane froze. He couldn't smile, and apparently, neither could Ilya.

Ilya gave him a curt nod and turned toward the door.

What was going on?

"Ilya!" Shane jumped out of bed. Too late, he realized he wasn't wearing anything. Worse, he didn't even know what he wanted to say. He only knew that he had to talk to Ilya now. After last night, he desperately needed some kind of reassuring gesture from him — which was foolish enough in itself.

Ilya turned around, his gaze gliding over Shane's naked body.

Shane snatched the blanket off the bed. Then he realized that Ethan would never have been so modest. But this time, his strange behavior seemed to go unnoticed.

"Good morning," Shane whispered nervously.

The expression in Ilya's eyes frightened him. Why was he so cold?

"Do you want to tell me something?" Ilya asked, casually glancing at the clock as if he couldn't spare a minute for Shane now that the night was over.

"Did I do something wrong?" Shane asked carefully. Why was he acting as if nothing had happened last night?

Ilya looked at him, his gaze unreadable.

"I don't know. You tell me."

Shane clutched the blanket so tightly that his fingers began to ache.

"I thought that… tonight… that we…" He trailed off. That they what? Ethan had no intention

of reconciling with Ilya. And Ilya? Couldn't they at least call a temporary truce?

Ilya's eyes widened in astonishment.

"You thought what? That we'd get along again and live happily ever after? It was just sex. Good sex, I'll admit — but let's leave it at that, shall we? I'm going to have breakfast with Jan now."

He turned and walked away.

Shane stood there in disbelief. On the one hand, he was relieved that Ilya's feelings for Ethan hadn't changed — but he was also hurt. After all, he had spent the whole night with him.

He ran after Ilya, dragging the heavy blanket behind him and stumbling over one corner. With one hand, he grabbed Ilya's wrist; with the other, he tried to hold the blanket in front of himself.

"I can't believe you're acting like this," Shane said seriously.

Of course, he hadn't expected everything to be fine now — but he certainly hadn't expected such coldness.

"What do you mean? Oh — you can't believe you didn't manage to fool me? Then take a good look, because this time you won't succeed." Ilya's smile was icy.

Shane was speechless. It took him a moment to form a coherent sentence.

"No. But I thought maybe we could call a truce."

Ilya looked at him darkly. "We slept together. So what? It wasn't the first time — and it probably won't be the last. Since when have you ever cared about a truce?"

Shane stepped back. Would Ilya never even consider it?

"I don't want to argue with you anymore," Shane whispered hoarsely, suddenly finding his inner strength. "I'm not going to argue with you anymore, Ilya," he repeated firmly.

Ilya stared at him. "I don't want another fight either. I just want a divorce."

It hurt. Even though he wasn't Ethan, it hurt. Because Ilya had spoken to him — to Shane — the man he had spent the night with. But it hadn't been love. It had just been sex.

"We need to talk," Shane said.

"Oh, really? What could you possibly want to tell me after last night? Let me guess — you've changed. You're not a calculating, selfish bitch anymore. Six years of adultery and lies suddenly don't matter. You've seen the light! Somehow you've become a completely different man. Loving, vulnerable, sincere. A man we've all terribly misunderstood and

treated unfairly?" Ilya's eyes narrowed. "Well? How did I do?"

Did he know? Was that why he was so angry?

Shane stared at him and forgot to breathe. Ilya returned his gaze, just as motionless.

Finally, Shane spoke in a shaky voice.

"I hope I really have changed. I'm sorry that—"

"You know what?" Ilya cut him off. "I'm so sick of the lies. The games. Your games. I have no idea what this is about this time, but I've had enough. Last night was good — but as far as I'm concerned, it was the last time." Ilya stormed out and slammed the door behind him.

He knows, a persistent voice whispered in Shane's head.

He can't possibly know — otherwise he would have said something, another, louder voice argued.

Shane wasn't even sure it mattered. He had never felt so miserable. Somehow, it had managed to break his heart — just a little. Over a man who would never love him. A man who didn't even know he existed.

—

Ilya was no longer in the kitchen when Shane came downstairs, dressed in fresh jeans, a blue sweater, and riding boots.

Lilly was mixing one of her fitness shakes. Jan was absentmindedly pushing his cornflakes around his bowl, and Olga stood at the sink with a slice of toast in her hand.

Jan squealed with delight when Shane entered the bright kitchen.

"Dad, Dad! You overslept again! Daddy said we shouldn't wake you."

Shane blushed and was relieved that Ilya wasn't there. He could barely endure his hostility.

"Hello, sweetheart," he said, hurrying over to kiss Jan's head. He felt eyes on his back, looked up, and met Olga's cold stare. Immediately, Shane realized that she knew exactly what had happened last night. His cheeks burned even hotter.

But why did she have to look so offended and disapproving? Why should she care if Ilya had slept with his husband?
Besides — Shane wasn't really his husband.

The guilt weighed heavily on him.

Shane forced a smile. “Good morning. Looks like it might snow.”

“It never snows this early in the year,” Olga replied dryly and turned away.

Shane walked over to the coffee machine. Lilly still had her back to him, busy with the blender.

He poured himself a cup of coffee, added sugar, and turned around.

“I want to call a truce, Olga,” he said seriously.

Olga turned off the tap and faced him. “Excuse me?”

“I want to let the past rest. I apologize for my sins — for everything I’ve ever done wrong. I want to start over.”

Olga stared at him. Lilly switched off the blender. Dressed in black trousers, a black leather vest, and a white T-shirt, she finally turned around and stared at Shane as well. She wore a fabric band around one wrist and a pearl bracelet with a small cross dangling from the other.

A heavy silence fell over the room.

“Sins?” Jan asked as he slipped off his chair. “Dad, did you do something bad?”

Shane smiled gently at him. “Sweetheart, it’s just a figure of speech. No, I haven’t committed any sins. But I’ve made mistakes — and now I’m apologizing for every single one of them.”

Olga hadn’t moved. “You’re drinking your coffee with sugar. You’re wearing jeans. And now this… strange suggestion.” She had almost — almost — lost her composure.

“Do you want to reject my apology?” Shane asked.

Olga shook her head slightly. “You’ve won, Ethan.”

“It’s not about winning. It’s about forgiveness.”

Olga turned away from him.

Shane took a sip of his coffee and met Lilly’s hate-filled gaze.

“Are you still mad at me?”

Lilly nodded, though today she seemed to have her anger under control. In fact, she looked more suspicious than furious.

“You told Dad and Uncle Alexei.”

Shane sighed. “I did what I had to do, Lilly. Your well-being is more important than keeping

a secret — especially one that's illegal and dangerous."

"My well-being…"

Lilly crossed her arms over her chest.

"Can you do me a favor? Gina's party is on Saturday. Could you take my dress to the dry cleaners tonight? Dad was supposed to do it, but…"

"I'll take it when I drop Jan off at nursery school," Shane said with a faint smile.

Lilly's face softened. "Really?"

Shane nodded. He felt his body relax slightly.

Lilly handed him the dress, which she had draped over a chair on a hanger.

"You'll look beautiful in it, Lilly. Just wait until Ilya sees you."

Lilly frowned. "I don't care what he thinks." She grabbed her juice and left.

How long would it take Lilly to forgive her father for yelling at her in front of all her friends?

Suddenly, Jan ran after his sister. "Lilly! Wait! You forgot to give me the magic cards!"

When he was gone, Olga turned back to Shane.

"Why are you taking her dress to the dry cleaners? Why did you apologize to me?"

Shane sighed. "She's going to look fantastic in that dress."

"I know what you're up to. Ilya knows too. You think you can stop the divorce, don't you?"

"No. I don't," Shane said, walking to the fridge.

Olga followed him. "Well, that won't work either. This time, he's definitely had enough."

"How kind of you to sound so pleased when the man you love like a son wants a divorce."

"You're the worst thing that ever happened to him, and I'll do anything — *anything* — to make sure he finally gets rid of you."

Shane froze. Olga's voice dripped with venom. Slowly, he turned to face her.

"I mean it," Olga said firmly.

And Shane wondered whether Olga hated him enough to kill him.

—

Jan was at nursery school, and Lilly's dress was at the dry cleaners. Shane went to the supermarket — he wanted to bring beer back into the house at last. After finishing his shopping, he impulsively returned to the mall. There, he bought Lilly a jacket with patches that perfectly matched her rebellious, edgy style. It was already noon — he could pick up Jan in an hour.

Shane looked around the covered plaza, wondering whether he should grab something to eat at the pizzeria.

Since it was Friday, the shopping center was busy — much busier than the other night. As he walked toward the pizzeria, he suddenly spotted Lilly.

Shane stopped in his tracks, stunned. He had assumed Lilly was at school all day. He looked more closely, but the tall, slender girl with the long hair was unmistakable. It was definitely Lilly — and she wasn't alone. A boy stood with her.

Shane stepped behind a pillar.

They were standing with their backs to him, talking. Shane suspected the boy was David Jenkins. His hair was dark, just like in the photos Shane had seen. He was tall for a sixteen-year-old — more like eighteen.

Lilly turned halfway toward him, and so did the boy. David pulled her close and kissed her. It quickly turned into a long, familiar embrace. Shane had to look away.

"See you later!" Lilly called cheerfully.

Shane cautiously peeked around the pillar. Lilly's cheeks were rosy, her face glowing with happiness. The boy was definitely David Jenkins.

Shane ducked back behind the pillar as Lilly hurried past him. Was she heading back to school? Should he follow her and ask why she wasn't in class? Or should he leave her alone? Maybe she had finished early on Fridays.

The last thing Shane wanted was to damage Lilly's trust even further. He had stumbled upon her by accident — but Lilly might not see it that way.

Shane turned and saw David slip through a door behind the McDonald's counter. Moments later, he reappeared wearing a uniform.

Shane's thoughts were racing. He didn't want to create more conflict — neither within the family nor with Lilly. But Lilly had a gun. And that was serious. This might be a good opportunity to take a closer look at David — more objectively than Ilya ever could. Shane still believed Lilly had lied to protect David, and that the gun actually belonged to him.

He walked up to the counter. David looked up.

“What can I—” He stopped abruptly. “Get out of here.”

Shane flinched. “Excuse me?”

David’s face darkened with fury. “Leave me alone.”

Shane saw hatred in his eyes. Anger. And something else — fear.

Ethan knew David Jenkins.

What was that supposed to mean?

“I want to talk to you,” Shane said as calmly as possible.

“I’m not talking to you,” David growled.

“Lilly’s gone. Did she go back to school?”

David cursed under his breath. Then he glanced around and hissed to a colleague, “Cover for me,” before pushing through the swinging door. Shane followed him and ended up behind the pillar again.

David turned to him, his hands clenched into fists.

“I’m working,” he hissed.

“I found the gun, David.”

David frowned. “I know. Lilly told me.”

“Do you love her?” Shane asked. The question had slipped out before he could stop himself. That wasn’t why he had approached David.

David stared at him in disbelief. “What? You don’t give a damn—”

“She said it was for her protection. But I think she’s trying to protect you. And I don’t like that you’re hiding behind Lilly instead of taking responsibility for that gun yourself, which —”

“I’m not hiding from anyone!” David cut in sharply. “What do you want? Why did you come here?” Fear flickered in his eyes.

“I want to know if the gun is yours,” Shane said.

“What?! What kind of bullshit is that?” David shouted. Then he leaned forward, suddenly looking threatening. “I love Lilly! Are you trying to blackmail me or something?” he demanded desperately.

“What? No! I just want to know if the gun belongs to you!”

“No, of course not — and you know that!” David hissed. “You know damn well who that gun belongs to, so I don’t understand what this is about. Is this another one of your games? I have to get back to work!” He turned away.

Shane grabbed his arm. “What do you mean — who the gun belongs to?”

David shot him another incredulous look, tore himself free, and walked away.

A terrible feeling settled in Shane’s stomach. Worse — he felt nauseous. What would Ethan want to blackmail David over? What the hell did Ethan have to do with him?

Throughout his youth, Shane had tried to ignore the extent of Ethan’s problems. He had wanted to believe there was still goodness in him.

Now, as he thought about David Jenkins and everything that had happened at McGill, his faith in his brother collapsed.

It didn’t just collapse — it evaporated.

It was time to pick up Jan.

…

It felt like déjà vu.

“Look, Dad, the police are here!” Jan shouted happily when Shane parked the car in front of the house.

“Is Uncle Alexei here too?”

Shane was about to answer when Ilya and Alexei stepped out onto the porch. Both looked grim.

“Yes, he is,” Shane said as cheerfully as he could manage. But he was deeply shaken. He could no longer convince himself that Ethan had an explanation for everything. He had run out of excuses for him.

He got out of the car slowly. Jan climbed out enthusiastically, and Shane retrieved the shopping bags from the back seat.

“Olga made cake, sweetheart. Go to the kitchen,” Ilya said.

Jan ran inside.

The two men remained on the porch, waiting for Shane. His heart nearly stopped. They were

waiting for him — for a reason. And that reason couldn't be anything good.

Slowly, he walked up the driveway and climbed the steps, dread filling him. Alexei stared at him as if he were a convicted criminal. But it was Ilya's gaze that made him falter. His eyes were black with rage.

"Ilya?" Shane heard himself whisper. What did he think Ethan had done now?

Ilya grabbed him by the wrist. "I told you this morning. I'm sick and tired of your games!" he hissed.

He was furious. Shane looked from Ilya's blazing blue eyes to Alexei, who didn't look at him any more kindly.

"Wh- what?"

Had they found out that he was really Shane Hollander?

Alexei stepped between them and forced Ilya to let go.

"We checked Lilly's gun," he explained — almost with satisfaction.

And Shane understood immediately.

"And guess what we found out. A Mr. Ethan Rozanov purchased that gun. Six years ago."

Shane felt dizzy.

"Do you even have a gun license, Mr. Rozanov?"

His knees nearly buckled. Alexei's words hit him like a punch to the gut, knocking the air out of his lungs.

The gun belonged to Ethan.

Even though someone had once threatened Ethan and Jan, Shane was stunned. Now he understood David's remark — that he *knew* exactly who the gun belonged to.

Suddenly, he remembered Lilly's surprise when he had asked her about it. She had asked whether he was going to yell at her about the gun. Now he understood why. Lilly had taken Ethan's gun — just like she had taken that sweater.

"How could you?"

Shane shuddered and looked up at Ilya.

"How could you bring a gun into this house without telling me? And why?" Ilya demanded harshly. "Why the hell did you buy a gun — right after our wedding?"

Shane was speechless. He had no idea.

“I can see you trying to come up with an answer,” Ilya hissed. “Why did you bring a gun into my house, damn it? What the hell is going on, Ethan?”

Ilya was beyond angry. His reaction seemed disproportionately intense — even for Ethan’s wrongdoing — and it was obvious he was using the gun as an outlet for all the anger he had built up over the years.

Since their night together, he seemed even more furious than before.

Shane had to think of something — fast. But he couldn’t come up with any reasonable explanation.

“Ilya, it’s not what you think. I bought the gun to protect myself,” Shane said, taking a step toward him.

Ilya recoiled slightly, but his cold stare didn’t waver.

“Why would you need protection? We live in one of the safest areas around! Fewer than five thousand people live here!”

Shane bit his lip and felt terrible for lying to him again.

“But you’ve been away so often, and I’ve been here alone.”

“When I go to tournaments, you usually come with me to ride Pride yourself,” Ilya replied sharply. “In fact, you travel more than I do. Don’t you have a better excuse?”

Shane was tired — tired of the lies, tired of the guilt. He finally shook his head.

If Ilya was already this furious because his husband had secretly owned a gun for years, how would he react if he learned about the fraud behind their entire marriage?

“Can’t we just let it go?”

Ilya’s eyes narrowed. “Don’t tell me you’re running out of lies.”

Their eyes met. Suddenly, Shane felt ice run through his veins. He stepped back. He couldn’t hold Ilya’s gaze.

It was only Friday. He still had to survive the entire weekend. Shane had no idea how he was supposed to do that — not after last night. After experiencing such overwhelming passion in Ilya’s arms, he could no longer deflect his questions with lies and continue playing his part in this monstrous deception. Every time he looked into Ilya’s eyes, he felt himself unravel inside.

“I’m sorry I didn’t tell you about the gun. I should have asked your permission before buying it.”

Even though Shane spoke quietly, Ilya heard him clearly. The look he gave him was deeply skeptical.

“Since when do you ask me for permission? Lilly could have gotten into serious trouble because of you and your gun. If anything had happened to her, I would never have forgiven you!”

Shane wouldn’t have forgiven Ethan — or himself — either.

Ilya turned away, went inside, and slammed the door.

Now Shane was alone with Alexei. He slowly turned toward him, only to look away again under his probing stare.

“Are you going to arrest me now?”

“Possessing a gun without a license is just a misdemeanor,” Alexei said with an icy smile. “But selling a gun to a minor — that’s something entirely different, my dear.”

“Selling?” Shane gasped.

Alexei seemed almost amused. “That’s definitely a crime.”

“Lilly took that gun without my knowledge, and you know it!” Shane shouted.

Alexei placed his hands on his hips. “You know what I think? I think you should watch your mouth. But that won’t change the past, will it?”

Shane wrapped his arms around himself, trying to steady his trembling body.

“What have I done to make you hate me so much?” he whispered.

Alexei frowned. Then he exploded.

“Are you mocking me? My brother brings home the most unfaithful bitch of the century, and you ask me that? You’ve been cheating on him for six years — right in front of him! Worse, you’ve done everything you could to hurt him, Lilly, and Jan! I know everything about you. I know the whole truth!” He was shaking with fury.

“I have to go,” Shane said firmly, turning away. He didn’t want to hear any more.

Alexei grabbed his wrist and yanked him back.

“We both know this marriage was a setup.”

“What?” Shane gasped.

“You married him for his money and access to his social circles. The whole thing was calculated from the very first day you appeared in his life. I can’t shake the feeling that you even knew exactly where he would be that day — and that you were waiting for him.”

“No,” Shane whispered, praying Alexei was wrong.

Alexei grabbed his chin and forced his head up. The painful grip and the look in his eyes terrified Shane.

“I know everything. And I’ll get you. You can count on that.” Then he let go.

Shane staggered back, breathless, trying not to shake.

Alexei left, and Shane stared after him. After only a few days in McGill, he felt like a different person. Sadder. More suspicious. More cautious. And deeply unsettled.

He desperately hoped Alexei was wrong about Ethan having deliberately targeted Ilya.

…

Shane stood in the living room by the window with a glass of Scotch in his hand — yes, Scotch — hoping it would stop him from trembling like a leaf.

Ilya appeared in the foyer. He was wearing a suit and tie, clearly preparing to go out. He looked devastatingly handsome.

Shane had the sudden urge to run to him and wrap his arms around his neck.

Instead, he closed his eyes.

One question kept circling in his mind: What kind of trouble was Ethan really in?

Alexei was a cop. He was going after his own brother. And he didn’t look like a man who failed at something he was determined to do. The remark that he would “get him” — what did that mean?

Either he wanted Ilya to see through Ethan and throw him out of McGill — or he wanted him in prison. Shane had the unpleasant feeling that it was the latter. Alexei had said he knew the whole truth. And for some reason, Shane was certain it wasn’t about the switched identities.

So what did he mean? What did he know? Was he really trying to send Ethan to prison?

Shane didn’t know what to think anymore. But Alexei was hunting his brother — and he had no idea how to stop him.

Part of him wanted to protect Ethan from Alexei. Another part wanted to protect Ilya, Jan,

and Lilly from whatever consequences Ethan's schemes might bring.

Shane was worried — but he was also furious with his brother for dragging the family — and him — into this mess.

He opened his eyes and saw that Ilya was watching him. The earlier closed, furious expression had disappeared.

Their eyes met. Shane saw confusion, surprise — and something very serious — in Ilya's gaze. Then Ilya shut down again, his face hardening.

Shane tightened his grip on the Scotch and stepped forward.

"Are you going out for dinner?" he tried to ask lightly — but it came out as a strained croak. He was sure Ilya simply wanted to avoid him.

Ilya nodded. "Yes."

"Let me guess." Shane tried to sound casual, but his voice carried an unmistakable bitterness. "Hayden and Jackie? Mitch and Sara?"

Ilya looked at him. "Do you even care?"

Shane pressed the glass against his chest. "Yes," he whispered.

Ilya flinched slightly. Shane realized he had unsettled him. He suddenly became aware that he still had a certain power over Ilya — that he could try to use it, persuade him to stay, to spend the evening with him.

Dangerous images flashed through his mind — of them tangled together in passion.

Ilya gave a scornful snort. "It's a little late for that, don't you think?"

Shane swallowed and set the Scotch aside. Then he walked slowly, carefully toward him.

"I have a lot to regret, Ilya," he said, his voice shaking. "You have no idea how sorry I am for all of this."

Ilya didn't move.

"Why are you still trying?"

"Because I think it's never too late," Shane said, and at that moment a plan entered his mind. Ilya would never have to learn about this role reversal. Ethan could come back and divorce him, and after some time, he — Shane — would enter Ilya's life.

Shane was appalled by his own despair — by the urge to save his relationship with Ilya. He admonished himself that this relationship didn't even exist.

Shane wasn't a liar, except in this one case. He hated it and found it horrible to lie to Ilya. He had to face the fact that he would lose every chance of becoming friends with this man if he found out the truth. And Ilya would definitely find out about his deception.

Ilya was still standing there as if rooted to the spot.

"This is about last night, isn't it?"

Shane hesitated. Ilya might think he was Ethan, and Shane might be caught in a lie for the moment, but now he would remain himself. He wouldn't even try to behave like Ethan.

"Yes... and no. It's about everything. But last night was... special for me."

Ilya threw his head back and laughed. "God, you can do better than that," he said amusedly. Then he stepped closer.

"Last night didn't mean anything at all, Ethan. Nothing. It was just sex. Plain and simple. Don't keep holding that against me!"

Shane froze but did not retreat. Wasn't Ilya protesting a bit too much?

"It may not have been special for you, but it was for me," he said quietly. Shane spoke only from his own point of view — certainly not from Ethan's.

"Is this supposed to be a bad joke?" Ilya asked.

Shane ignored the question. "Why don't you stay home today? We could talk and—"

"Talk?" Ilya sounded stunned. "When have we ever talked? Our entire relationship has always been about sex. Sex and money. I'm running late. You don't have to wait for me — not that you ever would."

He left.

Shane stood there for a moment as if petrified, then went to the window and watched Ilya get into his car.

"You really love him, don't you?" Lilly asked quietly, surprised.

Shane turned around. "I... Yes."

Lilly stared at him. Then she hesitantly said, "Thank you for the jacket. I... think it looks great."

Lilly hadn't been there when Shane came home, so he had put the jacket on her bed.

"It looks good on you, Lilly."

"Why? Why are you acting like this all of a sudden?" Lilly asked.

"People change," Shane said with a shrug. He cast a longing look out the window. Ilya's car was gone.

"I don't think so," Lilly replied.

Shane froze and turned to look at her. "What do you mean?"

"Jan says you're a new Dad. I think he's right."

Shane forced a smile while his heart began to pound heavily.

"Yes, I'm a new dad. I've changed. I—"

"It's not that." Lilly cut him off and shook her head.

Shane began to sweat with fear. "No?"

"You're not him at all, are you? Ethan never looked at my father the way you just did. You're not Ethan. You're someone else," Lilly said, her face pale.

Shane felt his knees weaken. Would he faint?

"Who are you?" Lilly whispered, her eyes wide.

-

It was 9:30 p.m. Shane wasn't waiting for Ilya, yet he was sitting on the porch outside. A cup of coffee and a box of cookies sat beside him. Both were empty. It was a beautiful, starry night, but Shane couldn't enjoy it, and he was freezing.

He had insisted to Lilly that he was Ethan, that he had suddenly woken up, gone through some kind of life crisis, and decided to change fundamentally. But Lilly hadn't said anything, and Shane knew she didn't believe him.

The clock was ticking.

Shane had been on McGill for four days, and both Lilly and Jan knew he wasn't Ethan.

Sometimes he thought even Ilya knew. Then again, a few hours earlier, when Ilya left, Shane had been sure he didn't suspect anything. Moreover, he would have asked him immediately what this was all about and who he really was if he had seen through the deception.

Shane's new phone lay next to the empty cookie box. He glanced at it, but it hadn't made a sound. Shane knew he wouldn't hear from Ethan again until Ethan was on his way back to McGill.

Had Ethan done anything to break the law?

Shane pursued this question — and the inescapable next one as well: Was he complicit now? Was he an accomplice? Was he guilty of being an accessory, or whatever the legal term was?

How had he gotten mixed up in this mess?

Shane was angry, frustrated, and sad. He knew Ethan hadn't told him the whole truth — but now he had the unpleasant suspicion that Ethan had lied to him just as much as he had lied to everyone else.

If Alexei was planning to put Ethan in prison, could it happen that Shane would be convicted instead?

Shane pulled his knees to his chest. He tried to calm down and breathed deeply. Eventually, he got up when he suddenly heard an engine roar. Startled, he looked automatically in the direction the noise had come from — the large stable building. He must have heard Cliff's old car.

Shane looked at the clock. 9:40 p.m. Where was Cliff going?

The mystery of Cliff Marlow grew bigger and bigger. Shane saw the car reversing, turning around, and then speeding down the driveway.

On impulse, he jumped up and ran to Ethan's sports car. He slid in, pulled the key from under the seat, and started the engine. He didn't turn on the headlights. By now, he knew the narrow road well enough to drive it without lights.

Moments later, he drove down the driveway and saw Cliff's headlights disappear around a curve. When they were no longer visible, Shane turned on his headlights and followed him. It was high time to find out who Cliff Marlow really was.

…

Shane parked on a narrow street in front of a fast-food restaurant. A dozen cars were in the parking lot. One of them belonged to Cliff Marlow. A police car was parked beside it.

Shane turned off the engine and took a deep breath. He was sure the police car belonged to Alexei. It was just a hunch, but he would check it out immediately.

He got out of the car and locked it. Cliff hadn't realized he was being followed. Shane had kept enough distance that he had almost lost him.

He hid behind a pickup truck and a tow truck. The restaurant had a large panoramic window and was brightly lit. It took Shane only a moment to spot Cliff Marlow at a table by the window — and to realize he had been right. The police car belonged to Alexei, because he was sitting across from Cliff.

Shane pressed himself against the wall, his heart racing. What was going on? Why was Cliff meeting Alexei for coffee?

Shane's thoughts were in turmoil. He didn't know what to think. Alexei wouldn't befriend a stable boy, would he? And both of them had independently claimed they were going after Ethan.

Shane began to tremble. He peeked around the corner of the wall toward the window. Both men had a cup of coffee in front of them. Alexei was eating ice cream. If there was supposed to be tension between them, nothing indicated it. They appeared relaxed and at ease. They ate and chatted.

What the hell was going on?

Shane closed his eyes and realized this was too much for him. Then he dared to sneak another look into the restaurant.

Cliff leaned forward and spoke to Alexei, who sat calmly in his seat and listened. Eventually, Alexei shook his head and clearly said, "No."

That was it. Shane was convinced the men were working together. And that meant Cliff had to be a police officer. Was he working undercover? Or had Shane simply watched too many bad TV shows?

He turned and stared at Cliff's pickup truck. Had he locked it?

Shane ran past three cars and ducked beside Cliff Marlow's truck near the driver's door. He slowly straightened and looked toward the panoramic window, but from there he couldn't see their table.

He pulled the door handle — it wasn't locked. Shane climbed over the driver's seat and pulled at the glove compartment. It was locked. He cursed under his breath. Then he looked around. The seats were empty. No papers, no clues, nothing. He shoved his hand into the side compartment in the passenger door and found nothing there either. From the compartment in the driver's door, he pulled out a road map and a small map of the area. So apparently Cliff didn't know his way around here very well.

Then Shane reached under the seat. And for the third time in three days, his fingers closed around cold steel. Cliff still kept a gun in his car under the seat. Only this one was much larger.

He had to be a police officer. Definitely.

Shane remembered that Cliff had advised him to be very careful. He had given him that advice when he caught Shane snooping around in his room. That had surprised Shane, because he had expected a hostile reaction, but instead Cliff had warned him — to protect him.

If Cliff knew he wasn't Ethan, then Alexei knew too.

Shane slipped out of the truck and closed the door when he heard a man's voice.

He froze.

"Yes, see you tomorrow."

That was Alexei. Shane ducked, his heart pounding, because he must have been speaking to Cliff — which meant Cliff would come to his car and get in.

"Good. Thanks, Alexei," Cliff replied, his voice sounding very close.

Shane was crouching beside the truck. His shoes crunched on the gravel, and he froze again. But neither man reacted. And that was worrying. They surely must have heard someone sneaking around the cars.

Shane's first impulse was to run. Cliff couldn't see him from where he stood now. But Alexei would definitely see him. If he turned around, he would spot Shane immediately.

Sweat ran into his eyes.

He heard Cliff open his car door. Why weren't they saying anything?

At that moment, Alexei said, "It's been a long day. I'm really exhausted. I'll see you tomorrow."

"Sure," Cliff replied. But had his tone sounded suspicious — or perfectly normal?

Shane could barely breathe. He ran along the row of cars, ducked behind one, and waited, panting. After a few moments, he ran again until he reached Ethan's car.

…

Alexei shoved his hands into the pockets of his black jacket and briefly stared into the night.

"Well..." he said quietly and finally smiled.

"I told you someone was following me," Cliff responded grimly. "Was it him?"

"Yes, indeed."

Cliff didn't check the parking lot. He leaned against his car. "He heard something."

Alexei shrugged. "It doesn't matter now, does it?"

Cliff sighed. "I guess not."

Alexei thoughtfully ground his shoe into the gravel.

"He'll betray himself anyway. They always do."

…

A car appeared in his rearview mirror. When Shane noticed he wasn't alone on the country road, he tightened his grip on the steering wheel.

He told himself that neither Alexei nor Cliff was following him, but the feeling in his chest proved he didn't believe it. It had been too easy to escape unseen.

Shane pressed the accelerator. Maybe Cliff was in the car behind him — he had to return to McGill as well. But why was he getting closer?

Shane was sweating. A cop? A criminal? Something in between? Who was Marlow?

Shane's tension grew as he glanced back into the rearview mirror — the other car was only a few meters behind him.

Maybe it was just some teenager or a drunk driver. Shane blinked, braked, and decided to stop before the next turn.

The car behind him didn't slow down. Shane glanced back and thought in horror: *He's going to ram me!*

At that moment, his small sports car was hit hard from behind. When the car shot off the road, Shane slammed on the brake pedal. Immediately he realized that was a mistake — the rear of the car fishtailed and spun. Branches crashed against it as the car tore through the trees, scratching the windshield. The whole vehicle shrieked; stones sprayed beneath the tires until the rear suddenly slammed into a tree trunk and the car came to an abrupt stop. There was a tremendous crash. The airbag deployed and shoved Shane back into the seat.

After a few seconds, Shane blinked and began to breathe again. The car was still. He clutched the steering wheel as if his life depended on it — and maybe it had. Now he looked back toward the road — his car had spun one hundred and eighty degrees.

Someone had hit him from behind. Had someone tried to kill him?

Shane gasped for air. He realized he was trembling uncontrollably. The driver who had hit him had not stopped to check whether he was alive or injured. That was obvious.

"Calm down," he whispered to himself. Was he hurt? Shane suddenly felt a stabbing pain at his temple. He let go of the steering wheel, raised his hand, and immediately knew that the sticky fluid on his head was blood.

Shane took a deep breath and realized that he had obviously not broken any ribs. He moved

his feet, then his legs, then his fingers, his hands, his arms. So far, he seemed unharmed.

Had someone tried to kill him? Or intimidate him? This had gone too far.

Shane sobbed and leaned against the airbag. When he finally managed to push it aside, he got out of the car and left the door open. He tried to think calmly. Had Cliff been the one who forced him off the road? Had the car that hit him looked like a pickup truck?

Shane wasn't sure; he had focused on controlling his car when it crashed into the forest.

But hadn't Cliff had plenty of opportunity to hurt him — or even kill him? If he had wanted to kill Ethan, he would have done it by now. Shane crossed him off the list. Besides, he was increasingly inclined to believe that Cliff was a police officer.

Shane took a deep breath and ordered himself to calm down. After all, nothing serious had happened to him. He was terribly frightened and bleeding a little — that was all.

He had to get out of there. Shane looked around. He was no more than ten meters from the road, and the night was pitch-dark except for a few stars in the sky. He couldn't see a single light anywhere. Suddenly, Shane realized he was in a dangerously isolated area.

He turned around and was about to get back into the car when he saw that both front tires were flat. He stared at them in disbelief. Then he grabbed his phone from his pocket and clutched it. The urge to call Ilya was overwhelming.

Was he home? Shane dialed the number and prayed he would be there. He didn't know his cell phone number, so he had to call the house phone.

While the phone rang, he glanced at the clock on the dashboard. It was midnight. *He must be home by now.*

"Hello?" Ilya sounded irritated and tired, as if Shane had woken him up.

"Ilya, it's Sh- Ethan. Fuck, I— I had an accident and now—"

"Are you all right?" Ilya immediately asked. He no longer sounded hoarse or sleepy.

"I think so. I mean, yes. Somebody hit me from behind and pushed me off the road." Shane told the story and realized he was close to tears and sounded almost hysterical.

"I've got two flat tires," he finally sobbed.

"Where are you?"

Shane took a deep breath. "About three kilometers from the main road, on the road to McGill."

"I'll be right there," Ilya said.

Shane didn’t hesitate and whispered a quiet "Thank you." Ilya’s only response was the click as he hung up.

He leaned against the hood and wrapped his arms around himself. If there was one person he could rely on, it was Ilya — he knew that from the bottom of his heart.

Shane looked down the road in the direction the other car had disappeared. "Please hurry, Ilya," he whispered.

He heard a car. But it wasn’t coming from McGill — it was coming from the other direction, from the main road. Shane turned and froze. The driver had obviously seen him, because the car was braking.

Leave me the fuck alone.

Shane didn’t want to be found by anyone now. He crouched next to the open driver’s door and silently begged the approaching driver to accelerate again and disappear. But he heard the car stop, and immediately afterward, a door opened.

Shane cursed under his breath. He reached behind the front seat and pulled out the vehicle jack he had recently taken from the trunk. He slowly straightened up and hid it behind his back. As soon as he stood upright, he was blinded by the headlights of the other car.

"Are you all right?" a woman called out.

"I’m fine," Shane said. "Just a fender bender. My husband’s already on his way."

The woman stopped. Since the headlights illuminated her from behind, Shane could see only a dark silhouette.

"Ethan? Is that you?"

Shane cursed softly. *Who was that?*

"Yes."

"It’s me, Jackie!" the woman called and hurried toward him. "What happened? Are you all right? Have you called the police yet?"

Shane’s mind wanted to shut down, but when the woman came closer and he could see her clearly, he tried to place her.

Jackie. Who was Jackie? Was that Hayden’s wife?

Suspiciously, Shane faced a tall, attractive woman.

"I called Ilya. He’ll be here any minute," Shane said when Jackie stopped in front of him.

"Oh my God, you're bleeding!" she cried, her eyes widening. "What happened?"

Immediately, she put an arm around Shane as if he couldn't stand on his own.

Shane didn't like it and shook off her arm. In that moment, he noticed her surprise.
"That was so stupid of me. I fell asleep at the wheel, can you believe it?"

Their eyes met. She looked surprised, and Shane didn't know why. Then her expression softened.

"Thank God nothing happened to you," she said. "But you're bleeding. And what do you want with that vehicle jack? Here."

She pulled a handkerchief from her handbag. "May I?" she asked with a faint smile.

Shane didn't move as she dabbed the blood from his temple. He told himself this was his best friend's wife, so it was perfectly normal for her to take care of him while he was bleeding.

When she smiled at him again, Shane felt uneasy.

"Thank you," he choked out and dropped the vehicle jack.

"You promised you'd call me as soon as you got back from Ottawa," she said, her dark eyes searching his face.

Shane was startled. "What?"

"I don't understand why you didn't call me," she said with an almost pleading tone. "Hayden told me you changed your hair. God, Ethan, you're so hot."

An icy shiver ran down Shane's spine. He desperately hoped he wouldn't discover next that Ethan had been having an affair with his best friend's wife.

"I've been so busy," Shane whispered. "And then this fall from the horse."

"I know. I wanted to rush over to you, but I didn't dare. So I sent Hayden. I miss you so much. I want to be with you, Ethan," she added, watching him almost fearfully.

That answered his question. Shane stared at her in horror.

Did Hayden know that his best friend was having an affair with his wife?

Of course he didn't.

"I want to reconcile with Ilya," Shane said cautiously.

"What?!" she shouted. "You can't stand him! You've told me that a dozen times! You said

you couldn’t wait for the divorce to be free! You told me McGill was a prison that suffocated you!"

Shane felt defeated. "Not anymore. I’ve given it a lot of thought," he said weakly. "I’m tired. I can’t talk about this right now."

"When, then?" Jackie pressed. She was getting angry. "I’ve wanted you from the very first moment, and it took me six years to finally have you. Are you just going to dump me now? Like all the others? Is that it?" Her dark eyes sparkled. "I love you. You’re all I can think about. You—"

"And what about Hayden?" Shane had to ask.

"We only have a marriage of convenience. He’s a nice man and a good father, but I’d leave him for you right now. You know all that. I’ve explained it to you before. All you have to do is say one word, Ethan, and I’m leaving him. We can go wherever you want. You just have to say it."

At least his brother hadn’t promised anything irrevocable.

"I’ve got two flat tires," Shane mumbled. "I’d better call a tow truck."

"You’re avoiding my question. How could you even think about staying with Ilya? He doesn’t love you. He loathes you!"

"We have Jan and Lilly," Shane said calmly. "Jackie, Ilya is on his way. This conversation has to wait."

"Oh, really?" Her anger flared up. "I haven’t seen you in over a week! Are you playing games with me now?"

The night around them was black. Crickets were chirping. The road was deserted. Jackie’s face was still half-hidden in the shadows while Shane stood in the bright beam of her headlights. Where was Ilya?

Shane had had enough of Jackie. He didn’t want to spend another minute standing here alone with her.

"I’m not playing games. I’m just tired and exhausted."

She stared at him, and her wrathful expression turned into mild confusion.

"Ethan?" she said uncertainly. "Are you sure you’re all right? You’re acting so strange. Maybe you hit your head in the accident."

Shane touched his temple. He had stopped bleeding, but he could still use that excuse.

"Maybe you’re right. My head hurts terribly. Please, we’ll have to talk about this another

time."

Jackie stared at him, then took his hands. Shane forced himself not to pull away.

"Just promise me this talk about reconciling with Ilya isn't serious. Promise me we have a future together."

What the fuck? Had Ethan promised this woman something like that?

He nodded numbly. Relief spread across her face. She smiled. "Come on. We'll call the tow truck. Then Ilya won't have to worry about it."

Shane slipped out of her grasp. "It would be nice if you could do that for me," he said quietly.

Jackie's facial expression changed; she suddenly seemed hard and suspicious. Then they heard a car approaching, and both of them turned toward the sound.

It was coming from the direction of the city. Alarmed, Shane thought that if it was Alexei, he would die instantly of shame. And indeed, moments later, blue lights flashed from the approaching car.

"Ilya must have called the police," Jackie said, watching the vehicle stop behind her car.

The door opened and Alexei stepped out. Shane bent down, picked up the vehicle jack, and held it in his right hand.

Alexei walked toward them. "Jackie." He nodded at her and then turned to Shane. His gaze flicked to Shane's bloody temple. Then he lifted his radio to his mouth. "Send me an ambulance and a tow truck," he said.

Suddenly his arm shot forward. Shane didn't have a chance to step back — Alexei had already grabbed him by the arm before he even understood what was happening. Shane looked at him in alarm, and Alexei's gaze unsettled him. He didn't take his eyes off Shane as he guided him toward the trunk of his car.

Shane realized he was being made to sit down on it.

"You can let go of the vehicle jack now," Alexei said quietly.

Shane looked into his expressionless eyes and didn't know what to make of them. He was shaking. For a moment, he thought Alexei might kill him — even though Jackie was standing right there.

"You hate me," Shane said weakly. But he dropped the vehicle jack anyway.

"Yes, I do. But you're hurt." Alexei crossed his arms over his chest. "What happened here, Ethan?"

"Somebody hit me from behind," Shane explained. "No— someone followed me on the road and forced me off." Too late, he realized what he had said. He froze. But if Alexei knew that Shane had spied on him and Cliff at the restaurant, he didn't show it.

"Did you see the car or the driver?"

Shane shook his head. "It all happened so fast."

"Do you think he or she was drunk?"

Shane looked him straight in the eye. "No."

"No?"

"I think someone tried to kill me," Shane said.

…

Ilya arrived at the same moment as the ambulance. Meanwhile, another police car had pulled up, and the whole scene was brightly illuminated by headlights.

Ilya approached Shane, followed by two paramedics. Shane studied his face and saw deep concern in his eyes. Ilya stopped and widened his eyes when he looked at Shane's temple.

Shane hadn't bothered to look in a mirror, but he must have looked pretty bad.

"Nothing serious happened to me, really," Shane said quietly.

Ilya took his arm and gently turned Shane's head to the side with his other hand.

"Glass fragments?" Ilya's gaze shifted to the shattered windshield of the car.

"I don't know. But the airbag deployed," Shane mumbled.

Ilya looked at him and remained silent for a moment.

"What do you mean, somebody forced you off the road, Ethan?"

"A car came up behind me and didn't slow down. Not at all. Maybe I was even being followed," Shane said in a low voice.

The two paramedics were standing behind Ilya, and Shane didn't want them overhearing everything.

"The driver hit me from behind. And he didn't stop — he just drove away."

Ilya stared at him. "Who would come after you — and why? Where were you tonight?"

Shane froze.

"Excuse me, but we need to examine this man," one of the paramedics said.

Ilya didn’t move.

"Sir?"

Shane licked his dry lips.

"I followed Cliff from McGill. It’s a long story, but I’ll tell you everything once we’re done here."

Ilya’s jaw tightened, and he gave Shane a mysterious look. "That’s a good idea," he said and stepped aside.

Shane was quickly examined by the first paramedic, who checked his vital signs and explained that he had been very lucky. He cleaned the wound and said that it would probably not leave a scar. The cut had been caused by a piece of broken glass, just as Ilya had suspected.

While Shane was being examined, Ilya turned to his brother. Alexei and his colleague were standing on the road, looking at something on the asphalt — probably the skid marks from his car, Shane thought. Ilya glanced briefly at Shane before walking over to join them. Shane wished he could hear what they were saying, but that was impossible.

Jackie was still there. She stood next to the hood of her car and occasionally looked in Shane’s direction. He wished she would finally get into her car and leave.

"All right, that’s it," the paramedic said cheerfully.

"Thank you," Shane replied. A tow truck had just pulled up behind the second patrol car.

Ilya was still standing in the street with Alexei and the other officer. Jackie walked over to Shane, and he would have preferred to retreat.

"So, are you all right?" she asked.

"Yes." Shane hesitated. "You really came by at just the right time."

"I guess so," she agreed. Then she lowered her voice. "I heard what you told Ilya. Why would someone try to force you off the road?"

"I don’t know," Shane lied. "But I guess I’ve made myself some enemies around here."

Jackie looked at him closely. "This is a small town. A lot of people may be angry with you, but no one would ever do *that*. That would be insane."

Shane nodded. "I agree with you. That would definitely be insane."

They looked at each other in silence. Jackie didn't move for a moment. Then she said:

"When can I see you?"

"After the weekend," Shane said, pleased with his answer — because by then Ethan would be back, and Shane wouldn't have to deal with this.

Jackie looked at him skeptically but finally nodded. As she left, she walked over to Ilya. They exchanged a few words, but Shane couldn't hear them. The brief conversation was warm and friendly, and Shane immediately realized that Ilya had no idea about Ethan's affair with Jackie.

Now he truly had a headache, and he doubted it was caused by the cut on his temple.

Ilya and Alexei walked back toward him.

"We found skid marks from the other vehicle. And there are plenty of paint traces on the back of your car. Whatever hit you was probably a Jeep or a pickup truck — the bumper was quite high. We'll send everything to the lab and see what turns up," Alexei explained.

Shane nodded nervously. Should he trust this man or not? Was he actually trying to help him? Shane wanted so badly for Alexei to be on his side and genuinely trying to find out who had done this to him — or to Ethan.

"If you remember anything else, let me know," Alexei said seriously. "Every little detail could help."

Ilya took Shane's arm. "Let's get you home first," he said.

Shane hesitated. Alexei hadn't moved.

"Alexei. Thank you," Shane said.

Alexei's eyes darkened. "This is my job," he said, staring at Shane. "That doesn't change anything." Then he turned away and left.

…

Shane went into the kitchen and noticed that Ilya followed him into the living room and then stopped. The kitchen light was on. Shane sat down on one of the bar stools at the counter and took off his shoes. Now the fear overwhelmed him, and he began to tremble.

He no longer doubted that someone was trying to kill him. Whoever was after Ethan had mistaken Shane for his brother — and now he was the target. Would Alexei really try to protect him?

Ilya appeared with two glasses of Scotch. He looked at Shane silently and handed him one.

Shane stood up. “No, thank you.”

He walked to the freezer, grabbed a large tub of chocolate ice cream and a spoon, and sat down again.

He felt Ilya’s gaze on him and looked up defiantly. Chocolate ice cream was one of Shane’s favorite comfort remedies. He didn’t care what Ilya might think.

He began eating the ice cream and watched Ilya discreetly. Ilya drank his Scotch and observed Shane in silence. Under the intensity of his gaze, Shane couldn’t enjoy the ice cream. It didn’t taste sweet — it tasted like nothing.

“Damn it.” Shane had barely taken a spoonful before he set the container aside. Tears burned in his eyes. He covered his face with his hands.

“What’s wrong?” Ilya asked, sitting down opposite him at the counter.

“This usually soothes me. Comforts me… But today it tastes like… nothing.” He didn’t look up.

Ilya seemed thoughtful. “I didn’t know you liked chocolate — or ice cream, or cookies, or pizza.”

Slowly, Shane raised his head and met Ilya’s eyes. Did he really have to keep up the act even now? It was too much.

“I’m just going through a phase. Everyone does, sometimes.”

Ilya set his glass down and took Shane’s hand. Shane looked at their clasped hands in surprise and then into two captivating blue eyes.

“That was just a drunk driver. I’m pretty sure of that, Ethan.”

“Someone’s trying to kill me,” Shane whispered. “I know it, Ilya.”

Ilya hesitated. “There are a lot of people around here who don’t like you very much. But kill you? I can’t imagine that.”

“Because you’re not insane,” Shane whispered, trembling. He looked deep into Ilya’s eyes. “I’m scared. I can’t take this anymore.”

Ilya stood up abruptly, anger flashing across his face.

“Why are you doing this to me? I look at you and think you’re the man I should hold on to forever. Then the next moment I remember all the lies and all the affairs.”

Shane trembled. “I’m scared, Ilya. If someone rammed your car and forced you off the road so you crashed into a tree, you’d be scared too.” He lifted his chin defiantly. “And I’m sorry there are even moments when you like me!”

Ilya didn’t move.

Determined, Shane grabbed the ice cream and began eating again. It tasted like sand.

“We should hold on to this moment,” Shane muttered.

Ilya didn’t respond. Shane felt a tear roll down his cheek. He wiped it away and stood up without looking at him. Frustrated, he put the ice cream back into the freezer.

“I’m sorry if I annoy you,” Shane said, finally looking at Ilya and managing a faint smile. “Must be the ghosts of the night. Tomorrow’s a new day. Hooray.” His voice was laced with sarcasm.

Ilya stared at him grimly.

Shane was tired of fighting. He left the kitchen.

In the bedroom, he picked up the phone and dialed his own number. When the voicemail picked up, he said harshly: “I don’t know what to do. Someone forced me off the road earlier, and I’m pretty sure someone’s trying to kill me. We have to go to the police. If you can come back earlier than Monday, then come quickly!”

He hesitated, but he was angry and exhausted and didn’t know what else to say. He hung up.

Unfortunately, he didn’t feel any better. There was no relief. Nothing had actually changed — he was still trapped in his role. Jan and Ethan were still in danger, and so was he.

Tomorrow was Saturday. He only had to survive two more days.

Shane turned away from the phone and was about to collapse into bed when he saw Ilya standing in the doorway.

He froze. How much had he heard? Had he left the door open while he was on the phone?

Shane stared at him, trying to read his expression. But it was unreadable, and Shane had no idea what he was thinking — whether he had heard anything at all.

“May I come in?” Ilya asked quietly.

Shane noticed that he was holding a bowl of chocolate ice cream.

“Of course. This is your room too, so…” Shane tried to smile and failed miserably. His heart was racing again.

Ilya stepped inside and handed him the bowl. “Try this.”

Shane looked into it and saw that the ice cream was generously covered with a dark sauce. He smiled weakly.

“Chocolate sauce?”

Ilya smiled faintly. “Better. Chocolate liqueur.”

Shane’s heart skipped — not because of the alcohol-soaked ice cream, but because of the gesture, Ilya’s smile, the almost tender look in his blue eyes.

“Why?” Shane asked.

“Because sometimes I can be quite an idiot,” Ilya said. He dipped the spoon into the ice cream and held it to Shane’s lips.

Shane looked into his eyes and lost his breath. He opened his mouth and let Ilya feed him.

The ice cream tasted like something again — sweet, creamy chocolate mixed with pleasantly warming liqueur.

Ilya pulled the spoon back. Shane saw the heat in his eyes before he lowered his thick dark lashes and broke the gaze.

Shane didn’t move. He couldn’t. His whole body felt warm. He took the spoon from Ilya’s long fingers and smiled. “Your turn.”

Ilya looked up, and Shane scooped some ice cream onto the spoon.

“Does it taste good?” Ilya asked, his voice rough.

Shane nodded. “Very good.”

The corners of Ilya’s mouth twitched. He had such a beautiful mouth, and Shane had to fight the urge to trace it with his tongue. Instead, he lifted the spoon and pressed it gently to Ilya’s lips.

Ilya slowly opened his mouth, and Shane caught a glimpse of his tongue as the ice cream disappeared. Their eyes met, and they held each other’s gaze for a long moment.

Then Ilya took the bowl from his hands. “I can imagine a place where this ice cream would taste even better.”

“Me too,” Shane said without hesitation, feeling himself blush. God, he was going to die.

Ilya smiled at him, gently took his arm, and seconds later Shane found himself lying on his back on the bed, Ilya above him.

Ilya kissed him deeply, tasting faintly of chocolate. Shane's hands slipped beneath Ilya's sweater, tracing the muscles of his back.

Ilya pushed Shane's shirt up, ran his hand over his chest, and kissed him with increasing intensity. Shane managed to pull off Ilya's sweater without breaking the kiss. He reached for Ilya's belt and zipper.

"We should take our time," Ilya said breathlessly. He removed Shane's shirt, pulling it over his arms.

"The door's open," Shane murmured.

Ilya groaned and jumped off the bed, dragging his half-lowered trousers with him. When he shut the door, Shane quickly slipped out of his jeans and underwear.

Ilya returned to the bed and smiled down at him.

"This image," Ilya murmured, brushing his thumb along Shane's chin, "has tortured me all day."

Shane felt Ilya's thighs settle against him. "Now you can get your revenge and torture me all night," he whispered.

"That," Ilya said, twirling one of Shane's strands between his fingers, "is a very tempting idea."

Shane gasped when he felt Ilya's hand cool from the melted ice cream.

Ilya grinned and bent down to kiss him again.

"Oh, God…" Shane moaned.

Ilya took more ice.

-

For Parker's gala, Shane wanted to wear something special, so he went into town that afternoon.

He chose a gray shirt and a velvety green suit. This time he wanted to wear something that didn't look like Ethan.

He stared at himself in the mirror. He was glowing, and he knew why. He and Ilya had made love all night, had fallen asleep in each other's arms, and exchanged countless kisses.

Thinking about the night before, Shane brushed his fingers over his lips and smiled.

Today, Ilya might once again claim it had been just sex — but no man could touch another with such devotion and tenderness if he meant nothing.

Besides, Ilya hadn't said that today. He had spent most of the day in the stables or in his office. But they had run into each other several times, and each time Ilya had smiled at him.

He no longer hated him.

Shane knew it as surely as he knew he had to breathe. He was still staring at himself in the mirror.

He was aware that he was in a dangerous situation. Ilya had begun to feel something for him — for Shane — even though he believed he was Ethan. And Shane had fallen in love with him.

He could no longer deny it.

Shane was shaking, even though it was pleasantly warm in the bathroom. It was Saturday night. Ethan wanted to be back by Monday. But Shane had left him a message telling him to come as soon as possible. Now Shane prayed that Ethan had not received his message or would ignore it.

Shane knew he was in deep trouble. Ilya wouldn't be able to understand his explanation, and he definitely wouldn't be able to forgive him. He would throw him out of McGill. He would be more than angry. He would hate him even more than he had ever hated Ethan. Shane was absolutely certain of that.

Suddenly, he heard a phone ring.

He jumped in fright, and his heart pounded. Even though he knew Ethan would never call him on the home phone, he was terribly nervous. The ringing stopped — someone had picked up.

With a sick feeling in his stomach, he grabbed his mobile phone, removed the battery, and put the separate parts into a drawer, as if he could delay the inevitable.

Shane tried to breathe calmly as he went down the stairs. Somehow, he had to let go of all his fears and worries, because those last hours and days with Ilya, Jan, and Lilly were too precious to waste.

Jan was in the office with Ilya. He was wearing his pajamas and studying a magazine with a serious expression. Ilya was on the phone and already dressed in his suit. When Shane looked at him, he could hardly move or think. He could only feel.

He married the wrong brother.

"Dad! You look so cool!" Jan shouted, jumping up and running toward Shane.

Ilya had turned halfway around to smile at Shane. The expression in his blue eyes made Shane's heart skip a beat.

Shane bent down and embraced Jan. "I don't look half as cool as you, you know," he said in a hoarse voice.

The phone clicked as Ilya hung up. Shane felt his cheeks grow warm and slowly turned around.

Ilya looked at him with sparkling eyes. His gaze traveled slowly over Shane's body.

"Very nice suit. I don't think I've ever seen it before."

Shane felt himself blush — this time with joy.

"To be honest, I'd like to take it off right away," Ilya mumbled, grinning broadly at Shane.

Shane was just about to suggest they could go back upstairs when he noticed that Jan was standing right next to him.

"But Daddy! That suit is so cool! Don't take it off!" Jan protested. "Dad looks like a prince from a fairy tale today!"

Ilya blushed. "You're right, sweetheart. Your Dad really does look like a prince. Daddy said something silly." He smiled at Jan, then threw Shane such a heated look that Shane's knees almost gave way.

Ilya lifted Jan into his arms and kissed his cheek.

"I'll check on you when I get home, but I won't wake you up. It might get late."

Jan frowned and tugged at a strand of Ilya's hair that had fallen into his face. "No, don't come home so late!"

"Why not?" Ilya laughed. "You won't even notice, sweetheart, because you'll be asleep, okay?"

"Because otherwise Dad will oversleep again tomorrow," Jan sulked. "And he promised to make me waffles for breakfast. If you ask him nicely, he'll probably make some for you too!"

Shane placed a hand over his heart. It all felt so right — and at the same time, so terribly wrong. Ethan would come back, and Jan was not Shane's son, but his.

"Jan? I won't oversleep," Shane said — and to his horror, his voice broke.

Ilya looked at him. "Are you all right?" His tone sounded gentle, but his gaze was full of concern.

Shane had to pull himself together. He forced a smile. “Yeah, of course. But we’re going to be late.”

Ilya stared at him for a moment, then sent Jan to the kitchen, where Olga was cleaning up. Eventually, he took Shane’s hand. “Something’s going on with you.” It wasn’t a question.

Shane licked his lips. “No, nothing. Do we really have to go to Parker’s gala?”

Ilya’s eyes widened. “I definitely have to go, even if it’s only for two hours. But you don’t have to come with me, of course, if you’re—”

“No, it’s fine. Of course I’ll go with you,” Shane said, overwhelmed by despair and worry.

“You seem so sad tonight. You’re not feeling well. Please tell me what’s going on.”

After a few seconds, Ilya turned him around and pulled him into his arms. At first, Shane’s body was stiff, but then he melted into Ilya’s warm embrace.

“I… I’m not sad. I’m just tired… from last night.”

Ilya’s gaze was searching. Shane could barely look him in the eye. Finally, Ilya stroked his thumb over Shane’s cheek.

“I meant it very seriously when I said it would be a long night,” Ilya mumbled.

Finally, Shane giggled and felt some of his inner tension ease. Ilya looked at him seriously, then cupped his face with both hands and kissed him.

Shane melted as Ilya sensually brushed his lips against his. He felt Ilya part his lips and slip his tongue inside. His hand wrapped around Shane’s hip, and it felt as though he were touching his bare skin.

A cough sounded from the doorway. Ilya looked up, froze, and pushed Shane away. *Was Ethan back?* Horrified, Shane whirled around. But it wasn’t his twin brother standing in the doorway — it was Lilly.

She was wearing the dress Shane had picked up from the dry cleaners earlier that day, and she looked very elegant and suddenly so mature — not like a moody teenager.

“Lilly!” Ilya said in surprise.

“Wow, Lilly,” Shane smiled. “You look gorgeous.”

Lilly cast a quick glance at Ilya, then looked back at Shane.

“Do you really think so?”

“Yes, absolutely stunning.” Shane glanced at Ilya too and noticed the disappointment on his

face. Lilly still refused to speak to her father.

“Lilly, you look a lot like your mother,” Ilya said, and Lilly froze.

“Thank you,” she mumbled, but she didn’t look at her father.

Shane gave Ilya a worried glance. He was trying hard to control himself, but Shane could see how hurt he was.

“Lilly, isn’t it time to bury the hatchet?”

Lilly spun around. “No! And I don’t look anything like Mum!”

“You look like your mother when she was your age,” Ilya insisted hoarsely.

“I don’t care,” Lilly said harshly. “She’s dead.”

Ilya’s face hardened. “I expect you to come straight home from Gina’s party.”

Lilly glared at him. “Maybe we’ll go to the mall and get pizza or something.”

Ilya frowned. “You mean you want to meet that David?”

“I can’t help it if he works there!” Lilly shouted.

“I’ve told you before, I don’t want you to see him,” Ilya warned.

“You can’t tell me who to meet or who not to meet. I’m sixteen years old, not six!” She turned around and walked out the door.

Ilya stared after her, and Shane took his arm. “Let her go, Ilya.”

He turned to him in frustration. “At least she spoke to me,” he muttered.

“Exactly,” Shane said, gently stroking his arm.

“I’m sure she’ll meet David Jenkins after the party — if he doesn’t even have the night off and go there with her!”

“You know, in a way, Lilly’s right. She’s old enough to make some decisions on her own.”

“She had a gun!”

Shane frowned. “But she got it from me, not from him.”

That brought Ilya briefly back to his senses.

“He’s a bad guy, and he hangs out with bad guys — that’s why she even thought she might

need a gun," Ilya said quietly.

"I don't think he's a bad guy," Shane replied. When he saw Ilya's expression, he added, "I met him at the mall the other day. I think it's still too early to judge him. But I have an idea."

Ilya crossed his arms over his chest. "Which is?"

"Why don't we invite him and his mother to dinner tomorrow? Lilly would be very happy about it, and then we could — you could — get to know David properly."

Ilya stared at him for a long moment. Eventually, he smiled, shook his head, and kissed Shane on the lips.

"You really have become a different person," he said quietly. "It's almost like you're actually someone else."

Shane had no answer to that.

Chapter End Notes

so... what do you think?
let me know in the comments!!

btw im on twitter @xoxo333_

Chapter 7: SEVEN

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“You're so quiet.”

Shane looked over at Ilya as an employee approached the Jaguar they were sitting in. Shane had managed to keep quiet when Ilya drove the car out of the garage, as if he had already known that Ilya owned another car besides his pickup.

“Do you think so?”

The employee who would park the car for them was already standing at the driver’s door. The large villa at the end of the driveway was brightly lit. Shane could hear an orchestra playing and muffled laughter.

“There’s really nothing wrong with me,” Shane lied, forcing himself to smile.

Ilya apparently accepted it.

They got out, and Ilya came around the car and took Shane’s arm. The smile he gave him was a little uncertain.

Shane gave him a grateful smile as they crossed the driveway and walked along the paved path toward the magnificent villa.

When the front door opened, the cheerful noise became clearly audible.

“You don’t regret last night, do you?” Ilya asked quietly.

Shane stumbled, but Ilya caught him instantly.

“No,” Shane said firmly. “Absolutely not.”

Ilya’s face softened. “Good,” he replied.

As they entered the house, Shane felt that his situation had suddenly worsened. The entrance hall was huge and full of guests. Shane was amazed and suddenly realized that he had entered a completely different world — a world of wealth.

This estate made McGill seem modest and almost cozy. Elegance showed in every detail of the architecture and furnishings. The women all wore conservative, elegant, and very expensive designer dresses, and the men looked very dignified in their tuxedos.

A friendly-looking man in his mid-fifties approached them.

“Ilya! I can’t believe another year has passed!” They shook hands.

Ilya seemed to genuinely like their host.

“No, Parker, but the older you get, the faster time flies,” he said. “So many guests are here tonight. Apparently no one wanted to miss the biggest autumn ball.”

“We didn’t get a single rejection,” Parker nodded happily. Then he finally looked at Shane, and his smile slipped slightly.

“Ethan. You’re looking charming as always, incomparable. And what a nice haircut.”

Shane didn’t feel like playing games — or trying to be as similar as possible to his brother.

“Thank you. The house looks really beautiful tonight. Everything is so lovingly arranged.” Shane was completely honest.

Parker looked amazed. “Thanks!” he said. “The only guest I’m not sure will come is Alexei.”

Ilya’s face suddenly became strangely expressionless. “Really?”

“He didn’t answer my invitation.” Parker’s expression became a little strained.

“He often has to work late,” Ilya explained.

Parker coughed, nodded to Shane, and slapped Ilya lightly on the back.

“He should take you as an example.”

Then Parker left.

So Parker didn’t like Alexei. But why?

Shane took a glass of champagne from a passing waiter. Then he noticed that a tall, elegant man with dark hair was staring at him. When the man smiled, Shane lowered his gaze and turned his back to him.

“What was that all about?” he asked Ilya.

Ilya hesitated. “Parker and his wife — his third wife — had temporarily split up. Alexei had an affair with her. Now Georgina is back.”

“Oh, I understand,” Shane said, looking into his half-empty glass.

“Come on, let’s see who’s here,” Ilya said, taking Shane’s arm. But he looked back over his shoulder before they went on.

Shane also looked around.

The tall man with the strangely silver-gray eyes was still staring at him. When the man noticed that Shane was looking for him, he lifted his champagne glass in an ironic greeting, turned away, and left.

“Who’s that?” Shane asked without thinking.

“Like you don’t know,” Ilya replied harshly.

Shane flinched and saw that Ilya had turned red with anger. That couldn’t mean anything good.

“Let’s go,” Ilya said, leading him into the next salon.

Shane dared to look back once more, but the man with the silver eyes had disappeared.

…

An hour later, Shane went to the restroom, but it was occupied. He was tired of Parker’s ball, even though Ilya seemed to be having a good time. He knew all these people and was very popular.

Maybe a little too popular.

Shane knew he hadn’t imagined that a few of the wives present were looking at Ilya with far too much admiration for his taste.

Often they stared at both of them — and at Shane with particular intensity. So Shane clung possessively to Ilya’s arm and practically hung on his every word with admiration.

Now he stood in front of the restroom door, and his smile faded. He didn’t like it here at all. Nobody liked Ethan, and pretending to be him in this environment was difficult, exhausting, and embarrassing.

So many glances filled with hatred.

How could his brother have endured this life?

Shane was reluctant to admit it, but he suspected that Ethan had actually enjoyed this kind of attention.

“Oh my goodness, you’re looking cute today!”

Shane turned around and found himself standing in front of Hayden and a tall, petite blonde woman.

Immediately Hayden embraced him.

“I don’t think I’ve ever seen Ilya so happy,” he whispered with wide eyes. “Not even on his wedding day!”

Shane managed to bring a small smile to his lips. He remembered that his brother had had an affair with Jackie, and he felt miserable.

“I’m a little tired, but how are you?” Shane asked, trying to distract from himself and Ilya.

“Wonderful,” Hayden replied radiantly. “Your suit is awesome, by the way,” he added with a smile.

The young blonde woman smiled at Shane. Her blue eyes looked a little blank, and she was wearing an emerald-and-diamond necklace. It had to be worth a fortune.

She said, “Are you and Ilya together again? Hayden obviously thinks so. Wouldn’t it be strange if you two reconciled — just like Parker and I did?”

Now Shane realized that he was standing in front of Parker’s third wife, Georgina. He wondered how she felt about Ethan.

Shane smiled at her. “Well, stranger things have happened,” he said lightly, quickly changing the subject. “That’s a beautiful necklace.”

Georgina beamed. “Parker gave it to me just like that, right after I went back to him. Isn’t it amazing? And I bought this dress just yesterday. We could have gone shopping together! Thank God they still had it in my size! Doesn’t it match the necklace perfectly?”

Shane wondered whether Georgina possessed even a spark of intelligence.

“Perfect,” he assured her. “Isn’t there a bathroom upstairs? I’ve been waiting forever.”

“Up the stairs and then the first door on the left,” Georgina smiled.

When Shane nodded and turned away, Hayden caught him by the wrist.

“You and Ilya… you look so happy. I’m really happy for you — if that’s what you truly want now.”

Shane recognized the question behind the words. Since Georgina hardly seemed interested in the conversation anyway, he replied quietly: “What I don’t want is for Ilya to hate me. It’s time I showed some dignity and decency.”

Hayden looked amazed, then blushed.

“Yes… I agree. So you two are going to stay together now?”

Shane hesitated. “I don’t know. But I really need to go to the bathroom now,” he said with a

weak smile, squeezing Hayden's arm.

"I regret my past, Hayden. I really do."

Their eyes met. Hayden seemed completely surprised.

"Okay," he finally said and nodded.

And at that moment Shane saw Jackie approaching them.

"Hello, Ethan," she greeted him with a polite smile and took her husband's arm.

"How are you, Jackie?" Shane asked with effort, wondering whether he had turned bright red. He reminded himself that he had not slept with this woman. Ethan was the one who had seduced her.

"What a beautiful suit," she said.

"Yeah, he looks pretty good," Hayden agreed with a smile.

"What a nice party," Shane said as cheerfully as he could — though it sounded rather bitter.

"Do you want to be rescued, Mr. Rozanov?" a strange voice whispered.

A man had stopped behind Shane.

Jackie said something, her arm still wrapped around Hayden.

Shane turned around and collided with the man who had spoken, who was standing very close behind him.

Shane froze as the man caught him by the arms and he found himself staring into two stunning gray eyes.

The man grinned at him.

The same man who had been staring at him earlier.

His eyes sparkled with amusement — and danger.

"Are you all right… Mr. Rozanov?" he asked quietly.

"Hello, Tom," Jackie growled, obviously struggling to control herself.

"Tom," Hayden murmured, nodding.

Shane began to sweat. He didn't turn around. He felt trapped.

He didn't like the way Tom kept holding him — or the way he looked deep into his eyes as if he knew him very well.

Too well.

Hadn't Hayden mentioned a man named Tom? Somehow implied that he loved Ethan?

"I'm fine. You can let me go now."

This seemed to amuse Tom even more, because he laughed quietly — but he let Shane go.

"Wonderful suit," he said.

"I need a glass of champagne," Hayden said dryly. "Jackie?"

Jackie didn't move. "Ethan? Would you like one too?"

"No, thanks," Shane replied nervously.

Jackie was obviously upset.

And Hayden kept looking from his wife to Shane, then to Tom, and back again.

Suddenly Shane had had enough.

He turned to Tom.

"I think I'll accept the offer of a rescue after all," he said firmly.

Tom laughed, took his arm, and led him up the wide curved staircase.

Shane couldn't help looking back and saw Hayden leaving while Jackie stood in the lobby staring after him.

Tom whispered, "You've been home for a whole week. What were you waiting for?"

Frightened, Shane met his sparkling gaze and tried to pull away. "What?" he gasped.

But he had already suspected that this man had something to do with his brother.

Strangely enough, he was exactly Ethan's type — sophisticated, self-confident, handsome.

"And you changed your hair," Tom said, shaking his head. "I know you probably have a good reason for it. It looks pretty cute too. But that's not you. Not at all. What were you thinking?"

Shane stared at him silently. Tom continued in a low, intimate whisper. "Did you see the necklace Parker bought for Georgina? I guess he'd freak out if he knew she's still sleeping with Alexei."

Shane tried to pull away.

“Please let go of me,” he said firmly.

They had stopped on the upper landing of the staircase.

Tom stared at Shane, and the laughter faded from his eyes.

“Is everything all right, babe? You look so different. And you’re acting very strange.”

“I’m fine! I just want to go to the bathroom,” Shane replied.

At that moment a door opened beside them, and an elderly man stepped out.

As the man went down the stairs, Shane didn’t hesitate any longer.

He tore himself away from Tom and hurried into the bathroom. He closed the door and breathed in relief.

But immediately the door opened again. Tom stepped inside and closed the door behind him.

For a moment Shane was so stunned that his mouth remained open. Tom grinned and pulled Shane against his chest.

“So what’s this new game, huh? I missed you.”

Shane tried to push him away.

“What are you doing? Jesus Christ, are you insane? Let go of me! Get out of here!”

Tom stopped trying to kiss him and stared at Shane in astonishment. This time his gaze was sharp and penetrating.

Shane was desperate. If Ilya found him in a situation like this, everything would be over.

“Get out. Now,” Shane ordered.

Tom’s gaze remained fixed on him, studying him carefully.

“What’s going on, Ethan?” His tone sounded completely different now.

Apparently Ethan had been having an affair with him too, but Shane had truly had enough. He struggled to regain control of himself.

“I’d like to go to the bathroom in peace, please.”

Tom continued staring at him as if Shane’s words meant nothing.

“This is really strange. You should be in my arms by now so I can take you right here against the wall. I mean, it’s been a week.”

Shane froze.

What the hell?

This affair seemed to be far more serious than the one with Jackie.

“Please. Just get out of here.”

But Tom didn’t move and continued as if he hadn’t heard Shane at all.

“I mean, in the ten years we’ve been together, you’ve never behaved like this before. And you didn’t call me when you got back from Ottawa. So what the hell is going on?”

Ten years.

Shane was sweating.

“Nothing is going on.”

Ethan and this man had been together for ten years? That was almost inconceivable. Shane had to swallow hard.

“Ten years is a long time. People change.”

“Not you. Not us. Is this about Ilya? Is it because of the divorce — the severance money we’re after?”

Shane stared at him in horror.

“Don’t look at me like you’re seeing me for the first time,” Tom said, pausing again. “For God’s sake, I’m far more than your friend. More than your lover. We’re a team, the two of us. And God, I missed you so much.”

A team.

“A team,” Shane managed hoarsely. He felt dizzy.

And he desperately wanted to ask what kind of team they were. But somehow he already suspected it. Tom and Ethan were after Ilya’s money. That was exactly what Tom had just implied.

Suddenly Tom took Shane’s hand and pressed his lips to the back of it. Shane shivered at the touch.

“I heard about your fall. At first I thought you staged it. I mean, you always have a good reason for everything you do. But that was real, wasn’t it? Did you hurt yourself? Is that why you’re looking at me like I’m some kind of crazy axe murderer?” Tom smiled. “We both know I’m not.”

Shane tried to pull his hand away, but Tom held on to it.

“Tom… let’s talk outside.”

He didn’t need the bathroom anymore. His heart was beating so fast he thought he might suffocate.

Tom didn’t take his eyes off him as he opened the door. Together they stepped out into the hallway.

How was Shane supposed to proceed now?

He needed to know who Tom was, when exactly he had met Ethan, how long they had been together — and what kind of “team” they formed.

Shane started walking down the hallway toward the staircase when Tom suddenly grabbed his wrist from behind.

Again Shane met his amused gaze.

“That’s the wrong way, babe.”

Tom’s eyes were still searching, but the casual grin had returned.

If Shane didn’t pull himself together immediately, this man would soon discover the entire role swap.

“Did you forget why we’re here today?” Tom asked. His face had become unreadable.

“Wha—?” Shane began.

“No. Of course not,” he said quickly, forcing a smile, even though it was difficult.

Tom took his arm and led him in the opposite direction.

Shane had no idea what plans Ethan and Tom had made together, but Alexei had probably been right. Ethan had chosen Ilya for his money, and this man was clearly somehow his partner.

Tom had let go of his arm again, and Shane followed him suspiciously down the hallway to the last door.

His heart was pounding with anxiety. He had no idea what awaited him behind the closed

door they were now standing in front of. He had the terrible feeling that he was about to witness something utterly horrifying — something unimaginable.

Tom opened the door and pushed Shane inside.

“This is the bedroom,” he whispered.

When Tom closed the door behind them, Shane felt a surge of fear.

Tom laughed softly.

“Oh, really?” Shane’s remark seemed to amuse him.

Shane wrapped his arms around himself because he was suddenly freezing, even though sweat covered his skin.

Tom walked over to a large portrait on the wall. It showed a pretty blonde woman in a ball gown. Shane realized it was Georgina Parker.

Tom lifted the portrait off the wall.

“What are you doing?” Shane shouted.

There was a safe hidden in the wall.

The moment Shane saw it, he understood what was happening.

His eyes widened in disbelief as he watched Tom smile at him charmingly and then hold a small, palm-sized device against the safe.

A soft click sounded immediately. Tom opened it.

“Stop!” Shane cried out, his voice firm with shock.

Tom took something out of the safe and then closed it again.

Proudly he raised his hand and showed Shane a huge yellow diamond ring.

“Well,” Tom said calmly, “that, my dear, is why we’re here today.”

Shane had lost his voice.

Tom hung the portrait back over the safe, and Shane finally snapped out of his stunned paralysis. He understood now what had just happened.

Tom had stolen a ring worth a small fortune. Tom was a thief. And he was Ethan’s partner.

Tom stepped toward him. Shane wanted to tell him to leave him alone, but no sound came

out. Tom smiled broadly and pressed something into Shane's hand.

It was the ring.

It burned in Shane's palm.

He blinked down at it, and the yellow diamond blurred before his eyes.

"I don't want it!" he shouted desperately when he finally found his voice again.

Tom wrapped an arm around him and, before Shane could protest, pushed him out into the hallway.

"Sure you do. You always do. You've never missed a job before."

"A job?" Shane whispered in horror.

Tom stared at him, frowning.

Voices were approaching, and Shane tried to push the ring back into Tom's hand.

"Take this and put it back right now!"

Tom grinned calmly. He closed Shane's fingers around the ring again.

"Smile, love. We're about to have company."

Shane looked past him down the hallway and saw, of all people, Georgina and Alexei approaching them.

They spotted Shane and Tom at the same moment and stopped as if rooted to the spot. Shane could no longer think clearly. He could only stare at them silently.

He had just helped steal a diamond ring.

And Alexei — who couldn't stand him — was on his way to the bedroom with the owner of that ring.

Can this really be happening?

Then Shane saw Alexei's face.

He was furious.

"Well, well. What do we have here?" he said quietly. "What a coincidence to meet you here, Ethan… Tom."

Shane suddenly realized that Tom still had an arm around him, as if they were a couple. To

anyone watching, it must look as though they had just come out of the bedroom — for the same reason that had brought Alexei and the hostess upstairs.

“Nothing happened,” Shane whispered miserably.

Tom released him.

“Nice party, huh?” he said casually.

Shane glanced at him in disbelief.

He was actually enjoying this whole situation.

Alexei looked colder than ice.

“Alexei, uh… let’s go back downstairs. That antique I wanted to show you isn’t going anywhere,” Georgina said quickly, her face bright red.

“After you,” Alexei said to Shane.

Shane took a deep breath.

He was still holding the diamond ring in his hand. He could feel its heat and was almost surprised that Alexei couldn’t somehow smell it.

He walked past him. Tom followed, and Shane made sure not to brush against him.

Then he stumbled and froze.

Ilya was standing at the top of the stairs.

Shane straightened and met his gaze.

Ilya’s eyes were dark and stormy.

Then he abruptly turned and walked down the stairs. “Ilya!”

Shane hurried after him. Despite his confusion, he was painfully aware that the ring was still in his hand.

Alexei walked right behind Tom, and Shane could feel his eyes burning into his back. He wanted to drop the ring, but he was too afraid Alexei would notice.

In the foyer he finally caught up with Ilya. “Ilya, please wait!”

Ilya turned around. “You told me it was over between you two!”

Shane gasped for breath.

He knows about Ethan and Tom.

“It is over,” Shane said, still panting. “I went upstairs because I wanted to use the bathroom, and Tom followed me.”

Ilya stared at him, clearly weighing whether to believe him.

Suddenly Tom appeared beside them. But to Shane’s astonishment, this time there was no amusement in his eyes.

“He’s telling the truth. I ran after him, Rozanow,” Tom said seriously.

Then he turned to Shane and lowered his head so deeply that it almost resembled a bow. “I apologize. My behavior was inappropriate.”

He gave Ilya a grim nod and walked away.

Only then did Shane realize *how* badly Ethan and Tom had betrayed Ilya.

Not only that. They were thieves.

And judging by the way Tom had opened that safe, very professional ones.

Ilya suddenly grabbed Shane’s arm. “Don’t lie to me now,” he growled. “I’m serious, Ethan.”

“Ilya, after last night, how could I look at another man the way I look at you?”

Ilya’s expression softened. And Shane knew that he believed him.

“Let’s go,” Ilya said, gripping Shane’s arm tightly.

Shane glanced back. Alexei and Georgina were standing several yards behind them, and Alexei was watching him like a bird of prey.

Was he imagining it, or was Alexei staring at his hand — the one still clutching the ring?

Before Shane fully realized what was happening, Ilya had already led him out onto the porch and down the steps to the waiting parking attendant.

Shane’s mind was racing.

Should he just drop the ring?

He was about to do it when he noticed someone hurrying after them.

Alexei had followed them outside.

He stood on the porch, watching Shane coolly — waiting for him to betray himself.

Shane fixed his gaze straight ahead, breathless with fear.

He held the ring tightly between his fingers, slipped his hand into his pocket, and slowly opened his fist so the ring could fall into it.

“The black Jaguar, please,” Ilya said.

When the employee hurried away, Ilya looked at Shane and reached for his hand.

Shane smiled at him.

But it was a false smile.

A moment later they were sitting in Ilya’s elegant car, driving back home to McGill.

…

Ilya lay on his stomach, breathing slowly and evenly, his head turned toward Shane.

He was fast asleep.

Shane looked at the glowing dial of the alarm clock on the bedside table.

It was three o’clock in the morning.

He slipped quietly out of bed, completely naked. On his way into the bathroom he stopped to pick up his shoes, then the suit jacket, shirt, trousers and finally his shorts. All these clothes had quickly fallen to the ground when they entered the bedroom a few hours ago.

In the dressing room he hung up his clothes and slipped into one of Ilya’s T-shirts, which fell to his thighs.

He let the noble shoes drop beside the carefully lined-up pairs and shook his head sadly. No, those weren’t his shoes, and the man in the bedroom wasn’t his husband — those were Ethan’s shoes, and Ilya was Ethan’s husband.

And his brother was a fucking thief. Shane couldn’t believe it.

But he had proof of it. He grabbed his pants and a few moments later he had the large yellow diamond ring between his fingers. Horrified, he dropped it back into the pocket.

When would Georgina Parker notice that the ring had disappeared? How long would it take Alexei to remember finding Shane and Tom just outside the Parkers’ bedroom door?

Shane was sick with fear. If the disappearance of the ring was noticed, he suspected that Alexei would not need two seconds before remembering where he had caught Shane and

Tom on the evening of the gala.

He had to return the ring before someone missed it. But would he be charged with theft?

How could such a thing happen to him? And of course right now, when Ilya had begun to turn to him more. But he might have thought he was Ethan… And Shane wasn't Ethan. Yet despite everything, he was deeply convinced that Ilya would never have behaved so lovingly toward his brother.

He heard his soft footsteps before he heard his equally quiet, sleepy voice when Ilya stopped in the doorway of the bathroom.

"Hey," he said with a tender smile. "What are you doing?"

Shane hesitated. "I can't sleep."

Ilya rubbed his eyes. He looked like a man who had just had sex for hours and had earned his rest. It meant he looked fucking hot and somehow kind of cute.

"So you're still not exhausted, huh?" Ilya asked with a sensual rumble in his voice.

Shane looked into his blue eyes and saw a seductive smile.

"You're not wearing anything," Shane said and would have loved to throw himself into Ilya's arms and cry on his shoulder.

"And you're sad. Why?"

Shane shook his head and wrapped his arms around himself.

Did Tom have the answers he needed? God, Tom had met Ethan when he was twenty-two — ten years ago. Did it really mean what Shane suspected?

But Ethan and Tom had probably split up six years ago. Ethan had met Ilya, fallen in love with him and married him, and then Tom had reappeared at some point.

Or did Ethan and Tom choose Ilya as a victim together? But why would Ethan wait so many years for a divorce? Did they have to hide from the police for a while? Or had it simply been practical to be the husband of a rich man while he robbed his unsuspecting wealthy neighbours?

Ilya disappeared and came back in white underpants.

"What's the matter, Ethan?" he asked quietly and sat down on the edge of the large bathtub, not far from the spot where Shane had sunk down.

Shane met his gaze and saw so much care in it that his heart flipped in his chest. This man would be devastated if he found out that not only Shane had deceived him, but also to what

extent Ethan had actually cheated and exploited him.

Shane had to talk to Tom as soon as possible. And it was about time Ethan finally got the fuck back. It was time for the truth.

“Let’s go back to bed,” Shane suggested and stood up.

Ilya’s gaze followed him and got stuck on the hem of his T-shirt, which brushed against Shane’s thigh.

“Do you want to distract me with that?” Ilya asked and got up as well.

Shane smiled, knowing that he had actually distracted him. “No.”

Ilya wrapped an arm around him, pulled him to his chest and kissed him tenderly on the mouth. “I’ll check on Lilly. What time is it?”

“Already after 3:00 a.m.,” Shane said. Lilly was allowed to stay out until midnight. “I’m sure she’s been back for hours, Ilya.”

“Me too, but I should have checked on her hours ago,” he replied.

Shane followed him. In the dressing room, Ilya quickly slipped into sweatpants and a T-shirt. When he left the bedroom, Shane stopped in front of the bed.

The bedside lamp was still on and he froze at the end of the bed, not only feeling helpless and lost, but gradually getting really angry. What the hell was he supposed to do?

The urge to involve the police or even the authorities became overwhelming. Because his brother was a fucking criminal.

Before Shane could follow that thought further, he heard a horrified scream.

Immediately he jumped into the nearest pair of jeans and ran down the hall to Lilly’s room. The door was wide open and the lights were on.

Shane rushed in and an unbelievable scene presented itself — Lilly sat naked in bed, holding the blanket in front of her body, and Ilya, foaming with rage, had flung the naked David Jenkins against the wall.

David looked scared and angry at the same time. Ilya pressed him firmly against the wall with one hand.

“It’s not what you think!” David called out.

“Dad!!” Lilly screamed.

Shane jumped forward and grabbed Ilya from behind.

“Ilya, stop it!” he shouted. Immediately he felt Ilya’s stiffened shoulders soften.

He slowly loosened his grip. “You’re sleeping with my daughter,” he growled. “And if I’m not mistaken, you’re eighteen and she is sixteen and—”

“I love her!” David groaned, still pressed against the wall.

“Let him go!” Lilly shouted. “Jesus Christ, I haven’t been a virgin for two years!!”

Ilya turned around and let David go. Shocked, he stared at his daughter while David picked up his boxers and jumped into them.

“It’s true,” Lilly said defiantly, tears running down her face.

“What, but… what?” Ilya asked. “When you were fourteen, Lilly? I mean, you were a—”

“Yes! And then you married Ethan and totally forgot me!” Lilly shouted.

“I’ve never forgotten you,” Ilya replied.

In the meantime David pulled a shirt over his head. Ilya looked at him from the side.

“Don’t move from here. I’ll call the police.”

“Ilya, don’t,” Shane whispered.

“I hate you!” Lilly screamed, and tears started running again.

“Hey, it’s going to be all right,” David tried to calm her. But Ilya had already gone to the phone.

Shane took care of Lilly in the meantime. He wanted to take her hand, but Lilly refused. She stared at her father's back with a gaze filled with hatred.

“Is he calling the police or Alexei?” she asked fearfully.

Shane realized there was a difference.

“I don't know. But he'll calm down. He's just scared and confused.” Shane hesitated. “But you... are you using—?”

Lilly blushed and David took a step closer. “Of course.”

Shane turned to him. He was suspicious and still scared, but more controlled than before when Ilya had pushed him up against the wall.

“I— we just think it's a good idea to think about who you're sleeping with. If you don't take

things seriously with the other person, then…"

"I'd marry Lilly right now," David said. Then he looked at her.

Shane watched them exchange glances and realized that they were very much in love.

Ilya hung up the phone. "Alexei's on his way," he mumbled, pointing a finger at David. "And I don't ever want to see you near my daughter again."

"Dad!" Lilly screamed. She jumped out of bed with the blanket wrapped around her. Her face was lime white.

"I'm serious," Ilya explained. "If I catch him with you again, I'll report him."

David turned pale as a sheet.

Shane was appalled. He knew that Ilya thought badly of David. He knew Ilya meant well. He knew how much he loved his daughter. Nevertheless, Shane also knew that he was doing the wrong thing.

"You can't tell me who to be with and who not to be with!" Lilly cried. "I'm fucking sixteen years old!"

"And that makes you a minor who lives under my roof. So you will follow my rules, do you understand?" Ilya replied harshly.

David touched Lilly on the arm and without any hesitation she looked at him. Shane didn't know what this silent exchange meant, but then Lilly said:

"Dad, if you take him to prison, I'll run away and you'll never see me again."

Ilya turned pale.

-

The waffles tasted like cardboard but Jan obviously enjoyed them.

Shane had allowed him not only to pour syrup over them, but also to decorate them with cream. Fortunately, Olga had gone to church, so Shane was spared her disapproval.

Ilya pushed his chair back. He had barely touched his plate.

"Thank you," he said to Shane. "I'm going to train Charm today."

Shane knew that Charm was a young stallion Ilya had recently bought.

He put a piece of waffle into the sticky maple syrup on his plate. Lilly wasn't with them. He really wanted to see her, but her door had been locked.

Last night Alexei drove David home. There wouldn't be any charges. The brothers had had a long and heated discussion about it, from which Alexei had apparently emerged as the winner — but he had nevertheless warned David.

“Daddy, you never train the horses on Sundays!” Jan wailed.

Despite the tense muscles around his mouth, Ilya answered tenderly:

“I know. But today everything is a little different. Is that bad, honey? You can stay with Dad, is that okay?”

Shane understood him. Ilya was furious and had to do something to distract himself.

“Jan, would you like to help me with the dishes? I rinse, you dry?” Shane suggested.

A week ago, Ilya would have stared at him with surprise, because they both knew that Ethan never did the dishes. But that had been a week ago — now Ilya smiled at him before he took a jacket from a hook on the wall and walked out. He had fully accepted the new Ethan.

When Shane and Jan cleared the table, Shane asked:

“Could you run upstairs and see if Lilly wants anything? We could bring her waffles.”

Jan beamed and ran off.

Concerned, Shane cleared up the rest of the breakfast. A teenage drama was the last thing they needed right now.

He felt sorry for Ilya, Lilly and even David. He was extremely relieved that Alexei had managed to dissuade Ilya from pressing charges.

Jan came running down again. “She says she's starving, and if you bring her the waffles, she'll eat them.”

“Really?” Shane was happy.

Ten minutes later he carried a tray up the stairs. Lilly's door was wide open and Shane peeked inside.

Lilly sat in her bed with two magazines, headphones on her ears. She took them off and gave Shane a sad look. Her eyes were red and swollen.

“May I come in?” Shane asked.

Lilly nodded. “You ask first at least,” she said quietly.

Shane went in and put the tray among the mess on the bedside table.

“Have you been crying all night?”

Lilly nodded.

“Your father won't press charges,” Shane said gently.

“No?” Lilly's face lit up. Then it darkened again. “Just because Uncle Alexei talked him out of it! My father's an ass!”

“Well, actually he's a wonderful man,” Shane replied and carefully sat down at the end of the bed.

“That's just because you love him. If you were me, you'd see things differently.”

Shane sighed. “Yes, probably, at least at your age. But Lilly, do you remember what I told you? You're really lucky to have a father who loves you and to whom you mean so much that he lost it when he caught you in bed with your boyfriend.”

Lilly blinked. “I can't give up David.”

“I know. Just take it easy until Ilya calms down. We wanted to invite David and his mother to dinner tonight, and then something like this happens.”

Lilly kept her mouth open. “Really? This must have been your idea!”

“It was. I thought it was time your father met David and got to know him.”

Lilly almost smiled. “You're really nice. I don't know who you are or where that bitch is, but I hope he never comes back. Will you stay with us?”

Shane stared blankly at her.

…

Shane had gone back to the kitchen and was almost done with the dishes when he heard the doorbell.

Jan was still with him and entertained him with a long story he had been told in nursery school on Friday.

Shane dried his hands and went to the front door. He opened it and stood in front of a grinning Tom.

He was just about to slam the door shut but instead he stared at the tall man in disbelief. “You.”

Tom's grin disappeared. He looked at Shane from top to bottom — the bare feet, the unmade

hair, a large shirt from Ilya over a pair of sweatpants.

Shane paused. “What are you doing here?”

If Ilya saw him, he'd never believe it was over between Ethan and Tom. But would that make any difference?

Without any trace of the amusement Shane had noticed on him the night before, Tom said: “Calm down. Ilya just drove into town. And you're not him.” Tom narrowed his eyes. “You're not Ethan, are you, my dear?”

Shane felt the ground sway under his feet.

“Are you crazy?” he finally gasped.

“Ethan would never, never be seen in jeans and such a shirt anywhere. Under no circumstances,” Tom said, emphasizing the words with his big grey eyes fixed on him.

“Just get out of here,” Shane mumbled. Then he changed his mind, grabbed Tom by the arm and pulled him into the house. He slammed the door shut and lowered his voice. “I want you to return that ring!”

“I definitely won't do that,” Tom said. He slowly circled around Shane and looked at him closely. Then he suddenly stopped.

“Holy shit, he told me that so long ago that I completely forgot. You are his twin brother..”

Shane took a deep breath. Now he couldn't talk his way out of it.

“He mentioned once, shortly after we moved in together, that he has a twin brother. An identical copy of himself.”

Shane froze. “He told you?”

Ethan had told this man about him, but no one else. He had told Tom, but not his husband.

“Yes, he mentioned it once casually. I think he said that you two were as different as day and night and that you rarely see each other. That's all he said.” Tom became thoughtful. “What the hell is going on here? What's he up to?” Now he looked grim and worried. “Where is he?”

At that moment Shane knew that he had finally found an ally in his search for the truth, even though Tom was a thief.

“I don't know where he is,” Shane answered.

Tom looked at him for a long time. “I need you to tell me what's going on,” he said almost threateningly.

Did he dare to put pressure on him?

“Will you bring the ring back then?”

Tom nodded, but Shane didn't believe him and finally sighed. It wouldn't do him any good to keep that information to himself.

“Ethan asked me to cover for him so he could raise the money to pay his debts,” he began.

“Wait a minute. Pay his debts?” Tom sounded unbelieving.

Shane stared at him. But since he knew that his brother was a thief and a cheater, he suspected that he had lied to Tom too.

“I'm gonna kill him,” Tom said, shaking his head.

Shane wondered if he was serious. But Tom didn't seem angry, rather amused.

“Why else would he have asked me to come and take his place?”

“You're pretty stupid,” Tom said with a small laugh. His gaze was direct. “Do you believe everything he tells you? What I can't believe is that he didn't tell me what he was doing!” Now he got a little angry. But he still didn't seem really furious and Shane couldn't tell whether he was truly that ice-cold and calm or just a good actor.

“What the hell is going on here?” Shane asked grimly. “Tom, I'm going crazy here! Not to mention the fact that someone shot at me — at him — and I was pushed off the road!”

Tom looked at him for a long time. “He set you up. Pretty thoroughly, it seems to me.” Suddenly he smiled.

Shane would have liked to knock the smile off his attractive face.

“That's not fucking funny.”

Tom gave him a look he couldn’t read.

“I find this quite amusing. He even set me up. And not for the first time, I might add.”

Shane stared at him. “Then why are you with him?”

Suddenly his thoughts from the morning came back to him.

“Did you guys break up when he married Ilya?”

Tom looked at him thoughtfully. “You’re a little romantic, huh?”

Shane blushed.

“We never parted. I’m with him because he’s the most exciting man I’ve ever met. And we’re partners. Neither of us could survive without the other.”

Shane walked to the nearest chair and sat down.

“He never loved Ilya,” Shane mumbled. And it wasn’t a question.

“No. But I think he found him amusing for a while,” Tom said. “You really are a romantic.” He smiled.

Shane rolled his eyes but didn’t look up. “But what about Jan?” he asked and finally met Tom’s grey eyes.

For the first time the tall man hesitated. “Some men are better Dads than others,” he said quietly.

And that was a strong understatement.

“I need to know everything, the whole—”

“Conspiracy?” Tom helped him.

Shane nodded. “So he only married him for money?”

“Oh my goodness, you’re really persistent.” Tom’s white teeth flashed. “We were looking for a victim. We wanted a nice, rich man with nice, rich friends, and then Ethan somehow found Ilya. One day he came to me very excited because his choice came from a rich, old family, was widowed, had a daughter and lots of noble, rich friends. We both had the impression that it was a perfect fit. And we were right.”

Shane couldn’t move. “How did he find out about Ilya?” he asked.

“I have no idea. But he knew that he had a business meeting at a certain restaurant, and that’s when he intercepted him,” Tom explained. Then he suddenly frowned. “What is it?”

Suddenly Shane realized the full truth. He buried his head in his hands.

“Spit it out,” Tom urged.

Shane looked up. “The year my brother met Ilya, I had dinner with Ethan. That dinner was earlier that year. We hadn’t seen each other for a long time, so I told him a lot. Where I live, what I do… And at the university where I graduated, a charity event was being planned. Ethan wanted to see the list of people who would come as potential investors.”

Shane felt sick. “Ilya had never gone to this charity event.”

Tom raised both eyebrows. “He’s very good,” he said smoothly.

“He’s terrible,” Shane said and stood up. *His brother wasn’t just terrible, he was a monster.*

“I think I’m beginning to understand. You’re one of the moral kind, aren’t you?”

Shane could easily imagine how Ethan had done it. He had informed himself about the possible investors and Ilya had fitted perfectly. Rich family, widower, lots of rich friends. Then he had “happened” to see him at a business dinner, had a “chance meeting,” and from there he had simply lied to him and tried to sneak into his heart.

Shane was terribly angry.

“Come on, Shane. It’s really not so bad that he stopped Ilya from going to that university thing and instead— Oh. Now I understand.” Tom looked at him with wide eyes.

“There’s nothing to understand,” Shane hissed.

“No? You fell in love with this guy and you think that if Ethan hadn’t interfered, you would have met him earlier — before Ethan had even met him — namely at that event. And now *you* would be at his side.”

“I don’t think that at all!” Shane lied. But that was exactly what he thought. It was ridiculous. He was ridiculous.

Shane turned fully toward him, his arms crossed over his chest.

“I still don’t understand why. Why did he lie to me so I could fill in for him?”

Tom smiled. “Isn’t it obvious? He was trying to pull off a coup without me. Either that, or he’s starting something new.” He didn’t sound angry, but apparently he didn’t think it was funny either. “He’s never played me like this before. Where is he?”

“I have no idea.”

“When was the last time you heard from him?”

“He wants to come back on Monday. Tomorrow, then,” Shane said.

Tom’s eyes narrowed when he heard this.

Suddenly he held out his hand. “Well, give me the ring then.”

Shane couldn’t wait to get rid of that ring. But he still had so many questions.

“Not yet. What about Alexei? He knows what Ethan really is, doesn’t he? And Cliff — is he a cop too?”

Tom laughed humorlessly. “Cliff is a private detective working for Ilya.”

“What?” Shane panted, completely taken by surprise.

“Yep. He collects evidence against Ethan so that Ilya can divorce him without Ethan being entitled to the stud farm. Like he would give a damn about this fucking house.”

Shane had to sit down again.

How much did Ilya already know? How long would it take a good private investigator to find out Ethan had a twin brother?

“What does Alexei know?” he finally managed to ask.

“We don’t know. I think he hates Ethan for obvious reasons, but a few months ago Ethan started to worry that Alexei might have found out about us.”

“He knows he’s a thief,” Shane said. “I’m sure of it.”

“Well, if that’s the case, it’s about time Ethan divorced him and we’re out of here.” Tom sounded impatient and apparently wanted to leave.

“It was nice to meet you, Shane. You are kinda cute.” He winked at him and turned to go.

“I’ll get the ring!” Shane shouted. But Tom’s hand landed heavily on his shoulder before he reached the stairs.

“No need.”

“What?” Shane gasped and looked at him.

Tom’s smile was wide, his eyes gleaming. Then he leaned forward.

“Tell me. You just stole something really precious for the first time, Shane. How does that feel?”

“I didn’t steal anything at all!” he whispered indignantly. “Now let me go so I can get the damn ring!”

Tom held him firmly. “No kick? No thrill?” he seemed amused. “Yes, there’s a thrill, sweetheart. Almost better than sex.”

“You’re taking this ring with you now,” Shane insisted.

“No, I don’t think so,” Tom replied and turned to go.

Shane ran after him. “Are you crazy? I can’t keep it! It has to be brought back! Alexei saw us there, Tom!”

He stopped at the front door.

“You keep it. For my safety, sweetheart,” he grinned.

Shane felt his mouth fall open.

Tom smiled brightly at him and walked away.

Shane stood in the doorway and stared after him when Jan came out of the house.

“Tom!!” he exclaimed enthusiastically.

Shane was amazed. Tom turned around smiling, and the next moment he had lifted Jan up and whirled him around.

“How’s the coolest little boy in the world?” Tom asked with a grin when he gently put him back on the ground.

Jan’s cheeks were flaming red.

“Dad made me waffles for breakfast! It was so great!”

“I’d like to believe that,” Tom said, plucking at a strand of hair. “I’ve got a surprise for you, sweetie.”

“Is it a gift?” Jan asked eagerly.

“Did I also mention that you are the smartest little boy in the world?” Tom laughed.

Jan giggled and looked back at Shane.

“What did he bring me today, Dad?”

Shane was stunned. Did Jan know Tom that well? Had Ethan brought Jan along to the dates of his secret relationship?

He was so perplexed that he didn’t say a word.

Tom and Jan walked hand in hand to Tom’s big car. Shane closed his eyes because he knew why Tom could afford such a luxury car. He would have to bring the ring back himself.

When Jan yelled, he immediately opened his eyes.

“Look, Dad, a skateboard!” Jan shrieked.

“But first a hug,” Tom said, kneeling in front of him.

Jan obeyed and they hugged each other like good old friends. Then he walked back to the porch while Shane stood there frozen.

Tom grinned at him and got into his car. When he drove away, Jan showed Shane a skateboard engraved with his name.

“That’s cool,” Shane said, and then he heard another car approaching. He froze. If that was Ilya, he would definitely have seen Tom in the driveway.

But it wasn’t a big, brand-new black car. It was Olga’s dusty old car.

Shane and Jan went into the house.

“Does Tom bring you a lot of presents?” Shane asked.

“He always has a gift for me when he comes to visit us,” Jan announced. “He loves me very much. He said that to me.” He smiled broadly and Shane couldn’t help but smile back.

Suddenly the front door opened and Olga walked in. She looked at him with wide eyes and a certain confusion.

“Good morning,” Shane said with a smile.

“I never thought I’d see Tom in this house again,” she said dryly.

So she obviously hadn’t buried the hatchet.

“That wasn’t my idea,” Shane replied grimly.

“Dad?” Jan asked quietly.

Shane bent down and placed his hands on the boy’s shoulders. “Why don’t you go upstairs and show Lilly your new skateboard?”

Jan ran off with a grin. Then he stopped.

“But can we play with my horses later?”

“Of course. We can watch a movie too if you like,” Shane said with a smile.

Jan nodded enthusiastically, ran up the stairs, and Shane turned back to Olga.

“Since he likes Tom, you shouldn’t speak about him in that tone in front of Jan.”

Olga went pale. “How dare you tell me how to behave in front of this child? I’m more of a parent to him than you’ll ever be!”

“You’re not his parent,” Shane corrected her.

He was terribly angry — at Ethan, at Tom, at this woman, and at everyone else who hated Ethan. He was even angry with himself.

“And you are?!”

Shane straightened his shoulders.

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

Olga knew he wasn’t Ethan.

And that woman wouldn’t keep his secret. She would use it against him, and Ilya would never look at Shane the same way again if Olga told him.

Shane couldn’t say a word. Should he explain? Should he beg her? Threaten her? Flatter her?

“We both know that you had to expect the divorce papers, and when you got them, you decided to use Jan to protect yourself from Ilya’s intentions! If he hadn’t decided to kick you out, you wouldn’t be going to the movies with Jan today, would you, Mr. Rozanov?”

“You’re wrong,” Shane replied.

“And then you bring your lover into the house! Right in front of Ilya’s eyes!” Olga shouted. “He thinks it’s over with that man, but I know what you’re doing!”

Shane looked up and saw hatred in Olga’s distorted face.

“I will no longer keep your dirty secrets! That was different when Ilya hadn’t yet decided to divorce you, but now I’m going to do everything in my power to keep him from staying with you! He should have done that years ago!”

Shane didn’t answer. He stared into the flashing eyes of the woman in front of him.

Did this woman have a gun? Could Olga have pushed him off the road the night before last? Was she capable of threatening him like this — was she even capable of attempted murder?

“You can tell Ilya whatever you think is right. Tom came here on his own accord. I had nothing to do with it.”

Olga snorted scornfully and stomped angrily toward the stairs. Shane’s knees immediately went weak as soon as the loathsome housekeeper left.

Ilya would be really upset about Tom’s visit, and Shane didn’t know if he could talk his way out of it again this time. And what was to become of the damn ring? Should he just flush it down the toilet? Throw it into the lake? Or should he try to return it?

The answer was obvious, but Shane was afraid of getting caught.

And even if he could somehow get into that house again, where would he put it? On a table somewhere downstairs? Or did he dare sneak into the bedroom and leave it there, perhaps on the counter in the bathroom? There was no way Shane could put it back in the safe.

Shane's temples were pounding. He cursed his brother and Tom for their unscrupulous crimes. He felt hatred for his brother rising within him. He went outside to get some fresh air.

How could he hate his brother?

Shane ran out, went down the hill to the stables and tried to regain his composure.

As hard as it was for him to reconcile the man Ethan had become with the impetuous child and the wild teenager Shane remembered from the past, he knew he had no choice. Ethan was a liar, a thief, a cheater.

Shane reminded himself once again that he still hadn't heard Ethan's version of the whole story. Certainly Ethan would have a dozen justifications for his behavior.

But Shane gave up. He was just kidding himself. There were simply no excuses, no more justifications. Ethan was just fucking selfish.

He slowly calmed down. For the first time in his life, he was surprised to find that he felt sorry for Ethan. For the first time in his life he felt no envy, no admiration for him.

But what should he do now? What would he do if Ethan came back tomorrow?

Suddenly Shane hesitated. Cliff Marlow stood in front of the stable building, leaning against the hood of his old pickup truck.

He was a private detective hired by Ilya to collect evidence against Ethan.

How much did he know?

Cliff drank from a can. Shane didn't avoid him. His piercing gaze drilled into Shane's. When he finished drinking, he crushed the can in his fist and threw it onto the loading bed of his truck.

Cliff was actually a good-looking man. He seemed to make an effort to appear as shabby as possible — he was unshaven and wore a blue shirt with torn sleeves over a white T-shirt, through which his muscular chest was visible.

At least now Shane knew Cliff hadn't tried to kill him. If he was a real private investigator and worked for Ilya, he did nothing more than gather information.

Did he know that he was Shane Hollander? If so, then Ilya also had to know the truth.

Shane shuddered at that thought. Ilya could have known for some time who he really was and

not said a word. The thought was fucking frightening.

“It’s a beautiful day,” Cliff said.

“Are we a little hungover?” Shane asked, looking at Cliff’s reddened eyes.

“Just a little bit. Was it nice with Tom?”

Shane froze. “Not particularly.”

“No? Well, that’s new.” Cliff seemed amused.

“I asked you a few days ago, and now I’m asking you again. What do you want from me?” Shane frowned, but Cliff just shrugged.

“Not much,” he replied.

Shane didn’t like that answer.

“A few days ago you told me to take care of myself.”

“I still think that’s advisable,” Cliff said.

“Am I in trouble? In danger?”

“Well, only if you think it’s funny that someone shot at you and pushed you off the road.”

Okay. Cliff wouldn’t tell him anything.

“You also said you wanted to hunt me down.” Shane’s heart pounded. Surely Cliff could see how scared he was. “That has changed, hasn’t it? Why?”

Cliff leaned back against the hood, supporting himself with his elbows.

“Did it… Mr. Rozanov? What makes you think that?”

Shane stared at him. Cliff held his gaze, and Shane couldn’t read anything in his eyes.

“I know you were in Ottawa when I was there last week.”

“Bravo.” Cliff clapped his hands three times. “I’m from there. I’ve got a girlfriend there.”

“Liar,” Shane said.

Cliff looked surprised. “Well, did you finally find your sharp tongue, Mr. Rozanov? What else could I have been doing in Ottawa except visiting my girlfriend?”

“No,” Shane said seriously. “You followed me.”

“Do you have something to hide? You look very nervous right now.”

Shane wanted to tell him that he had nothing to hide, but that would have been such a huge lie that the words wouldn’t leave his lips.

Cliff leaned back against the hood again.

“That’s what I thought.”

“How much do you know?” Shane whispered.

Cliff smiled at him.

"Do you really think I'd tell you that, *Ethan*?"

…

Since Cliff apparently enjoyed lounging around in the autumn sun by his dented pickup, Shane went into the stable.

It was empty, because all the horses were out in the pasture. As soon as Shane was inside, he collapsed against a stall door, close to tears. Cliff had emphasized his brother’s name so strongly that Shane was almost certain: he knew about it.

But why should Ilya play this game with him?

Deep down, Shane knew why. To see what Shane was up to. And that meant that Ilya had also been putting on a performance — acting as if he had fallen in love with Shane.

Shane felt sick. He tore open the stall door, fell to his knees and threw up his meager breakfast. When he could only choke, he remained on his hands and knees in the straw. Tears ran down his face.

He had fallen in love with Ilya, but their whole relationship was built on nothing but lies. Maybe it was even better if Ilya knew the truth and had also lied to him. Because then Shane might still have another chance — because he wouldn’t be the only liar.

A door slammed shut.

Shane didn’t think anything of it and assumed it was just the wind. He fell back on his heels, wiped his eyes and brushed a few straws from his face. Maybe he was wrong and Cliff didn’t know anything incriminating about him.

Suddenly Shane froze because he thought he smelled smoke. He sniffed, couldn’t detect anything, and tried to get up calmly.

But before he had fully straightened, the biting smell returned.

Shane ran out of the stall and saw smoke rising at the other end of the stable, where he had just come in. Before his eyes, a stall went up in flames.

The door through which he had entered the stable was closed — and the large gate for the vehicles had already been shut before.

Shane ran to the small side door and tugged at it, but it didn't move.

He turned around. In the corner of the stable there were six stalls, three on each side of the aisle.

All three stalls on the far side were burning.

The whole stable would burst into flames.

Shane screamed and ran away from the fire, along the stable aisle, past another dozen stalls toward the riding arena.

He heard one stall after another burst into flames, as if the fire were chasing him.

For the first time since he had been at McGill, he saw the gate in the passage to the riding arena closed, and he immediately knew that it had been deliberately shut and locked.

The stable was a trap. A trap in which he was supposed to die.

Shane tried to open the gate anyway, but without success. Smoke hung in the air and made it difficult for him to breathe. Behind him every stall was on fire.

Coughing, he looked to the right, where the stairs led up to Cliff Marlow's apartment and the empty flat next to it.

Suddenly he heard someone calling his brother's name.

He froze. Was he imagining it?

"Ethan!!"

That was Ilya.

"Ilya, help me!!" Shane screamed. But that was a mistake, because he immediately doubled over in a coughing fit.

Shane tore off his shirt and pressed it over his mouth and nose. Sparks glowed on his jeans. He knocked them away and ran up the stairs.

Out of the corner of his eye he saw the fire swallow the door to the saddle room.

Shane ran into the empty apartment, straight to the window. As he crossed the room, he felt the heat of the fire beneath him through the soles of his shoes.

If he didn't get out of here right now, he would die.

Shane reached the window and pulled at it, and to his relief it flew open immediately.

Smoke flooded through the doorway behind him and Shane didn't dare to look back. He climbed over the ledge and dropped his shirt. The ground beneath him seemed terribly far away.

"Ilya!" he screamed as loudly as he could. "Ilya!!"

He looked back into the room. The fire had reached the first floor and he saw flames flickering on the hallway floor outside the open door.

There was only one way out.

Shane looked down again. He would survive the fall, wouldn't he? He might break a leg — or both — but he wouldn't break his neck. At least that was what he hoped.

Shane hesitated. The room behind him burst into flames.

"Ethan!!"

Shane turned his head and saw Ilya and Cliff standing in the meadow beneath the windows.

"The fire is already in the apartment!" Shane shouted.

"Ethan! Can you hold on? The rain gutter is about a meter and a half to your left!" Ilya shouted up to him. His expression was horrified.

Shane looked to the left and saw the rain gutter running vertically down the wall.

"Ethan, you can do this! But you've got to hurry!" Ilya shouted frantically.

Shane turned around. The fire had already devoured the door and spread across the half floor. Thank God it was made of oak planks and not synthetic carpet, and the fire hadn't yet reached the small rug under the table.

"I don't know!" he shouted desperately. His mind told him to jump, but his body was frozen with fear and he was afraid to balance along the narrow ledge to the gutter.

"Go for it! Now!!" Ilya shouted with despair in his voice.

Shane looked down and met his gaze. So that was it. He either had to reach the rain gutter and slide down — or jump.

Shane took a deep breath, pressed his hands flat against the wall behind him, pressed himself as tightly against it as possible and began edging along the narrow ledge toward the gutter.

“That’s it!” Ilya shouted.

Suddenly Shane’s foot slipped and he screamed in shock, pressing himself even tighter against the wall. Panic nearly stopped his heart. He almost slipped off the ledge.

“Ethan, keep going! You’ve got to hurry! Please!!” Ilya roared.

Shane blinked through sweat and tears. The wooden wall behind him had become so hot that it felt as if he would burst into flames at any moment.

Shane jumped.

Desperately he grabbed the rain gutter and slid down it, the hot metal burning his palms and his bare torso.

A moment later he felt Ilya’s hands on his feet. When Ilya’s arms closed around his hips, Shane let go of the gutter. Ilya caught him and held him tightly.

Shane began coughing violently as he heard the wail of approaching sirens. Ilya turned him around and Shane collapsed into his arms, into his protection. He pressed his face into Ilya’s chest and tightened his grip on him.

“It’s all right,” Ilya said gently, stroking Shane’s hair. “I’m here. You’re all right.”

Shane squeezed his eyes shut and sobbed loudly.

Ilya kissed him on the forehead and lowered his head to Shane’s ear.

“Shh. Everything will be all right,” he whispered.

Then he kissed Shane until his rigid grip on Ilya’s body loosened slightly.

…

“How bad is it?” Shane coughed.

“You just breathed in a little smoke. It’s no big deal,” Mitch reassured him with a friendly smile.

“No,” Shane said hoarsely. “I mean the stable.”

“They managed to save the riding arena and the offices,” Mitch explained. “And the fire hasn’t spread to the other stables. Not a single horse was harmed.”

Shane nodded and tears ran down his cheeks. Mitch took his hand.

“It’s going to be okay. Ilya is well insured and has enough stables to accommodate all the horses,” Mitch said softly. “He hasn’t lost a single animal. And most importantly, he hasn’t lost you.”

Shane sobbed harder. He wanted to stop but didn’t know how.

“What’s the matter?”

“You can’t understand,” Shane said quietly. “But it’s my fault.”

Mitch looked alarmed.

“What makes you think that?” he frowned.

“This wasn’t an accident.” Shane took a handkerchief from the bedside drawer. “Somebody locked me in the stable. Someone wants me dead.”

Mitch stared at him. Silence fell between them.

“Is Alexei there?” Shane asked.

“The entire local police force is here. And of course the fire department — and pretty much all of your neighbors.”

Shane nodded.

“You’ll have a sore throat for a few days. Normal lozenges will help. Otherwise, I’d say you were very lucky.”

Shane couldn’t even smile.

“Call me if you need me, okay?” Mitch said, lightly squeezing his shoulder.

Shane looked at him. As soon as Mitch was gone, he picked up the phone and dialed his brother’s number, determined to finally confront him.

Once again he reached his own voicemail.

Shane hung up, angry and frustrated. He had definitely had enough — and if he hadn’t been incredibly lucky, he could already be dead.

Shane tried to think, but that wasn’t easy. His throat hurt, he was terrified, and the stress gave him a pounding headache.

The only person who might know where Ethan was, was Tom.

Shane didn’t have his phone number, but he would try to reach him next. Whatever Tom

knew, Shane would get it out of him — even if he had to buy a gun and threaten him with it.

Shane called directory assistance. Tom was listed, and Shane immediately wrote down his address. But when he called Tom's number, no one answered.

He only got the answering machine.

Nevertheless, Shane left a short, harsh message.

"We need to talk, Tom. I need to talk to your partner. Call me at home or on my phone. As fast as possible."

He hung up trembling, but now he was mostly angry.

How had he gotten involved in this whole shitty mess? Ethan had lied to him just as shamelessly as to everyone else. He had used him just as recklessly.

Did he know he had put Shane in mortal danger when he switched places with him?

Shane wanted to believe the answer was no.

But he feared the opposite.

Then he had an idea.

They had switched places. What if Ethan was living in his apartment in Ottawa? He had to stay somewhere — pretending to be Shane — so what could be more obvious than moving into Shane's apartment?

Breathlessly, Shane dialed his own number.

But instead of Ethan — or his answering machine — he heard the automated message: *The number you have dialed is no longer in service.*

He couldn't believe it.

Shane jumped out of bed.

What was that supposed to mean? How could his phone be disconnected?

Desperately Shane called his phone company. After fifteen endless minutes in the queue he finally reached customer service, and the employee told him that he, Shane Hollander, had personally terminated his phone line.

"What?" Shane gasped.

"Excuse me, but aren't you Mr. Hollander?"

“Yes, that’s me!” Shane shouted, his heart pounding in his throat. Only one person could have had his social security number and done this.

Ethan.

Shane hung up in shock and sank down onto the edge of the bed.

When the shock eased slightly, he decided to call his neighbor.

Elia answered after the second ring.

“Elia, hi, it’s Shane. How are you?” Shane asked as calmly as possible.

“Shane? Shane Hollander?” the old lady asked, as if she hadn’t been his neighbor for eight years.

“Yes, Shane Hollander!”

He knew he sounded hysterical, so he took a deep breath to calm himself.

“I urgently need to speak to my brother, but apparently there’s something wrong with my phone. Could you go over and see if he’s there? And if he isn’t, could you leave him a note that he should call me urgently?”

Elia knew Shane had a brother, but she had never met him.

“Shane, is that really you?” Elia asked suspiciously.

Fear gripped Shane. “Yes, Elia. Why?”

“Why? Because you said goodbye to me the other day when you moved out.”

Shane froze completely.

“What?!”

“You told me you were moving to the country and selling the apartment. The realtor has been showing it to dozens of people since then. Are you calling from there? From your new place?”

Shane jumped to his feet. “What? What are you talking about?”

“What do you mean, what am I talking about? You moved out and your apartment is for sale. Shane, are you all right? Are you feeling okay?”

The room began to spin around Shane.

“No,” he whispered finally. “No, I’m not okay.”

Elia said a few more things, but Shane didn't hear a single word. He hung up.

Ethan had cancelled his phone.
Ethan had sold his apartment.
Ethan had told his neighbor he was moving to the country.

Ethan had erased his entire old life.

But why?

The answer was obvious.

Ethan would never come back.

Ethan wanted Shane to stay on McGill — forever.

Chapter End Notes

so... what do you think?
let me know in the comments!!

btw im on twitter @xoxo333_

Chapter 8: EIGHT

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Shane tried to think clearly.

A man came into his head — Tom. Shane had to reach him, because if anyone could have an answer for him, if anyone could know what Ethan was up to and where he was, it was Tom. Shane dialed his number again.

“What are you doing?”

Shane flinched when he heard Ilya’s voice.

He was standing in the doorway with soot marks on his face. He looked utterly exhausted. Jan was anxiously clutching his hand.

Shane hadn’t seen Ilya since the paramedics had taken him in front of the burning stable. And he hadn’t seen Jan since breakfast — apparently Olga had taken care of him.

Shane’s heart ached. Ilya hadn’t deserved this. And neither had Jan or Lilly. Neither the fire, nor Ethan’s fraud, nor Shane’s own lies.

They deserved none of it.

“I’m sorry,” Shane whispered trembling. He saw the fear and worry in Jan’s little eyes and tried hard to smile at him.

“Jan, I’m all right. Really. Come here.”

Jan ran toward him, looking close to tears.

“Dad, you inhaled smoke from the fire! Daddy said you got smoke in your lungs!”

Shane caught him with both arms when Jan jumped onto the bed.

“That’s right, but I’m fine.”

Jan leaned back to look into Shane’s eyes.

“But your voice sounds so weird.”

Shane stroked his hair. “It’ll stay that way for a few more days. That’s what happens when you breathe in too much smoke.”

Jan hugged him tightly.

“Can I sleep here tonight? Please?”

Shane looked up at Ilya in surprise, who was staring at both of them.

“I wouldn’t mind,” Shane said, noticing that his voice almost suffocated in a sob. “But you have to ask your Dad.”

Ilya’s jaw tightened. “Mitch wants you to get enough sleep, but… I think it’s okay.”

Jan beamed.

“I’m going to get my pajamas,” he announced, even though it was only early afternoon. He jumped off the bed and ran out.

Shane realized that he was close to collapsing.

Somehow Jan had become his son, and apparently it was exactly what Ethan had wanted — or intended. But Shane shouldn’t be speculating about his brother now.

He looked carefully at Ilya. “Thank you.”

“For what?”

“For allowing Jan to sleep here.”

Ilya’s face hardened again. “I sleep in the guest room.”

Shane nodded.

“What are you sorry for, Ethan?” Ilya asked quietly.

Shane frowned.

“You said earlier that you were sorry…”

Shane shook his head, suddenly unable to speak. The conversation with Elia wouldn’t leave his mind. Had all of this really happened? How could Ethan just dissolve his life like that?

The answer was simple.

Because Ethan was in trouble and apparently preparing to escape.

Shane thought of Georgina’s diamond. He had to return it before someone suspected him of being a thief — which, in some way, he was.

Shane looked up at Ilya and couldn’t pry the fear and exhaustion from his gaze.

“This is all my fault,” Shane said hoarsely. “Everything. The fire. Everything.”

“Why do you say that?” Ilya asked seriously and stepped closer, but didn’t sit down on the bed. He didn’t take Shane in his arms or try to comfort him. It was almost as if they were strangers all of a sudden.

Shane took a deep breath.

“Don’t you understand?”

“No, frankly, I don’t understand anything.” His blue eyes didn’t leave Shane’s face. “But I’d like an explanation.”

Did he mean to suggest something? Was he indirectly asking Shane to tell the truth about who he really was?

“Somebody’s trying to kill me, Ilya. How can you believe anything else now? Somebody shot at me, pushed me into the street, and now this!”

Ilya stared at him.

Shane didn’t know exactly what he was thinking or feeling at that moment. He seemed calm, impenetrable, controlled.

But Shane remembered Ilya’s face when he stood in front of the burning stable on the meadow and Shane almost fell from the first floor.

Ilya had been fucking terrified for him.

“I’m starting to think you might be right. Maybe there really is a killer out there,” Ilya finally said.

Shane’s tension grew. “Who could it be?”

“I don’t know.”

“Everybody hates me, and with good reason. Almost every man and woman who went to Parker’s gala hates me. I saw it in their eyes.” Shane swallowed. “Olga hates me. Even your brother hates me,” he added bitterly.

“I don’t think one of them would set my stable on fire just to kill you,” Ilya replied sharply. “Alexei only wants what he thinks is best for me. The same goes for Olga, whom I almost consider family.”

“But someone set that stable on fire, Ilya. Somebody is after me!”

An awful realization struck Shane like a blow.

Alexei was after Ethan because he was a real criminal.

And if Shane continued pretending to be Ethan, he could end up being held accountable for Ethan's crimes.

Shane sat there, stunned with bewilderment, deeply shocked by what the future might hold for him.

Ilya laid a hand on his. "Alexei and I have already discussed this. There will be a preliminary investigation, and if it turns out to be arson, it will turn into a police investigation — a criminal case. Whoever's after you, we'll catch him."

"Before he shoots again or after?" Shane heard himself ask.

Ilyas's gaze was full of determination. „Я не позволю, чтобы с тобой что-нибудь случилось", he finally said.

Was that... was that *russian*?

Shane felt a warm glow at the sound of the words coming from Ilya's mouth. How can he become even more attractive?

Shane was completely taken aback, while Ilya covered his mouth with one hand and looked at him in horror. "Sorry."

Shane blinked slowly. "No, it's okay! I mean, I don't really understand, but it sounds… nice."

Oh God, or does Ethan actually speak russian?!

"You never used to like it when I spoke in my native language." Ilya smiles, almost shyly.

Shane should actually be panicking because he might have just given himself away, but what upsets him more is: Ethan didn't like it when Ilya spoke Russian? What was wrong with his brother?!

"What? Why?"

"You felt left out. And there's hardly anything you hate more than that."

Shane shook his head. "I like it. I really like it."

The problem was, Shane probably liked it too much. He had to pull himself together, damn it. People had tried to kill him several times. He had no idea who was after him, and he was slowly running out of energy.

Shane closed his eyes, but he still couldn't hold back a few tears.

“I’d like to go away — far away. I can’t take it anymore.” The hysterical undertone in his voice could not be ignored.

Ilya was startled and needed a moment before asking, “Is that what you want? To run away?”

He looked deep into Shane’s eyes, but Shane didn’t say a word — he simply nodded.

Suddenly, Ilya seemed angry and turned his gaze away.

“When this is over, we’ll do that. For now, I have to get back to the stables. Get some rest.”

Shane stared at him in disbelief. They wouldn’t go anywhere. He had the awful feeling that Ilya knew everything — and that their days together would soon be over.

…

As soon as Shane had driven Jan to nursery school the following Monday, he studied the road map, searching for the street where Tom lived. When he found it, he started the Jaguar and headed there.

Ten minutes later, he arrived at a fenced-in, newly built housing estate on the outskirts of the village. A freshly engraved sign on one of the pillars read: “Greenhill – the equestrian paradise.”

Shane drove past half a dozen beautiful villas worth millions, each set back from the road behind wrought-iron fences, surrounded by well-kept lawns and newly planted trees.

He could hardly imagine Tom living in such a place. Tom seemed more like a city person — someone who belonged in a stylish apartment in a big city rather than here, in this exclusive community next to a riding school.

But there he was — and for a good reason. He wanted to be close to Ethan. Shane wondered how well Tom and Ethan must understand their business to afford such an elegant, spacious house. He felt more than anger — he felt bitterness.

The gate to the property stood open, and Shane drove toward the house with fierce determination.

He had to make Tom talk — and give him back the ring. He wasn’t fooling himself; this man was far more experienced than he was. Tom was a thief, a professional swindler, while Shane was nothing but an amateur.

The garage door was closed, and there was no car in the driveway. But it was only 9:00 a.m. Shane got out of his car nervously and walked up the garden path. He wouldn’t leave until he found out where Ethan was. By now, Tom must know something.

He rang the bell, but no one answered. He tried again and again. Four times he rang the doorbell, but nothing stirred. Tom wasn’t home — nor was a housekeeper or anyone else.

Meanwhile, the diamond ring burned a hole in his pocket. There was no way he could risk bringing it back to the Parkers. Shane hesitated no longer. Maybe it was a good thing Tom wasn't home.

Carefully, he pulled the small envelope containing the ring from his pocket and slid it under a flowerpot next to the front door. Immediately, he felt lighter — as if a weight had been lifted from his shoulders.

It wasn't until he drove off that he thought about checking the garage to see if Tom's car was inside. He considered turning back, but decided against it. Still, as he pulled out onto the street, he glanced into the rearview mirror.

For a moment, Shane thought he saw a man standing outside Tom's front door, staring after him — a man who looked exactly like him.

He screamed in fright as his car barely missed a road sign. Shane jerked the steering wheel, steered the car back onto the driveway, and stopped. He turned around and looked at the house.

But there was no one there.

—

Shane went into the kitchen, where Olga and Ilya were speaking in hushed voices, their expressions serious.

Ilya was talking when Shane entered. Both of them looked at him, and Ilya stopped mid-sentence.

What were they whispering about? Had they been talking about him?

Olga straightened. "Since you've had such a hearty appetite lately, I've put some sandwiches in the fridge for you."

Shane looked from Olga's stiff, strained face to Ilya's somber one.

"I've lost my appetite," he said tensely. After a pause, he added, "Am I interrupting?" He couldn't even manage a smile.

"No," Ilya replied quickly. He looked at him. "You look better today. How do you feel?"

"Better."

Ilya nodded. "Good."

Shane stared at him. Last night, Ilya hadn't come to the bedroom. Yes, Jan had slept in their bed, but Ilya had made himself scarce long before that — especially when Shane had longed

to sink into his arms.

“Brent Black called,” Ilya said. “He’s the arson investigator. His number’s on the fridge — he wants to see you as soon as possible.”

Then he left.

Shane trembled. He wasn’t imagining it — Ilya had been distant since the fire. Shane couldn’t understand why he was keeping his distance when he needed him now more than ever.

“Hayden called,” Olga said coolly.

Shane turned to her.

“Your dear friend seems terribly worried about you. He wants you to call him back.”

Shane nodded, though he had no intention of doing so. Hayden was kind, but every time Shane thought of him, he was reminded that his wife was cheating on him with Ethan.

Automatically, Shane took the note from the refrigerator door, where it was held by a horseshoe-shaped magnet. Then he suddenly stopped.

Hayden was so kind to him. Everyone else despised Ethan — but not his best friend. Ethan was having an affair with Hayden’s wife. How could Hayden not know?

Shane knew he was usually a terrible actor. But in his current state, he suddenly felt capable of an Oscar-worthy performance.

What if Hayden was just as good at pretending?

Shane realized he should put Hayden at the top of his list of possible suspects. Maybe he knew about the affair and wanted revenge on Ethan.

Suddenly, the phone rang. Shane jumped, then picked it up.

“Hello?”

“Ethan!!” Lilly screamed. “David’s been shot! Please, come quickly!!”

…

Shane, Ilya, and Olga rushed to the emergency room. Shane spotted Lilly immediately. She was sitting on a blue plastic chair, crying.

She jumped up and threw herself into Shane’s arms.

“What if he dies?” she sobbed. “Oh my God — what if he dies? I can’t go on living if he

dies!"

Shane held her tightly and stroked her long, tousled blonde hair. "Where is he?"

Lilly blinked through her tears. "He's in surgery right now."

"What happened?" Ilya asked.

Lilly looked at her father. "He ran into Ben Abbott — that asshole! We were at the mall." She burst into tears again. "Ben made a stupid comment about me. David told him to apologize, and that's when Ben pulled a gun! That fucking asshole!"

Shane held on to her tightly, but looked at Ilya. Ilya met his gaze, and a silent understanding passed between them. Shane was about to suggest asking a doctor or nurse about David's condition, but it wasn't necessary.

"I'll find out what's going on with David," Ilya said. He turned quickly and hurried down the hallway. Shane saw him grab a doctor by the sleeve of his coat. Then he looked down again at the sobbing girl in his arms.

"Lilly, I'm so sorry," Shane said quietly. "When did this happen?"

"I don't know," Lilly sobbed, gasping for air. She was trembling. "We went out for pizza after school… What time is it now?"

"1:00 p.m.," Olga said, placing a hand on Lilly's shoulder. "This is a good hospital, Lilly. I'm sure your friend will be better soon."

Lilly gave her a grateful look.

"He tried to defend my honor," she said. "Then they fought over the gun — and it went off." Tears streamed down her face again.

Shane noticed a police officer in the emergency room. Ilya had seen him too. As Ilya approached the officer, Shane said, "I'll be right back, Lilly." He squeezed her hand, then hurried after Ilya to the reception desk.

"We've taken him into temporary custody," the officer said. "He claims David started the fight and that the weapon belonged to David."

Shane gasped. "Lilly told me the gun belongs to Ben Abbott."

"I've already taken her statement," the officer replied. "Unfortunately, there are no witnesses. The incident happened in the parking lot behind the shopping mall — it's usually deserted. We do have a woman who heard the shot, but that's all. It looks like we'll have to open an investigation. We'll determine who had the gun and who fired it."

"David's been shot! That's obvious, isn't it?" Shane hissed.

The officer shot him an annoyed look and walked away. Shane turned to Ilya.

“Can you get Alexei?”

“He’s already on his way,” Ilya replied. “David was shot in the side. He’s been in surgery for forty-five minutes. We won’t know more until it’s over…” Suddenly, he looked deeply distressed. “Jesus Christ, I just hope the boy survives.”

Shane took his hand. “We can only hope. But he’ll make it, Ilya. I believe that.”

Ilya squeezed his hand gently. “Is Lilly telling the truth? Or did David start it?”

“I don’t know. But your daughter needs you right now. I think you should stand by her — no matter what happened.”

Ilya nodded, but looked so shaken that Shane wanted to take him in his arms and comfort him.

Instead, he took his hand. “Come.”

He led him back to the waiting area, where Lilly and Olga were sitting. As soon as they approached, Lilly shouted at her father, “Are you satisfied now?”

“No, Lilly. I’m not,” Ilya said darkly. He placed a hand on her shoulder, but she shook it off.

“I don’t believe you!” she cried. “You hate him! I’m sure you secretly hope he dies!” She burst into tears again.

Ilya reached out to her. “Lilly, please.”

She looked at him, her face twisted with rage. “I hate you!”

Ilya stepped back, and Shane swallowed a cry. “Lilly, you don’t mean that,” he said quickly.

“Oh yes, I do!” Lilly hissed.

Shane saw the pain in Ilya’s eyes. But Ilya managed to control himself and spoke calmly, though firmly. “I’m not happy that you’re with this Jenkins guy, but of course I don’t want anything to happen to him. And if you think about it for a moment, you’ll realize that.”

“His name is David, goddamn it!” Lilly screamed. She turned as if to run, but then froze. “That’s the doctor.” She pointed toward the ER, trembling. The last bit of color had drained from her face.

Ilya hurried over to the doctor, while Shane stepped closer to Lilly and put an arm around her.

“Your father is terribly worried about David.”

“Don’t…” Lilly whispered. She didn’t take her eyes off her father and the doctor for a second.

Shane followed her gaze. Moments later, Ilya returned. One look at his face told Shane everything — David was alive.

“He’s alive,” Ilya announced, his eyes fixed anxiously on his daughter.

Lilly cried out in relief.

“He’s stable and in recovery,” Ilya added. “Dr. Travis says he has a good chance. The bullet injured his spleen, but he’s young and strong — that may save him.”

“Will he die?” Lilly whispered, still leaning against Shane.

Ilya hesitated. “Travis says he has a sixty percent chance of survival.”

Lilly stared at her father in horror. “Only sixty percent…”

“Lilly, he’s strong. He’ll make it.”

She stared at Ilya, speechless.

“Can she see him?” Shane asked.

“Not yet. When he comes out of recovery in about an hour, we’ll all be able to go upstairs for a moment.”

Lilly whimpered and leaned against Shane’s side. He held her tightly in his arms.

…

Lilly sat beside David. He was conscious, but so dazed from the anesthesia and painkillers that he could barely keep his eyes open. He looked at Lilly for a moment, then closed them again.

Shane stood next to Ilya, gently holding his hand. Olga had gone to pick up Jan.

Someone stepped up behind them. Shane and Ilya turned around and saw Alexei. He nodded to them and gestured for them to step out into the hall.

“How’s Lilly?” he asked once the door had closed behind them.

Ilya sighed. “She’s completely wrecked.”

Alexei glanced past his brother into the hospital room. David was deathly pale, and with the IV and the oxygen tubes in his nose, he looked in very bad shape.

“I spoke to Dr. Travis. Come on, Ilya. He’ll be all right.”

Ilya frowned. “Don’t talk to me like that!”

Alexei’s expression darkened. “You’re right. I’m sorry. It’s very serious. But there’s a good chance he’ll make it.”

“Really? Have you ever seen gunshot wounds like this before? Are the chances really that good?” Ilya asked.

“I’m not a doctor, Ilya — I’m a cop. As soon as Lilly is able, I’d like to talk to her and find out what really happened.”

A brief silence followed. Shane knew what all of them were secretly hoping: that Lilly wasn’t lying to protect David — that Ben Abbott owned the gun and was the one who fired it.

“Give her a little more time. She’s hysterical with fear,” Ilya finally said.

Alexei cast another glance into the hospital room, his expression softening. “Poor Lilly,” he murmured.

And in that moment, despite everything — Ethan, Tom, and the fact that he himself had practically stolen a diamond ring — Shane found that he liked Alexei.

“This is going to be a long afternoon — and probably a long night,” Alexei said.

Shane didn’t believe they would be able to get Lilly to leave the hospital — and he completely understood why.

“I’ll go down to the cafeteria and get us some sandwiches and something to drink. Lilly really needs to eat something,” Shane said.

Ilya looked at him, a softness in his eyes. “Thank you.”

Alexei nodded at him. “Are you feeling better today?”

Shane was surprised that he even asked. “Yes, thank you.”

Alexei turned back to Ilya. “Let’s go inside. Lilly needs us.”

Shane walked down the empty corridor of the intensive care unit as the two brothers disappeared into David’s room. Suddenly, he felt exhausted — completely drained. His life felt like one endless roller coaster. He desperately needed a break.

Hopefully, David Jenkins would survive.

He hoped that not only for Lilly’s sake — but for his own as well. He was so young.

Suddenly, a hand landed on Shane's shoulder from behind. He hadn't heard anyone approach; he had been too lost in his thoughts. For a moment, he froze.

Before he could turn around — before he could do anything but gasp — he was pulled into a dim stairwell, and the door slammed shut behind him.

Shane tore himself free and spun around.

What the hell is going on?

He expected to see the person who had been hunting him — perhaps even staring into the barrel of a gun.

But instead, Ethan stood there, leaning calmly against the door.

Ethan — with very short hair.

"Hello, Shane," he said.

Shane couldn't believe his eyes.

"You look terrible, Shane. Have you been sick?"

"Sick?" Shane repeated in disbelief. He had just been about to tell his brother that this whole situation was making him sick. Instead, he took a few deep breaths. He needed every ounce of self-control.

"So you came back after all," he managed to say.

"Don't panic," Ethan said with a crooked smile. "I have no intention of staying."

Shane stared at him, his thoughts racing. Ethan had cut his hair short — he looked like a stranger.

"I'm not panicking," Shane lied. He had to sit down. He could barely breathe, as if the walls of the narrow stairwell were closing in on him. He sank down onto the cold concrete steps.

"Did you get my message?" he asked quietly.

"No. I can't check your voicemail, remember?"

Shane stared at him.

"What's wrong, Shane? You look sad — and angry."

"You really asking me that?" Shane said quietly. He made a helpless gesture. "Everything is fucking wrong!!"

“But it’s almost over. And I’m not staying long. But I think we both know — you are.”

Shane refused to answer. Ethan sat down beside him.

“You’re really mad at me. I just wanted to say goodbye.”

Shane wrapped his arms around himself and shifted away from Ethan.

“I don’t understand you at all,” he mumbled. “I don’t understand how you could exploit and hurt so many people.”

Ethan jumped to his feet. “Don’t you dare judge me, Shane! You’ve never been in my place, so don’t pretend you understand!”

Shane stood up as well. He was shaking. Slowly, he said:

“Did you really think that if you sold all my furniture and my apartment, I’d just submit to your plan — stay here and pretend to be you for the rest of my life?”

“I quit your job too.” Ethan shrugged, and Shane could only stare at him in disbelief.

Ethan sighed. “Shane, we both know that Ilya is your dream man — and that you want to stay. Tom told me how well the two of you get along. So what’s there to discuss? I don’t want this marriage anymore. So I’m giving it to you.”

Shane couldn’t speak. It felt as though words no longer existed. After a moment, he whispered, “Why don’t you stay here and get a divorce?”

Ethan shrugged. “This way is a lot easier.”

“Not at all.”

“What do you mean?”

“Alexei would love to execute you, Ethan.”

“He’s got nothing on me — nothing at all. I’m leaving for Paris tonight, Shane. And I’m never coming back. Alexei can’t hurt you. He may want to, but he can’t. And eventually, this whole thing will be forgotten, won’t it? This arrangement is the only thing that makes sense. I get exactly what I want — and you get exactly what you want.”

Shane trembled with suppressed anger.

Ethan stepped closer and put an arm around him, but Shane flinched.

“Shane, why are you fighting this? We both know you don’t want to go back to your old life. We both know you want my life — everything I have. It’s always been that way.” He smiled.

Shane looked his brother straight in the eyes. They were the exact same brown as his own, framed by the same thick black lashes. And yet, they were completely different. Ethan's eyes were flat — empty, expressionless. Shane had never noticed that before.

"Just tell me one thing. How can you leave not only Ilya, but Lilly and Jan as well — just like that?"

Ethan seemed amused. "I'm a terrible father. But you know that by now, don't you? And I'm a horrible husband. But not you, Shane. You're just like Ilya. I knew it the moment I met him. I can't imagine two people who belong together more than you two."

He paused, then continued lightly, "Think of it this way. I know you. You're my twin brother. I know you've always been waiting for someone like Ilya. And come on — you've got him now. He may not be as perfect as the heroes in novels, but I know you well enough to know that you love and admire him. You wouldn't have slept with him if you hadn't wanted him with all your heart. He should have married you, not me. So let's just say this mistake has been corrected — and now he's yours."

Shane stood up, Ethan's words swirling through his mind like a diabolical temptation.

"It's not that simple. You're asking me to live a monstrous lie! At the beginning, it was easy — I didn't know what I was getting into. But now I can barely get through the next minute, let alone an hour — or a whole day!"

Ethan raised an eyebrow.

"Sweetheart, if you tell him the truth, he'll never forgive you. And then your fairy tale is over."

Shane gasped. He already knew that.

"Why, Ethan? *Why?* How could you do something like this? You set me up — from the very beginning, didn't you? You lied to me so I would switch places with you. Just like you lied to Ilya. Tom told me everything — you've been together for ten years, and you only married Ilya for his money and social status because he was the perfect victim! And then you even adopted a child together!!"

Ethan laughed. "Holy shit, you really are invested" Then he sighed. "I'm not stupid, Shane. I had to have a child with him — otherwise he might have suspected something. Jan was my insurance, my leverage in case Ilya ever found out about Tom and me. And it worked. All these years, Jan kept everything together."

Shane felt sick. "You don't deserve Jan."

Ethan shrugged. "No. Not me. But you do."

But you do. Ethan's words echoed in Shane's mind. He wrapped his arms tighter around

himself, fighting the temptation.

“Do you have no conscience at all? You’re as cold as ice. Why? Why are you so immoral? How could you steal from your friend? How could you marry Ilya and still sleep with Tom? How could you cheat on him over and over again?”

How could you not love him?

Ethan laughed. “Which question do you want me to answer first, Shane?”

“That’s not funny!” Shane shouted, forgetting completely that he could be overheard — that Alexei was only a few steps away.

“No — answer this: You found out about Ilya through me, didn’t you? You saw him on that investor list, called him, approached him at a business dinner — and then targeted him.”

“That’s right,” Ethan said with a shrug. “He was the perfect victim — a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity I couldn’t pass up. He was very lonely at the time, you know. He didn’t doubt me for a second.”

Shane felt a surge of hatred and recoiled from it. He couldn’t allow himself to be consumed by it — not now. He needed to think clearly. A decision was coming, and he had to make it rationally, without letting his emotions take over.

“Shane? Relax.” Ethan stepped closer again, trying once more to put an arm around him.

Shane was sweating. Somehow, he managed to stay calm, even though every instinct told him to push his brother away. Once, he would have given anything for such closeness. Now, his twin brother disgusted him.

Ethan looked surprised. “Hey — I’m handing you the man of your dreams. It’s the best solution for everyone,” he said, satisfied. “And besides — you don’t really have a choice, do you?”

“How can any relationship ever be happy if it’s built on a lie like this?” Shane hissed.

In that moment, he knew there could be no future for him and Ilya. Not just because of the lie. Whether he confessed or not — it couldn’t work.

“Are you going to faint?” Ethan asked, grabbing his arm. “You’ve gone completely pale.”

Shane pulled away. “No. I’m fine.” He struggled to steady himself.

Ethan studied him with narrowed eyes.

Shane swallowed. “Ethan… you need help.”

His brother smiled, amused. “Want me to tell you a secret?”

Shane was trembling.

“Tom and I had been living together for about half a year when we pulled off our first job. I was working as a housekeeper,” Ethan said, smiling at the memory. “My God, my boss’s wife was unbelievably stupid. It took her forever to realize someone was robbing her right under her own roof. But not long after that, I went to see a psychiatrist. Yes, Shane — a psychiatrist. I was thrilled stealing from that stupid woman who paid my wages every week. Of course I knew it was wrong. But I didn’t feel guilty at all. So I went to that old bastard exactly once. And do you know why I never went back?”

Shane shook his head numbly. It was hard for him to concentrate on Ethan’s words.

“Because he said I was a sociopath. A *sociopath*. And he didn’t want to treat me, because apparently sociopaths *can’t* be treated.”

Shane shivered. “What exactly does that mean?”

Ethan smiled. “Someone who understands the rules of society — morality, ethics, all of it — and breaks them without remorse. Without guilt. I can’t feel guilty, Shane. I don’t have a conscience. Unlike you.”

Shane felt dizzy. “Let me help you. This has to stop — you can’t live like this.”

Ethan sighed. “Weren’t you listening? I don’t feel guilty. And I *love* the life I have. It’s like a drug.” He smiled. “It’s heaven.”

“Please, listen to me,” Shane whispered.

“No — you listen to me. I have to leave now. I’m offering you my life, Shane. The life you deserve. Of course, you don’t have to stay — you can do whatever you want. But I’m leaving tonight.” Ethan spoke calmly, without emotion. “I came to say goodbye. To say goodbye — and to see Jan one last time.” He sighed. For a moment, his eyes shimmered, as if he were close to tears.

“Forget us, Shane. Tom and I will be gone in a few minutes, and you and I will go our separate ways. You’ll never see me again. So you can stay, be me, and have everything you’ve ever dreamed of — or you can leave.” He shrugged. “And we both know Ilya will never forgive you if he finds out you’re Shane Hollander — and not Ethan Rozanov.”

Yes. Shane knew that.

“How can you just leave like that? How can you leave Jan?” he asked, his voice choked.

“It’s not as easy as it sounds.” Ethan touched him, and Shane forced himself not to pull away. “But I’m not good for him, Shane. You know that.” He smiled faintly. “I saw you two at the nursery school this morning. He idolizes you. It’s like you’ve always been his father.”

Ethan didn't play fair.

"Where are you going after Paris?" Shane asked. His lips felt stiff, like cardboard.

"I can't tell you," Ethan replied with a smile. "Not even you. But I have something for you."

He reached into his pocket — and a small black object slipped out. Ethan blinked in surprise, and Shane stared down at it.

A pistol lay at their feet.

"That's just for protection," Ethan said. After a moment, he bent down and picked it up. Shane exhaled slowly.

"You don't owe anyone money, do you?"

"No. That was a lie to get you here." Ethan slipped the gun back into his pocket.

"Someone's after you. Who is it?"

"I don't know," Ethan said. "Are you sure you're not mistaken? Until you showed up, no one ever tried to hurt me."

"I was shot, pushed into the street, and yesterday someone set fire to Ilya's stable — and locked me inside!"

Ethan's eyes widened. Then he said, "Well, the police can deal with that. If I knew who it was, I'd tell you. But if you want to keep Ilya and Jan, you'll have to take that risk, won't you? You can get police protection. It runs in the family." He grinned. "Here."

Something small and hard was pressed into Shane's hand. He recognized it instantly — without even looking. He cried out in horror and stared at it.

Georgina Parker's diamond ring.

"I'm not taking this! I don't want it!"

"But it's my farewell gift, Shane. It's worth about a hundred and fifty thousand." Ethan smiled, amused.

Shane's thoughts spiraled. Ethan left him no choice — about anything. Slowly, he looked up into his brother's eyes, which could have been his own — and yet were so completely different.

"Well… I knew you weren't as innocent as you look," Ethan laughed. He took the ring back from Shane and slipped it into his own pocket.

Shane reached into his jacket pocket instinctively, but Ethan gently took both his hands. “I have to go now.”

Shane looked at him for a long moment, then shook his head in disbelief. “Will I ever see you again?”

“I don’t think so,” Ethan replied calmly. “Shane, let’s make a deal. I trust you. I know you’d never do anything to harm me. You’d never betray Tom and me to the police — and even if you did, would they believe you?”

He paused. “So go home. Go back to McGill. Take care of Ilya, Jan, and Lilly. Be the father I never was. Your dream is right in front of you — you just have to take it. It’s all yours. And in return, I get my freedom.”

Shane began to tremble. He could barely speak. Dizziness washed over him, and fear tightened his throat.

Ethan seemed to understand and pulled him into an embrace.

“I’m going to miss you. But I can’t go to prison, and I can’t stop this, so…” He shrugged. “I have to go.”

He kissed Shane on the forehead — his lips surprisingly cool.

“Just stay calm. Things will settle down,” he added. “I’m happy for you, Shane. And I know how much you love Ilya.”

Shane couldn’t breathe. The stairwell felt unbearably hot. He was so weak, as if he might collapse at any moment.

But his decision was clear.

There was no turning back.

He looked his brother in the eye. Ethan smiled. Shane couldn’t.

“Goodbye,” Ethan said quietly.

Shane only stared at him.

…

Shane looked into the room where David lay sleeping. Nothing had changed. Lilly sat beside the bed, while Ilya and Alexei stood next to her, speaking quietly.

Ilya sensed his presence immediately and turned around as Shane approached. Their eyes met.

Shane licked his lips nervously. “Alexei?”

Alexei turned as well, and Shane cleared his throat. “Can I talk to you? In private?”

He had made his decision five minutes earlier — on that cold, gray staircase, when Ethan had offered him his marriage, his husband, his entire life.

Alexei and Ilya exchanged a glance. Then Alexei stepped out of the room.

“Let’s go somewhere quiet,” Shane said. His heart was pounding violently. He didn’t want Ilya to overhear what he was about to say.

Alexei followed him into a small, empty waiting room. “What’s going on?”

Shane met his gaze. “My name is Shane Hollander. I’m Ethan’s twin brother.”

Alexei didn’t smile. “Really.”

“Yes,” Shane said again, now overwhelmed. He wrapped his arms tightly around himself as tears filled his eyes.

"God, I always knew there was something—"

“My brother is a criminal — but I think you already know that. Ten minutes ago, he dragged me into the stairwell and told me I could have his life. He said he was flying to Paris tonight — but I know that’s a lie. He’s too smart to tell me the truth…”

Alexei stared at him, stunned. “Stay here.”

He hurried out.

Shane sank into a chair, buried his face in his hands, and broke down.

He cried for the brother he had loved and admired all his life — who had never truly existed. The more he thought back, the clearer it became: Ethan had always lied. Always deceived.

Shane felt as though he had loved a lie his entire life.

And now it was over.

Ethan was more than a cheater, more than a criminal — he had admitted it himself: he was a sociopath.

Had he really thought Shane was so weak? That he would go on living this lie forever? That he would let him get away with everything?

It took every ounce of strength Shane had left to betray his own brother.

But he had done it.

And strangely enough, Shane still felt that Ethan's worst crime wasn't theft or deception — It was betraying his family.

Ilya.

Jan.

Lilly.

Shane.

But it was a crime that no one would hold him accountable for. Now, at least in part, justice would prevail.

Suddenly, Alexei stepped in front of him, speaking into a small radio.

"He couldn't have gotten far. Lock down the hospital, lock down the exits. I want every goddamn car checked!" He turned off the device after his orders were acknowledged, then fixed his gaze on Shane.

Shane didn't like the way he was looking at him.

"Maybe you should set up roadblocks in case he's already left the hospital grounds. And I'd send someone to Tom's house too."

"Impossible. Too many side streets." But Alexei lifted the radio to his lips anyway.

"Send someone over to Tom's. Cover the house. When he leaves, follow him — and whatever happens, don't lose sight of him!" Then he turned his questioning gaze back to Shane.

"I haven't enjoyed this little performance for a second, believe me," Shane said quietly.

"Yeah, sure." Alexei let out a bitter laugh.

"He told me he was in danger. He made me believe Jan's life was at risk too," Shane explained hoarsely. "I hadn't seen him in years. I didn't even know he was married. He just showed up out of nowhere, told me he was in trouble, shoved a letter into my hand, and then he was gone."

"Have you switched places often?"

"No! We haven't done that since we were eight or nine!" Shane replied, then saw Alexei's skeptical look. "You don't believe me."

“I don’t know what to believe. But Cliff found out a few days ago that Ethan has a twin brother. The only question is — which one are you?”

Shane shivered. “I’m Shane. I’ve been working as a professor in Ottawa until now. Go ahead and check. Check everything. I’m telling you the truth.”

Alexei stared at him for a long moment. “What do you want, Shane? And why are you handing your brother over now?”

Shane pulled the diamond ring from his jacket pocket. “Tom stole it the night of Parker’s gala.”

Alexei looked at the ring, his expression unreadable.

“It belongs to Georgina,” Shane added.

“I know.”

Shane’s face darkened. “Alexei, I didn’t know about Tom — or that he and my brother were partners… and a secret couple for ten damn years. They cheated on Ilya. Ethan only married him for his money and his wealthy connections.“

Alexei studied him. “So you and Tom stole that ring? Or was it Tom and your twin brother?”

Shane swallowed hard, realizing where this was going. The confusion over who was who — and who had done what — wasn’t just complicated; it was a web of lies that might never be fully untangled.

“I was there with Tom. But I’ve never stolen anything in my life. Yes, I was there when he took it — but he tried to pin it on me. I gave the ring back to him the next day.”

Alexei watched him closely. “You gave it to him. Not to me. Not to the police.”

“I wasn’t ready to betray my own brother! To hand him over — to send him to prison!” Shane shouted, finally losing his composure.

“But now you are.”

“Yes,” Shane muttered. “Yes, I am. He just gave me the ring back as a parting gift. And he tried to convince me to live his lie forever.”

Shane turned away and closed his eyes.

“Please don’t tell Ilya yet. Please. I’ll explain everything to him tonight when we get home.”

Shane felt Alexei’s eyes on his back and slowly turned around.

“I could arrest you right now,” Alexei said quietly.

“Good,” Shane whispered. “That’s exactly what I want.”

For the first time, Alexei looked surprised. “What?”

“Arrest me, Alexei. Lock me up — make it headline news. That’s exactly what he wants. Ethan’s plan was to give me his life. He wants me to take the fall for him.”

They stared at each other for a long moment.

“You think your own brother wants you to go to prison for him?”

Shane nodded, even though it felt like his heart was breaking.

Alexei looked at him, confused. “But—”

“Don’t you see? If you arrest me — as Ethan — he’ll think he’s safe. He’ll become careless, because he believes no one else is looking for him. And then you can catch him. Then you can bring him to justice,” Shane said.

…

Time was slipping away. It was already 7:00 p.m.

Shane barely knew where the day had gone. After everything that had happened in the hospital, it all felt like a blur.

Was it six, seven, or eight hours ago that his brother had spoken to him? Had only a few hours passed since he turned his own brother over to the authorities? It felt like a lifetime ago.

Somehow, Shane had made it through the afternoon. He brought sandwiches, cookies, and water to David’s room. Then he held Lilly’s hand — and finally Ilya’s.

Mitch had stopped by to check on David and gave Lilly a sedative so she could go home and sleep.

Now Ilya stood motionless in the doorway of Lilly’s room, his arms crossed over his chest. He looked exhausted. Lilly lay on the bed, still in her jeans and T-shirt, fast asleep.

David was still in intensive care, but his condition was stable, and Ben Abbott had been released on bail.

Shane still felt numb. He assumed he was in shock.

He carefully removed Lilly’s boots and stockings, focusing entirely on these simple tasks — as if that could keep the memories of Ethan and the conversation with Alexei at bay.

He knew Alexei was hoping to intercept Ethan and Tom at the airport. Shane doubted he'd catch him that easily. If Ethan had said he was flying to Paris today, he'd probably be heading to Singapore tomorrow.

Shane was exhausted. All day long, he had fought against those terrible memories, trying to behave as normally as possible — whatever that meant.

He was aware that Ilya was watching him from the doorway. The moment of truth had come, and he could no longer avoid it.

If he didn't tell him, Ilya would hear it from Alexei. He had given Shane until midnight.

It was getting dangerously late.

Shane carefully pulled the blanket over Lilly, made sure the glass of water on the bedside table was full, then slowly straightened up and turned around.

He looked at Ilya.

"Thank you," Ilya said quietly, giving him a strange look.

Shane couldn't speak. In a few minutes, Ilya wouldn't be grateful anymore. In a few minutes, he would never look at him with love or tenderness again.

"Do you want something to drink?" Ilya asked, without moving.

The numbness began to fade, replaced by a wave of nausea and fear.

"No." If he ate or drank anything now, he would throw up.

"You've been acting strange all day… Is everything okay?" Ilya asked, suspicion creeping into his voice.

"No."

Ilya's face went rigid.

He would never hold him again. Never kiss him again. Never touch him again. Their eyes would never meet in silent understanding, followed by that small, secret smile.

"We need to talk."

Ilya stared at him but said nothing.

"Please," Shane said, hesitating, still standing by Lilly's bed. "In private."

"I don't like this," Ilya said.

Shane let out a quiet breath. “Yeah. I have to tell you something you’re not going to like.”

He tried to take a deep breath, but it was impossible. His breathing was too shallow, too fast. With effort, he forced himself to move, walking past Ilya — feeling like a man being led to his own execution.

He heard — and felt — Ilya follow him.

Shane chose not to go to the bedroom. Instead, he headed downstairs to the living room — neutral ground.

When they entered, Ilya moved past him and poured himself a large glass of Scotch.

“I’m not Ethan,” Shane said without hesitation.

The moment the words left his mouth — far more abruptly than he had intended — his heart felt like it might explode.

Ilya had just turned toward him, gripping the glass of Scotch tightly in his right hand. He didn’t raise it to his lips. He didn’t show any surprise.

Shane was stunned. And confused. Despite everything, he didn’t want to believe it — but the thought returned, stronger than ever:

Ilya knows.

“I’m his twin brother. My name is Shane. Shane Hollander.”

Ilya set the Scotch aside. Shane noticed his hand tremble slightly.

“I know.”

Shane stared at him, shaken to the core. “Since… since when?” He didn’t doubt for a second that Alexei had kept his word.

Ilya’s expression hardened even further. “Since we slept together.”

Shane could barely breathe, barely stand, barely think.

“W-why?”

Ilya’s mouth twisted into a bitter grimace.

“Why? Shouldn’t I be the one asking you that?”

“If you knew… why didn’t you say anything?”

“Why should I? I was willing to play your game — by your rules… *Shane*,” Ilya said coldly.

Shane couldn't — didn't want to understand. But he did. Every moment they had shared… had been a lie, at least from Ilya's side.

"So our whole closeness was…"

"You're not the only actor here, Shane." There was dark fury in Ilya's eyes. "I can pretend just as well as you can, if I have to."

Shane didn't want to feel anything anymore, but the chaos inside him came with unbearable pain.

"Do you have any feelings for me at all?" he asked quietly.

Now it was Ilya who seemed surprised. "No," he said at last.

Somehow, Shane managed to stay on his feet. "It was all fake… every moment, every touch, every kiss," he whispered.

"Yes," Ilya replied. "Now it's my turn. Why? Why this game, Shane?"

Shane felt like he might collapse at any second. Ilya didn't like him, didn't love him — had never loved him. He wanted to confess what he felt, but the fear of humiliating himself held him back.

"I had no choice."

"No choice?" Suddenly, Ilya's tone became aggressive, and Shane flinched.

"You're a free man! It *was* your choice!"

"I can explain — please, just give me a moment… I can't breathe," Shane gasped. The room darkened before his eyes, and he thought he might pass out.

"No. I can explain it myself." Ilya's expression was hard, filled with disgust. "You and Ethan are exactly alike."

"No! We are completely different!" Shane shouted. Fear and panic crashed over him like a wave. He had expected this reaction — but deep down, he had still hoped for understanding… for forgiveness… for a future.

"I still have a question for you," Ilya said. The contempt in his voice struck Shane like a blow. "How many times have you switched places? How many times have you lied to people?"

"Never!!" Shane protested. "This was the only time! I didn't even know Ethan was married until he showed up in Ottawa last week!"

“Oh, really?” Ilya’s voice was mocking. “I don’t believe a word you say.”

Shane exhaled shakily and grabbed the back of a chair to steady himself.

“Shane Hollander from Ottawa… that name sounds familiar. *Shane.* You were on the committee back then, weren’t you? The one organizing the charity gala?”

Shane froze. Ilya had remembered his name. He nodded silently.

“Wow,” Ilya said quietly.

“What?”

“I think you and Ethan have been working together for a long time,” Ilya said angrily.

“Oh my God, no!” Shane shook his head desperately. “Please, listen to me! Ethan and I were never close — not even as children. He was always the wild one, the popular one. Outgoing, hungry for life. We weren’t even friends, and I hadn’t seen him for six or seven years until he suddenly showed up last week! I had no idea he’d married you — or adopted a child! His call came out of nowhere!” Shane said, his voice rising.

“If you were really a decent person, you would never have agreed to step into his life and deceive not only me — but my children as well!” Ilya hissed.

“He said he was in trouble! That he needed my help! I was so happy to see him again — to have my twin brother back — that I would have jumped off a fucking tower if he’d asked me to!!”

Ilya fell silent. For a moment, Shane thought — hoped — that he had reached him.

But when Ilya spoke again, he knew he was wrong.

“You can play your games with me,” Ilya said sharply, “but not with my children.”

Before Shane could react, Ilya hurled the glass across the room.

Shane flinched as it shattered beside him, Scotch splashing across his back and shoulders.

Ilya stepped closer, and for the first time, Shane realized he hadn’t considered every possibility — that Ilya might want to kill him himself.

They stared at each other.

Then Ilya broke the silence. He grabbed Shane by the shoulders and slammed him against the wall.

“You walked into my life — into Lilly’s life, into Jan’s life!” he growled. “You acted like you were my husband! Don’t you dare say you’re different from him! He’s a fucking asshole,

Shane — and so are you!"

Shane heard himself whimper. The pain came from his chest, not from Ilya's grip.

Ilya turned away, and Shane thought he heard him groan.

"I was just trying to help my brother," Shane said weakly. "He told me he owed someone a lot of money. I was stupid enough to believe him. He said they'd kill him — or Jan — if he didn't pay, and I believed him. He said I only had to take his place for a few days — and I believed that too. I had no idea he was planning all of this!"

Ilya turned back to him. "Or maybe you knew exactly what you were doing — and decided to enjoy a piece of the life we have here."

"No! I came here to help Ethan — and then I grew fond of Jan and Lilly…" *and you*, Shane wanted to add — but he didn't dare. Tears ran down his face.

"You only love yourself," Ilya said quietly. Then louder: "Don't you ever dare say you love Jan or Lilly again."

"But I do," Shane whispered.

Ilya took another step toward him. "Stop," he roared. "Stop before I lose what little control I have left! You don't love us — you used us, just like your brother did!"

Shane held his gaze. Ilya's eyes were so dark with anger, it was hard to remember they had once been blue.

"I only lied to you about one thing," Shane said hoarsely. "And that was my name."

"Don't… I don't want to hear it," Ilya said quietly, turning away.

"Ilya, wait," Shane whispered — but Ilya was already gone.

Shane slid down the wall, wrapping his arms around himself, and began to cry.

He had lost him so quickly.

But he had never truly had him. Ilya had known the truth from the very beginning.

Shane's sobs grew heavier.

"Here."

At the sound of Cliff Marlow's voice, Shane froze. He looked up to see him holding out a handkerchief, his expression kind and compassionate.

"I love him," Shane whispered.

„I know.“

…

Shane hadn’t been able to sleep. Almost the entire night, he had tossed and turned restlessly, clutching his pillow. Ilya’s side of the bed remained empty.

The sound of birds woke him. He realized he must have dozed off for at least an hour. A glance out the window showed a grey morning sky — the sun had not yet risen.

Shane lay motionless in the large bed, his mind filled with images of Ilya, Jan, and Lilly. Each memory hurt.

He thought of his brother, and a cold dread settled in his chest. Where was he now? There had been no call from the police during the night — so they hadn’t caught him yet.

He thought about everything he had done and squeezed his eyes shut, trying to hold back the tears and the pain.

As he tightened his grip on the pillow, he suddenly felt something soft and warm brush against the back of his hand. He pushed the pillow aside — and found Jan sleeping peacefully beside him, a teddy bear clutched in his arms.

The tears came at once. Shane moved the pillow away completely and gently pulled Ethan’s son closer.

Jan stirred, opened his eyes, yawned, and smiled like an angel. Shane stroked his hair.

“Looks like I had a visitor in the middle of the night,” he whispered hoarsely.

“I had a bad dream,” Jan said, snuggling closer. “I dreamed you were leaving.”

Shane said nothing. He looked into his nephew’s eyes and thought of Ethan’s plan — to leave him here, to take care of his son. Of course, Ethan hadn’t expected Shane to betray him… or that Ilya would already be one step ahead of them both.

“I’m here,” Shane said softly. “Go back to sleep, sweetheart. It’s still early. I’ll wake you later, okay?”

Jan nodded, hugged his teddy bear, and closed his eyes again. Shane stroked his hair until he drifted back to sleep. Then he carefully got up.

For a moment, he considered calling Alexei — but quickly dismissed the idea.

Shane took a shower and changed into jeans and a T-shirt. The morning was cold; autumn had finally arrived.

He picked up Ilya’s grey sweatshirt, pulled it on, and left the bathroom barefoot.

He paused outside Lilly’s door. The concern that gripped him was almost welcome — it distracted him from his own thoughts.

Carefully, he opened the door, not wanting to wake her.

She was still lying exactly as she had been the night before — on her back, deeply asleep, the blanket pulled up under her chin and wrapped tightly around her.

Shane quietly closed the door again. Lilly was exhausted — and with good reason.

He continued downstairs. At the threshold of the kitchen, he hesitated.

He had expected to have the house to himself this early in the morning — but he was wrong.

Ilya and Olga were sitting at the kitchen table, drinking coffee. Ilya looked like he hadn’t slept at all. Dark circles shadowed his eyes, and his hair was completely disheveled.

The worry on Olga’s face — and the way she leaned toward him — made Shane suspect that she now knew the full extent of his deception.

She was the first to look up. Anger, shock, and indignation were written all over her face.

"Good morning," Shane said quietly, ignoring her. Instead, he looked at Ilya, who slowly raised his head. He didn’t say a word.

Olga stood up.

"You are no longer welcome here. When can you leave?"

Shane tensed his shoulders. "I’ll pack my things after breakfast," he said, trying to hide his feelings. But his voice sounded strained and miserable, even to his own ears.

Again, he glanced at Ilya, and their eyes met cautiously. It was Shane who quickly lowered his gaze, his heart pounding.

Olga stood up abruptly. "I’ll see if the newspapers have arrived."

Shane poured himself a cup of coffee and noticed that his hands were shaking, and he couldn’t stop it.

He looked at Ilya, who was staring into his coffee as if it were a cup of poison — as if Shane didn’t exist.

Shane didn’t dare sit at the table with him, so he leaned against the kitchen counter. It was obvious he was now considered an intruder.

Suddenly, Ilya stood up. "Where is he?"

Shane froze. He didn’t even need to ask who he meant. "I don’t know..."

Ilya stared at him grimly. "That," he finally said, "is what I call luck." He grabbed his coat.

A siren wailed once, and then again. The sound made Shane go rigid with fear. Everything he had done since yesterday hit him like a freight train.

The siren wailed again — this time just a short burst. Shane froze. Did it mean what he thought? He had been serious when he told Alexei to arrest him.

Once Shane was in prison, Ethan would think his plan had worked. He would grow reckless, take bigger risks, and eventually they would catch him. At least, that was what Shane hoped.

It was, he thought, their only chance to catch Ethan before he disappeared without a trace and moved on to his next wealthy victim.

Ilya looked out the window. "It’s Alexei," he said tensely, "with two officers." He gave Shane a startled look and hurried outside.

Shane stayed in the kitchen, not moving an inch. Now he understood what the instinct to flee really felt like. His whole body vibrated with tension, and he had a sinking feeling that nothing would go as planned. He just wanted to run.

But that was only his nerves. He wouldn’t run. He had survived all his brother’s lies — he would survive this too.

He heard footsteps. Carefully, he moved forward, reminding himself to be brave, that he had told nothing but the truth, that he was innocent, that Tom had stolen the ring.

When he stepped into the foyer, the front door opened and Alexei walked in. He had never looked more terrifying.

"Morning, Ilya. Olga," he said. Two policemen stood behind him, dressed in dark, menacing uniforms.

"What’s the matter, Alexei?" Ilya asked nervously.

"We’re looking for a thief."

Ilya hesitated, then stared at Shane in horror.

"Parker was robbed the other day — possibly the night of the ball. A diamond ring is missing. I’d say it was someone who knew their way around the house. What do you think?" Alexei asked.

Shane began to tremble. He was innocent — but he wished Alexei didn’t look so frightening.

"You didn’t find him?" Shane asked, his voice shaking.

"You mean, did I find your twin brother? No. We checked every flight to Paris, and then all the others that left the airport. Obviously, your little tip didn’t work." Alexei reached into his jacket and pulled out a folded document while Shane watched in growing horror.

Alexei was just playing the cold, calculating cop, wasn’t he?

"Here I have a search warrant," he said, holding up the paper.

Shane didn’t move. He clung to one thought: Alexei didn’t really want to arrest him. It was all part of the plan.

"A search warrant?" Ilya repeated, as if he didn’t understand.

Alexei didn’t take his eyes off Shane but signaled to his men with a nod. The two policemen headed upstairs.

"Check the bedroom first," Alexei said. "I got a tip," he added, looking directly at Shane.

"I told you he wouldn’t take that machine," Shane said quietly.

"I have another court order, signed about half an hour ago." Alexei almost smiled. "A warrant for your arrest."

Shane’s knees buckled. So this was it. But it was still part of the plan… wasn’t it? Yet Alexei looked almost pleased.

"You have the right to remain silent," he said, stepping up to Shane. He pulled Shane’s arms behind his back. "Anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law."

For a moment, Shane closed his eyes, trying to steady himself.

Everything would be fine, he told himself. The newspapers would report Ethan’s arrest. His brother would believe he was safe, grow careless, and make a mistake.

Shane opened his eyes as Alexei snapped a handcuff onto his wrist. The cold metal sent a wave of panic through him. He tried to fight it — but failed.

Desperately, he turned to Ilya. But Ilya just stared at him, wide-eyed and horrified. The second handcuff clicked shut.

"You have the right to an attorney. If you cannot afford one, the court will appoint one for you."

More policemen entered. Shane wanted to shout that he wasn’t Ethan — that Ethan and Tom had stolen the ring, that they had been robbing people together for years.

He told himself to stay calm — but when he saw Ilya’s stunned, glassy expression again, he couldn’t hold back.

"Ilya, I’m innocent. I didn’t steal anything." Shane was sweating.

"Shane..." Ilya said quietly. He looked so confused and hurt that Shane wanted to shut his eyes.

"Hey, boss — take a look at this!"

Shane twisted around as much as he could to see one of the policemen hurrying down the stairs with a small plastic bag in his hand. The handcuffs dug painfully into his wrists, but he ignored it.

Then he saw what was inside.

Georgina Parker’s yellow diamond ring.

"You’re under arrest," Alexei said.

Chapter End Notes

Я не позволю, чтобы с тобой что-нибудь случилось = I won't let anything happen to you

What do you think?
let me know in the comments!!

btw im on twitter @xoxo333_

Chapter 9: NINE

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Shane didn't see Alexei again until they reached the county jail.

It stood behind the red brick building that housed the sheriff's and district judge's offices. From there, a long paved road led to the single-story, elongated prison building. The entire complex was new and very tidy, with well-kept lawns surrounding the buildings and tall, magnificent trees shading the parking lot.

A policeman unlocked the back door of the jeep and pulled Shane out.

Shane let himself be roughly pulled from the car, his gaze fixed sternly on Alexei, who was getting out of his own vehicle. He must have planted Georgina Parker's stolen diamond ring in the bedroom himself — an old trick. But surely he had only done it to make this fake arrest look as real as possible, right?

"Alexei, I need to talk to you."

"I'm still a sheriff to you. And unless you intend to make a full confession, I suggest you talk to your lawyer first," he said, nodding so the other officer moved Shane toward the prison building.

Shane stumbled on the curb, but the cop caught him. Shane tried to grab Alexei's arm, but Alexei easily avoided his bound hands.

"Alexei, I'm Shane! You know that, don't you?! You told me yourself you knew Ethan had a twin brother! What are you doing?!" Shane was panicking.

"You have the right to make a phone call. If I were you, I'd call my lawyer," Alexei replied without turning back as he hurried toward the rear entrance.

The dreadful words "*District Prison*" were carved into the beam above the door.

"And I'd really shut up right now. Anything you say can and will be used against you. Better save it for your lawyer, Ethan."

Despair surged through Shane's body. *This couldn't be happening.*

"Shane. My name is Shane. We need to talk! In private, please," he begged desperately.

This time Alexei didn't even bother to answer. Shane was stunned. Had he made the biggest mistake of his life by trusting him? Surely Alexei didn't mean to frame him for Ethan's theft, right? After all, he had searched for Ethan all night long — Shane had overheard him

speaking with his deputies.

But Ethan hadn't been found. Only Shane was left behind. Fear tightened inside him.

"Alexei, stop! God, I'm not Ethan. I'm not Ilya's husband! We switched places, and you know that!" Shane screamed at Alexei's back.

"Of course. And you're his twin brother. How convenient," Alexei finally said, turning to look at Shane as he pushed the door open.

"Hello, boys. Looks like we've finally caught our thief. Call the public prosecutor."

Shane swallowed hard and forced himself to stay calm. He told himself he would not end up in prison for his brother's crimes, because he was not Ethan — and he had told both Alexei and Ilya the truth.

But he was really, truly terrified. The police hadn't found Ethan. Why would they believe his crazy story? Why would Alexei or Ilya believe another word after everything that had happened? Would Ethan's plan — to make Shane pay — actually succeed?

Shane felt dizzy. He remembered that Alexei had slipped him the stolen ring. God help him — he could go to prison for years.

"I didn't steal that ring," Shane whispered. "Tom stole it. Ethan gave it back to me yesterday, and I gave it to you right away."

He grabbed Alexei's arm, forcing him to turn and face him. Alexei looked at him with a cold, smug smile.

"I have no idea what you're talking about, and I don't give a damn whether your name is Shane or Ethan or whatever." His eyes flashed. "But I do know you've been living with my brother — as his husband. And I know that about a year after you showed up in Ilya's life, a series of thefts began. Two thefts in the first year, four the next… So inconspicuous at first that nobody noticed. But then I realized — there were a dozen thefts in this county, all following the same pattern. No break-ins. A trusted visitor cracks the safe, and valuable jewelry disappears. And now your story? Oh, yes — you're not the man who married my brother six years ago. You're his twin brother. You conveniently showed up and swapped places with him, and he's the real thief, of course. And where is this other man now? On his way to Paris? I only know one thing — can you guess what it is?" He didn't wait for Shane to answer. "If you really have an identical twin, who's to say you're not the thief and he's the honest one?"

Shane backed away. Suddenly he understood how much Alexei truly hated Ethan.

He was terrified. Alexei hated him. So much that he would take false orders from him. So much that he might shoot him and push him off the road to kill him. So much that he would even set fire to his brother's stable.

He wasn't Ethan, but Alexei clearly didn't believe that.

"The day you tricked my brother and pretended to love him was your first big mistake. And the second was marrying him," Alexei said, his eyes burning.

Shane had made a terrible mistake. Alexei was the enemy. Why had he ever believed he could trust him?

"We've got half a dozen fingerprints from the Parker bedroom," Alexei continued grimly. "Two maids, Parker, and Georgina. What do you want to bet your fingerprints are all over that room, Ethan — or Shane, or whatever your real name is?"

Shane froze. Tom had worn gloves when he cracked the safe. Shane, of course, had not. He'd never even thought of that. And he had touched the door at least once. His fingerprints would definitely be there. And Alexei had slipped him the ring. He was finished.

"Book him," Alexei said in disgust.

…

Shane sat motionless on the narrow bunk, hands folded in his lap. The prison had only one other inmate — a young man who was badly injured and appeared to be sleeping off a heavy intoxication. His cell was at the far end of the corridor, and Shane was grateful for the distance.

How long would he be stuck here? Shane felt utterly hopeless.

He heard the door at the end of the cell block open. He froze when footsteps approached. He didn't get up.

An officer stopped at his cell. "You have a visitor."

Behind him, Shane saw Lilly and Ilya standing in the doorway. He jumped to his feet.

"Ilya," he whispered.

Ilya stopped at the threshold. His face hardened, and he stared at Shane without blinking.

"Ilya!" Shane shouted louder, grabbing the bars. "Please — I'm not Ethan! I'm his twin brother! I explained everything last night — I'm Shane!" he pleaded. "You have to convince Alexei, or Ethan will get away." His voice broke. "Please… help me."

Ilya turned on his heel and walked away.

If Shane hadn't been gripping the bars, he would have collapsed. Ilya had been his last hope.

"You don't have much time. The boss says five minutes."

Shane looked up as the guard unlocked his cell and let Lilly inside. She was pale.

The officer let her in and locked the cell behind her.

“At least he doesn’t seem to think I’m a murderer,” Shane muttered. “Otherwise he wouldn’t let you in here.”

There was no reply — only the sound of the door slamming at the far end of the corridor.

“Damn it!” Shane shouted. Then Lilly put a hand on his arm, and he turned to her.

She looked frightened for a moment, but then they embraced.

“Don’t worry,” Shane whispered. “It’s going to be okay.”

Lilly pulled back. “The sirens woke me up. I thought Ben Abbott had lied to them, and they were going to arrest me. I looked out the window and saw them take you away. I had to come see you.”

“Thank you,” Shane whispered, overwhelmed. He thought of Ilya, who hadn’t spoken to him and was now waiting for his daughter just a few doors away. “How’s David doing today?”

The question seemed to surprise Lilly.

“If he keeps recovering like this, he’ll be transferred out of intensive care this afternoon,” she said.

“That’s good, Lilly. I’m really glad to hear it.”

Lilly hugged him tightly and didn’t let go for a long time. Finally she pulled back slightly.

“How can anyone mistake you for him?”

Shane hesitated. “I’m his twin brother. I switched places with him, Lilly. And it was wrong of me…”

Lilly stared at him. “Dad said Ethan lied to you the same way he lied to all of us. He said you thought Ethan was in danger, and that the only reason you switched places with him was because you wanted to help him… not hurt us.”

Shane almost fainted with relief. Ilya had defended him to his own daughter.

“He said that?”

Lilly nodded. “Yes,” she smiled faintly. “Your name is Shane?”

Shane nodded, trembling with relief. It felt so good to hear his real name.

“It’s a beautiful name. It suits you… *Shane.*”

Shane smiled and sat back down on the bunk. Lilly sat beside him.

“Why aren’t you angry that I lied to you, Lilly? What I did was wrong, and you know it. The end doesn’t justify the means.”

Lilly shook her head firmly.

“I’m glad you lied. I’m glad you came into our lives. And Jan thinks so too.”

Shane froze. “Does he know?”

“No. He’s in nursery school. I guess Dad will explain it to him the way he explained it to me.”

Shane waited a moment before asking, “Are you talking to him again?”

Lilly hesitated. “I am. Kind of.”

“You can’t blame him for loving you,” Shane said gently.

Tears filled Lilly’s eyes. “See? That’s why I’m glad you lied and pretended to be him! Can’t you stay with us, Shane? I mean, when you get out of jail? I know it sounds strange, but we’d like you to stay.” Despite her tears, her voice was steady.

Shane bit his lip. “I wish for nothing more than that,” he whispered shakily. “But I can’t. I really hurt your father… He deserves so much more.”

“He loves you.”

Shane flinched. “How do you know?”

Lilly shrugged and smiled faintly. “That’s pretty obvious.”

Shane didn’t argue with her, nor did he try to convince her otherwise.

“He doesn’t want to talk to me,” he said quietly.

“He’s really upset. When Dad gets upset, he can be pretty cold. And he was *very* upset.” Lilly looked at him openly. “But he’ll calm down. It’s always like this.” She hesitated. “He never loved him the way he loves you.”

Shane didn’t dare believe it. Lilly believed what she wanted to believe. At her age, she couldn’t imagine that you could love someone and still feel so deeply betrayed that you had no choice but to walk away forever.

“Don’t be sad,” Lilly whispered. She stood up and took his hand. “I know you’re innocent.

And the others will realize that soon. Including Dad. He'll want you back, Shane. I'm sure of it."

Shane hugged her tightly. How had he grown so fond of this girl in such a short time?

"Lilly? I need your help."

"Sure," she said confidently.

"I need a lawyer. A really good defense lawyer."

Lilly nodded. "Don't be afraid. I'll get you one. I'll take care of it as soon as I get home."

The door at the end of the corridor opened, and Shane turned anxiously. A cop entered with a man.

"Visitors are lining up to see you, Mr. Rozanov," he muttered.

By then they were close enough for Shane to recognize the man — it was Hayden.

Suddenly Shane remembered that the person who had shot at him, forced him off the road, and then set fire to the barn was still out there — and that news of Ethan's arrest was spreading.

Hayden smiled. Shane felt both uneasy and strangely relieved to be safe behind the bars of his cell.

"You have to go now, Lilly," the cop said, unlocking the cell door.

Shane met Hayden's gaze as Lilly stepped out.

"Don't worry," she said, giving Shane a weak smile.

He couldn't even nod. Hayden stepped into the cell, and the door closed behind him.

Shane turned to him warily while Lilly and the officer left the cell block. The door at the end of the corridor slammed shut.

"Finally. Finally, you're getting what you deserve," Hayden said, raising his hand.

Shane recoiled, thinking for a moment that Hayden had a gun.

Instead, the man struck him hard across the face.

-

Two days later.

It was lunchtime. Sarah sighed in annoyance after glancing at the clock for what felt like the hundredth time.

She had been married for exactly three days. She couldn't wait to get home to her husband, and whenever she thought of the word husband, a grin spread across her face.

Home — to a place not far from Ottawa. She had grown up there, and Jason had immediately fallen in love with the charming little town, so they had decided to move there. They planned to go on their honeymoon in June and had chosen Paris, the most romantic city in the world.

"Excuse me, I'd like to check in. Otherwise I'll miss my flight," a man's voice said.

Sarah snapped out of her daydream. She smiled at the customer, took his ticket and passport —and then had to look twice.

The man looked familiar. His photo had appeared on the front page of the local newspaper for two days in a row.

"Why are you looking at me like that?" the man asked, still smiling, though now a bit uneasily.

Sarah shrugged, feeling herself blush. "Oh — I'm sorry," she said quickly. But as she spoke, she glanced at his ticket again — the destination was Mexico City.

The man looked like Ethan Rozanov, a burglar who had finally been arrested after six years of crimes. But his hair was different. And not just that — the name was different too.

The ticket read *Shane Hollander*, but Sarah could have sworn that Ethan Rozanov was standing right in front of her.

"Your hairstyle is nice — where did you get it done?" Sarah asked, now almost certain that Ethan had escaped and was trying to leave the country with a new look and a false name.

"I went to a hairdresser in Ottawa," the man replied patiently.

Sarah began to sweat. "Would you like a window seat?" *Oh God… I'm facing a real criminal. An escaped prisoner!*

"No, I'd prefer an aisle seat, thank you."

Sarah assigned him a seat and forced herself to breathe steadily. She prayed her hands wouldn't start shaking.

"Two checked bags?" she asked, eyeing his suitcases.

"Yes — and a carry-on," the man said with a friendly smile.

He seemed like a perfectly pleasant person — nothing like a ruthless thief.

Sarah attached the luggage tags and placed the suitcases on the conveyor belt. With another polite smile, she handed him his boarding pass.

“Have a nice flight. Your gate is to the right,” she said.

“Thank you.” The man smiled, picked up his carry-on, and walked away.

Only then could Sarah breathe again. Panting, she ignored the next customer, flipped the “closed” sign on her desk, and rushed into the office to call the police.

…

Ethan flipped through a magazine, studying the pictures of Mexico’s landscapes. He smiled as he imagined Tom on the beach, the two of them toasting with ice-cold drinks. God, no man looked better than Tom. Other images followed — him and Tom in their beach bungalow, tearing off their swimsuits.

It had been so easy.

It wasn’t that he wished his brother to go to prison. But Ethan would never go to prison — and he wasn’t about to give up the life he had built.

The small coastal village where he would meet Tom was only the first stop on their journey through countless seaside towns. They planned to arrive in Rio de Janeiro on New Year’s Eve, and if everything went well, it would become their home for the next few years.

His brother was so naive. And so desperate. Ethan liked him — but he also thought he was pathetic. Any man who could fall in love so quickly was a lost cause. As for his punishment, well — maybe five years. Possibly less with good behavior.

It wasn’t so bad. And since Shane had always had an easy life, Ethan figured a little time in prison might actually do him good. Build some character.

Still, Ethan had the strange feeling that Ilya was waiting for his brother.

Annoyed, he snapped the magazine shut. He told himself he had no reason to be angry — after all, the two of them were perfect for each other. But he couldn’t help it. Somehow, it didn’t feel fair.

He had never loved Ilya — never even come close. But everyone preferred Shane. Their mother had held Shane’s hands and told him how proud she was when she was dying.

Shane had been their father’s favorite too. Even the teachers at school had admired him.

Ethan, on the other hand, had been able to have any man he wanted — but deep down, they had all been in love with Shane. What they had with Ethan had never been love.

Ethan looked up from the closed magazine and immediately noticed several women glancing at him. He smiled. He was ridiculous to feel jealous of his boring, well-behaved brother.

His gaze lingered on a muscular blond guy who couldn't have been more than twenty. The man looked back, and Ethan held his gaze.

He smiled. It was going to be a long flight, and he was bored. He had always enjoyed a bit of excitement on planes. Besides, it would be a whole day before he saw Tom again.

Suddenly, something made Ethan tense. He turned around.

Two men were approaching the departure lounge. They were dressed in ordinary suits — but Ethan immediately knew they were police officers.

He told himself to stay calm. They couldn't possibly be after him. No one knew where he was except Tom. And even if they caught him, he would never betray Tom — not for anything in the world. Just as Tom would never betray him.

He picked up his bag and looked up cautiously. The men entered the lounge.

Ethan quickly scanned the area and spotted two uniformed officers a few steps behind the plainclothes detectives.

Running wouldn't make sense.

Shane…

Ethan frowned, thinking of how easily Shane had agreed to stay behind as Ethan at McGill. How simple it had been to slip the ring back onto him. He remembered the newspaper headlines announcing Ethan's arrest.

And suddenly, he understood.

His eyes widened in shock.

His brother had done that. The weak, naive, hopelessly vulnerable Shane? Had he — Ethan — really been tricked by Shane?

The two plainclothes officers stopped in front of him.

"Ethan Rozanov?"

He smiled. "I'm afraid you've mistaken me," he said smoothly. "My name is Shane Hollander."

"Please come with us," the younger one said, his expression icy as he firmly grabbed Ethan by the arm.

“Would you like to see my ID?” Ethan asked sweetly.

“We already know you’re carrying Shane Hollander’s passport,” the senior detective replied. “I’m afraid you’ll have to come with us.” He gave him a mild smile.

“What did I do?” Ethan asked, feigning surprise as they led him out of the departure lounge. “There must be some mistake. I’m not Ethan — he’s my twin brother! I’m Shane Hollander, and I can prove it to you.”

The older officer met his gaze.

“We don’t know all the details yet, but Ethan Rozanov is wanted by the police. Take it easy. I’m sure everything will be cleared up once we get to the station.”

Ethan smiled at him gratefully. He wasn’t going to let Shane win.

—

Shane heard the door to the cell block open. He jumped to his feet and gripped the bars. His heart was pounding in his throat. Hope flared up inside him, but the fear of never being released still lingered.

The last two days had been the longest of his life. And it hadn’t exactly been pleasant being accused by Hayden of stealing his wife.

All Hayden had done was slap him once. But even that had seemed to shock him as much as it had Shane. His voice had nearly broken as he said he hated Shane, before turning away, sobbing.

The only bright moments in those two days were that Hayden hadn’t come back — and that Lilly had found him an excellent lawyer. Shane had already spoken to him twice on the phone, and he was coming to visit him in prison tomorrow. Shane still couldn’t believe he needed a lawyer because Ethan’s crimes were now being pinned on him. It was unbelievable.

Shane pressed his face against the bars. *If only Ethan were finally arrested*, he thought desperately.

Then he saw Alexei walking casually down the corridor.

Shane’s entire body tensed with sudden hope. Even before Alexei stopped in front of his cell, their eyes met.

“What happened?” Shane asked quietly.

Alexei smiled — his expression surprisingly friendly.

“Your brother was just arrested at the airport. He was about to board a plane to Mexico. I don’t know all the details yet, but your plan worked.”

Shane nearly collapsed. Instead, he staggered backward and sank onto the bunk, gasping loudly.

He had done it. Ethan had set him up and tried to make him pay for his crimes — but Shane had turned the tables and actually outsmarted him. Yet he felt no triumph. Only relief.

"And Tom?" Shane asked hoarsely.

"Ethan was traveling alone. If he doesn't talk, we don't stand a chance. Tom has probably already left the country. I don't think we'll catch him."

Shane just stared at him. He couldn't move, speak, or even think clearly. He was exhausted.

Alexei unlocked the cell. "Are you all right… Shane?"

Shane noticed his strangely neutral expression.

"No. No, not at all."

Alexei hesitated in the doorway. "You did the right thing."

Shane spoke, though his lips barely moved. "I know. But that doesn't change the fact that he's my twin brother. He's my brother. Nothing will ever change that…"

"He lured you here so you'd go to prison instead of him," Alexei said. "You had to choose: him or yourself. Don't blame yourself for that."

Shane finally managed to look up at him.

"Does that mean you don't hate me anymore?"

Alexei seemed taken aback. "I don't know what to think of you. You lied to my brother, to Lilly and Jan. But without your help, we never would have caught Ethan. I did some research — you're from Ottawa, right?"

Shane nodded as he got to his feet. "Alexei, what I did was wrong. And the closer I grew to Jan, Lilly, and Ilya, the harder it became to justify it — to keep up the lie. Ethan told me Ilya's life was in danger, but it was just a damn trick."

"He manipulated you," Alexei said quietly. "And he's very good at that, isn't he? That's how he operates. He knows exactly where a person's weak spot is — and that's where he strikes, with a smile on his face."

Shane stepped out of the cell. "Why do you hate him so much? Did he try to seduce you?"

Alexei laughed. "He was too smart to even try. I hated him from the day Ilya brought him home, because I saw right through him. I know a cheat when I see one, Shane. But Ilya

refused to listen to me." His expression darkened. "After the wedding, we didn't speak for six months. That was a hard time."

"I'm sorry," Shane said sincerely. "I know how much Ilya, Lilly, and Jan mean to you."

Alexei didn't respond. He simply looked at Shane with an unreadable expression.

Shane knew what he was thinking.

"I'm different. I'm not like him. We only look alike on the outside."

"No," Alexei said slowly. "You're nothing alike. Your eyes are completely different. Yours are… gentle. There's always a hint of a smile in them. I never saw that in Ethan's eyes — not in six long years."

Shane blushed, then smiled broadly at him.

Afterwards, they walked slowly down the corridor. Every step felt exhausting to Shane.

"You were very convincing. I was so afraid you'd set me up, Alexei," Shane said, looking at him questioningly.

Alexei held his gaze. "I believed you — but not completely. I had my doubts. I mean, why should I trust you? I figured we'd bring him in first and then see what happened. But Lilly insisted you were really Shane, and more importantly, I think Ilya can tell you apart even with his eyes closed."

Shane blushed again. He hoped Alexei hadn't meant that literally.

"God, I was so scared," Shane admitted. "I was afraid you'd never find him — and that I'd have to go to prison instead of him."

"Ilya wouldn't have let that happen," Alexei said. "And I was pretty sure you were Shane, too. I just had to exaggerate my performance a bit so no one would suspect we'd come up with such a crazy plan to catch Ethan."

Shane stopped. "Really? Ilya wouldn't have let me go to jail? Why do you say that? Did he say something?"

Alexei smiled. "Why don't you go home and ask him yourself?"

"Home?" Shane echoed. He didn't have a home. Not in Ottawa, and not here.

"And you really don't need to feel guilty. Your only mistake was letting your brother manipulate you — and acting a little rashly. You've got nothing else to blame yourself for, Shane."

Shane looked down at his feet and finally nodded. When he looked up again, he saw Alexei

smiling.

“You can read your emotions in your eyes like an open book, Shane. And that’s the biggest difference between you and him.”

Shane looked at him for a moment, then held out his hand. “Truce?”

“Truce?” Alexei repeated, surprised. He hesitated, then took Shane’s hand. “Of course,” he said with a smile.

Shane thought about how he had lost Ilya, Lilly, and Jan, and tears blurred his vision. But at least he had done the right thing — and Ethan would go to prison.

“Well, you’re exhausted and completely drained. Go home and get some rest. You’ll feel better in a few days.”

Shane stared at him. “I don’t have a home,” he muttered.

“I think you do. But the last time I interfered in my brother’s life, he ignored my advice completely… Anyway, there’s a little boy and a young lady waiting for you.” He pushed open the door to the cell block.

Shane was afraid to face Ilya. He was so nervous that his hands started to sweat.

“You’re right,” he finally said, because he couldn’t delay it any longer. He had to pack his things and say goodbye.

…

A cop drove him to McGill. Shane thanked him, and when the car pulled away, he looked up at the front door of the large house. His heart grew heavy. *He didn’t want to leave.*

But he was no longer welcome — and he had no choice.

Slowly, he climbed the stairs. Suddenly, the front door flew open and Jan ran outside.

“Dad!!”

Shane bent down and caught him as he jumped into his arms. He stood up, holding the child tightly — as if Jan were clinging to him for dear life.

“Dad, I missed you! You just disappeared!” Jan cried.

“I’m so, so sorry,” Shane said, setting him down. “I had to leave — but only for a few days.”

He felt terrible. He had to be very careful about what he said — and how he said it.

“But you didn’t say goodbye! And you didn’t tell me where you were going,” Jan

complained, clutching Shane's hand. "But now you won't leave again."

Shane tried to smile, but it was difficult.

"Sit down with me for a moment, sweetheart," he said. They sat together on the front steps, hand in hand. His heart was already broken — how could it break any further?

"You're not going away again," Jan insisted.

"What did your Daddy tell you?" Shane asked carefully.

"He said it was an emergency and you had to leave. And if you came back, he would explain everything," Jan mumbled, looking at him.

Shane heard a noise behind him and froze — he knew it was Ilya. Jan must have noticed his unease.

"Dad, I know now that he also knows you're a whole new dad!" Jan said.

Shane felt Ilya's gaze on his back. "Yes… he knows."

Slowly, he turned around and looked at Ilya. He didn't know what to expect — but to his surprise, Ilya looked sad. Shane realized that his heart was broken too.

"Hello, Shane," Ilya said quietly.

Shane had seen pain and anguish in his eyes before — but never like this. He stood up.

"I… I just wanted to explain everything to Jan."

Ilya nodded, stepped closer to his son, and rested a hand on his head. He didn't seem able to speak.

Shane desperately wished he would forgive him — so they could bring back the love they had found, if only briefly. But he knew that hope would remain just that — hope.

"Jan? I want to tell you a story," Shane said gently. "It's about two brothers."

"A story?" Jan brightened, though he kept glancing uncertainly between Shane and Ilya.

"Sit down," Shane said, and they settled on the steps again. Ilya leaned against a pillar. Shane glanced up at him, and their eyes met briefly.

"Once upon a time, there were two brothers, Jan. Twins. Two little boys who looked exactly alike," Shane began nervously. "But they were very different. One of them was shy, often afraid — sometimes too afraid to play with other children. He spent a lot of time at home, reading or helping in the barn so he could ride there. The other brother wasn't shy at all. He had many friends. You could always see him laughing, running, jumping. But he never

studied, so school was very difficult for him."

Shane saw Ethan vividly in his mind, and it hurt deeply. A tear rolled down his cheek.

"What were their names?" Jan asked eagerly.

"Ethan and Shane," he answered quietly.

Jan's smile faded. "My other dad was called Ethan. The one who left…"

Shane stroked his hair. "I know. The twins lost their mother, too. Their father was very sad when she died. His heart was broken, and he couldn't be the kind of father he had been before. Not like Ilya."

Shane glanced at Ilya and saw tears in his eyes. After a brief pause, he continued.

"The twins were never very close, and over time they drifted further apart. Ethan went out a lot, met many people, bought a motorcycle, and went to parties. Shane studied and dreamed… And then one day, they went to different universities — and Ethan never came home again."

Jan's eyes widened. "Never again?"

"Never again," Shane said, feeling another tear fall. He didn't dare look at Ilya.

"So they were separated for many years. Shane missed his brother very much. Sometimes Ethan visited him, and they would go out to eat together — but then Ethan would disappear again. Shane didn't understand what he had done wrong, why his own brother seemed to care so little about him…"

He had to pause. Jan gently patted his knee. Shane's vision blurred.

"Don't cry, Dad," Jan whispered.

Shane nodded, swallowing hard. He looked up and saw Ilya's face drawn with pain. He wanted to throw himself into his arms — but he couldn't.

"But one day, Ethan came back. And he told Shane he needed his help. He asked him to do something terrible."

"Switch places?" Jan asked.

"Yes," Shane nodded. "Ethan asked Shane to go to his house and pretend to be him for a few days. I was so happy to see him again that I couldn't say no. You see, sweetheart — I'm Shane. I'm your dad's twin brother."

"But you're my dad now!" Jan cried, jumping to his feet.

Shane stood up shakily. “I’m your uncle. But I love you like you’re my son,” he whispered.

“No!” Jan stomped his foot. “You’re my new dad, and you can’t leave again!!”

Ilya took his son’s hand. “Shane has to go, sweetheart. He has another life in Ottawa.”

“I won’t let him go!” Jan screamed, pulling away. “He can’t leave!”

Shane looked at them both. Jan was frightened and angry, beginning to cry — and Ilya’s eyes were filled with tears. Silently, Shane begged him to ask him to stay.

But he didn’t.

“Shane has to go back to Ottawa,” Ilya said hoarsely.

Jan turned to Shane. “Please don’t go!”

The plea hit Shane like a blow. It shattered him.

“I did something wrong. I lied to you, and to Lilly, and to your father,” he whispered.

“But Dad told you to do it! It’s not your fault!” Jan cried.

Shane heard the front door open and close again. He glanced back and saw Lilly standing there, pale and expressionless. He closed his eyes, then turned back to Jan.

“But it was still my choice to lie, Jan. And that was wrong. Do you understand that?”

Jan nodded — but remained stubborn. “But now you’re not lying anymore. So you can stay!”

Shane was devastated. He looked up at Ilya.

“Olga has already packed your things,” Ilya murmured. “If she forgot anything, we’ll send it to you.”

He really meant it. He would forget everything they had shared and send him away.

“I’ll call a taxi,” Shane said quietly.

Ilya nodded and didn’t even offer to drive him to the airport himself.

“Dad!” Lilly shouted. “You can’t send him away!”

Ilya didn’t respond.

Shane walked past Lilly, unable even to force a faint smile, and reached for the door handle.

“How can you do this?” Lilly hissed at her father.

Shane turned back.

“Dad!” Jan shrieked in panic. “Dad!!”

Shane couldn’t move.

“Shh, sweetheart,” Ilya murmured, lifting Jan into his arms. The little boy kicked and struggled wildly, completely desperate.

Shane closed his eyes and somehow managed to step inside the house.

He could still hear Lilly shouting at Ilya, “You’re so stupid!!”

—

“I’m leaving now. Do you need anything else?”

Tom stepped out of the bungalow bedroom. His shirt was open, and he hadn’t shaved in days. The maid, hired by the landlord, stood in the main room, which served as a living room, kitchen, and dining area all in one.

Everything was clean and tidy. The refrigerator was well stocked. A ceiling fan turned slowly above them, and all the windows were wide open.

Behind the maid, Tom could see the wide, bright white beach and the sparkling blue sea.

“No, thanks,” he said.

She smiled at him, her large brown eyes wandering over his bare chest. “I can stay, if you want,” she said softly, meeting his gaze.

Tom didn’t have time for that. He knew exactly what she meant — and he wasn’t interested.

“See you tomorrow. Gracias,” he said finally, nodding.

The young woman pouted briefly, then smiled again as she left the door wide open, letting the warm breeze drift inside.

Tom went to the fridge and grabbed an ice-cold beer. He drank deeply, then stood in the open doorway, scanning the road — first to the north, then to the south, then back again.

Not a single vehicle in sight.

Where was Ethan?

He should have been there hours ago. Soon the sun would be setting.

Tom took another sip, walked through the overly clean, empty bungalow, and stepped out onto the back porch. A narrow path led straight to the nearby beach. He leaned against a post and stared out at the sea.

He hadn't been caught. Ethan was the smartest, most resourceful man Tom had ever known. No — he hadn't been caught. He was just late. Or maybe he had missed his flight.

Still, Tom couldn't help worrying. Not about Ethan's abilities — but because Ethan hadn't called. And that thought made a cold fear settle in his chest.

Suddenly, he heard a sound — a distant engine.

Tom rushed to the front of the bungalow.

A large vehicle — a bus or a camper van — was crawling slowly along the road from the north.

Tom's heart began to pound wildly. He tossed the beer can into the bushes and hurried toward the mailbox by the roadside. Shielding his eyes from the setting sun, he stared ahead.

Ethan is on that bus. I know it.

It felt like an eternity as the vehicle approached. As it drew closer, Tom saw that it was full of passengers.

He waited for it to slow down — waiting for Ethan to step out.

But it didn't slow down.

In disbelief, he watched it pass.

"Hey!" he shouted, running after it. "Hey! Señor! Stop!"

The van finally stopped. Tom ran until he reached the driver's window. The driver looked at him as if he were insane. Tom asked in English if there were any new passengers on board, but the man just shook his head.

Tom stared at the sweaty driver in shock, then slowly stepped back. The vehicle started moving again, and Tom jumped aside so the rear tire wouldn't crush his foot.

Why wasn't Ethan on that bus?

For the hundredth time that day, he reached into his back pocket. No messages.

Tom returned to the bungalow, grabbed another beer, and this time walked down the narrow, palm-lined path to the beach.

He stared out at the shoreline, into the setting sun. A figure was walking across the sand.

He narrowed his eyes, hoping it was real — and not just his imagination.

The figure was real.

Tom's heart leapt. He started walking, certain now that it was a man. The distance was still too great to see his face clearly.

He quickened his pace, smiling. The man became more distinct — blond hair, long, slender legs. Suddenly, Tom stopped.

Ethan had cut his hair short a week ago. And this man's skin was deeply tanned.

Tom stared in dismay. The man walked right past him.

Tom dropped his can.

He'll come. I know he will. He hasn't been caught. This… this can't be happening.

Slowly, he turned and walked back to the bungalow, then out to the road again. At the end of the driveway, beside the rotting mailbox, lay a large white rock.

The road was empty.

Tom sat down on the rock and looked north.

He would wait.

If Ethan didn't come today, he would come tomorrow. Or the next day.

Tom wouldn't leave this country without him.

He would wait — days, months… years.

-

He glanced in the rearview mirror as the unmarked car drove north along the highway. Traffic was heavy — it was almost 5:00 p.m., and commuters were heading home. Their prisoner seemed quiet, withdrawn… almost sad.

But that wasn't his concern. Nor was it his concern that the man insisted he was Shane Hollander. Their eyes met briefly in the mirror, and Ethan offered a faint smile. The officer returned it automatically.

Bill, his partner who was driving, noticed and sighed.

"I need to use the bathroom," Ethan said quietly.

Bill ignored him, but Dan turned around.

“We’ll be there in an hour. Can’t you wait that long?”

“At this pace, it’s more like two or three hours,” Ethan replied calmly. “I’m wearing handcuffs — and as far as I’m concerned, you can come into the stall with me.” He smiled, and Dan flushed slightly.

After a moment, Dan sighed and turned to Bill.

“Pull over at that gas station.”

Bill snorted. “If he really needs to pee, I’m a fairy.”

“Come on, just stop the car. He’s not going anywhere.”

There were five pumps at the station. Bill parked in front of the shop and got out.

Dan turned back to Ethan. “One moment.”

Ethan nodded. “Thank you.”

Bill entered the shop and asked a young clerk where the restroom was. He was directed to the back, down a narrow hallway. When he opened the door, he saw a small room — just a toilet, a sink with a mirror, and a trash bin.

Shaking his head, he went back outside and returned to the car.

“No problem,” he told Dan. “No windows. No way out.”

Dan nodded, opened the back door, and helped Ethan out. Their eyes met briefly, but neither spoke. Dan wasn’t supposed to remove the handcuffs — but where could Ethan possibly go? And how?

He unlocked the cuffs, tossed them onto the back seat, shut the door, and took Ethan by the arm.

“This way.”

“Your partner could learn a thing or two from you,” Ethan said as they entered the shop.

Dan flushed again and led him to the back.

“Take your time. Traffic’s bad anyway…”

Ethan chuckled, stepped into the restroom, and locked the door behind him. Dan leaned against it.

He can't escape.

After a few minutes, Dan checked his watch. How long had he been in there? Two minutes? Three? Five? It couldn't have been more than five. He decided to wait a bit longer.

When another five minutes passed, Dan cleared his throat awkwardly.

"Ethan? I mean — Mr. Hollander… uh… Mr. Rozanov?"

No response.

He knocked on the door, deciding to stick with the name the man claimed.

"Is everything okay?"

Silence.

A rush of unease filled him. There was no window in that tiny room — no way out.

He knocked again, harder.

"We need to get going. Are you all right?"

Still nothing.

The silence was suddenly unbearable.

Dan hurried to the counter, flashed his badge, and demanded the restroom key.

Moments later, he unlocked the door.

The room was empty.

The trash bin stood upside down on the closed toilet lid. The soap dispenser had been ripped from the wall and lay on the floor.

Dan slowly looked up.

Above the toilet was a ventilation grate — forced open. A dark square hole gaped down at him.

He stared, stunned.

He escaped.

Dan spun around and drew his weapon.

"Where does this vent lead?" he demanded of the clerk.

“How should I know?” the young man replied with a grin.

“Did you see him leave the store?”

“No,” he said, as if Dan were an idiot.

Dan rushed back into the shop, scanning the ceiling. All the other vents were intact. Was Ethan still crawling through the ducts above them?

“There’s a storage room in the back,” the clerk suggested eagerly. “Maybe he’s in there.”

They ran to a door marked *No Entry.* It wasn’t locked.

The clerk pushed it open. Dan stepped inside while the young man fumbled for the light switch.

The room lit up — and immediately Dan saw the open back door leading to the parking lot.

The clerk looked up at the ceiling. So did Dan.

Another vent — wide open.

Dan bolted outside. The highway was less than a hundred meters away, cars passing steadily at moderate speed.

“Someone must’ve picked him up,” the clerk said with a grin. “What did he do — kill someone or something?”

Dan felt his stomach drop.

“Or something,” he muttered.

—

Lilly was frantic. She stood in the foyer, where two suitcases and a garment bag were waiting. Her father had retreated to his office, and Shane was upstairs. She guessed he was showering and changing for his trip back to Ottawa.

She wiped the tears from her cheeks and ran upstairs, taking the steps two at a time. She rushed down the hallway and burst into the bedroom without knocking — then stopped, breathless.

Shane stood by the window. He turned when she entered.

“I can’t let you go. We love you, Shane. And Dad loves you too!”

Shane smiled sadly.

“I don’t think so. I’ve done something he’ll never forget — and more importantly, never forgive.”

Lilly felt like she couldn’t breathe. First her father had yelled at her in front of her friends, then David had been injured — and now this.

“I don’t understand! You and Dad are such hypocrites!!”

Shane looked at her briefly, then turned back to the window.

“Life isn’t always fair,” he murmured.

Tears filled Lilly’s eyes.

“But you love each other,” she said softly, a painful knot forming in her chest.

“Yes,” Shane replied, giving her a faint smile. “I love him.”

After a moment, he sighed, swallowing back a sob. “I should go.”

Lilly grabbed his arm. “No! Dad always talks about forgiveness — about how important it is, how you should apologize and forgive people. I’ve heard that speech a hundred times! But when it comes to him, he just refuses to forgive? I mean — I’m supposed to forgive him for humiliating me and being awful to David, but he can’t forgive you for coming here to help your brother?”

Shane shook his head silently, then pulled her into a tight embrace.

“I care about you very much. You can call me anytime,” he said softly. Then he straightened. “If your father allows it.”

“That’s bullshit!” Lilly shouted.

Shane gave her a tearful look, squared his shoulders, and hurried out.

Panic surged through Lilly. Shane was her father now — he couldn’t just leave. She needed him. Jan needed him. And she was certain her father needed him most of all.

Lilly ran after him.

"Shane!! Please don't go! I'll apologize to Dad! I'm not seeing David anymore — I’ll do anything you want, please!"

Shane whirled around and took her in his arms again. He cried quietly as he held her tightly, whispering into her ear:

"Lilly, you don't have to do anything differently because of me. I love you just the way you

are, okay?"

Lilly cried, and Shane gently wiped her tears away and kissed her on the forehead. Then he slowly went down the stairs. Lilly couldn't move and sank onto a step.

She heard the door open and close again, heard Olga say something, and Shane answer.

Snapping out of her trance, Lilly jumped up and ran down the remaining steps until she reached the front door. She saw Olga's car drive away with Shane in the passenger seat next to the housekeeper.

For a moment she stood there, frozen. Then she wiped her wet face with her sleeve and ran desperately to her father's office.

He was sitting at the desk, his head resting on his arms, his eyes closed as if he were asleep.

"Dad?"

He slowly straightened up. "What?"

"You do love him. You have to forgive him — you have to get him back!" Lilly nearly screamed.

Ilya stared at her. "You don't understand..." he finally mumbled.

"I understand!" Lilly stepped closer. "You love him, I love him, and Jan loves him! And we need him, Dad! Why don't you stick to all that forgiveness-and-forgetting stuff you always preach to me?"

Ilya stared at her, looking strange and miserable.

"I'm scared," he whispered.

Lilly was stunned. "But he's not like his brother. He's nice and sweet. And he loves us! He loves you! You're breaking his heart, Dad!"

"Lilly, you can't understand this—"

"Yes, I do understand! I understand that you're a pathetic coward!!" Lilly ran out.

"Hey!" Alexei called from the doorway and grabbed Lilly by the shoulders.

Lilly glared at him. "He's such an idiot, and I'm going to Ottawa to live with Shane." She shot an angry glance at her father, tore herself away from her uncle, and ran off.

Ilya stared at his brother, and Alexei returned the look.

"Do you have a minute?"

"Not if you came to lecture me."

Alexei smiled. "It's been a while since I've seen you cry."

Ilya felt the pain deep in his heart — the pain for the man he had only recently learned to love. The pain of losing Shane.

"Do you love him?"

Ilya gave his brother a dark look, turned to the window, and refused to answer.

"Stupid question. I already know the answer. You know, I have a very good understanding of human nature. And as little as I like Shane, I still like him. I think he's as different from Ethan as a brother can be, and I know he's fallen in love with you."

Ilya turned to him, trembling. *Does he love him?*

He wanted to believe it so badly. And somewhere deep down, he did. But if he loved him, how could he lie to him for so long?

He wasn't like Ethan. Ilya knew that — his damn heart told him so, even if he didn't want to trust it.

"You don't always get a second chance in life," he muttered, realizing he sounded like an idiot. But hadn't he also acted like one?

After all, he had played games too. The moment Shane looked deep into his eyes while Ilya was naked above him, he had known. He had known he wasn't Ethan.

At that moment, he remembered what Cliff had recently found out — that Ethan had a twin brother.

At that moment, he knew that the man beneath him, who felt so unbelievably wonderful, was his husband's twin brother.

He had been relieved, aroused, and had decided to enjoy every single moment until the game would inevitably end.

Because he wanted to be with him at all costs, because he had fallen helplessly in love with him, and because he had been selfish enough to wish that the game would never end.

Otherwise, they would have to face reality — something neither of them wanted.

"Really?" Alexei laughed. "People hope as long as they live, Ilya. And that means you get a billion chances."

"Goddamn it, Alexei! Since when are you on his side?" Ilya asked, as angry as he was

desperate.

All the time, while pretending not to know who Shane was, he had known that one day they would have to face the truth — and that it would end their love.

In a way, he was even angrier with himself than with Shane. Angry, frustrated, trapped in his own moral standards and self-righteousness. Strangely enough, the only person he no longer cared about was Ethan.

Being with Shane had completely erased his hatred for Ethan. He felt nothing for him anymore — no anger, no pain, nothing at all.

"I'm always on your side. Never forget that," Alexei said. "So listen. Shane is very brave. It must have been incredibly difficult for him to betray his own twin brother. And it doesn't matter that Ethan is a thief. I bet Shane will feel guilty for a long time — maybe for the rest of his life. But he still did the right thing. I'd say he was a victim of Ethan's schemes, just like you, Lilly, Jan, the Parkers, and half the town."

Ilya growled. "Damn it, you're not telling me anything new!"

"Then why are you sending him away?"

Ilya looked at him. That was a damn good question — and suddenly, he didn't have a damn good answer.

He was in love, he was scared, and he was angry — especially at himself. Now it was clear to him that he should have confronted Shane immediately with the truth the first time they slept together. How easy that was to see in hindsight.

While his mind insisted that no relationship could start like this, his heart told him he was a coward and a fool.

"Do you love him?" Alexei asked.

"Of course I love him."

Alexei smiled.

…

Shane stared out the window as Olga drove silently toward the highway.

His heart was shattered into so many pieces that he felt nothing at all. He couldn't think — and that was probably a good thing. If he could feel anything right now, he would collapse completely. He had to pull himself together.

The forest blurred past him.

Suddenly, Olga slowed down.

Shane wondered what was happening, but he was too exhausted and heartbroken to care. He reminded himself not to forget to thank Olga later for driving him all the way to the airport. He would have preferred a taxi, but Olga had canceled it without asking him. Shane sighed — and then heard quiet sobbing.

Olga braked and pulled over.

Shane closed his eyes. *What now?*

He couldn't handle another argument. No more confrontations, no more accusations. He didn't even know if he had apologized to her for the deception — but he didn't have the strength anymore.

"Get out of the car," Olga said grimly.

Shane turned his head — and froze.

The black barrel of a gun was pointed straight at him.

"Get out of the car," Olga hissed.

"Wh… wh—" Shane couldn't get a word out. Then his mind snapped back.

Olga? Olga was the one who had tried to kill his brother?

"I'm not Ethan," he choked.

"Get out!!" Olga shouted.

Shane pushed the door open and jumped out. He stumbled, and when his hands hit the wet ground, he heard Olga get out on the other side.

Olga wanted to kill his brother. It was Olga!!

Shane jumped up and ran.

A shot rang out.

Shane panted behind a mighty oak tree and crouched on the ground.

"I should have done that a long time ago," Olga growled.

Shane pressed himself against the tree trunk. "I'm not Ethan, Olga!! Don't do this!"

"I know who you are!" Olga laughed. "There are two of you — my God, there are two of you! And this time it's even worse than before! You seduced him — Ethan could do that too.

But back then it was just sex, and now Ilya has fallen in love with you! I won't let him go through all that again! Now get up!!"

Shane didn’t move.

"Olga, think about what you're doing! I'm not Ethan, and I would never hurt Ilya! I lo—"

Olga cut him off.

"He took advantage of him from the very first day they met. When he came back from Ottawa and started using Jan, I knew what I had to do! But I failed. Now, thank God, he's in prison where he belongs! But I’m not going to stand by and watch Ilya destroy himself and his children by getting involved with you! Do you hear me??"

The bark bruised his cheek. Shane looked around in panic but saw nothing but trees — endless trees. He couldn’t run. There was nowhere to hide.

Then he heard Olga’s footsteps approaching.

"You burned down his stable!! How could you do that? And his horses… he could have lost half a dozen!" he shouted, gasping.

"I thought the fire was foolproof. I thought I’d succeed. I just did what I had to do. Do you think I wanted to kill his horses?! Get up, Shane!“

Shane straightened slightly and carefully peeked around the trunk. Olga spotted him immediately and fired.

Shane jerked his head back; the bullet struck the tree just a centimeter from him. He couldn’t breathe. She was a very good shot.

"Ilya doesn't love me," he gasped. "He sent me away. Why are you doing this? Ethan is in prison, and Ilya and I will never be together again! Isn’t that enough for you??"

Another shot rang out. Shane felt the impact shudder through the tree just behind his head. He struggled for air. Somehow he had to get to safety — but how? And where?

He glanced around desperately. Nothing had changed. The forest was dense, but there was no real cover.

Then he spotted a fallen tree about fifteen meters away, rotting on the ground. It would offer much better protection than the oak.

A car door slammed.

"Olga? Shane? Are you all right??" Ilya shouted.

For a moment, Shane thought he was imagining things. He craned his neck and saw Ilya

standing by the roadside, bathed in the light of the setting sun, his pickup parked in front of the jeep.

Olga turned at the sound of his voice. Shane saw the exact moment Ilya noticed the gun — his face went pale.

"Ilya, she wants to kill me!" Shane shouted.

Ilya’s eyes widened in horror.

"Ilya, it’s for your own good. Go home. No one has to know," Olga said.

Ilya didn’t move. His gaze shifted past her to Shane.

"Shane? Are you hurt?"

Shane shook his head, then called out, "No!"

Ilya held his gaze for a moment, then turned back to Olga.

"Give me the gun."

Olga hesitated.

"Ilya, I have to protect you and the kids. I can’t live with myself if I let you fall for him again."

"This is my decision. Now give me the gun," he said firmly.

Shane dropped to his hands and knees. Olga had turned her back to him; she stood about three meters away.

"Don’t you see? He’s trying to trick you again!!"

"You burned down my stable..." Ilya said, his voice strained. "That’s not a solution."

Shane lunged forward and tackled Olga from behind.

She spun around instantly and fired.

"Shane, don’t!!" Ilya screamed.

A bullet whizzed past Shane’s head for the second time in his life — just before he collided with her.

A sharp pain flared in his shoulder. Then they both went down — Olga on her back, Shane face-first onto the ground.

Ilya dropped to his knees beside him.

"Are you all right??"

Shane looked into his wide blue eyes and slowly lowered himself onto his chest, trembling.

"Yes," he whispered. "You're here."

Ilya pulled him tightly against his chest. "I wanted to ask you to come back," he murmured hoarsely into his hair.

Shane froze in amazement, then slowly looked up. "Really?"

Ilya nodded.

They both turned to Olga, who was struggling to sit up.

Ilya bit his lip. "Are you hurt, Olga?"

She burst into tears. "I was just trying to protect you. You know that, don't you?"

Ilya stood and helped Shane to his feet, giving him a reassuring look before letting go.

Then he extended a hand to Olga. She took it, and he helped her up.

"I know," he said quietly. "I know how much you love me and the kids."

"Really?" she said loudly. "I'd give my life for each of them — you know that, don't you?"

Shane removed his jacket and used it to pick up the gun so his fingerprints wouldn't be on it. A tear ran down his cheek. He could imagine what was going on in Ilya's mind. Olga was practically family — like a beloved aunt.

Ilya came after him. Ilya didn't let him go.

Despite everything, Shane found himself smiling through his tears.

"I know that, Olga," Ilya said softly.

Shane turned as another car approached. A black patrol car rolled up. He and Ilya exchanged a glance.

The car stopped. Alexei left the engine running and stepped out.

"What's going on here?" he asked, looking around.

No one answered. Shane stepped toward him and handed over the jacket with the gun inside. Alexei looked into it, then slowly raised his eyes.

"I had no choice!" Olga cried. "Alexei, you're not going to arrest me, are you? I know you hate him too! Someone had to do something!!"

Alexei's expression shifted — confused, conflicted.

Suddenly, Ilya stood beside Shane, wrapping an arm around his waist and holding him close. Shane knew then that everything would be all right.

"Ethan escaped," Alexei finally said.

…

The moment they entered McGill's front door, Lilly came thundering down the stairs. Ilya held Shane's hand tightly, and Shane knew he felt the same — that after everything, neither of them wanted to let go.

Alexei, recovering from his shock, had taken Olga into custody. Shane knew Ilya was deeply shaken — not only by Olga's actions, but by Ethan's escape. And once free, Shane knew, Ethan wouldn't be caught again.

"You're back!" Lilly cried happily, running toward him with open arms.

Shane smiled and hugged her tightly. "Yes. I am."

Lilly looked at Ilya. "You did it. You followed him. You actually did it!"

Ilya laughed softly and finally smiled. "Yes, I did." His hand was still intertwined with Shane's. "You were right, Lilly. I couldn't let him go."

Shane met his gaze, wondering what would come next. Ethan might disappear without a trace — but what about Olga?

"Are you all right?" Shane asked quietly.

Ilya hesitated. "A lot has happened. I think I need some time to process it all." He sighed, then gently turned Shane to face him. "A lot has happened — not just today… I still have a few things to tell you." He smiled shyly.

Shane nodded and smiled back. Suddenly, Ilya kissed his forehead and pulled him close again.

They stood there for a moment, and Shane let himself sink into the warmth of his embrace. After a while, Lilly cleared her throat — but neither of them noticed.

Ilya leaned back slightly, just enough to look into Shane's brown eyes.

"You know what drives me crazy? If Ethan hadn't shown up at that business dinner six years

ago… we would have met back then."

Shane was astonished, because the same thought had crossed his mind.

"I've had that thought too," he confessed quietly. And it struck him how easy it suddenly felt to overcome the abyss of his deception with this man in front of him — and to build a foundation for a shared life.

Ilya smiled at him and pulled him close again. Shane tilted his head back slightly so he could kiss him. At last, he realized that the impossible had become reality.

Ilya had forgiven him — and they would stay together.

Lilly coughed louder. "Hello? I'm still here," she said mischievously.

Shane gasped softly and stepped back, meeting Lilly's grinning face.

"How's David, Lilly?"

Her face lit up.

"They moved him out of intensive care. They say he's out of danger and might be home in a few days! He can't go to school for a while, but yeah…" She looked down, suddenly uncertain.

Shane stepped closer and pulled her into his arms. "I'm so glad to hear that, Lilly," he whispered into her hair. "You have no idea."

Lilly leaned back to look at him.

"I'm going to break up with David. I promised I wouldn't see him again if you stayed, so…"

Before Shane could respond, Ilya stepped forward.

"Lilly, David needs you right now. Who's going to help him get back to school if not you?"

Lilly's eyes widened. "Really?"

"Really." Ilya smiled, then cleared his throat. "I'll try to be more open-minded about David. I mean, I don't know him yet — but I'd like to, if that's okay."

"Dad…" Lilly stammered, momentarily speechless.

"I want you to be happy, Lilly," Ilya said gently.

She stared at him, and after a moment Shane nudged her lightly. Lilly blushed, then stepped into her father's arms.

"Thank you," she said hoarsely.

"I love you so much, Lilly. That's never going to change — no matter what. I hope you know that," Ilya said firmly.

"I know, Dad. I love you too," she whispered. She pulled back, wiped her tears, and smiled at Shane.

Shane smiled back. "Is Jan in his room?"

"He's with Cliff at the stable," Lilly replied. Then she ran upstairs. "See you later!" she called happily.

A moment later, Shane found himself back in Ilya's arms.

"How are you going to deal with what Olga did?" he asked quietly.

Ilya gently brushed a strand of hair behind Shane's ear. "I don't know. I really don't. I'm very sad about what happened. What about you — how are you dealing with Ethan's escape?"

Shane hesitated. "I don't know either. I'm not angry anymore… I just want to look forward. With you. And Lilly and Jan."

"I agree completely." Ilya smiled. "But I'd like to talk to you about something else. Shall we go to the living room?"

Shane nodded and let Ilya lead him into the next room.

…

Ilya sat down on the sofa, and Shane sat cross-legged beside him so they could look each other in the eye.

For a moment, neither of them spoke. When Shane noticed Ilya nervously picking at his sweater, he gently placed his hand over his fingers.

"Hey… it's okay. Just tell me what you're thinking. I'm here."

Ilya met his gaze, and slowly his tension eased. He gave Shane a faint smile.

"After we slept together — and I knew you weren't Ethan — I waited for you to tell me the truth. I wanted to give myself completely to you, if you stopped pretending. And when you finally told me… I was just overwhelmed. I'd seen my daughter cry all day, I was scared out of my mind, and then you told me everything… it was just too much."

Tears gathered in Shane's eyes, but he blinked them away.

"When I realized you weren't him, I believed in the good in you. Yes, there was a chance you

were playing a role — but I saw you. I saw the way you looked at me. I saw you — completely open and vulnerable. I saw how you cared for Lilly and Jan like they were your own children. I knew it couldn't all be an act."

He paused.

"So I waited for the moment you would finally tell me the truth. But when it came… I doubted everything. You told me your name, and I knew it — and that scared me. I panicked. I thought maybe you and your brother had been working together all along… that I'd been wrong about everything. And then, the next day, when Alexei came and arrested you… it only made it worse. I thought it proved my fears — that you were part of that horrible scheme."

Now Shane couldn't hold back his tears any longer. Ilya gently cupped his cheek and wiped them away.

"I was wrong. I sent you away, and I'm so sorry. God… you could have died. I was almost too late and then—"

"But you weren't," Shane interrupted softly. "And you know I don't blame you, right? Everything you felt was completely understandable. I mean… this whole situation is insane." He gave a quiet, shaky laugh. "I was confused myself in the beginning. And I never planned to fall in love with you, but…"

"But…?" Ilya asked.

Shane looked into his eyes — so blue, brighter than ever.

"But the problem is i did fall in love with you."

For a moment, Ilya said nothing.

Then, „Do you want that problem to go away?"

Shane smiled and shook his head, „I don't ever want that problem to ever go away."

Then Ilya cupped Shane's face and kissed him gently.

It took Shane a second to respond — but then he melted into the kiss completely.

At first it was soft and careful, but gradually it deepened. The kiss grew more intimate, more certain — like something long overdue finally finding its place.

When Ilya finally pulled back, both of them were breathless.

"I finally got to kiss you the way I've wanted to all this time," Ilya whispered. "You. Shane."

Shane smiled, his hand still resting in Ilya's hair.

"That was—"

"I’m in love with you too," Ilya blurted out. "How could I not be? It hurt so much to see you suffering when you told me the truth. You looked so broken, and all I wanted was to hold you… but instead I pushed you away."

"Ilya… look at me." Shane gently touched his cheek and waited until their eyes met. "You don’t have to apologize. After what my brother did to you, I’d be the one who should—" He stopped, swallowing. "But we’re here now. Together. That’s what matters."

"Stay with me," Ilya said suddenly.

Shane searched his face — but Ilya was completely serious.

"I mean… would you like to stay here? With me? With us?" he asked quietly.

Shane smiled. "I think you already know the answer."

-

Olga was not put on trial but was placed in a psychiatric facility. Ethan was never found. Shane suspected he had fled somewhere to South America — it was only a feeling, but a strong one.

Shane tried not to dwell on the past. He threw himself into his new life.

Every day, he took Jan to kindergarten and picked him up again. He trained regularly with Jacob, and soon Ilya surprised him with a beautiful grey horse. In the evenings, they often cooked together, and several times a week Alexei joined them for dinner.

Two weeks later, Hayden came by in the early evening after learning the truth.

"I broke up with Jackie," he said.

Shane simply nodded.

"I had a feeling for a long time that she liked Ethan. But I didn’t think they’d actually… you know. Maybe I was naive. I didn’t want to believe that my wife *and* my best friend would betray me like that."

"I’m really sorry it turned out this way," Shane said sincerely.

Hayden studied him for a moment, then smiled.

"It’s not your fault."

Shane smiled back, relieved.

"And besides… Cliff has been quite a distraction for me."

Shane frowned. "Cliff?"

Hayden blushed slightly. "Yeah… we've been seeing each other almost every day since the breakup. He's been helping me get through everything."

Shane couldn't help but smile knowingly. After a brief moment, Hayden cleared his throat.

"So… fresh start?"

Shane laughed softly. "Yes, please."

Hayden extended his hand, and Shane shook it.

-

Shane lay on Ilya's chest while he gently stroked his hair, occasionally twirling a strand and pressing soft kisses to his temple.

"I don't think I've ever been this happy," Ilya said quietly.

Shane lifted his head to look at him. "Neither have I," he said with a soft smile. "It's getting easier every day to leave the past behind."

He thought not only of his life as Ethan — but also of the fact that Ethan had once been Ilya's husband and had now vanished without a trace.

"I know," Ilya murmured, pulling him closer and burying his face in Shane's hair. "Sometimes I can hardly believe I was ever with anyone else."

Shane fell silent for a moment.

"I think I was scared," he admitted. "I was afraid it wouldn't work after all."

"That we wouldn't work?" Ilya asked, propping himself up on one elbow.

Shane placed his hand on his cheek. "I said I *was* feeling scared." He searched for the right words.

"I guess I was afraid the past wouldn't let us go. But the last few weeks have blended seamlessly into a new life. It was so easy to slip into this life with you. Sometimes I forget there was a time when I didn't live here — when I wasn't with you," Shane explained seriously. "And then suddenly I woke up and wasn't afraid anymore. I was just happy."

Ilya kissed the tip of his nose. "I was worried about the past too — until the day I followed you and got you back. That day, I just shut out all my fears because… because you were

more important to me than fear."

They looked into each other’s eyes, and after a few seconds, Shane broke the silence.

"Let’s make a pact. This is the last time we talk about the painful past between us — and about Ethan."

Ilya smiled. "That’s a good idea." He sat up. "We’ll never see him again. I’m sure of it."

"Yes… I can feel that too," Shane murmured.

Ilya took his hand. "Maybe we’ll have to wait a long time before we can get married legally."

Shane blinked, then let out a soft laugh. "Is that a proposal?"

Ilya laughed and brushed a quick kiss over his lips. "I think I can do better than that," he teased.

Shane smiled at him, his eyes glistening. "I love you."

Ilya grew serious. "I love you too, Shane. *So much.*“

"Say it to me in Russian, please."

And Ilya did. First, he whispered it softly against his lips, then again and again like a mantra, as he covered Shane’s body with kisses, piece by piece.

Chapter End Notes

most people didn’t suspect that this person was behind it, hehe.

buuut I have one more important question for you: who would like an epilogue — just everyday life with Shane and Ilya, Lilly, and Jan?? (this would be chapter ten) <33

Chapter 10: TEN

Chapter Notes

Here you go, your extra-large portion of cuteness!! <33

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Three years later

It was early in the morning. Shane was barely awake; everything was blurry. After rubbing his eyes with both hands, he noticed Ilya standing in the middle of the room, getting dressed.

“You’re always up so early,” Shane mumbled.

Ilya laughed, walked over to the bed, bent down, and kissed him on the tip of his nose, then on his mouth.

“Mmh.” Shane slid a hand into Ilya’s hair, tugging gently.

“I love early mornings when it feels like the rest of the world is still asleep and you’re the only one awake, you know?”

Shane nodded. “Yeah, I know.” He smiled and lightly touched Ilya’s face, brushing over every feature with his fingers.

Ilya gave him another kiss on the lips before straightening up and quietly leaving the room.

…

“Jan, can you wake your sister?”

Jan nodded eagerly and ran happily up the stairs.

Ilya had just come in from outside, still in his riding clothes. He walked around the kitchen island, smiling widely, and greeted Shane with a tender kiss on the back of his neck. Then he placed a few more light kisses on the sensitive skin behind his ear until Shane giggled softly and finally turned in Ilya’s arms, wrapping his hands around his neck to pull him closer.

“Hi,” Ilya whispered.

Shane traced his cheekbone with his thumb and smiled shyly. “Hi.”

Ilya let out a soft laugh and kissed his chin, then his mouth. Shane immediately deepened the

kiss, but then murmured, “We have to cook, you know.”

“Why can’t you indulge my dream for even a minute, huh?” Ilya laughed quietly, and Shane pressed another kiss to his neck, then his shoulder. “Fine — one minute of pretending.”

Ilya smiled broadly, pulled Shane closer, gripped the fabric of his shirt at his hips, and kissed him passionately.

After a few moments of heavy making out, Lilly entered the kitchen and cleared her throat. Jan followed her, and Ilya pulled back slightly while Shane turned red.

Still in her pajamas, Lilly went straight to the fridge and took out a carton of orange juice.

Ilya frowned. “Did you just get up?”

Lilly filled her glass and rolled her eyes. “Here we go again.”

“It’s 1:00 p.m., Lilly.”

She emptied her glass in two big gulps before finally speaking. “I don’t get it. Why do parents get mad when you sleep all day? Like, I’m staying out of trouble and I’m not spending your money, so what’s the issue?” she mumbled, and Shane laughed.

“Clever girl.”

Lilly smirked at him.

A smile spread across Ilya’s face, smoothing the wrinkles on his forehead. He laughed too and absentmindedly ran a hand through Shane’s hair, gently tugging at a few strands. Shane bit his lip to keep from grinning, but then lifted his head, looked into Ilya’s eyes, smiled, and brought their lips together briefly. And then again. And again.

Jan giggled. After a few pecks, Shane pulled back and raised his eyebrows.

“So, what shall we cook?”

“Pizza!!” Jan shouted enthusiastically.

Lilly sighed. “No, I had that yesterday.” Shane sighed loudly — he knew this would turn into another long discussion.

“We could make something with potatoes,” Ilya suggested.

“Something with potatoes?” Jan looked confused.

“Oh my God, yes! I’m all for it!” Lilly exclaimed, and Shane laughed.

“Well, that’s a relief.”

“I don’t like potatoes,” Jan mumbled, but Lilly nudged him lightly.

“Of course you like them. There are so many ways to eat potatoes. Breakfast? Hash browns. Fast food? French fries. Fancy dinner? Baked potatoes. Then there’s mashed potatoes, potato chips, and so on.”

Everyone stared at her until Shane clapped his hands together.

“Your sister is right, Jan. There’s a potato dish for every occasion. So, are you okay with us making something?” he asked, gently squeezing Jan’s shoulder.

Jan groaned. “Fine.”

Yes, it wasn’t easy to please a nineteen-year-old and a six-year-old at the same time.

…

“Jan, don’t you have homework to do?” Ilya asked, raising his eyebrows.

Jan slowly turned toward him and sighed loudly.

Ilya laughed. “You have to do it today. Tomorrow’s the wedding, and then there won’t be time. Go get your books — you can work down here,” he offered.

Jan slowly stood up and made his way to his room.

“And you?” Ilya looked at his daughter, taking a sip of his coffee.

Lilly slowly looked up and stared at him in confusion, as if she couldn’t believe he was speaking to her.

“Dad, I’m in my first year of college. I don’t think you need to remind me about my responsibilities,” she scoffed.

“I know, but I’m just saying there’s going to be a lot going on tomorrow, and there won’t be much time, you know. And—”

“Don’t worry,” Lilly assured him. “I’ve got it under control, Dad.” She smirked, and Ilya nodded, smiling gratefully at her.

When he looked over at Shane, who was preparing his next lesson on his laptop, he couldn’t help but grin. Shane was always completely absorbed in his work, forgetting everything around him.

In this state, almost nothing could distract him. But Ilya didn’t care. He was perfectly happy just staring at Shane — his longer black hair falling loosely onto his forehead.

“What are you looking at, huh?” Shane asked fondly, his eyes still fixed on the screen in front of him.

Ilya smiled and gently placed a hand on Shane’s hip, tracing small circles with his thumb.

“It’s hard to work if you’re trying to distract me…” Shane mumbled. Ilya smiled at the thought that this was one of the rare things that could actually distract him — gentle touches, just with his thumb.

“Did you know that the actress who played Sansa in Game of Thrones adopted the dog from the show and now it’s her pet?” Ilya asked, clearly excited about this fact.

“You mean the wolf?” Shane asked absently.

“Yes, the dog that played the wolf.”

Shane frowned slightly. “Wasn’t that a real wolf?”

Ilya laughed. “No, sweetheart, it was a dog.”

Shane shrugged. “Seemed like a wolf to me.”

Ilya tightened his grip on Shane’s hip and pulled him closer to his side.

“And do you know what you look like?” Ilya whispered into his ear. “A little kitten.” He kissed him before Shane could respond.

Shane stayed still for a moment, then returned the kiss and deepened it, one arm wrapping around Ilya’s neck.

“God, you two have a bedroom,” Lilly mumbled as she grabbed her glass of water.

Shane nearly fell off his chair, having forgotten that Lilly was sitting at the other end of the table.

Ilya giggled and turned to his daughter. “So, how’s it going with David?”

“Good,” Lilly answered simply, though she smiled widely at her screen.

“Yeah?”

Lilly laughed. “Last week he talked for like an hour about having kids. It was a little weird, but kind of cute, I think.”

“Wait, what?” Shane asked, laughing, while Ilya choked on his drink, which only made Shane laugh harder as he patted him on the back.

“Well, okay. Wow. I mean, that shouldn’t surprise us. He’s totally into you,” Ilya finally said.

Lilly blushed and cleared her throat. “Yeah, but imagine if I were pregnant right now.”

“I honestly don’t want to imagine that yet, little one,” Ilya mumbled.

“Then I’d already be a grandfather,” Shane pointed out.

“A really hot one,” Ilya said with a smirk.

“Eww, Dad!!” Jan shrieked as he returned to the table, throwing his schoolbooks onto it and covering his ears. Even Lilly burst out laughing.

…

“I hate biology,” Jan groaned, letting his head drop onto his arms. Ilya laughed and ruffled his hair.

“You’ve got to get through it, kiddo. We all did…” he sighed, and Shane looked up from his laptop, raising his eyebrows.

“Always so little love for science subjects,” he laughed, grinning at Ilya.

Ilya chuckled. “Not everyone’s a genius like you, you know.”

Shane giggled while Jan rolled his eyes.

“Maybe I’ll just drop out of school. I mean, Bill Gates was a dropout, and he turned out fine…”

Ilya sighed. “Yeah, but he dropped out of Harvard, not third grade, Jan. And it’s important to learn some things for your future and—”

“No, it’s not, Dad,” Jan interrupted, rolling his eyes. “Like, never.”

“You know, there are jobs where those skills come in handy. Like your dad’s, for example.”

Jan raised his eyebrows. “Yeah, he’s a teacher for those subjects, and that’s like one of the few jobs where it actually matters.”

Ilya gave Shane a helpless look, and Shane laughed softly as he finished typing.

Before Jan could say anything else, Shane closed his laptop and said, “I can help you, if you want.”

Jan’s face lit up. “Cool! Then I’ll definitely be better than Amber!”

Shane laughed and reached for Jan’s book. “Let’s get to work, then.”

Jan slid his chair closer and leaned forward eagerly. Shane smiled, then finally glanced up at Ilya, who gave him a wide grin and mouthed, “Good luck.”

Shane chuckled quietly. Jan gave him a light slap on the shoulder, which made Shane turn his attention back to the books in front of him.

…

“There’s something I’ve been meaning to tell you…” Shane mumbled.

Ilya hummed softly. “That sounds dangerous.”

Shane smiled faintly. “It’s not. Well… maybe a little.”

Ilya chuckled and pulled him closer. “Alright, go on then.”

Shane hesitated for a second before continuing, “Hayden texted me earlier.”

“Everything okay?”

“Yeah. More than okay, actually.” Shane shifted slightly so he could look up at him. “He’s bringing Cliff tomorrow.”

Ilya raised his brows. “To the wedding?”

Shane nodded. “And Amber, too.”

For a moment, Ilya just looked at him — then a slow smile spread across his face. “Wow.”

“Yeah,” Shane laughed quietly. “That was my reaction too.”

Ilya let out a soft breath, his hand absentmindedly tracing along Shane’s side. “That’s… kind of a big step, isn’t it?”

“It is,” Shane agreed. “But now Jackie isn’t making their lives difficult anymore, and they can finally enjoy their time together.”

Ilya tilted his head slightly. “But is it really okay for you that they’re coming to the wedding together? Considering your past with Cliff?”

Shane smiled, a little softer now. “I am. Cliff seems good for Hayden. They are really happy together. And from what he says, Amber’s excited.”

Ilya huffed a quiet laugh. “Kids usually are when there’s a party.”

Shane nudged him lightly. “Hey, ours are too.”

“Fair point,” Ilya admitted, grinning. “You really do have a thing for emotional timing.”

“I do not,” Shane protested, though he was smiling.

“You do,” Ilya insisted softly, brushing his thumb over Shane’s freckles. “But I like it.”

Shane’s expression softened. “So… you’re okay with it?”

Ilya didn’t hesitate this time. He leaned down, pressing a gentle kiss to Shane’s forehead. “Of course I am.”

Shane relaxed against him again.

“Besides,” Ilya added with a quiet smirk, “if they survive this family at a wedding…”

Shane laughed. “Then they’re definitely meant to stay.”

“Exactly.”

“But you know,” Ilya whispered, twisting Shane’s hair between his fingers, “as long as you’re there, everything’s fine for me.”

Shane giggled. “Who’s cheesy now, huh?” He pressed a soft kiss to Ilya’s chest, right where his heart was. “I will definitely be there.”

Then he felt Ilya smiling above him — and it didn’t stop.

“What?” Shane asked.

“Mmh? I’m just thinking.”

“About what?”

“About corny stuff.” Ilya laughed quietly before adding, “About you.”

Shane turned his head toward him and smiled sweetly. “What in particular?”

“Let me think.” Ilya began, gently rubbing Shane’s back. “That you’re incredibly beautiful. That you still keep stumbling over your own feet — which is sometimes dangerous, but infinitely adorable. That when you’re sad or grumpy, you don’t just crave chocolate ice cream — it actually calms you down. That every time you think hard, you lick your lip, which drives me crazy. And that nobody on this earth has a bigger heart than you. Honestly… if I could build a person, they’d be like you.”

“Oh…” Shane said softly, a little overwhelmed, not having expected this. He fell quiet for a moment.

“And what are you thinking?” Ilya asked, his thumb now gently stroking Shane’s cheek.

“I think… that I don’t deserve you.”

“You deserve the world.”

“You are my world.”

“See? Then you definitely deserve me,” Ilya smirked.

Shane smiled, tears in his eyes, and slowly leaned up to kiss him.

…

Shane woke to small hands tugging lightly at his shoulder.

He blinked into the darkness, disoriented, until he recognized a silhouette in front of him. “Jan?”

No answer — just soft sobbing.

Shane immediately sat up and turned on the bedside lamp. Jan stood in front of him, trembling, his cheeks wet with tears.

“What’s wrong, sweetheart?” Shane asked worriedly.

“I—I had a nightmare…” Jan stuttered, and fresh tears rolled down his face.

Shane lifted the duvet and gently took the little boy’s hand. “Come here.”

Jan climbed into the bed between him and Ilya. Shane kissed his forehead and pulled him close against his chest.

“It’s okay. I’m here. We’re here,” Shane whispered. “We’ll leave the light on until you fall asleep, okay?”

Jan nodded, his crying slowly calming as Shane whispered to him. He buried his face into Shane’s neck while Shane softly stroked his hair.

“Shane?” Ilya mumbled sleepily. When he saw Jan curled up against Shane, he immediately sat up, rubbing his eyes. “What happened?” he asked, looking at Shane with concern.

Before Shane could answer, Jan spoke. “There was an angry wizard, and he wanted to take me… and then I was alone… and nobody was there… I—I was all alone and you weren’t there and…” His voice broke again.

“Hey,” Ilya said softly, moving closer and kissing Jan’s forehead. “It’s okay. You’re not alone. You’re never alone, okay?”

Jan nodded and looked up briefly to meet Ilya’s eyes.

“Jan… is it possible that you and Amber watched Harry Potter yesterday?”

Jan didn’t answer — he just lay there stiffly.

“Jan?” Ilya frowned.

The little boy sighed and finally muttered, “Yes… but only the first part, and not—”

“Only the first part? Jan, we told you not to watch that movie.“

“But why? I love watching films, and Dad loves films too!” Jan protested, suddenly wide awake.

“There’s nothing wrong with liking films, Jan,” Ilya said, sighing and running a hand over his face.

“But—”

“But it is wrong to watch films we’ve forbidden you to watch.”

Jan stared at them, unsure what to say.

“Jan, Harry Potter, even just the first part, isn’t for six-year-olds. See? You even had a nightmare about it.”

For a moment, everything was quiet. When Jan tried to speak again, Ilya gently cut him off. “No. You’re too young, and that’s final. I don’t want to have this discussion again, okay?” His tone was firm.

Jan finally mumbled a quiet, “Okay…”

“We’re not trying to forbid you anything, Jan,” Shane added softly. “We just want you to be okay.”

Jan nodded, still a little sad, which made Shane’s chest tighten.

“It’s okay now. You’re here, and we’re here,” Shane said gently. “And you are never, ever alone, okay?”

Jan smiled. “Tomorrow you’re getting married!” His face lit up instantly, so bright that Shane couldn’t help but laugh as he brushed Jan’s messy hair behind his ear. “Are you excited?”

“God, yes!!” Jan said proudly, and Ilya laughed.

“Now go back to bed, and we’ll see each other tomorrow, okay?” Shane said.

Jan nodded eagerly, jumped off the bed — and nearly fell.

Ilya chuckled. “Careful, little man.”

But Jan just waved him off and finally ran out of the room.

After a few seconds, Ilya turned to Shane. “I love Harry Potter,” he said, and Shane laughed. “I know, baby, I know.”

Ilya kissed Shane a few times on the lips until he drifted off to sleep again. But Ilya couldn’t fall asleep anymore. Tomorrow would be the day. Tomorrow, Shane would be his husband. He would take his name. He would officially become part of this family — even though, in truth, he had been for a long, long time.

Carefully, Ilya got out of bed and quietly left the room, heading down the stairs and out onto the terrace to get some fresh air.

When he got there, he saw Lilly wrapped in a blanket on the bench, looking out over the fields, which shimmered like a dark blanket dotted with tiny lights from the fireflies.

“Lilly?” Ilya asked softly.

After a moment, she turned to him and smiled weakly, a little tired. “Hey.”

“Are you all right?”

“Yes, of course. I just couldn’t sleep.”

Ilya chuckled quietly. “Are you as excited as I am?”

Lilly looked at him fondly. “Dad, there’s no need to be nervous. You and Shane are made for each other.”

Ilya smiled and turned his gaze back to the fields. The view always calmed him. “He’s perfect.”

“And so are you,” Lilly said, and Ilya turned back to her with a bright smile.

They talked about Lilly’s dream wedding, how many children she wanted to have, and what kind of career she hoped to pursue.

“How have your lectures been going lately?” Ilya asked.

Lilly lit up at the question and started talking enthusiastically about her latest topics in her science classes — without stopping for nearly half an hour.

But Ilya didn’t mind. He didn’t even want to talk. He just wanted to listen to his daughter. He was so incredibly proud of her.

“Why are you smiling like that?” Lilly asked at some point.

“Hm? Oh. I’m just fascinated.”

“By what?”

“By you.”

Lilly blushed and looked down at her lap, but Ilya continued.

“We all know you’re not Shane’s biological daughter, but…”

“But what?”

“You’re so much like him.”

Lilly looked up at him.

“You’re curious. You love science, but you’re also open to other perspectives. You even have the same dimples when you laugh — it’s almost creepy,” Ilya added with a grin, and Lilly laughed quietly.

“And he has the biggest heart, full of compassion and love.”

Lilly nodded and looked back out over the fields as a soft breeze moved through the night.

“That’s something you have in common too,” Ilya said gently.

Lilly looked at him again and brushed a small tear from her cheek.

“But when I look at David, I can definitely say you don’t share Shane’s excellent taste in men,” Ilya added with a teasing grin.

“Dad!!” Lilly laughed, burying her face in her hands.

—

Shane walked slowly down the stairs. There were only a few minutes left before the ceremony. At the bottom, he found Jan bouncing up and down impatiently. It was ridiculously cute, but Shane kept that to himself — he was sure Jan would just roll his eyes.

Instead, Shane placed a hand on his back and guided him toward the door.

Alexei stood in the foyer and immediately walked over, smiling. “Excited?”

Shane nodded, laughed softly, then sighed. “Kind of, yeah.”

Alexei smiled and nudged him with his shoulder. “I’m really glad it all turned out this way.

You two are good together."

Shane looked up and saw nothing but sincerity in Alexei's eyes, so he pulled him into a tight hug.

"Thank you, Alexei. For everything."

As Alexei turned to join the other guests, Shane noticed Hayden leaning casually against the wall at the end of the foyer. He smiled and walked over.

When he reached him, he pulled Shane into a long hug. "I think it's time. You ready?"

…

When Shane stood just a few steps away from Ilya, he couldn't hold it back anymore. "God, you look fucking handsome."

Ilya's blue eyes sparkled as he smiled brightly. "So do you." He reached for Shane's hand and gently kissed his wrist.

During the ceremony, they both said their vows. A single tear rolled down Shane's cheek as he listened to Ilya's russian words.

When Ilya wiped it away with his thumb, Shane let out a shy chuckle, and Ilya's smile only grew wider.

Everything else felt like a blur — the moment they were declared married, the exchange of rings, the cheers from the crowd.

But one thing wasn't a blur.

When Ilya leaned in, brushed their noses together, and kissed him — long, slow, and full of everything they were — Shane felt every second of it.

"I love you," Shane whispered, looking into Ilya's ocean-blue eyes.

"And I love you," Ilya replied softly. "Всегда и навсегда. Always and forever."

Shane cupped Ilya's neck with both hands and kissed him again, slow and deep. "Always."

…

Later, JJ pulled them over for a wedding game. Shane laughed loudly when he heard the rules — not at all surprised, given that he knew his colleague well by now.

They had to sit back-to-back on chairs and answer questions using two signs: blue for Shane and yellow for Ilya.

Lilly sighed. “This won’t be very exciting. These two always agree on everything.”

Shane and Ilya laughed, sat down, and took the signs. JJ read the first question.

“Who makes breakfast in the morning?”

Shane didn’t hesitate and raised the yellow sign. Judging by the reactions — cheers and laughter — Ilya had done the same.

“Dad oversleeps all the time, and Daddy brings him breakfast in bed!” Jan shouted, and Shane could hear Ilya laughing.

Lilly laughed too, but then David nudged her lightly, grinning and raising his brows, which made her blush.

“Who takes the longest in the bathroom?” JJ asked, already laughing. “I think we all know the answer.”

“These curls take time,” Ilya said proudly, pulling Jan onto his lap.

…

"Who's in charge of travel planning?"

Shane and Ilya held up the same sign again — this time the blue one.

"I must admit, I'm really too incompetent. Luckily, I have such a planning genius at my side," said Ilya, leaning sideways to kiss Shane on the shoulder.

…

"Who complains more when he's sick?"

Alexei grinned and sipped from his glass of champagne.

Again, Shane and Ilya lifted the same sign — the yellow one.

"Dad's horrible when he's sick," Lilly said, and Cliff laughed loudly next to her.

"I just enjoy it when your dad takes special care of me," Ilya said with a broad smile.

"Dad!!" Lilly groaned and buried her face in her hands. Jan rolled his eyes next to her, even though he probably didn’t fully understand what Ilya had implied.

Shane had to laugh, genuinely amused.

…

"Who's the worse loser?" JJ asked, raising his eyebrows curiously.

"Dad!!" Lilly shouted, then immediately covered her mouth. "Sorry," she muttered.

Ilya laughed. "Don’t worry, I think we all agree on that."

"Hey!!" Shane said. "It’s only because you three always cheat!"

The guests laughed, and Jan giggled. "Sure, Dad."

…

"Now, a few more questions for Lilly and Jan. Just call out the names, okay?" JJ said with a broad grin. "What do you think — who spends more money?"

"Daddy!“ they both said at the same time.

"But only on necessary things," Lilly added, winking at Ilya, who rolled his eyes.

"Who prefers to read?"

"Definitely Dad," Jan said. "He often reads aloud to us too," he added with a smile, and Shane smiled gently back.

"Who has control over the remote?"

Again, both answered at the same time. Ilya laughed.

"Well, what can I do? I just know the best movies," he said.

"Film nerd," Shane whispered and kissed him briefly on the cheek, then on the mouth.

There were more questions, and they kept giving the same answers until JJ started asking more intimate ones. Shane sighed loudly and got up from his chair.

"I knew something like this would happen when you started asking the questions."

JJ laughed and put an arm around Shane’s shoulder. "I'm really, really happy for you, buddy."

Shane smiled and looked at Ilya, who returned his gaze with bright, sparkling eyes.

"Believe me, I am too."

…

Later that evening, their guests danced to a groovy '80s song on the terrace, chatting and laughing. Everyone was visibly happy and enjoying themselves.

Shane watched Ilya dancing with Lilly in his elegant suit. At nineteen, she had grown into a tall, beautiful young woman.

Jan danced around them, trying hard to imitate Ilya, almost tripping over his own feet.

Shane chuckled softly, his gaze drifting past his family to Alexei, who danced with his wife among the lively crowd.

Then he noticed Cliff sneaking off into the garden with Hayden. Shane turned back to Ilya, but his smile faded after a moment.

Where was Jan?

He quickly scanned the crowd again. They had decided to celebrate the wedding in a small, close circle — but his son was nowhere to be seen.

Shane had a feeling he knew where Jan was and hurried into the house. Sure enough, he stopped in the living room, where the wedding presents were piled up on the sofa.

Jan sat there with eight-year-old Amber, just as Shane had expected. They were arm wrestling, and it looked like Jan was about to lose. To be fair, Amber was a little bit older.

"Take that, you baby," Amber said, slamming his arm onto the table with a triumphant shout. "You might as well be a girl," she added before jumping up.

"And you a boy!" Jan shouted back.

"You're just jealous because I'm stronger than you," Amber replied proudly.

"You're two years older!" Jan protested, but Amber had already run off, yelling, "Such a bad loser!!"

Shane pressed his lips together, hiding a smile. He knew they liked each other a lot, even if they didn’t always show it.

"Dad!!" Jan said when he spotted him, jumping up. He looked adorable in his little suit and bare feet. His black shoes lay under the table.

„Amber thinks I'm like a girl," Jan said with a frown.

Shane chuckled softly. "I’m pretty sure she’s just trying to annoy you. I think she likes you a lot."

"Well, I like her too." Jan’s eyes sparkled, but then he grew serious. "Do you think I should kiss her?"

"Jan, you're only six years old!" Shane laughed. "You’ve got plenty of time."

"But Kai has done it before," Jan argued gloomily. "Maybe I'll never kiss a girl. I'm going to die without ever kissing one," he sighed dramatically.

Shane laughed and ruffled his hair. "I really don't think that's going to happen."

Jan looked at him for a moment, then lifted his chin and marched barefoot toward the terrace. "I will challenge Amber to the next duel."

Shane laughed and waved after him.

As soon as Jan left the room, Shane heard a quiet voice: "Hey Daddy, Dad is inside." Moments later, Ilya appeared in the doorway.

Finally, they were married. They had waited three years for Ethan to be officially declared missing.

Three years — and now it was finally done. He had married the love of his life.

Ilya approached him calmly. "What are you doing here?" He placed one hand on his hip and gently stroked Shane's cheek. "Are you crying?"

"No," Shane whispered, blinking away another tear. "Or yes. I'm just a happy… husband."

Ilya smiled and kissed him gently on the forehead. "So am I. More than happy, even."

"At first, I thought I'd catch Jan kissing Amber in here," Shane sniffed, laughing softly.

"And?" Ilya asked, amused.

„Amber beat him at arm wrestling."

Ilya laughed. "Poor Jan. But I think they really like each other. Let's see what they'll become."

"He thinks he'll die without ever kissing a girl."

Ilya laughed again and pulled Shane toward him. "I somehow feel that suspicion will vanish very soon."

Shane smiled and kissed Ilya tenderly on the mouth. They kissed for a long time until Ilya finally whispered, "Let's go upstairs."

"But we have guests."

„I don't care," Ilya muttered.

Shane brushed his soft hair at the nape of his neck. "Insatiable," he said quietly. Then he wrapped his arms around Ilya, stood on his tiptoes, and kissed his forehead.

Ilya grinned during the kiss. "You're not reaching me very well, sweetheart."

Before Shane could answer, Ilya lifted him off his feet, adjusting him so their heads were level and their foreheads touched.

"Clearly not," Shane said, giggling as he nudged Ilya's nose with his. He wrapped his legs tightly around Ilya's waist. "I do like this," Shane murmured, stroking Ilya's lips with his thumb before kissing him again.

After a few more kisses, Shane loosened his grip and slid down Ilya's body, his hands still resting on his waist. Ilya took one of his hands, threading their fingers together, and led him toward the stairs.

Then Ilya suddenly stopped, holding Shane's hand firmly.

"What's the matter?"

Ilya smiled, then lifted Shane into his arms without warning, cradling him like a child. Shane yelped in surprise, but Ilya only laughed softly and kissed his nose.

"I waited three years for permission to do this," he said, carrying him upstairs.

Shane looked at him and grinned. "You're not even out of breath."

"I have a husband who keeps me in good shape," Ilya winked. Shane blushed and lightly poked his chest, making Ilya laugh.

"Stop it, or I'll drop you," he warned, holding him tighter.

Shane stilled, and Ilya stopped at the door to their bedroom. Shane clung to his neck, and before entering, Ilya whispered softly into his ear, "I love you, Shane Rozanov."

Shane smiled, his eyes glistening. "I love you too."

Once Shane was back on his feet, Ilya gently took hold of his waist and guided him toward the bed, easing him down. He paused for a moment, just looking at him as Shane lay beneath him.

His eyes sparkled, his lips slightly parted — Shane was beautiful. *So fucking beautiful.*

Slowly, Ilya moved over him, straddling his lap and leaning down to kiss him.

After they slowly undressed each other, Ilya moved lower, kissing along Shane's inner thigh, drawing quiet moans from him.

Shane tangled his fingers in Ilya's hair, his other hand gripping Ilya's as their fingers intertwined on the mattress.

Ilya traced a slow line upward with his tongue, lingering, moving with deliberate care. Shane grew more impatient, his grip tightening.

When Shane reached for him, Ilya pulled back slightly, his expression dark and intense — flushed, breathless, his lips swollen. Shane sometimes lost his words just looking at him.

Ilya lifted one of Shane's legs, meeting his gaze as he moved closer again. Shane's breath hitched, his hands pressing against Ilya's back.

"Fuck, I love you," Shane whispered. "I love you so much."

Ilya exhaled softly, leaning down to kiss him deeper. "Love you too… so much," he murmured against his lips.

Their movements became more urgent, their breaths uneven, voices breaking between soft gasps and quiet sounds.

When it was over, Ilya leaned down and kissed Shane deeply.

They stayed like that for a moment, breathing heavily, looking at each other.

After a while, Ilya carefully pulled away and lay back, pulling Shane against his chest.

„That was so hot," he whispered into Shane's ear, making him giggle and blush even more.

Ilya stretched out beside him, and Shane immediately curled against him, pressing a few kisses to his chest.

"You know, when we first met, I fell for you so fast," Shane said softly. "It's like the universe already knew you were mine — that we were meant to be together."

He looked up at Ilya. "And when we finally were together, I realized… that moment was just the beginning of everything."

Ilya's eyes shimmered. "I think it's more than just love," he said quietly. "I don't think anyone else in this world feels what I feel when I look at you. Your smile is the brightest thing I've ever seen."

He traced the corner of Shane's mouth with his finger, then stroked his cheek before kissing him deeply.

"My husband."

Husband.

…

They returned to their guests and had a wonderful night.

Some of the guests were already quite drunk, still dancing and laughing. It was warm, lively, full of joy.

Ilya sat on a table, watching everyone. Hayden chatted with Cliff, who smiled brightly. And Alexei, Lilly and Shane laughed about something Jan had said.

Ilya watched them, his chest full of love.

Then his eyes met Shane's, and they held each other's gaze for a long moment.

He knew Shane felt the same.

It felt like finally arriving.

…

After the last guests had left, Shane found Jan asleep on the couch, looking completely peaceful.

He moved quietly, crouching beside him, then carefully slid his arms under Jan's knees and back, lifting him gently. He paused to make sure Jan stayed asleep, then kissed his forehead and carried him upstairs.

There was a soft whine as he laid him down.

"Shh, go back to sleep."

"Mmh," Jan murmured, hugging his pillow.

Shane stepped quietly toward the door, but just before leaving, Jan mumbled, "Love you, Dad."

Shane smiled softly. "I love you too," he whispered back.

He closed the door gently — only to feel a hand on his shoulder.

"Hi," Ilya whispered, kissing behind his ear. Shane hummed softly, leaning back into him.

"How about we clean up tomorrow and go back to bed?" Shane suggested, taking Ilya's wrist and kissing the inside.

"Good idea," Ilya said, smiling, pulling him closer and brushing his nose against Shane's temple before kissing it.

They walked hand in hand into the bedroom, only letting go to undress.

As Ilya took off his trousers, Shane noticed a small box wrapped in brown paper on the bedside table.

"What's this?" He expected a knowing grin, but Ilya looked just as confused.

"I have no idea," he said, frowning.

"You didn't put that there?"

Ilya shook his head.

"Cliff mentioned a package arrived this afternoon. I must've forgotten. That's probably why he put it here."

Shane picked it up and sat on the bed. It was addressed to him — *Shane Rozanov*.

"It's for me. That's not a wedding present."

There was no name — just an address.

"It's from Rio de Janeiro," he said slowly. "I don't know anyone in—"

He froze.

He hadn't heard a single word from his brother in years.

Ilya looked at him quietly. "Maybe you do know someone in Rio."

Shane took a deep breath and tore open the package. Inside was a smaller box.

"It's from Ethan," he said quietly.

Ilya was silent for a moment. Then: "Open it."

Shane nodded and opened it.

Inside lay a beautiful watch — clearly expensive.

"There's a card," Shane said.

He picked up the envelope. He recognized the handwriting immediately.

"And?" Ilya asked.

Shane opened it and looked down.

"Congratulations," he said quietly. "That's all. It just says *Congratulations*."

Chapter End Notes

I kind of feel like writing little everyday scenes like this from time to time. Is there anything specific you'd be interested in? :)

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!