

Something About the Heat

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Something About the Heat

by [coziecake](#)

Summary

Shane Hollander, a lonely and longing househusband, calls pool cleaning services at the beginning of summer.

Ilya Rozanov the pool boy shows up.

Notes

yooohoo i want to preface this by saying i'm used to writing porn w no plot this is gonna be fast paced lmao. idea from @earthtolovers and @dearilya on twt.

Chapter 1

The house was big and beautiful in a way that felt unnecessary.

Sunlight spilled through towering windows, pooling across marble floors and designer furniture no one ever really used. Everything gleamed. Everything echoed. Shane Hollander moved through it like a ghost in silk shorts and an oversized shirt that belonged to his husband.

Another morning alone.

He poured himself a cup of black coffee, leaned against the counter, and stared out at the backyard. The pool stretched murky and uninviting beneath the heat, leaves gathered at the bottom like quiet accusations. He hadn't put any effort into the upkeep of the pool, feeling like it was another thing in the house meant for two, taunting him.

His husband was gone. Again.

Somewhere expensive. Somewhere important. Somewhere Shane had stopped asking about.

He checked his phone—no new messages—and exhaled sharply through his nose, annoyed at himself for even looking. He hated that part most. The waiting. The way the house made it impossible to forget how alone he really was.

He scrolled instead. Online shopping. Maybe a new bag he could show off at his weekly cycling class would be nice. Group chats, maybe the girls want to go yachting. Nothing really stuck.

Finally, he got so bored that he decided to call the local pool company.

It felt absurdly domestic, this tiny act of responsibility in a life that otherwise ran on autopilot. The woman on the line was pleasant, efficient.

"Late morning," she said. "We'll send someone out."

Shane thanked her and hung up, already dialing Rose before the silence could creep back in.

Rose picked up on the second ring. "You sound bored," she said immediately, voice bright and amused.

"I am bored," Shane replied, wandering out onto the patio. The heat hit him instantly, heavy and languid. "I'm wasting away in my mansion. Someone should come save me from my tower."

"You're married to money."

"Yes, and money is never home," Shane said dryly.

He dropped into one of the lounge chairs, stretching his legs out, toes curling against the warm stone. "I called the pool company. I'm having a pool boy fantasy summer."

Rose gasped theatrically. "Oh?"

"It's not like that," Shane said, though he smiled despite himself. "I just called to have someone clean the pool."

"That's how it starts."

"Please. I'm loyal. I'm just—lonely. I guess."

There was a pause on the line, brief but knowing.

"I'll come visit," Rose said lightly. "Between shoots. We'll drink coffee and i'll try not to spill it on your twenty thousand dollar sofa."

"Ugh, I would die for you."

"I know."

Shane and Rose got lost in conversation, they always did. Suddenly an hour and a half had passed, and he had wondered his way back through the house and to the front door, almost startled when movement at the gate caught his eye.

A man stepped into the yard.

Shane straightened up without realizing he'd moved, his eyes fixated on the window. The stranger was tall—no, big—all solid lines and quiet confidence. His t-shirt clung faintly to his chest in the heat, curls already damp at his temples. He carried equipment over one shoulder like it weighed nothing at all.

"Shane?" Rose called out. "What's with the moment of silence?"

"I—" Shane blinked. "I have to go."

"What?"

"I'll call you back."

"Shane—"

He hung up.

He opened the door as the man reached the first step of the porch, setting his gear down and wiping his hands on a towel, glancing up when he noticed Shane. Their eyes met.

Something low and electric sparked in Shane's chest. *Fuck, he's hot.*

"Hi," the man said, accent unmistakable. Russian. Warm. "Ilya. Here for pool."

Shane just stood, smoothing his shirt unnecessarily. "Yes. Hi. I'm Shane. You can follow me."

Ilya smiled, easy and unguarded, and Shane had the distinct, alarming thought that this man had no idea what he was doing to him.

"Nice place," Ilya commented as he made his way in.

"Thank you. It was built in the late nineties," Shane started, his hands dug into his pockets as he led Ilya through the home.

"The layout's actually really efficient for the square footage. The foyer opens directly into the main corridor to avoid wasted transitional space."

"Oh." Ilya responded, not really catching what the other had said. "Okay" He added, usually he could get by with that if he didn't understand what was being said to him.

They walked through the house together, footsteps echoing lightly as Shane led him toward the back. He was acutely aware of Ilya's presence behind him, the solid sound of his steps, the way his gaze seemed to take everything in.

Shane kept talking as they walked. Not much. Just enough. He pointed out where the doors led, mentioned the pool was just past the patio, explained—without meaning to—that the glass doors were impact rated and original to the build.

"Must be nice," Ilya said casually. "Living here." Shane huffed a quiet laugh. "It's... large."

They stepped outside, sunlight spilling over them both. The pool stretched out ahead, water dulled with neglect. Ilya set his bag down and rolled up his sleeves.

Shane sat back in one of the lounge chairs, telling himself firmly to behave, just watch. Watching never killed anyone.

The sun caught on Ilya's arms as he worked, muscles shifting beneath tan skin. There were freckles across his shoulders—faint, scattered. Water splashed lightly as he knelt, testing the pool, dampening his shirt until it clung in ways Shane absolutely did not need to be noticing.

He was married. For 4 years he's been married.

He was not the kind of person who ogled hired help.

And yet—

"So," Shane said, grasping for normalcy, his voice a touch too careful. "You've been doing this long?"

"Couple years," Ilya replied, glancing over his shoulder at him as he worked. "I like it. Being outside. Working with my hands."

Shane nodded, throat suddenly dry. Yes, I can tell, he thought, his gaze catching on the flex of Ilya's forearm as he dragged the skimmer through the water. "That makes sense."

They talked like that for a while—small things, harmless things. Where Ilya was from. How long he'd been in the city. What he'd done before pool work.

"Moscow," Ilya said when Shane asked, shrugging one shoulder as he adjusted the equipment. The movement pulled his shirt tight across his back, damp fabric clinging. "I moved here about six years ago."

"That's a big change," Shane said, eyes lingering a second too long before he forced them back to Ilya's face.

"Do you miss it?"

"Sometimes," Ilya replied easily. "Mostly the food. Not the winters."

Shane smiled, warmth blooming low and slow in his stomach. "That's fair."

He offered water a little later, mostly as an excuse to stand. To be closer. Ilya accepted with a quiet, sincere thank you, tilting the bottle back as he drank. Shane's attention drifted helplessly to his throat, the way his jaw flexed, a bead of water slipping free and trailing down his neck.

Shane's mouth watered.

He sat back down quickly, crossing his legs, pulse loud in his ears.

Every time Ilya smiled, Shane felt an almost embarrassing rush of heat that made his skin feel too tight. Every time Ilya turned back to the pool, Shane's eyes followed the deep line of his spine, the easy strength in the way he moved, grounded and sure.

He told himself that this was ridiculous.

He was just touch starved. That was all. Months without attention, without being looked at like he mattered, and suddenly his brain had latched onto the first attractive man who showed up in his yard.

It meant nothing.

Except nothing hadn't felt this alive in a very long time.

At one point, Ilya glanced over at him—*really looked at him*—and for half a second Shane felt uncomfortably exposed. Like maybe Ilya could see the way his thoughts were circling. Like he was reading him far too easily. Then the moment passed, easy as everything else about him, and Ilya went back to packing up his equipment.

When the job was done, the pool twinkling again, water catching the sun just right, Ilya slung his bag over his shoulder. He paused, lingering in that way that felt like he was waiting to be dismissed.

Shane stood, heart thudding. "You did a really good job," he said, then hurried on before he could overthink it. "I, uh— I like consistency. Having the same person come back."

Ilya studied him for a beat, eyes thoughtful, then smiled. "Yeah," he said. "I get that."

"So maybe," Shane continued, pulse racing now, "I could get your number? For scheduling."

"Sure."

Shane unlocked his phone and handed it over. Their fingers brushed—brief, unmistakable—and Shane felt the shock of it all the way down, sharp and electric.

Ilya typed his number in, handed the phone back, his thumb brushing Shane's palm this time, slower, it felt like a question.

"I'll see you around, Shane," Ilya said.

"Yes," Shane replied softly, unable to stop the smile that tugged at his mouth as he walked him toward the gate.

When Ilya stepped out and the gate slid shut behind him, Shane stayed there for a moment longer than necessary. "Yes you fucking will," he muttered under his breath, a breathless laugh escaping him.

The house felt different when he went back inside.

Still big. Still empty.

But humming now, like something had been switched on.

Shane leaned back against the door, heart still trying to race. He thought about his husband, somewhere far away, likely not thinking about him at all.

What did it say about him to want this? To crave attention from a pool boy when he had everything he was supposed to want?

Shane huffed and ran a hand through his hair.

His husband didn't have to know.

He wasn't here anyway.

Eventually the day passed and night had fallen.

In the quiet dark, every creak felt louder, every hum of electricity stretched itself thin through the walls. Everything felt like it pierced deeper, and Shane lay awake in his bedroom in nothing but his cashmere pajama pants, sheets tangled around his legs like they were trying to keep him anchored.

He stared at the ceiling, and the ceiling stared back, smooth and white and utterly unhelpful.

He exhaled slowly, one arm thrown above his head, the other resting uselessly at his side. His chest rose and fell, skin still warm from the day, from the memory of sun and water and—

Ilya.

The thought slid in so easily it startled him.

Shane squeezed his eyes shut, tried to focus on the tick of the grandfather clock in the corner, but it only made it worse.

He could see him again so clearly, the way the sunlight had caught on his shoulders, the faint scatter of freckles across his back. They had looked almost accidental, like God had lost focus for a second and dotted him without thinking.

And his hands.

God, his *hands*.

Shane flexed his fingers absently, remembering the brief, electric moment when they'd touched while exchanging phones. It had been nothing. Barely there. And yet Shane had felt it all the way down his spine, like a wire pulled too tight.

He shifted in the bed, silk sheets whispering against his skin.

Ilya had been so big. Not just tall but solid. Thick through the chest, the arms, the thighs. The kind of man who took up space without apology. Standing in front of Shane, damp and sun kissed, he'd felt impossibly real. Untouchably close.

And Shane had wanted to reach out. Just once. To put his hand on that warm skin and see if it felt as strong as it looked. To slide his fingers into those curls and pull, just enough to—

He groaned softly, cutting the thought off, jaw tightening.

It had been months since he'd touched his husband.

Months since anyone had touched him.

Shane swallowed, throat tight, chest aching with something dangerously close to grief. He closed his eyes and rolled onto his side. then back again, restless, every nerve awake now. His skin felt too sensitive, like the air itself was aware of him.

He imagined leaning in, close enough to smell Ilya properly this time. The heat of his body after working all afternoon, radiating and burning into Shane. The slow rise and fall of Ilya's breath there, the pulse just beneath the skin. The way Shane's mouth might hover for just a second and press in, a soft kiss, barely there. Then his tongue, slow and deliberate, dragging up Ilya's neck. The sharp bite of chlorine clinging to his skin, mellowed by sweat and warmth, salt blooming against Shane's tongue in a way that made his stomach tighten.

His breath hitched.

He imagined doing it again, slower this time. Letting the taste linger. Letting his mouth learn the skin. He wanted to feel Ilya tense under it. Wanted to know how he'd respond. Wanted *desperately* to be close enough to find out.

Without really deciding, his hand moved.

It traced slowly down his chest, over the familiar planes of his body, following a path worn thin by habit and loneliness. His fingers slid over his abdomen, lingering, before slipping beneath the waistband of his pants.

Shane sucked in a sharp breath, head tipping back against the pillow.

He let his eyes close again, let the image bloom fully now as he rubbed his hard cock slow and gentle. Ilya above him. Ilya close. Strong hands clamped at Shane's hips. Warmth. Weight. The confidence of someone who knew exactly what they were doing.

Shane's legs spread further involuntarily, his hips rocking up against his hand, wishing for it to be Ilya.

His breathing grew uneven, shallow, the room shrinking around him until there was nothing but sensation and want and the steady pulse of need curling low in his body.

He finally removed his pants fully, gripping tight around himself and pumping once, twice. He moved slowly, deliberately, chasing the edge of the fantasy without crossing it. Letting the tension build, coil, stretch until it bordered on unbearable.

"F-Fuck.." Shane whimpered out quietly into the air, his breath stuttering.

He panted, bringing his hand up to his mouth and spitting into it, embarrassed by how badly he needed it. He brought his hand back and dragged it down, the contact and the sound made him groan, frustration and relief crashing into one.

It wasn't just arousal, it was a hunger. For touch. For attention. For being seen.

Shane pressed his lips together, stifling the sound that wanted to escape him, his body arching subtly into the bed as he picked up speed and the pleasure built.

The only sounds that filled the room were his breathless moans, and the thick wetness of him jerking off.

He writhed as eventually the pleasure became too much, his hips bucking aggressively as his stomach tightened and his thighs shook.

"*Ilya!*" he choked out, his body spasming involuntarily as he spilled over onto his hand and stomach, leaving him breathless, spent, and staring into the dark once more.

Once he had calmed down, the silence rushed back in.

He lay there, heart racing, hand lying limply on his stomach, shame and satisfaction tangled too tightly to separate.

The ceiling stared back at him again, unchanged.

Shane laughed softly under his breath—once, humorless. "This is stupid," he murmured to no one. But even as he said it, he knew. Tomorrow, when the sun came up, he'd be thinking about Ilya again.

Chapter 2: To do or Not to Do

By the time Ilya got home, the sun had started to tilt into that late afternoon slant that made everything look warmer than it was. His apartment was small in the way most apartments were, real, lived in, not trying to impress anyone. One bedroom, floors that were creaky in spots, a couch that had seen better years and survived anyway. A drying rack by the window. A little dent in the wall near the light switch he'd been meaning to patch for months.

He kicked his shoes off by the door and toed them into a neat line out of habit, then paused like he was waiting for the day to fully leave him.

Work clung to his skin, chlorine drying out his skin, sunburn imminent. The faint ache in his shoulders. The kind of tired that felt honest.

He washed his hands at the sink and stared into the little mirror above it, water dripping from his fingers. His eyes looked the same. Calm. Unbothered.

So why did his mind keep skipping back to the same image?

A man in a mansion doorway, barefoot, too pretty for his own good, talking like he was reading off a brochure.

The layout's actually really efficient for the square footage.

Ilya's mouth twitched, almost a smile, almost not.

Shane.

It was a soft name for someone with sharp edges. A man who tried to sound neutral, tried to act normal, but whose eyes kept tracking Ilya like he didn't know how to stop. Like he wasn't used to wanting things he couldn't buy.

Ilya reached for a glass, filled it with water, drank half without tasting it. The cold didn't erase the heat that lingered in his head. So instead he poured it out and replaced it with vodka.

He shouldn't think about clients like this. Obviously. He knew that. It was easier when clients were normal families, old men who complained about leaves, women who asked if he could "just check one more thing." People who didn't look at him like Shane had.

Because Shane had looked at him the way men looked at things they wanted and didn't quite believe they were allowed to want.

Ilya had seen it before. Plenty. Most men couldn't stand that they even thought about other men, much less acted on it. The look in their eye recognizable to Ilya after so many times.

But it had been a long time since that look had made him curious.

His phone buzzed on the counter.

Text from his friend, Nick: We're at Aiden's. Come.

Ilya stared at it for a second too long, then replied: On my way.

He changed into a clean t-shirt and jeans, shoved his wallet into his pocket, and left. The stairwell smelled like someone's cooking and old paint. Outside, the air felt cooler than it had at the mansion, like the city couldn't afford heat the way rich neighborhoods could.

Aiden's place was a few blocks away, slightly bigger than Ilya's, slightly louder. The kind of apartment where people showed up without knocking and stayed too late. When Ilya walked in, there were voices, laughter, a game on TV, someone arguing about the best place to get tacos.

"Ilya! My man," Aiden called, tossing him a beer.

Ilya caught it one handed and twisted it open. "Got caught up working."

Nick snorted. "You're always working."

"That's how money happens," Ilya said dryly.

They laughed. It was easy. Normal. Just the guys.

For a while, he almost forgot.

Almost.

But then Nick leaned back on the couch and grinned at him, eyes sharp. "So," he said, like he was about to ruin the peace on purpose. "Any good clients today? Any rich weirdos?"

Aiden perked up instantly. "Yeah, tell us. You go to those big houses. They got secret rooms or what?"

Ilya took a sip of beer and shrugged like it didn't matter. "It was just pools."

"That's boring," Aiden complained.

Ilya glanced down at the bottle in his hand. He could have left it there. He could have said nothing. Kept it professional.

Instead, he heard himself say, "The house was... big."

Nick's eyebrows lifted. "Big how?"

"Big big," Aiden translated, laughing. "Like movie big?"

Ilya's jaw flexed. "Like... too much space for one person."

Aiden made an interested noise. "One person?"

Ilya stared at him, his eyes saying something like '*Fuck you why are you catching on*'. Aiden always caught things. Always.

"Client was home," Ilya said, careful. "His husband wasn't."

Nick whistled, delighted. "Ohhh."

Ilya rolled his eyes. "Don't do that."

Aiden's grin widened. "Do what? Be entertained?"

Ilya didn't answer. He shouldn't feed this. But his mind, unhelpfully, offered up details anyway—Shane's coffee cup, the way his voice tried to stay flat and failed, the wedding ring catching the sunlight when he lifted his hand.

The ring.

That had been the first thing Ilya noticed once he started noticing.

Married. Locked away. Or atleast supposed to be. Shane's tv production looking home and missing partner led him to believe his marriage may not be fulfilling. Either way he was still wearing that damn ring, so Ilya really shouldn't have even worried about it.

But he still remembered handing something back. The phone. Their fingers brushing. Not accidental. Not fully on purpose either.

It sent alarms off in Ilya's head, Shane may be gay and may be into him. He hadn't planned it. Not fully consciously, but it had just happened—a test, quick and quiet. He slid his finger along Shane's palm on the handoff, slow enough to mean something, subtle enough to deny.

And Shane had reacted.

Not dramatically. Shane wasn't that kind of man. But his breathing had changed. His gaze had flickered. His body had gone still in a way that told Ilya everything.

Aiden watched him, grin turning sharp. "You're thinking."

"I'm not."

"You are," Aiden said, like it was a fact. "Rich guy hot?"

Ilya scoffed. "He's married."

Nick leaned forward, eyes bright. "Is he like.." Nick gestured vaguely to Ilya "you know.." he continued "gay and stuff?"

Ilya hesitated. Aiden and Nick had been Ilya's friends since he first moved to Canada. They didn't know Ilya was bisexual until about two years ago, and to say it was awkward was an understatement. Not that they were disgusted with him but they just didn't know what to do with the information. They tried to be inclusive for him though, and that he appreciated.

He took another drink, then said, "Probably."

Aiden laughed. "Probably."

Ilya shot him a look. Aiden held up his hands like he was innocent.

"I'm just saying," Aiden continued, voice teasing, "if you want that ass," He responded with his hands still up "or dick.. or—"

"Stop."

"Okay." Aiden muttered quietly, defeated.

Ilya didn't respond. He looked away, toward the window, toward the city lights starting to blink on.

Aiden and Nick continued talking and he pulled his phone out without thinking, thumb hovering as he unlocked it. Contacts. Recent. A name he hadn't meant to save as anything but a client.

Shane Hollander.

Ilya stared at it.

Then, after a beat, he hit "edit" and changed it to simply:

Shane.

He didn't text. He didn't call. He wasn't stupid.

He put the phone face down on the table and forced his attention back to the room, to his friends, to normal life.

But later, when he left and walked back through the quiet streets to his small apartment, the air cool against his skin, he still felt that same little spark of curiosity.

And the uncomfortable weight of a wedding ring in his memory.

Rose arrived to Shane's place the next day like she owned the place.

To be fair, she moved like she owned every place she walked into—chin up, sunglasses on, confidence sparkling off her like glitter. Shane let her in, watched her sweep through the foyer with a dramatic sigh.

"God," Rose said, slipping her shoes off like she had worked a long day, lazily tossing her coat on the coat rack. "I forgot how boring and curated your house is."

Shane shut the door behind her. "It's just a house."

Rose turned slowly, staring at the chandelier, the art, the clean lines, the sunlight. "Shane."

"What?"

"It's a museum," she said. "A museum where the exhibits are loneliness and high ceilings."

Shane snorted despite himself. "You're dramatic."

"And you're avoiding eye contact," Rose said, instantly. "Which means something happened after you hung up in my face yesterday."

Shane's mouth opened. Then closed.

Rose smiled like a cat who'd found something breakable. "Coffee?"

"It's already made," Shane said, because of course it was. He led her into the living room, the one with the couch Rose had mentioned being the price of a down payment on a house.

She dropped onto it and bounced once, pleased. "God. I could live here."

"You'd get bored in a week."

Rose pointed at him. "Eh, maybe. I'd throw some killer parties though. Anyways, talk."

Shane handed her a coffee and sat on the opposite end of the couch like he needed distance from his own life. The sunlight through the windows made the room feel bright, almost normal.

He tried to start with something casual.

"I got the pool cleaned," he said.

Rose's eyes widened in mock shock. "Thrilling."

Shane glared. Rose waited.

He exhaled, annoyed at himself for how quickly the truth wanted out. "They sent someone."

Rose's smile sharpened. "Oh?"

Shane looked down at his coffee like it was suddenly fascinating. "His name was Ilya."

Rose made a noise, half amusement, half interest. "Sounds Russian."

Shane's throat went tight. "He was."

Rose leaned forward, elbows on her knees. "Okay. And?"

And Shane had no idea how to explain the feeling without sounding insane. That was the worst part. It wasn't just that Ilya was attractive. Shane had seen attractive people. He lived in a world where attractive people walked around like it was their job.

This was different.

This had dug into something.

"He—" Shane started, then stopped, frustrated. "He was just... there. Like he belonged in my backyard. Like it made sense. And I—" He cut himself off, cheeks warming. "I don't know."

Rose stared at him for a beat, then sat back with a slow grin. "Oh, you're in trouble."

"I'm not."

"You are," Rose said, delighted. "Look at you. You're doing the thing you do."

"What are you talking about?"

"The thing where you're trying to sound bored because you don't want to admit you care," Rose said. "Tell me what he looked like."

Shane shot her a look. "I don't think we need details."

Rose sipped her coffee. "You're telling me."

Shane's mouth pressed into a line. He held out for about five seconds before it all spilled anyway.

"He's tall," Shane said, like he was giving a reluctant weather report. "And... big. Not—" He gestured vaguely, irritated. "Not sloppy. Just... solid. Strong. His chest.." Shane trailed off.

"and his hair—he has these curls—"

Rose made a sound that was absolutely, unmistakably satisfied.

Shane smiled shyly and threw a pillow at her. "Don't."

"I'm not doing anything," Rose said, catching the pillow easily. "Continue."

Shane hated how the memory came back instantly, vivid and bright. The way Ilya rolled his sleeves up. The freckles across his shoulders. The bead of water on his neck.

Shane's pulse kicked.

He forced himself to take a sip of coffee like it could drown the thought.

"And he talked like..." Shane paused, then scowled at himself. "He has an accent."

Rose's eyebrows lifted. "Oh really."

Shane looked at her, defensive. "Stop."

Rose's smile was too sharp. "Do you want to hear yourself right now?"

Shane leaned his head back against the couch. "I'm married."

Rose's expression softened a fraction. "I know."

Shane stared at the ceiling, jaw tight. "And he saw my ring i'm pretty sure."

Rose waited.

Shane swallowed. "And I still—" He stopped, frustrated again. "God. I don't know. It's not like I was flirting. I wasn't."

Rose's eyes glittered. "Were you watching him?"

Shane's silence was answer enough.

Rose laughed softly. "Shane."

"It's been so *long* Rose," Shane groaned out, too honest, too fast. The words felt like they scraped on the way out. "And I know that sounds pathetic, but it's been months since someone looked at me like I was... anything. Like I mattered. Like I was—"

Rose's face shifted, something gentler. "Okay."

Shane hated that he'd said it. He hated that it was true.

Rose set her coffee down and nudged his knee with hers. "Hey i'm not judging you."

"You should," Shane muttered.

"I won't," Rose said firmly. Then her grin returned, because she was Rose and she couldn't stay serious for long. "But I am going to ask if you got his number."

Shane's stomach flipped.

He tried for casual. Failed. "Maybe."

Rose's eyes widened, delighted. "Shane!"

"It was for scheduling," he said quickly. "Consistency. Professional. Normal."

Rose laughed. "Sure."

Shane's phone buzzed on the table like it had heard them talking.

Rose eyed it. "Is that him?"

Shane snatched it up too fast. It was a spam email.

Rose looked at him with deep, theatrical pity. "You're down horrendous."

"I hate you."

"You love me," Rose corrected, standing. "Come on. Let's go look at your stupid pool."

"It's not stupid."

"Shane," she said, already walking. "It's a rectangle of water that costs more to maintain than my entire apartment."

They went outside as the sun slid down, the heat easing into something softer. By the time it was fully dark, the pool lights clicked on, glowing from below, turning the water into something cinematic. The surface shimmered gently, reflecting the stars and the clean lines of the backyard like it belonged in a magazine.

Shane stood at the edge, arms crossed, trying not to think about Ilya standing here earlier. Trying not to remember exactly where he'd knelt, where the water had splashed his forearms, where Shane had sat pretending he wasn't staring.

Rose leaned on the outdoor chair and sighed. "Okay Ilya did a good job. This is pretty."

Shane didn't answer. His mind was too loud.

Rose glanced at him sideways. "You're thinking about him again."

Shane's jaw tightened. "Stop narrating."

Rose's smile turned wicked, sudden. "You know what?"

"What," Shane said hesitantly.

Rose ignored him, stepping closer to the pool. "This water is so perfect now."

"Yes," Shane said cautiously. "That's the point."

Rose nodded like she agreed, then—very deliberately—reached over to the side table, picked up a small decorative pot with a plant in it, and "accidentally" tilted it just enough that dirt spilled toward the pool.

"Rose!" Shane hissed, lunging forward.

The dirt hit the water with a soft plop and clouded, ugly and obvious.

Rose clapped a hand to her mouth, eyes wide with fake horror. "Oh my God."

Shane stared at the spreading mess, then at her. "You did that on purpose."

Rose blinked innocently. "Shane. The pool. Whatever will we do."

Shane sighed and stared as the dirt spread out in slow, ugly plumes, the blue turning murky in a way that made his face scrunch in disgust. The pool lights caught it from below, illuminating the mess instead of hiding it.

"That's... not good," Rose said, tilting her head.

Shane crouched at the edge, heart starting to thud. "That's really not good."

A low, unfamiliar sound cut through the quiet—a strained, mechanical whine coming from the side of the pool. Shane froze. Rose's smug expression dropped a bit.

"What is that?" Rose asked.

Shane straightened sharply. "Not a sound it's supposed to make."

They both stood there, listening. The noise stuttered, stopped, then started again, louder this time. Something gurgled in protest.

"Oh," Rose said slowly. "That sounds expensive."

Shane dragged a hand down his face. "The filter system is—" He stopped himself, swallowed. "It's sensitive. If debris gets pulled in like that—"

The sound cut out abruptly.

Silence.

Shane's stomach dropped.

Rose looked at him. "Did it just die?"

"I don't know," Shane said tightly. "I don't think so. But it definitely shouldn't have done that."

He walked over to the control panel, crouching to inspect it like that might magically solve something. The display blinked once. Twice. Then flashed an error code.

Shane stared at it. He really didn't know what he was looking at but whatever.

Rose leaned over his shoulder. "Is that bad?"

"Yes," Shane said flatly.

Rose bit her lip, eyes flicking back to the pool, then to Shane's face. "I mean... accidents happen."

Shane exhaled slowly through his nose. "This isn't a 'wait until next week' problem, Rose."

Rose's gaze slid to him, sharp and knowing now. "So you're saying..."

"I'm saying," Shane cut in, already standing again, already pulling his phone out without meaning to, "that this probably needs to be looked at sooner rather than later."

Rose's smile was slow. Dangerous. "Oh no."

Shane shot her a look. "Wait."

"We're going to have to call someone," she continued sweetly. "Like, immediately."

Shane stared at the glowing water, the quiet backyard suddenly feeling too loud. His phone felt heavy in his hand.

Rose folded her arms, smug. "Well. Good thing you already have a number to call."

Shane didn't answer.

But he didn't put the phone away either.

Rose's grin widened. "Call him."

"I can't call him," he said, already defensive.

Rose folded her arms, unimpressed. "You absolutely can."

"It's late," Shane argued. "It's rude. He's not going to answer."

Rose cocked her head. "You don't know that, Shane."

"I do know that," he said, pacing now, phone clutched tight in his hand. "If I was him and some random married guy I cleaned a pool for called me at night, I'd say no and block the number immediately."

Rose blinked. "That feels... like projection."

"Because it's true," Shane said. "It screams 'desperate.' I will not be desperate."

"You're already desperate," Rose said gently. "You're just deciding whether to be polite about it."

Shane shot her a look. Why would she have such an inconsiderate idea as to call Ilya so late at night to do, what, clean a pool at 11pm? Saying no is the nicest thing he could do.

"He has boundaries."

"Oh so I don't know him like you do, is that what you're saying?" Rose said.

Shane stopped pacing and looked at the pool again, the lights still glowing innocently beneath the surface like nothing was wrong. "What if he thinks I'm lying? Like I made it up just to see him again?"

Rose shrugged. "Did you?"

Shane opened his mouth. Closed it. "That's not the point."

Rose smiled. "It kind of is."

Shane groaned and dragged a hand through his hair. "I can't do this. I can't call him at night. He'll think I'm weird."

"You are weird,"

"I'm serious."

"So am I," Rose replied. "And I think you're catastrophizing. He might answer. He might be awake. He might be at work. He might—"

"He might hate me," Shane interrupted.

Rose softened, just a little. "Come on, Shane."

Shane looked down at the phone again, thumb hovering uselessly over the screen. His heart was beating too fast for someone who wasn't actually doing anything yet.

"I'll call him in the morning," he said finally, voice tight but resolved. "That's reasonable. Morning is professional. Morning says 'this is normal pool-related business.'"

Rose sighed like she was conceding a very small war. "Fine."

Shane looked up. "Fine?"

"Yes," she said. "You can call him in the morning."

He exhaled, relieved.

"But," Rose added, immediately, "you are not allowed to chicken out."

Shane stood neutrally, shrugging. "I won't."

"You will," Rose said. "So I'll be here."

"No you won't."

"I absolutely will," she said cheerfully. "I'll make coffee. I'll sit right there." She pointed at the edge of the pool. "I'll watch you do it."

Shane groaned again. "I hate you."

Rose smiled, satisfied. "You're welcome."

Shane slipped his phone back into his pocket, pulse still racing, and turned back toward the house. The pool lights shimmered behind him, the quiet night heavy with everything he was trying not to think about.

Tomorrow, then.

Chapter 3: Unraveling

Shane didn't call him the next day.

He kicked Rose out that morning with a coffee cup still in her hand and a warning look that said do not start.

"I'm serious," Shane said, standing in the doorway in socked feet, hand rested on the doorknob. "I'll handle it."

Rose raised an eyebrow, stood in her tank top, pajama pants, and messy bun, appalled that Shane was physically removing her from his house.

"You said that last time!" She whined.

"And I handled it then," Shane insisted. "I am handling it now."

She looked past him, into the quiet, pristine house. "By... not calling the hot pool boy?"

"Yes," Shane said firmly. "By not calling him."

Rose sighed like she was dealing with a difficult but beloved child. "You're scared."

"I'm realistic," Shane corrected.

She smirked. "You're terrified."

Shane shut the door in her face before she could say anything else.

"Shane!" He heard her muffled scream on the other side, the patter of her hand against the wood.

"Go away, Rose!" He yelled back.

For a few days, it worked. The house went back to being quiet in the familiar way. Shane busied himself with errands he didn't really need to run and projects he didn't really intend to finish. He went shopping once. He didn't think about Ilya fucking him in the dressing room.

By day five, the edges of Ilya were already blurring in his mind in a way that unsettled him more than he expected. The accent faded first, less distinct than Shane wanted it to be. The exact cadence of his laugh. The way he'd said yes instead of yeah. Shane found himself irritated by that. By how easily his brain threatened to let it go.

On day seven, Rose called him six times before noon. He had ignored the first three.

The fourth time, he answered on instinct.

"You're avoiding it," she argued.

"I'm not," Shane replied, too fast.

She sighed, long and heavy. "You kicked me out last week and haven't brought him up since. That's avoiding."

Shane leaned against the counter, staring at the back doors, at the pool sitting there quietly like it hadn't started this whole mess. "I just... don't need to rush."

Rose hummed. "You're wasting time, eventually you'll forget him."

That landed harder than Shane expected.

He bluffed. "I'm not. And it doesn't matter because i'm married."

"You are," she said gently. "But you can't stay married to a piece of shit forever. You need to do something, anything!"

Shane opened his mouth to argue, then stopped. He looked down at his wedding ring again, that wretched piece of metal felt like such a joke. It laughed in his face from the moment he woke up to the moment he went to sleep. Daring him to believe the oath it represented.

Later that afternoon, after Rose hung up and the house went quiet again, Shane found himself standing in the living room with his phone in his hand, scrolling aimlessly until he landed back where he'd been pretending not to look.

Ilya.

He stared at the name for a long time.

If he waited too much longer, it would turn into nothing. Just another moment that almost mattered. A moment where he almost chose himself.

That thought was worse than the fear.

He pressed call before he could overthink it.

Ilya was sitting miles away on the edge of his bed, pulling on clean socks, when his phone buzzed.

He glanced down, already half expecting it to be Aiden or Nick, and then froze.

Shane.

He let it ring once. Twice. Staring.

Shit, he thought. *He's actually fucking calling me.*

Then he cleared his throat and answered.

"Hello?"

There was a brief pause on the line, a breath pulled in too fast to be casual. "Hi," Shane said. "It's—uh. It's Shane. From the pool."

Ilya smiled slightly to himself, Shane's voice was smooth in his ear. He could listen to him talk forever.

"I know," Ilya said, and only afterward realized how sure it sounded.

"Oh," Shane replied, then laughed softly, relieved and flustered all at once. "Right. Sorry. I just—hi."

Ilya leaned back against the wall, crossing one ankle over the other. "Hi." Ilya smugly smiled to himself, he could imagine Shane on the other side of the phone, knee bouncing anxiously, cheeks and ears red, flustered just for him.

Another pause. Longer this time.

"So," Shane began, clearly regrouping. "This is... not urgent. I want to say that first."

"Okay," Ilya said, patient.

"The filter made a noise last week," Shane continued. "It stopped. But now I'm thinking maybe it shouldn't have done that at all."

Ilya smiled. He could hear the nerves so clearly under the words. "You want me to come take a look?"

"Yes," Shane said quickly. "If that's not—if you're available. I mean."

"I am," Ilya replied. "When were you thinking?" Ilya's own foot started to fidget upon asking.

Shane named a time that sounded rehearsed.

"I can do that," Ilya said.

There was a beat of silence after that, like neither of them wanted to be the one to hang up.

"Okay," Shane said eventually. "Great. Thank you."

"No problem," Ilya said. Then, because he felt like it mattered, he added, "I'll see you then."

Shane's breath hitched just slightly. "Yeah."

When the call ended, Ilya stared at his phone for a moment before setting it down carefully on the bed.

Married, he reminded himself again.

Still, his pulse was a little faster than usual.

Rose arrived at Shane's the morning of the appointment with the energy of someone about to really fuck shit up.

"Okay," she announced, walking into Shane's bedroom like she owned it. "Outfit."

Shane, who had been standing in front of his closet in a t-shirt and pajama pants for ten minutes, turned slowly. "I don't need an outfit, Rose."

Rose laughed. "You absolutely do."

"It's a pool service," Shane insisted. "I can wear whatever."

"Yes," Rose said, nodding. "And what you wear will say something."

"I don't think I want it to say anything."

"That's a lie," she replied easily, yanking hangers of shirts back and forth. "You just don't want it to say too much."

Shane crossed his arms. "I was thinking gray sweatpants."

Rose physically recoiled. "No."

"What?"

"Gray is a choice," she said. "Gray is loaded."

Shane frowned. "Well is black better?"

"Yes," Rose said immediately. "Black is neutral. Black is 'I rolled out of bed like this.' Gray is 'look at me. look at my dick.'"

Shane snorted. "You're crazy."

"And correct," she said, already digging through his drawers. "Here."

She tossed him a pair of black sweatpants.

"And what shirt," Shane added quickly.

Rose paused. Looked at him. Then shook her head. "No shirt."

"No shirt," Shane repeated flatly.

"You live here," she said. "You're allowed to exist comfortably in your own house."

"This is not about comfort."

Rose smiled. "Exactly."

Shane groaned, but he pulled the sweatpants on anyway, standing awkwardly as Rose evaluated him like a project.

"You look so good," she said, staring at his abs.

"Don't say it like that."

"You'll live."

When Ilya arrived, Shane felt it immediately. A shift in the air, weighing on him hard like he was about to compete in the olympics.

He stepped outside, heart already beating faster than it should have, and found Ilya standing on the porch with his bag slung over one shoulder, sleeves rolled up.

"Hey," Ilya said, eyes flicking briefly over Shane before returning to his face.

Shane tried not to think about the fact that he'd noticed. "Hi." Shane said softly.

Ilya noticed. Of course he did.

Shirtless, bare skin warm and open in the sun, like Shane hadn't thought through what that would do to someone standing across from him. It hit Ilya low and fast, an immediate, visceral awareness that had nothing to do with romance and everything to do with appetite.

Fuck, he thought, and tightened his grip on his bag.

Shane looked soft in a way that made Ilya's mouth go dry. Touchable. Skin you could press into. Hold. Leave marks on without meaning to. The thought came uninvited and unwelcome and stuck anyway.

Ilya forced his eyes up, jaw setting. He could control this. He always did.

Married, Ilya reminded himself again, sharper this time.

He exhaled slowly through his nose, steadying. Professional.

They stood there for a moment, neither of them quite moving, the air between them felt tight with things unsaid.

"I thought i'd tell you before you start," Shane said, gesturing vaguely. "About what happened."

"Sure," Ilya said easily.

They walked through the house again, out to the back and along the edge of the pool together. Shane talked—about the noise, about the panel flashing, about how it scared him more than it probably should have. Ilya listened, asking questions, nodding, standing closer than necessary.

"So you turned everything off?" Ilya asked.

"Yes," Shane said. "Well. I tried to. I might've panicked."

Ilya smiled. "That's okay."

Something about the way he said it was so calm, reassuring, it made Shane's pants tighten.

When Ilya finally set his bag down to work, Shane stayed nearby, perched on the edge of a chair closer to Ilya this time.

"You don't have to stay," Ilya said lightly, glancing up at him.

"I know," Shane replied. "I just don't mind."

Ilya looked at him for a second longer than strictly professional. "Okay."

As he worked, Shane watched. Tried not to be obvious. Failed.

They talked more than Shane expected.

Not anything crazy. Not the kind of conversation that demanded anything from either of them. Just small, careful questions that opened doors without pushing them all the way through.

"So," Shane said at one point, leaning back against the counter of the small bar near the pool, arms loosely folded. "What do you do when you're not... here?"

Ilya glanced up from what he was working on, surprised but pleasantly so. "Outside of work?"

"Yeah," Shane said. "You don't seem like someone who only lives to work."

Ilya smiled at that, the expression easy and genuine. "I don't know. I cook. I go to the gym. I see my friends too much." He shrugged. "Normal things."

Shane hummed. "I don't do enough normal things."

Ilya looked at him for a moment longer than necessary. "What do you do, then?"

The question caught Shane off guard. He opened his mouth, then closed it again, considering.

"I... live here," he said finally, gesturing vaguely at the house. "I read. I reorganize rooms that don't need reorganizing. I buy furniture I don't need." A small, self aware smile tugged at his mouth. "I wait."

"For what?" Ilya asked.

Shane's chest tightened. He hadn't meant to invite that.

"My husband," he said, after a beat. "Usually."

Ilya's gaze flicked briefly, respectfully, to the ring on Shane's finger. He didn't comment right away.

"Is he home now?" Ilya asked instead.

Shane shook his head. "No. He's on a business trip."

"How long?"

"A week and a half," Shane said. Then, softer, more honest than he'd planned, "He was supposed to be back already."

Ilya nodded slowly, like he understood more than Shane had said out loud. "That is rough."

Shane let out a quiet breath. "Yeah."

The silence that followed wasn't uncomfortable. It settled around them, warm and heavy, like it was meant to be there. The pool equipment hummed quietly again, steady and unassuming.

"You here alone a lot?" Ilya asked gently.

Shane hesitated, then nodded. "Most of the time."

Internally Shane sighed, this is not the kind of conversation he wanted to be having. He didn't want to dwell on his stale monotonous life, he wanted to fuck Ilya.

Ilya straightened, wiping his hands on a towel, and stepped closer, not invading Shane's space, but near enough that the question felt more personal than any of their interactions so far.

"You don't seem like someone who should be alone all the time," he said.

Shane flinched subtly, his palms starting to clam.

"I don't think I am either," Shane admitted. "I just... ended up here."

Ilya studied him for a second, expression unreadable but attentive. Ilya was aware of him. He noticed the way Shane shifted when he leaned over. The way his gaze lingered, then darted away.

Shane on the other hand, was feeling light and fuzzy. Ilya stood in front of him, entirely too close yet not close enough, his body so big it blocked the sun from reaching Shane.

He wasn't touching. Not crowding him. Just there, his broad shoulders filling Shane's vision, curls darkened slightly with sweat and pool water, skin still damp where the sun hadn't had time to dry it. Ilya's gaze lingered on him, steady and unreadable, like he was trying to figure something out.

Shane had meant for this to go differently.

He'd put on the sweatpants. He'd stayed shirtless. He'd told himself this time he'd be the one unfazed, the one calm and in control while Ilya tried to keep it professional.

Instead, his heart was racing.

He couldn't seem to keep still. His fingers fidgeted at his sides. His weight shifted from one foot to the other. When he tried to meet Ilya's eyes, he only managed it for a second before looking away again, heat crawling up his neck.

Ilya noticed. Shane was sure of it.

The silence stretched, charged in a way that made Shane's thoughts start to slip. His mind betrayed him, showing him images he didn't want right now. Not here. Not with Ilya standing in front of him like this.

Broad shouldered. Warm. Damp.

The memory of the other night surged up uninvited, being this close, closer, breath against skin, the taste of chlorine and salt and heat. The thought of leaning in. Of—

Shane sucked in a sharp breath and forced himself back into his body.

Say something. Say anything.

"Do you want—" he started, then cleared his throat and tried again. "Do you want water?"

Ilya blinked, like he hadn't expected that. "Water?"

"Yeah," Shane said too quickly, words tumbling out now that they'd started. "I'm getting thirsty. It's starting to get warm. I can bring you a bottle. It's Spring water."

Ilya's mouth twitched, just barely. "Yeah," he said, calm as ever. "That'd be fine."

Like he couldn't tell Shane was unraveling right in front of him.

"Okay," Shane said, relieved for the excuse. "I'll—yeah."

He turned and headed inside before he could overthink it.

The house swallowed him up instantly, cool and quiet and painfully still. Shane immediately leaned against the marbled granite island in the middle of the kitchen, his shirtless torso finding the cool sensation grounding. He inhaled and exhaled slowly, and turned around to yank the fridge open, grabbing two bottles of water from the fridge.

Then he saw it.

The home security panel on the wall.

He stopped short.

His eyes darted to it, then back at the water bottles in the fridge, then back again, like either of them might jump at him if he looked away for too long. His pulse thudded in his ears. He told himself it was nothing. That there was no reason to even think about it.

But, what would happen if he did?

It could be for nothing. It could be a complete waste of time.

Or it could be for something else entirely.

Permission, maybe. Just to feel something.

Shane stood there for a moment, bottles hanging uselessly at his sides, fighting the thought even as it settled deeper. His stomach twisted. His chest felt tight.

"This is stupid," he muttered under his breath.

Still, he stepped closer.

His fingers shook slightly as he punched in the code. The panel beeped softly, obedient. Shane hesitated one last time, then pressed the red button.

"All home cameras now deactivated," the small box said in its flat, robotic voice.

The words echoed louder than they should have.

Shane exhaled, slow and shaky.

He stood there for a second longer, heart racing, then forced his shoulders to relax. He picked the bottles back up, schooled his face into something like a smile, and walked back outside.

Ilya looked up when he returned.

"Here," Shane said, handing him a bottle, like nothing had happened at all.

Ilya took it, fingers brushing his again. "Thanks."

Shane smiled small and careful, standing there with him in the warm afternoon light, the pool humming softly behind them, the house quiet and unwatched.

For now.

"Everything okay?" He heard.

"Yes," Shane said, too quickly. "Just needed this water."

Ilya nodded as he took a few gulps of his own water.

"Pool's fine," Ilya said lightly, stepping back like nothing had happened. "Filter's sensitive, but it didn't break."

"Oh," Shane said, voice a little rougher than before. "Good."

They lingered again after that—talking about the neighborhood, about how long Shane had lived there, about the city. Ilya asked what Shane liked about it. Shane asked what Ilya missed from home.

When it was time for Ilya to leave, neither of them moved right away.

"You should get out more," Ilya said casually, slinging his bag over his shoulder. "This place is nice. But it is a lot."

Shane laughed softly. "That's one way to put it."

Ilya hesitated, then added, like it was no big deal, "If you ever want, my friends and I grab drinks sometimes. Nothing fancy like you are probably used to but it's something."

Shane looked at him, surprised. "You're inviting me out?"

"Yeah," Ilya said, meeting his gaze steadily. "I am."

Shane felt that same warmth bloom low in his chest—not frantic this time, not booming against his chest like it needed to escape.

"I'd like that," he said.

Ilya smiled, honest and toothy.

"I will text you," he said.

As he walked toward the gate, Shane stayed where he was, watching him go.

Chapter 4: Just The Two of Us

Chapter Notes

k maybe i am getting a little invested in writing plot idkiddkiddk. The next chapter is already written buckle up buttercups

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

"Ilya—"

The name ripped out of him, ugly and desperate, as Shane rocked back and forth on the thick length inside of him, breath breaking apart in his chest. The bed shifted beneath him, sheets twisted tight under his hands, his body moving on instinct alone—chasing something he couldn't stop wanting.

For a few reckless seconds, he let himself believe it.

Let himself imagine the weight behind him, sturdy, bearing down on top of him, the way Ilya would fill the space so completely that Shane wouldn't have to think anymore. Broad shoulders, solid presence, hands that wouldn't hesitate. Someone close enough to crowd the air out of his lungs and take him past the point of pretending he was in control.

"Oh my god—fuck," Shane choked, burying his face into the pillow to muffle the sound, hips rocking harder, faster against the dildo, like his body was begging for something it already knew it wasn't going to get.

The room stayed quiet and empty.

That should have snapped him back to reality. It didn't.

He clung to the fantasy instead, chased it harder, let his mind drag him somewhere darker and more humiliating—imagining how rough Ilya might be, how easily he'd take what Shane was offering, how little patience he'd have for Shane's half hearted resistance.

Shane's hand came down against his own skin, the sharp sting on his asscheek grounding and devastating all at once. It wasn't enough. Nothing was enough. He needed the pressure, the presence, someone else there, someone real.

"Ilya," he gasped again, voice wrecked, like saying the name might summon him out of thin air.

Shane came with a sudden, violent jerk of his body, leaving Shane shaking, breath coming in harsh broken pulls as he collapsed forward, cheek pressed into the sheets. His whole body felt overstimulated and wrung out.

For a long moment, he just lay there, panting into the fabric, heart hammering.

Then he let out a quiet, mortified groan and pressed his forehead down harder.

"Jesus," he muttered, half to himself. "Get it together."

But even as the heat faded, even as his breathing slowed, the want didn't go with it.

Ilya's name still lingered in his mouth like something forbidden he'd once tasted and couldn't forget.

Around him the house was quiet and heavy with night, the security system still dark the way he'd left it earlier that day. He hadn't turned it back on. Not yet. He'd told himself it was because he kept forgetting, because it didn't matter, because nothing had actually happened that warranted the secrecy in the first place.

And that was true, mostly.

Nothing had happened between him and Ilya. No crossed lines. No reckless moment to catch on film. Just an invitation, quiet and unassuming, offered like it meant nothing at all.

Still, at least there was no footage of that. No clean, timestamped proof of Ilya standing too close, asking him out like it was the most natural thing in the world. Easier to deny if he ever needed to. Easier to pretend it had all been imagined, that it hadn't landed in his chest the way it had.

Shane lay facedown in the bed, cleaned up, sheets warm beneath him, the weight of his own body grounding in a way his thoughts refused to be. His breathing was evening out, attention scattered, sensations blurring together as his mind slipped into dreamland.

Nothing had happened, he reminded himself dimly.

But the cameras being off meant there was no proof of how badly he wanted it to.

Morning arrived gently.

Shane woke later than usual, sunlight beaming through the windows in a way that made the house feel less cavernous. He showered, lingering under the water until the steam softened the sharpest edges of his thoughts, then padded into the kitchen to make coffee, light on his feet. The quiet didn't feel as oppressive today. Still present and heavy, but not suffocating.

Ilya had asked him out.

The thought brought with it a faint, almost giddy warmth that Shane didn't bother trying to suppress. Drinks with friends. Super casual, nothing crazy at all.

Still, he checked his phone more times than he meant to.

By midday, doubt crept in, unwelcome and persistent.

What if he's not even gay?
What if this is just... friendliness?

The idea irritated him. Shane scoffed aloud, setting his mug down harder than necessary. No. Ilya didn't look at him like that out of politeness. That hadn't been bro behavior. Shane had lived too long ignoring his own instincts to start gaslighting himself now.

His phone rang while he was pacing the living room, the sound cutting cleanly through the quiet, piquing his interest immediately.

It was his husband.

Shane rolled his eyes before answering, then smoothed his voice into something pleasant. "Hey."

"Hey," his husband said, distracted already. "You haven't called."

"Sorry," Shane replied automatically. "I've just been busy."

"Yeah," his husband said. "This project keeps getting delayed. I won't be back for a bit."

Shane closed his eyes. "How long is 'a bit'?"

"Another couple weeks. Maybe more." A pause. "I put eighteen thousand in your account for the week. I'll put more in next week."

"*Eighteen?*" The word slipped out before Shane could soften it.

There was a beat. "Is that... not enough?"

"It's just," Shane began, then stopped. Chose his words carefully. "I wasn't expecting it to be that low."

A faint exhale on the other end. "If you run out, let me know. I know you'll probably go shopping with your girls or something. Buy something pretty for me to see you in when I get back."

For a fleeting moment, Shane felt a small smile attempt to tug at his lips, something almost like affection or comfort stir in his chest.

Then he heard it.

Soft, faint, but unmistakable.

"Come back to bed..."

A quick shushing sound. A flirty laugh that made his stomach drop.

His expression went still.

"Okay," he said quietly. "Just send it as soon as you can. I already have some plans."

"Yeah," his husband said. "Of cou—"

Shane ended the call before his voice could irritate him anymore.

The text came through almost immediately.

Don't ever do that again. And turn the cameras back on.

He groaned, letting his head fall back against the couch. He checked his bank account. The money was already there.

Fine.

He turned the cameras back on.

Then he called Jasmine and Lucy.

Shopping had always been a saving grace for Shane.

Jasmine swept him through designer stores, waltzing through aisles of clothes and shoes, her face nearly pressed completely against glass jewelry cases. Lucy followed with an armful of garments she didn't need, holding things up and asking Shane's opinion. He gave it honestly, amused and distracted all at once.

"Too tight."

"Not your color."

"Girl, take that off."

He watched them try on lace and silk, delicate straps and short hems, and felt a familiar tug — not jealousy, exactly, but longing. A quiet wish to be allowed softness the same way girls were.

I'd look good in that, he thought, then laughed under his breath.

He bought things although he'd told Jasmine and Lucy that he really didn't need or want much of anything. Of course he did. Shoes, a jacket, sunglasses he didn't need but 'it has Swarovski crystals lining the frame.'

At one point, he picked up a bracelet, heavy, silver, glittering, and turned it over in his hands, only for the sales associate to beam at him.

"Mr. Hollander," she said, "you bought this bracelet last week. Are you getting a matching one for your husband?"

Shane stared at it.

Oh. He had.

"No," he said politely. "I must've gotten mixed up. We can put that one back."

Matching, he thought sourly. *Absolutely not.*

They wandered into a furniture store after that, full of sculptural pieces and brutalist silhouettes. Shane slowed instinctively, assessing proportions and flow. Nothing worked. Nothing belonged in the house.

'Buy something pretty for me to see you in.'

The thought made his jaw tighten.

As he stood in the middle of the food court waiting on Jasmine and Lucy to pay for their sushi, his phone buzzed.

Ilya.

free tonight?

Shane's heart kicked hard.

Fuck yeah he thought immediately, then, nonchalantly typed:

depends on what u have for me

The dots appeared. Disappeared. Reappeared.

dive bar downtown, me u and a couple of friends. first drink on me ;)

That felt flirty, He thought.

He looked up at Jasmine and Lucy, grin spreading despite himself. "Okay, I changed my mind I do need more clothes."

"For what?" Lucy asked.

"Tonight." He responded, and left it at that.

They circled the stores more slowly this time.

Lucy drifted over to a rack of t-shirts, pulling one free and holding it up. Dark, washed black, soft like it had already been broken in.

"This," she said dramatically. "This feels right."

Shane took it from her, thumb brushing the fabric. It was thin enough to drape, thick enough not to cling. The neckline sat low but not indecent, relaxed in a way that suggested ease instead of intention.

He imagined it on — imagined Ilya seeing him like that. Not polished or dressed for approval. Just there in a regular casual t-shirt. Someone you'd bump shoulders with at a bar, someone you'd lean close to hear over the noise.

Someone you'd want to keep near.

"Try it," Jasmine said.

In the mirror, Shane barely recognized himself, he looked so *comfortable*. The shirt hung just right, skimming his torso, the sleeves loose enough to make him look soft instead of sculpted. He turned slightly, checking the way it moved when he shifted.

He'd notice, Shane thought, Shane hoped.

He bought it without hesitation.

The jeans came next, dark, worn-in, the kind that sat low on the hips without trying to advertise it. Lucy made him turn around once, assessing.

"Yeah," she said. "Your ass looks great."

"And boots," Jasmine added. "Not dress shoes. Something you can actually walk in."

Shane picked a pair he already knew he liked — scuffed leather, comfortable, familiar. Shoes he could stand in all night without thinking about them.

He bought them, walking back out into the afternoon with bags swinging lightly at his sides.

He might like it, he thought, the idea warm and unsettling all at once.

Better, he might want it.

Shane swallowed and kept walking, the city humming around them, the night ahead suddenly full of possibility.

By the time the three of them parted ways, his bank account sat at six thousand dollars.

Pitiful.

He texted his husband with practiced ease, his thumbs dancing across the keyboard as he stared blankly at his phone.

hi baby. miss you. overspent a little today and the girls want me to go out tonight. it'd be embarrassing to run out of money before them. can you put a little more in? xx

A heart, kissy face. Always a kissy face.

The reply came quickly.

be good.

Another notification followed.

+\$12,000.

Only then did Shane smile.

It lingered longer than he expected — small, private, a little sharp around the edges. The kind of smile that came from getting exactly what you wanted without having to jump through hoops.

He scrolled back through his texts with Ilya, thumb hovering as if he might somehow alter the past by rereading it.

10pm at Buster's. Dress casual.

Shane had stared at that one for a full minute before he responded.

casual is subjective. i'll do my best not to embarrass you.

Ilya's reply had come a moment later.

i doubt that

—

Buster's hit Shane all at once.

The sound came first — music pounding low and heavy, bass vibrating through the soles of his boots, layered with laughter and shouting and the sharp clink of glass against glass. The lights followed, dim and uneven, neon bleeding into shadow, everything in motion whether he wanted it to be or not. The smell of alcohol, smoke, sweat, something fried and oily hung thick in the air.

It was a lot. Too much if he let himself think about it. He hadn't been to a place like this in years.

He stood just inside the door for half a second longer than necessary, grounding himself the way he always did, eyes scanning, brain cataloguing. Bar straight ahead. Bathrooms toward the back. Exit behind him. He focused on the geometry of the space, the way bodies flowed around fixed points, until his heart rate eased enough to move.

Then he saw Ilya, and it was like the room reoriented around him.

Ilya stood at the bar, one elbow braced casually against the counter, shoulders relaxed like the noise didn't touch him. Dark long sleeve shirt, sleeves pushed up just enough to show forearms Shane had already memorized against his will. He looked comfortable here. Like this was his element.

Ilya turned.

Their eyes met.

The smile that crossed Ilya's face was small, almost restrained, like he'd been waiting.

Shane's chest went light and tight all at once.

He made his way through the crowd, acutely aware of his body, of how close everyone felt, until he reached the bar. Up close, Ilya felt steady. Anchoring. Like standing near him made the rest of the room recede just enough.

"Hi," Ilya said, voice warm, easy.

"Hi," Shane replied, breath catching slightly despite himself.

"Drink?" Ilya asked, already turning toward the bartender.

"Yes," Shane said immediately, then laughed softly. "Please."

Ilya ordered without hesitation, something in Russian Shane didn't catch, his accent thickening just a little. When the drink arrived, he slid it toward Shane.

"Trust me," he said.

Shane took a sip.

Strong. Unexpected. It burned pleasantly all the way down, settling low in his chest like it belonged there.

"Oh," he said, surprised, face scrunched a bit. "Okay. Yeah. I like that."

Ilya chuckled, clearly pleased.

They talked, not about anything important at first. The bar. The music. How crowded it was. Ilya leaned in close so Shane could hear him, their shoulders nearly brushing, the proximity doing something dangerous to Shane's concentration.

"You look good," Ilya said suddenly, eyes flicking over him with quiet appreciation. "Casual suits you."

Shane felt heat creep up his neck. "Honestly, I overthought it."

"I assumed," Ilya said, amused.

That made Shane laugh — a real one, light and unguarded. He hadn't realized how tense he'd been until it loosened.

More drinks came. The music shifted to something familiar, something Shane liked, and he found himself swaying slightly without realizing it. The bar didn't feel quite as overwhelming anymore. Maybe Ilya just made it easier to exist inside it, maybe it's because he's on his 4th drink.

Shane noticed things he hadn't expected to notice, like the way Ilya listened without interrupting, the way his attention stayed fixed on Shane even when the room demanded it. The way he smiled with his eyes. He felt chosen.

After a while, Shane glanced around, a thought surfacing slowly.

"So," he said, trying to sound casual, slurring his words slightly. "Your friends?"

Ilya took a sip of his drink, watching Shane over the rim. "Yeah. They cancelled."

Shane blinked. "Cancelled?"

"Last minute," Ilya said smoothly. "Stuff came up."

"Oh," Shane said, brain recalibrating. "So it's just..."

"Just us," Ilya finished, expression open, unreadable.

Something fluttered hard in Shane's chest, he didn't want to say what he was thinking, so he stuck his fist out in between them and watched as Ilya met it. A fist bump.

Why did I just do that, Shane thought.

Ilya chuckled again and tilted his head slightly, his eyes flickering from Shane to Shane's drink. "The drink okay?"

Shane met his gaze, pulse loud in his ears. "Yeah," he said honestly. "It's good."

They stayed like that, closer now due to Shane, conversation dipping into more personal territory. Work. Music they liked. Childhood. Ilya asked questions that felt intentional, like he was mapping Shane rather than passing time.

Shane felt seen. Noticed, rather than owned or managed.

And if Shane had been paying closer attention, if he hadn't been so busy riding the warmth of it all, lost in Ilya's eyes, he might have caught the detail that didn't quite fit.

The way Ilya hadn't checked his phone. The way there had been no frustrated messages, no apologies sent into the void.

Ilya hadn't called his friends to come out tonight.

He'd never planned to.

He'd wanted this, the noise, the drinks, the closeness, without witnesses. Without distraction. Just the two of them, learning the shape of each other in a crowded room.

And as Shane smiled into his glass, heart light and unguarded, Ilya watched him with quiet intent, already certain he'd made the right choice.

Eventually they left the bar, the air outside was cooler, sharp enough to cut through the fog in Shane's head.

Ilya had suggested it gently, a hand on Shane's elbow. *'Let's get some air.'* Shane hadn't argued. He'd followed, buzzing, the door swinging shut behind them and muting the noise of

the bar into a dull throb.

The parking lot was half lit, yellow streetlights pooling on cracked asphalt. Cars sat in uneven rows, quiet and unremarkable after the chaos inside. It had to be at least 1 a.m. by now.

They stopped near Ilya's car. A Honda.

New, but not flashy. Just a Honda.

He stared for a second too long, then smiled — wide, soft, drunk in the way that stripped him of pretense. "Wow," he said, wonder creeping into his voice, looking at Ilya with his lazy and admiring eyes. "A *Honda*."

Ilya frowned slightly, amused. "Yeah?"

Shane nodded, eyes still bright. "Yeah."

There was a beat.

Ilya tilted his head. "What?"

Shane shook his head, laughing quietly. "Nothing. Just... nothing."

But his smile lingered, fond and unguarded, like the thought meant more than he was letting on.

You're real, his brain supplied helpfully. *You go home to a Honda. You're not pretending.*

Ilya watched him carefully, something tightening low in his chest.

Shane leaned back against the side of the car without thinking, palms braced behind him on the cool metal of the door. The movement brought them closer, shoulder to shoulder as Ilya stood beside him, but close enough that Ilya could feel the heat coming off him. Close enough to smell the alcohol on his breath, the faint soap underneath it.

Ilya should've stepped back. He didn't.

"You're pretty drunk," Ilya said quietly, not accusatory. Observing.

Shane hummed in agreement, leaning in, eyes flicking up to meet his. "Mm. Yeah."

The way he said it — open, unashamed — sent a slow, dangerous pulse through Ilya. It sounded like Shane was testing him, daring him. Shane wasn't sloppy but he was loose and honest in a way that made Ilya painfully aware of how carefully he was holding himself together.

I want him, Ilya thought, plain and immediate.
But not like this.

Shane shifted again, one knee bumping Ilya's thigh. This time, he didn't pull back.

"I'm having a really good time," Shane said, voice softer now, stripped of bravado. "With you."

Ilya's breath caught just slightly. "Me too."

The space between them felt electric, compressed. Shane's gaze kept dropping to Ilya's mouth and then darting away, like he didn't trust himself to linger too long. They also kept trailing over Ilya's chest, wondering how he might respond if Shane let his tongue graze over one of his nipples. His hands flexed uselessly at his sides.

Say something, Shane told himself.
Do something.

Stupidly, he ended up swaying more than he wanted as he tried to turn to face Ilya, his drunken body leaned in, just enough that his shoulder brushed Ilya's chest. The contact was brief, almost accidental.

Ilya's hand came up automatically, steadying Shane at the waist. Shane's hand coming up to Ilya's chest, steadying himself there.

Ilya's touch was firm but careful, fingers splayed like he was grounding Shane rather than pulling him closer. The heat of it sank straight through the thin fabric, settling low in Shane's stomach. He sucked in a breath, eyes fluttering shut for half a second.

Ilya didn't move his hand. He stayed where he was, hand still firm at Shane's lower back.

Shane was warm against him now — not just figuratively, but physically — the press of his body solid against him. Shane's hand still rested on his chest, light but deliberate, fingers clutched slightly into the fabric like he was anchoring himself there. The contact sent a slow, dangerous pull through Ilya's gut.

This would be so easy, he thought, a little darkly.

Easy to let his hand slide just a few inches lower. Easy to let Shane feel what he was doing to him, how badly he wanted to close that last inch of space and make it real. His mind betrayed him in flashes — Shane tipped back against the car, hot and flushed, that soft, open sound he made when he was overwhelmed, the way his eyes had been tracking Ilya's mouth all night like he was waiting for permission.

Ilya's grip tightened, just slightly, grounding himself as much as Shane.

Not like this, he reminded himself, *Married*, even though want surged hard enough to make him reconsider it all. Shane was drunk, yes. He wasn't gone or incapable, but open in a way that made Ilya ache and hesitate in equal measure. He needed Shane awake for this. Clear. Certain.

Shane shifted, just enough to bring their faces closer, and when he looked up, their eyes locked, dark, searching, unguarded. For a breathless second, everything narrowed to that

look, to the shared understanding humming between them.

“You’re a little unsteady,” Ilya said quietly. “Take a breath.”

It sounded like concern. It felt like something else entirely.

Shane swallowed, pulse loud in his ears. “Yeah,” he murmured. “I know.”

They stayed like that for a beat, bodies aligned, neither of them moving, neither of them pretending they didn’t feel the pull. Shane’s forehead tipped forward, grazing Ilya’s shoulder, the contact brief and grounding. Ilya let it happen, then shifted back just enough to give them space.

Ilya let his hand fall away slowly. Shane missed it immediately, but followed suit.

The moment thinned.

Ilya glanced toward the street, keys turning in his hand like he’d just remembered the rest of the world existed. “You didn’t drive, right?”

Shane hesitated just a fraction, then sighed. “I did.”

Ilya’s brow knit immediately, concerned. “Okay,” he said. “Then you are not driving home.”

“I know,” Shane said quickly. “I won’t. I’ll call one of my friends. They can grab me and I’ll come back for my car in the morning.”

He pulled his phone out as if to prove it, fingers a little clumsy as he unlocked it.

Ilya nodded, relief flickering across his face. “Yes. That works.”

Shane started scrolling, then paused. “You don’t have to stay,” he added, glancing up. “I mean, they’ll be quick—”

“I’m not going anywhere,” Ilya said easily, like it wasn’t a question worth debating. “I’ll wait with you.”

The words settled between them, warmer than they had any right to be.

Shane’s mouth tilted into a small smile, something soft and grateful. “Okay.”

He stepped a little closer again without meaning to, just near enough to feel Ilya’s presence beside him as he sent the text. The night had gone quieter around them, the bar noise muffled behind closed doors, the streetlights casting long shadows across the asphalt.

Ilya leaned back against the car, arms folded loosely, watching Shane with an attention that felt domestic.

They didn’t talk much while they waited.

They didn't need to. And the moment had passed technically, folded away, tucked neatly back into something manageable, but the awareness lingered. A shared understanding that sat comfortably between them, neither pressing nor fading.

When Shane's phone buzzed with a reply, he glanced at it, then looked up. "They're on their way."

"Good," Ilya said.

Eventually they bid goodbyes and Ilya barely made it through the door of his own apartment before the restraint finally cracked.

The apartment was dark and quiet, the kind of quiet that pressed in on you if you let it. He didn't bother turning on the lights. Didn't bother with anything except getting his jacket off and undoing his jeans as he plopped against the couch and the image hit him again, sharp and immediate.

Shane against the car. Unsteady. Flushed. Looking up at him like that.

Ilya exhaled hard as he freed his hard cock of the tight material, he'd been hard the whole drive home. His head tipped back as he stroked himself, a low sound leaving him before he could stop it. "Блядь," (fuck) he muttered, the word rough in the empty room.

He closed his eyes and let it take him this time.

The press of Shane's body replayed in his mind, the warmth, the give of him, the way he'd leaned in like he was waiting to be told where to go. Ilya's grip tightened on himself as he imagined crowding him there, imagined the way Shane would melt when someone finally took control.

A quiet groan slipped out of him, involuntary.

His hips rocked slightly as the fantasy sharpened. Shane's voice, soft and breathless. The look in his eyes when he stopped pretending he wasn't overwhelmed. The trust in it.

"Да...," (yes) Ilya murmured under his breath, barely aware he was speaking. "Вот так," (just like that)

The want came on hard and fast, coiling low in his gut, impossible to ignore. He leaned into it, let himself feel it fully — the ache, the need, the frustration of having walked away when every instinct in him had screamed to stay.

The release came quick and intense, leaving him bent forward, breathing hard into the silence, cum running down his hand.

For a moment, he stayed like that, chest heaving, letting the aftershocks fade.

Then he straightened slowly, dragging a hand over his face, the tension bleeding out of him in uneven pieces. The apartment felt too quiet now, like it was listening.

Chapter End Notes

Wow. A Honda.

Chapter 5: So Anxious

Chapter Notes

HAPPY VALENTINES DAY i wanted to post as a gift lol

Shane woke up feeling like someone threw a flash bomb at him.

The sun knifed through the curtains and hit him straight in the face, piercing through his skull, too bright, too hot, too loud in the way only morning could be when his head was full of cotton and regret. He made a noise that was somewhere between a groan and an actual plea, then rolled onto his side, burying his face in the pillow like that could save him.

His mouth tasted like stale liquor and bad choices. His temples throbbed in a slow, relentless rhythm. He shifted, trying to find a position that didn't make the world spin, and managed to get one eye open—

—and saw a figure sitting upright beside him.

In his robe.

Shane jerked so hard his spine popped. "What the f—"

"Gooood morning, sleepyhead" Rose sang, bright and theatrical, like she wasn't an intruder in his bed.

Shane stared at her, blinking slowly, waiting for the hallucination to pass. It didn't.

"Rose," he said hoarsely. "Why are you in my bed."

She beamed. "Because you texted me at—" she checked her phone with exaggerated patience, "—one thirty-three a.m. to come pick you up."

Shane squinted. "From what...?"

Rose's grin sharpened. "From some grimy bar downtown."

Shane closed his eyes. His brain offered him a flash of neon lights and bass and the heat of bodies packed too tight. He felt his stomach roll.

Rose leaned forward like she was about to share a secret. "After going out for drinks with the hot, hunky Russian pool boy."

Shane's face went blank in self-defense.

"Oh," Rose continued, as if she'd just remembered the best part. "And *MY. GOD*. Shane. He is *hunky*. Like... the kind of man you see in a movie and you're like, okay, that's not a real human. That's a sculpture."

Shane cracked one eye open. "Please stop talking."

"No," she said happily. "Absolutely not. I have water, vitamins, and a story to hear."

Shane dragged his hand down his face. "How did you get in my house."

"I just stayed after I brung you home last night," Rose said, like that explained everything.

Shane groaned. "I hate you."

"Apparently, 'cause you didn't tell me you were even going." Rose's tone shifted into theatrical betrayal. "You didn't tell me you called him. You didn't tell me you—"

"Rose," Shane rasped, "I'm going to throw up."

Rose clapped her hands once. "Great! Then you need electrolytes. Sit up."

"I don't want to."

"You're doing it anyway."

Shane rolled onto his back, defeated, staring at the ceiling like it had answers. He'd been doing that alot recently. Rose scooted closer, smooth and relentless, and shoved a glass of water into his hand.

"There," she said. "Drink."

He took a sip. His stomach threatened mutiny, but he kept it down.

Rose's eyes glittered. "Okay. I'm giving you an hour. You're going to shower, you're going to pretend you're a functional adult, and then you're going to tell me everything."

Shane turned onto his side again, presenting her with his back like a wall.

Rose leaned in, unbothered. "And I swear to god, if you try to fall asleep again—"

"Rose," Shane mumbled into the pillow, "why are you torturing me and wearing my robe."

"It makes me feel rich and powerful," she said. "Also, it's soft."

"Get *out* of my house."

"No."

Shane's sigh came out like a dying animal.

Rose patted his shoulder. "One hour, Hollander."

An hour later, Shane sat at the kitchen island with damp hair, a hoodie, and the haunted look of someone who had survived something. Rose sat across from him with her third cup of coffee she definitely didn't need and an intense, predatory focus.

"Okay," she said, very calm. "Start talking."

Shane stared into his coffee like it might swallow him whole.

Rose leaned forward. "From the top."

"I don't—" Shane began.

Rose lifted a hand. "Shane."

He sighed. "Fine."

He told her about Buster's, the noise, the lights, the way the room had hit him like a wave. How he'd almost turned around.

"And then?" Rose demanded.

"And then I saw him," Shane admitted, and his voice changed without him meaning it to. Like the name lived in the back of his throat now.

Rose made a noise. "Mhm."

"He was at the bar," Shane continued. "Like he belonged there. All hot and broody."

"Classic Slavic," Rose said solemnly.

Shane shot her a look. "He ordered me a drink."

Rose's eyes widened. "He ordered you a drink."

"In Russian," Shane added reluctantly.

Rose pressed her fingers to her mouth like she was about to scream. "Oh, I know that was hot."

"Yeah," Shane said, his cheeks heating up. "And he kept leaning in so I could hear him. Like—normal leaning. Not weird."

Rose nodded like a therapist. "And you felt normal about that."

"No," Shane said immediately.

Rose grinned.

Shane tried to keep going without looking at her. "We talked. A lot. And I got too drunk."

Rose sat up straighter. "How drunk."

Shane narrowed his eyes. "Don't do that."

Rose pointed. "How. Drunk."

Shane's ears warmed. "I don't know, drunk enough that he asked if I was okay."

Rose's expression softened a fraction. "Okay. That's... sweet."

"He's—" Shane stopped, then tried again. "He's not a dick."

Rose blinked. "Perfect for you."

Shane stared at his coffee, jaw tight. "Anyway. We went outside for air."

Rose's smile returned, feral. "We did."

Shane's throat bobbed. He remembered cool air, the quiet, the parking lot, the streetlights. Ilya's car. The Honda. The stupid fondness that detail had sparked in him like he'd found proof of something.

Rose leaned forward. "Did you kiss."

"No."

Rose slapped the counter lightly. "Did you touch."

"Barely."

Rose let out a sound of pure frustration. "This is torture."

Shane huffed a laugh despite himself, and that surprised him. The laugh felt lighter than he'd been in a long time.

"It got close," Shane admitted, and his voice went even softer. "But we didn't—he didn't push it."

Rose watched him carefully. "Because you were drunk."

Shane nodded once.

Rose's eyes were bright, but her tone gentled. "That's... actually really hot in a non-hot way."

Shane glanced up. "What does that mean."

"It means he's not gross," Rose said. "It means he's not trying to get something out of you while you're messy. It means when he does—" she made a vague gesture with her hand, like she couldn't even say it without getting excited, "—it's gonna be because *you* wanted it. Not because you were drunk and convenient."

Shane swallowed.

His stomach did a slow flip, not from nausea this time.

Rose's grin returned, because she couldn't help herself.

Shane stared at her. "Okay, time for you to get out of my kitchen. And my house."

"No," Rose said sweetly. "Continue."

Shane tried to ignore the way his face wanted to smile. It was embarrassing. It was also uncontrollable.

"I left," he said. "You picked me up. The end."

Rose squinted. "You're leaving out something."

Shane froze. "No I'm not."

Rose tapped her nails against the counter. "You are. Tell me what he said to you outside."

Shane's chest tightened. He remembered Ilya's voice close to his ear. It wasn't really what he said. Just... the way the air around him had shifted, the way Ilya had been careful with him.

Shane pushed his coffee away slightly like it had gotten too intimate.

"He just," Shane said quietly, "he just made sure I was okay."

Across town, Ilya woke up to a quiet that didn't press down on him for once.

His apartment didn't get much sun. The light that came in was pale and indirect, more suggestion than intrusion. He lay still for a moment, one arm thrown over his eyes, letting his body reboot.

His head was clear. His mouth wasn't dry. He'd slowed himself down like he always did, kept one foot in control all night.

And still—his thoughts had gone where they wanted. To last night, and Shane.

The way he'd looked under streetlights, cheeks flushed, eyes glossed over. The way he'd leaned closer without realizing it, like his body was trying to close distance his mind didn't yet have permission to cross. The softness beneath Shane's sharpness, revealed in fragments, like a crack in glass.

Ilya lowered his arm, staring at the ceiling.

He didn't regret pulling back. He didn't, seriously.

He pictured Shane in the morning—hungover, probably, dramatic about it. He pictured him squinting at his phone, rereading messages like they were evidence.

A faint smile pulled at Ilya's mouth.

He reached for his phone. He typed, paused, then sent.

you make it home okay?

He set the phone down and stood up, moving through the small routines of the morning. Water, kettle, tea.

He had two pools to maintenance today, neither of them Shane's. He needed to grab more chlorine testing kits from his job. Probably needed to go grocery shopping afterwards. So much to do, yet his attention kept drifting back to the same point, like a compass that wouldn't recalibrate.

Shane.

Shane's phone buzzed mid-Rose monologue.

Rose was describing, with unnecessary detail, how she could "accidentally" trip Ilya into the pool at some point if Shane "would just commit to the bit."

Shane glanced down.

His heart jumped so hard it felt like it knocked against his ribs.

Rose stopped instantly. "Is that him."

Shane's face went blank again. "No."

Rose leaned across the counter like a hawk. "That *is* him."

Shane typed back before he could overthink it.

yeah. thanks to you.

i feel like i got hit by a truck

Rose slapped a hand over her mouth to smother a squeal.

Ilya's reply came quickly.

drink water

eat something

don't be dramatic

Shane's mouth twitched.

"He's kinda funny." Rose said, shocked.

Shane ignored her.

i'm never dramatic

also, thanks again for last night. seriously.

you're welcome

you were safe. that's all.

That line did something strange to Shane. It wasn't romantic, but it was. It wasn't flirtatious, but it was. For sure though it was simple. Like Ilya had made a decision and didn't need applause for it. What a man.

Shane stared at it longer than necessary, then pressed his phone to his chest, breathing deeply.

Rose watched him, eyes narrowing with suspicion. "What did he say."

"He's so hot," Shane breathed out, not bothering to answer Rose's actual question.

Rose snatched his phone out of his hand so fast it should've been illegal. She read the thread, then looked up slowly, eyes wide.

"Oh," she said softly.

Shane snatched the phone back. "Rose."

Rose shook her head dramatically like she couldn't believe something. "Human decency, wow."

"I'm about to call the police and have you removed from my house," Shane said, but his face was pink and his smile said otherwise.

Rose rested her chin in her hands, laughing. "So what now?"

Shane stared at the phone.

What now was the problem.

Everything was already built for him here, sprawling and expensive and deeply monitored. There were good parts. Comfort. Security. Space. The ability to never worry about money or where he'd sleep or what would happen if he got sick or overwhelmed or tired of the world.

But there were other parts too. The ones he didn't like to look at for too long.

The way his husband treated him like a possession that needed maintaining. The way affection came with conditions. The way love felt like something transactional, measured out in wire transfers and instructions. *Buy something pretty for me to see you in when I get back.*

Shane swallowed.

What would he even do if this became real? If Ilya became more than a fantasy, more than a quiet spark in the middle of his carefully controlled days? He couldn't just... *leave*. Could he? He didn't even know if he wanted to. The thought of dismantling everything — the house, the routine, the safety — made a heaviness settle in his chest.

And still, his thumbs moved before his brain could stop them.

pool looks good today btw

thanks again for saving it from my idiot friend

The text was safe and mundane. It was also a door, Shane could only find out what he was getting into if he left it open.

Ilya read it while his kettle hissed quietly in the background.

Ilya typed,

your friend always sabotage you?

Then, after a beat:

i can swing by later this week. quick check. routine.

Was that too much? Ilya thought. *Too eager?*

Shane's phone buzzed again.

Rose leaned forward like she was watching a tennis match.

Shane read it silently.

A quick check. Routine. He could almost see Ilya typing that, choosing words carefully. Offering without offering.

Shane swallowed.

yeah she's evil

later this week is fine

Rose made a satisfied sound and leaned back. "There we go."

Shane stared at his phone like it might burn him.

Then he looked up at Rose, expression flat. "Now get out."

Rose blinked. "What."

"You've gotten your fill for the day," Shane said. "Go."

Rose stood slowly, dramatic. "Fine. But I'm coming back."

"Don't."

"I'm coming back," she repeated, already walking away. "I'm invested now."

Shane watched her go, then exhaled.

Two days later, Ilya came back.

Shane saw him through the security cameras first—walking through the gate with his slouchy bag, red shorts, fitted white tank like a lifeguard, and posture relaxed like he wasn't stepping into a mansion, like the wealth didn't change the air around him.

Shane's heart did the stupid little flutter again.

He hated that it did that.

He also couldn't stop it.

He met Ilya at the side entrance because meeting him at the front felt too formal for what this was and too intimate for what it wasn't.

"Hey," Shane said, trying for casual.

"Hey," Ilya replied, gaze flicking over him—quick, controlled—then settling on his face.

Shane's brain snagged on the fact that Ilya was looking at him like he remembered him. Not like a client, but like a person. He wanted Ilya to *see* him so desperately.

"You feeling better?" Ilya asked.

Shane scoffed. "Barely."

Ilya's mouth curved. "Told you. Dramatic."

Shane rolled his eyes, but the corner of his mouth betrayed him. "Come on."

He led Ilya through the yard toward the pool.

The air was warmer today, sun bright and clean overhead. The water shimmered, blue and inviting, like it had never been ruined by a bucket of dirt and one woman's crazy plans. The world felt too pretty for how keyed up Shane's body was.

Ilya set his bag down and crouched near the filter, hands moving with practiced ease. Shane hovered nearby, trying to look like he belonged there, trying not to watch too hard.

He failed, obviously.

Because Ilya was Ilya. Because Shane's brain insisted on cataloguing details. The way his forearms flexed, the way his curls caught sunlight, the faint line of concentration between his

brows when he listened to the machinery.

Shane made himself speak, because if he stayed quiet his thoughts would get loud.

"So," he said, aiming for neutral, "this is just a routine check?"

Ilya glanced up. "You needed me to, right?"

Shane's face warmed. "I—yeah. I know. I just mean—"

"Shane," Ilya said, snorting softly, like he could hear Shane's spiraling without seeing it. "Relax."

Shane swallowed.

Ilya stood, wiping his hands on a cloth. "Everything looks fine. Your system is good."

"Good," Shane said too quickly. Then, because his mouth kept betraying him. "Thanks."

Ilya's gaze held his a moment longer than necessary.

Shane looked away first, irritated at himself.

The silence that followed wasn't awkward exactly. It was thick with awareness. They had just been at a bar, chest to chest nearly, *mouth to mouth*... nearly.

Ilya picked up a small testing kit from his bag, then stepped closer to the pool's edge. Shane shifted too without thinking, ending up beside him.

Ilya leaned forward slightly, reaching past Shane to dip the tester into the water.

The movement brought Ilya's shoulder close to Shane's chest. Shane went very still, breath catching, because suddenly Ilya was in his space the way he'd been in the parking lot—the difference being this time, Shane was sober. This time, he couldn't blame it on alcohol.

Ilya straightened with the tester in his hand, waiting for it to read.

Their bodies stayed close.

Shane's heart started to race, *god* he wished it would stop fucking doing that, because it made him feel young and stupid and out of control. He tried to make his voice normal.

"So," he said, and it came out too soft, "do you... remember much from the other night?"

Ilya's gaze flicked to him. "Yeah."

One word. Okay.

Shane swallowed. "I don't."

That wasn't entirely true. He remembered too much in fragments. The way Ilya's hand had been heavy against his back. The way the air outside had felt like relief. The pull that had made him want to be reckless.

Ilya's expression shifted—subtle, thoughtful, knowing. "You remember enough."

Shane's throat tightened. He stared at Ilya like he was trying to read him, like he was trying to find the safe way through something that felt unsafe.

The space between them felt like it was shrinking on its own.

Shane's eyes dropped to Ilya's mouth.

He looked away instantly, like he'd been caught stealing.

Ilya noticed it and instead of pushing, he didn't move. He just waited. Calm. Steady. Like he was giving Shane room to choose.

Shane's brain did a frantic little loop.

This is stupid.

This is too much.

This is exactly what you want.

You're married.

He's looking at you.

He's right there.

Shane's breath hitched.

"Ilya," he said quietly, and his voice cracked on the name like it meant too much.

Ilya's eyes softened a fraction, glancing down at his lips quickly. "Yes?"

Shane didn't know what he was gonna try and say next. He didn't have a line for this. No script. No plan.

So he did the only thing he could do.

He leaned in.

Ilya felt it immediately. The shift in air. The narrowing of space. Shane's warmth edging closer, hesitant but wanting. Every instinct in him screamed to close the distance, to take that half step forward, to spare Shane the uncertainty of the moment.

He didn't.

Ilya stayed still.

Not because he didn't want it, the want was sharp, immediate, humming under his skin, but because this wasn't about want. It was about choice. About letting Shane decide, sober and unpressured, what he was doing.

For a heartbeat too long, Shane hovered there.

Panic flared through him, hot and bright.

Oh god. I misread this. I fucked this up. I—

Then Ilya moved. Just enough. He met Shane halfway, closing the last inch with deliberate slowness, like he was careful not to spook something fragile.

Their lips touched.

Soft. Warm. Barely there.

A gentle press, a pause where neither of them moved, both of them suspended in the awareness of it. The faintest brush of breath, the subtle give of lips that felt impossibly intimate because of how restrained it was.

Shane's eyes fluttered shut on instinct, and something inside him went quiet. Not everything, not the world, not the consequences, not the life waiting behind him like a locked door.

The noise.

The constant chattering, the spiraling loops of thought, the need to analyze and justify and brace, all of it dropped to a hush. All that was left was Ilya.

The warmth of his mouth. The steadiness of him. The way the moment didn't ask anything more.

Shane pulled back first, like the part of him that remembered how to survive had finally caught up.

He stared at Ilya, breath uneven, heart hammering so hard he was sure it showed. Shocked, not by the kiss, but by how *right* it had felt. How gentle. How grounding.

Ilya stared back.

His expression was unreadable, but not cold. Focused. Like he was holding something carefully inside himself, something he wasn't ready to drop.

"Ilya," Shane breathed again, quieter this time, the name slipping out before he could stop it.

Something in Ilya gave slightly. He leaned in and kissed Shane again — just as soft, just as brief — a deliberate echo, a reassurance rather than an escalation. A wordless *yes, I felt it too*.

And then he pulled back.

The absence of his mouth made Shane instinctively lean forward, chasing the warmth that had vanished. His body wanted more, his hand twitched at his side, his breath stuttered, but he stopped himself.

Because Ilya had stopped.

They stood there for a moment longer, the space between them newly charged, newly fragile.

Then the world slowly eased back in around them.

No one spoke.

The pool water shimmered beside them like nothing had happened.

Finally, Ilya cleared his throat lightly and looked down at the testing kit in his hand like it was suddenly the most important thing on earth.

"Water chemistry is fine," he said, voice steady.

Shane let out a breath that sounded like a quiet laugh and a near breakdown combined. "Great."

Ilya nodded once. "Yeah."

They both shifted—just slightly—creating a sliver of space again, as if the world had snapped back into place.

Shane rubbed his thumb along the edge of his sweatshirt sleeve, not looking at Ilya's mouth again because he didn't trust himself.

Ilya packed his kit away with calm efficiency.

When he finally lifted his bag, he paused like he might say something else.

Instead, he just looked at Shane—longer this time.

"I'll see you," Ilya said quietly.

Shane nodded, throat tight. "Yeah."

Ilya turned and walked back toward the gate like he hadn't just rearranged Shane's entire nervous system with two of the most tame kisses.

Shane stood frozen by the pool, sunlight warm on his skin, heart hammering.

The house behind him felt just as big. Just as expensive. Just as full of watching eyes. But Shane felt awake. Because now he knew exactly what he'd been missing.

And exactly who could give it to him.

Chapter 6: Exhale

Chapter Notes

Drink some water before you start this one.

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

By the time the sun started to dip, Shane felt like he had lived three different days in one.

He had paced the house, muscles tight. He replayed it while brushing his teeth. While standing in the shower with the water too hot.

The kiss would not leave him alone.

It lived in his mouth. In his chest. In the back of his throat every time he swallowed.

Shane tried to outrun it.

Soft. Careful. Brief.

Everything he'd wanted, yet somehow, not enough. And the house didn't help, it never did.

Every room felt too large, too composed. The kind of quiet that wasn't restful, just watchful. The cameras blinked from their corners, tiny green lights reminding him that even alone, he wasn't unobserved. That somewhere, something always knew where he was, what he was doing, how long he lingered.

He hated them today.

He hated the way his reflection looked in the dark glass — beautiful, expensive, hollow. He hated the way his thoughts kept circling back to Ilya like a bruise his tongue wouldn't stop pressing.

And he hated the ring.

He twisted it absently as he paced, the metal sliding too easily against skin that had worn it long enough to forget what bare felt like. The weight of it suddenly seemed absurd. Symbolic in a way that made his chest ache.

He stopped short in the hallway, breath catching unexpectedly.

"Oh my god," he whispered, pressing his fingers into his eyes. "Get it together."

He didn't.

The tears came out of nowhere — sharp, humiliating, leaving him blinking and furious with himself. He leaned his palms against the kitchen counter, shoulders shaking once before he forced himself to breathe.

This wasn't about the *kiss*, he told himself. It was about what the kiss had cracked open.

He straightened, wiping his face, jaw clenched. His gaze landed on the security panel glowing quietly on the wall.

Something in him went still.

Before he could think better of it, he crossed the room and yanked it free.

The plastic casing cracked as it hit the floor, wires snapping loose with a soft, final sound. The lights of the camera's went dark.

The silence afterward felt enormous.

Shane stood there breathing hard, heart pounding, a strange calm settling over him the same time a fire built in him.

He didn't regret it. He picked up his phone with shaking hands, unlocking it and finding Ilya's contact.

so that's it?

He stared at the words, then sent them before fear could intervene.

Ilya had spent the afternoon trying to outrun his thoughts with his hands.

Fixing a hinge. Replacing a cracked tile. Anything that required focus, muscle memory, repetition. It usually worked. Today, it didn't.

The kiss followed him everywhere, too.

The way Shane had leaned in like he was bracing for impact. The way he'd gone quiet when their mouths met, like something in him had finally stopped screaming.

Ilya had walked away because he thought that was the responsible thing to do.

It hadn't felt responsible all day.

When his phone buzzed, he already knew who it was.

The message hit him square in the chest.

He exhaled slowly, leaning back against the counter, eyes closing briefly. *Here we go.*

He typed. Deleted. Typed again.

It wasn't nothing

That felt insufficient.

I left because I didn't want to make things harder for you

The reply came almost immediately.

it already is hard

you don't get to decide how much

Ilya swallowed.

you're married

The three dots appeared. Disappeared. Appeared again.

and?

Ilya ran a hand through his hair.

and that matters

then why did you kiss me

He stared at the screen for a long moment.

Because I wanted to.

Because you looked at me like I was real.

Because I haven't wanted something this badly in years.

He didn't send any of that.

maybe we should talk in person

The reply was instant.

come over then

Ilya hesitated only a second.

on my way

The sun had fully set by the time Ilya arrived. The kitchen lights were too bright.

Shane hadn't turned most of them on, but the ones over the island were enough to make everything feel exposed. Stainless steel. Marble. Clean lines. Nothing to hide behind.

Ilya stood on the opposite side of the island, hands braced lightly against the counter like he was grounding himself. Shane stayed near the sink at first, but eventually he drifted forward until they were facing each other across the slab of stone — a barrier that suddenly felt deliberate.

For a moment, neither of them spoke, but Shane broke first.

"Did I do something wrong?"

His voice wasn't sharp. It wasn't dramatic. It was steady in that way that meant he'd been thinking about this for hours.

Ilya exhaled slowly through his nose.

"No."

Shane nodded once.

"Okay," he said.

Silence.

He just stared at him. The look on his face said the rest.

So what the fuck then?

Ilya's jaw flexed.

"It mattered," he said finally.

Shane's eyebrows lifted slightly. "Okay..."

He let the word hang there.

Ilya pushed off the counter slightly, restless. "I didn't leave because it didn't matter."

"But you left," Shane replied.

"And?"

"And that's insane," Shane said, frustration finally breaking through. "You kissed me like that and then you just walked out like you'd dropped off a package."

"That's not what I meant."

"Then what do you mean?" Shane demanded, palms flattening against the island now, leaning forward like he was physically pushing against the distance between them. "Because I've been standing in this house all day replaying it and I'm trying to understand what part of it didn't mean what I thought it meant."

"It meant something," Ilya said.

"Then why did you leave?"

The question landed harder than anything else.

Ilya hesitated.

"See?" Shane said, voice low now. "That pause. That's what I'm talking about."

Ilya dragged a hand over his face. "You're married."

Shane went still.

"That's your answer?" he asked quietly.

"It's part of it."

Shane laughed once, sharp and humorless. "You think I don't know that?"

"I think you're standing here acting like this is clean," Ilya said. "Like there aren't consequences."

"I'm not acting like it's clean," Shane snapped. "I'm acting like it's real."

They stared at each other.

The air felt thick.

"I can't do this back-and-forth thing," Shane said, his voice cracking just slightly now. "I'm already past my limit. I can't do the are-we-or-are-we-not thing. I can't do you *looking* at me like that and then pretending it's complicated."

"It *is* complicated."

"It's *not* complicated," Shane shot back. "It's simple."

Ilya let out a frustrated breath. "Simple?"

"Yes," Shane said, jaw tight. "I wanted you. You wanted me. We kissed. That's not complicated."

"You have a *husband*, Shane."

"Okay?" Shane fired back.

"And I don't want to be the thing you grab onto without thinking," Ilya said.

"I have been thinking," Shane shot back. "*All day. Every day. Every minute* since you stepped into my yard."

That hit.

Shane blinked once. "I'm not using you," he said, quieter now but no less intense.

"I'm not accusing you," Ilya replied, but there was heat in it now. "I'm protecting myself."

"From what?" Shane demanded. "From me deciding I actually want you?"

"From being an escape," Ilya shot back. "From you waking up one morning and deciding this was just rebellion."

The word lingered in the air.

Rebellion.

Shane stared at him like he'd just said something obscene.

"You think this is rebellion?" he asked softly.

"I think you're unhappy," Ilya said. "And I showed up at the right time."

Shane's chest rose and fell.

"You think I'm confused," he said.

"I think you're desperate for something different—"

"I'm desperate for *you*," Shane said, the words ripping out of him before he could filter them.

The kitchen went very, very quiet. Shane looked away from Ilya.

Ilya swallowed.

"That's not the same thing," he said.

Ilya's eyes flicked down involuntarily — just for a second.

To Shane's left hand.

"Look at your hand right now, Shane," he said quietly.

Shane's fingers curled instinctively.

"You haven't taken that off," Ilya continued. "Not once."

"That doesn't mean what you think it means."

"It means something," Ilya countered. "It means you're still wearing your life while reaching for mine."

Shane stayed silent, though his nose scrunched slightly in anger.

"If he walked in that door tonight and gave you what you've been asking for... what would I be?"

The question felt like a gunshot.

Shane's throat tightened. Something hot and reckless surged up his spine. Frustration. Anger. Overwhelm. Being boxed in. Being told what he was allowed to feel.

"Don't," he warned.

"Answer me."

"You wouldn't be nothing," Shane said fiercely.

"But I wouldn't be everything," Ilya countered.

The island between them suddenly felt like the only thing keeping this from detonating.

Shane yanked the ring off his finger in one swift motion and threw it.

It hit the marble, bounced off the surface, and thumped against Ilya's chest before dropping to the floor.

The tink echoed.

"I'm not confused," Shane said, breathing hard. "I'm not running. And I'm not using you."

Ilya stared at the ring on the tile.

"You shouldn't do that for me," he said quietly.

"I'm not doing it for you," Shane snapped. "I'm doing it for *me*."

His chest was rising fast now, eyes burning.

"I'm doing this for *my* life," he went on, voice rough and unsteady. "I'm choosing you because I'm choosing *me*, Ilya."

The words landed and stayed there.

Ilya didn't argue.

He just looked at Shane — really looked — like he was finally seeing him clearly instead of bracing for impact. Whatever tension had been coiled in his shoulders eased a fraction.

"Okay," he said quietly.

He stepped around the island then, slow and deliberate, closing the space without urgency. Shane didn't move. Didn't retreat. His hands stayed planted on the counter, knuckles white, breath uneven.

Ilya stopped close enough that Shane could feel the heat of him, the solid presence grounding everything that had been spinning out of control all day.

"This," Ilya said softly, gesturing between them with two fingers, "this isn't nothing."

Shane swallowed, the counter cold against his hot skin. "I know."

Silence took over where the argument had been, heavy and charged. Ilya's hand came up, just resting at Shane's hip, warm and steady, like an anchor.

Shane's breath stuttered at the contact.

He let his hands slide up Ilya's arms, slow and deliberate, like he was memorizing the shape of him. Solid. Warm. Real. He swallowed, throat tight, then lifted his gaze.

"Ilya," he said quietly.

Ilya hummed in response, eyes still on his mouth.

"I want you to kiss me," Shane said. The words came out steadier than he felt. "And I want you to stay after."

He nodded once.

Their lips met again, and this time there was no hesitation.

They both melted into it immediately, the kiss deepening without urgency but with intent, like both of them had been holding back the same breath all day and finally let it go. Shane let out a sound he didn't bother to stop, shoulders sagging as his body relaxed all at once, tension draining out of him in a rush.

Everything went quiet.

The house. The cameras. The ring. The noise in his head. It all receded until there was only Ilya's mouth, the warmth of him pressed close, the steady way he kissed like he wasn't going anywhere.

Shane's hands slid around Ilya's neck, fingers curling into his shirt, pulling him closer without thinking. Ilya responded immediately, one hand firm at Shane's waist, the other coming up to cradle the back of his head, guiding him in just enough to make Shane's knees feel weak.

They kissed like that for a long moment, slow, thorough, unhurried, mouths sliding together perfectly.

It grew heavier without either of them deciding to make it so.

Shane shifted instinctively, closing the space completely, chest to chest now, and Ilya let him, let his hands roam, let the kiss deepen, let the restraint finally loosen. Their breathing grew uneven again, mouths parting and meeting, teeth grazing, a soft sound slipping from Shane when Ilya kissed him a little harder.

The kiss finally broke because they needed air.

Shane leaned in closer, forehead pressing to Ilya's collarbone, breath warm against his skin. His hands were still gripping Ilya's shirt like he was afraid this might disappear if he loosened his hold.

"I want you," Shane said, the words low and wrecked and completely unguarded. Desperate in the quietest way.

Ilya inhaled sharply at that — and then he was kissing him again.

Harder this time. Deeper, hungrier. The kind of kiss that made Shane's fingers curl and his stomach drop. Ilya's hands slid down his back, firm and sure, pulling him fully against him until there wasn't an inch of space left between them.

Shane made a soft sound into Ilya's mouth, something halfway between relief and need, and his hands started moving without waiting for permission. He traced the solid line of Ilya's torso, fingers sliding under the hem of his shirt, feeling warm skin beneath it.

He pushed the fabric up, slow at first, then more impatiently when Ilya's mouth dropped to his jaw, then his neck, leaving warm, delicate kisses in their wake. Shane's head tipped back instinctively, exposing more of himself, breath growing uneven.

"*Ilya*—" he exhaled.

Ilya caught the hem of his own shirt and pulled it over his head in one smooth motion, tossing it somewhere behind him without looking. Shane didn't get time to admire because Ilya was kissing him again, hands firm at his waist, grounding and possessive all at once.

The air between them had shifted entirely now. It was heated and alive.

Shane's fingers skimmed over bare skin, tracing muscle, feeling the warmth of him beneath his palms. His body felt like it was waking up in layers, skin too sensitive, breath too shallow, heart pounding hard enough to drown out thought.

Ilya's hands slid lower, firm and steady as they settled at Shane's hips. He paused there for half a second, a check-in without words, and when Shane pressed closer in response, Ilya's thumb hooked under the flap of his jeans and popped the button open.

It felt like gravity had weighed down on both of them, pulling them together. The way their mouths kept finding each other between breaths. The way Ilya held him like he wasn't fragile but still precious. The way every touch felt purposeful, neither of them were taking this lightly.

Shane's hands slid up Ilya's chest, over his shoulders, gripping lightly as another breathless sound escaped him. His head felt empty now. Just Ilya.

Shane's mouth slid down Ilya's neck again, slower this time, softer at first — then needier.

He pressed a lingering kiss just beneath Ilya's jaw and let his tongue follow, tasting him properly now. Warm and salted.

A quiet, breathless sound slipped out of him.

"I've wanted this," Shane murmured against his skin, voice thinner now, almost trembling. "*God*, I've wanted you."

Ilya's hand slid into his hair, not rough — just firm enough to steady him.

Shane leaned into it immediately.

He kissed lower, sucking lightly at the spot he'd fantasized about more times than he wanted to admit. Ilya's breath hitched above him, chest rising sharply.

"Shane..." Ilya warned softly.

Shane only whined in response, a small sound that vibrated against Ilya's throat.

"I always wondered," he said, breath hot against skin. "What you'd taste like. What you'd sound like."

He kissed him again, slower, letting his mouth drag, letting the contact linger until Ilya's fingers tightened reflexively in his hair.

"F-fuck," Ilya stuttered, head tipping back as Shane flipped them around and his back hit the counter.

The sound made something in Shane melt.

He pressed closer, almost climbing into him, body fitting against Ilya's like he belonged there. He felt the heat building between them and Ilya's body responding, unmistakable and grounding, and it made him softer, needier.

Shane's hands slid down Ilya's sides, light and feathery, and before Ilya fully processed it, Shane was lowering himself, knees meeting the floor with a soft sound that punched the breath out of him.

"You gonna suck me?" he asked, hoarse.

Shane nodded with a 'mhm' but didn't look up right away, his eyes locked on Ilya's hard bulge through his shorts. His hands stayed where they were, palms warm against Ilya's hips, grounding himself there like this was exactly where he belonged.

The sight of it hit Ilya all at once.

The man who'd been arguing with him minutes ago, furious, certain, unflinching, now on his knees in front of him, eyes dark, mouth parted, looking wrecked and wanting and entirely his.

It stole the fight right out of him.

Ilya's hand came down to the counter behind him, fingers curling hard around the edge as his body reacted before his brain caught up. He felt spent already, the tension had been winding him too tight all night and this was the moment it finally snapped.

Jesus.

He swallowed, chest heaving, every instinct screaming to pull Shane back up, to slow this down—

And another, louder one telling him he didn't want to.

Shane's hands slid lower, his touch intoxicating, and Ilya shut his eyes for half a second, overwhelmed by the intimacy of it—the trust, the want, the way Shane was choosing him without hesitation.

He's really doing this.

The thought landed heavy and dizzying.

When Ilya opened his eyes again, Shane was looking up at him, expression open and needy and devastating in its certainty. The room felt smaller, hotter, like it was holding its breath with them.

Ilya reached down, threading his fingers gently into Shane's hair, not pushing, just there.

Shane reaches up to the waistband of his shorts, his fingertips tickling Ilya slightly, and pulled just the shorts down a bit, pressing a couple kisses to Ilya's cock through his boxers, earning a deep groan from him.

He went ahead to pull his boxers down as well, he was too worked up to tease for long.

Shane took Ilya into his mouth immediately, desperately swirling his tongue over him, and Ilya's head tipped back almost instantly, jaw tightening as sensation climbed fast and sharp up his spine.

"Fuck," he muttered under his breath.

"So pretty with me in your mouth."

His hand flexed in Shane's hair as he fought the urge to move too much, to take control, to lose it completely. The counter pressed into his palms as he braced himself there, chest rising and falling harder now.

He was already too aware. Too sensitive.

Shane's hands tightened at his hips, and that small, grounding pressure made something heavy roll through him. Ilya's body reacted before he could think — heat pooling low, breath catching again, a quiet, wrecked sound slipping out of him when Shane adjusted slightly.

He looked down.

Shane looked back up at him through his lashes, expression soft and intent and devastatingly pleased with himself.

Ilya swallowed.

His control thinned.

Shane bobbed his head quickly, taking him all the way to the hilt and gagging himself slightly. The house was silent apart from Ilya's heavy breathing and the deep wet sounds of Shane's mouth on him.

Ilya's shoulders were tense. His thighs rigid. His pulse hammering. Every nerve lit and buzzing and too close to the edge already.

He hadn't expected to feel this undone this fast.

Ilya's head tipped back again, throat exposed, breath breaking in uneven pulls.

"Fuck—*fuck*, Shane—"

Ilya's breath broke on the words as he pulled him back suddenly, hand tightening in his hair just enough to stop him. Urgent but not rushed.

Shane came off him with a soft, ruined sound, chest heaving as he caught his breath. He stayed right there on his knees, eyes blown wide, flickering hungrily between Ilya's face and his dick, his mouth watering at the teasing image of Ilya's dick in his face.

He leaned forward instinctively, and Ilya tugged his hair back again, firmer this time, not allowing him to get closer.

"Stop," he said, low and steady.

Shane smiled, satisfied and unapologetic.

Ilya dragged in a deep breath through his nose, forcing himself to calm down, hands shaking just slightly as he adjusted himself and smoothed his clothes back into place. He reached down, grasped Shane by the arms, and pulled him back up to his feet in one smooth motion, crowding him immediately.

"Bedroom," he said quietly.

Not a question.

Shane didn't hesitate.

He turned, already leading the way, pulse racing, the house suddenly feeling smaller, warmer, like it had been waiting for this moment too. Ilya followed close behind, hand firm at Shane's back, grounding him, guiding him, making sure he didn't disappear into his head again.

Shane glanced back over his shoulder once, eyes bright and wrecked.

Ilya met his gaze and tightened his grip.

The bedroom barely had time to register before Ilya had him backed into the mattress.

Shane fell onto it with a soft gasp, legs spreading instinctively as Ilya followed, settling between them like he belonged there. His mouth found Shane's chest immediately, grinding their cocks together.

Shane arched up into it without thinking.

"Ilya— Please—" he breathed, the name coming out thin, needy.

Ilya lifted his head just enough to look at him. "Please what?"

Shane swallowed hard, hands gripping the sheets at his sides. His thoughts scattered, body buzzing, everything reduced to sensation and want.

"Use that pretty mouth," he murmured, leaning back in, kissing lower again, slower this time.

"Touch me," he stammered. "Please. I— I need you."

A low sound left Ilya — approval. His hands slid down Shane's sides, firm, grounding, reminding him exactly who was in control of the pace now.

Shane whimpered, his hips lifting without permission. Ilya smiled against his skin.

Then he shifted them, guiding Shane onto his stomach with practiced ease, one hand firm at his waist, the other smoothing down his back in a way that made Shane shiver all over.

Shane's breath stuttered as the mattress dipped behind him, warmth pressing close, Ilya's presence unmistakable now — dominant, attentive, unyielding in the best way.

His hands slide down Shane's hips, thumbs pressing into his back dimples briefly. He takes his time removing Shane's jeans and boxers, like he's savoring the sight — the way Shane trembles, the way he holds himself there, waiting.

Ilya lowers himself.

The shift sends a shiver through Shane. He feels Ilya's presence behind him change, feels the heat of his breath against his hole, closer, *closer*, not touching yet, just close enough to make anticipation ache.

A kiss lands, soft and firm, exactly to Shane's puckered hole. He pushes back into it instinctively.

Ilya presses one more kiss, right where Shane needs it, then sticks his tongue out flat against it, licking up, swirling his tongue, then pressing his lips in again.

Shane's fingers claw into the sheets, shaking, breath coming apart as Ilya settles in behind him, unhurried, intent, making it very clear he plans to take his time.

"Oh fuck—" He moans out, a broken sound tearing out of him as his hand reaches back and tangles in Ilya's hair. "Oh my g—" He cuts himself off with a strangled noise.

"Like that," he pants, voice wrecked. "Please don't stop—"

Ilya hums and continues, the heat intensifying, wet and overwhelming, and Shane's entire spine tingles. He presses his cheek to the pillow beneath him, eyes squeezed shut, mouth falling open on breathy, uncontrolled sounds.

Ilya continues lapping at Shane's asshole, both of his hands gripping onto his soft skin, spreading him open. Then he dips his tongue in, feeling the tight squeeze, and bobs his head, fucking him open with his tongue.

Shane's grip tightens, tugging, desperate, grounding himself through touch as sensation keeps pulling him under. Every time he tries to steady himself, it only gets worse — richer, deeper, spreading until it feels like it's everywhere.

"Oh— fuck, Ilya—"

His voice breaks completely. "Feels—so good—"

He rocks back again, needier now, chasing it shamelessly, no control left to pretend with. His thoughts leave him in clouds and he basks in knowing that Ilya is right there, focused entirely on him.

He buried his face into the pillow, body going loose with it, the last of his tension finally cracking.

The pleasure kept building. Deep.

The kind of pleasure that didn't spike so much as spread, slow and overwhelming, filling every hollow space inside him until there was nowhere left to brace.

Shane's fingers curled into the sheets, knuckles whitening as his body betrayed him completely. He'd spent weeks wound too tight, replaying moments, inventing sensations, chasing ghosts of touch—and none of it had prepared him for how consuming this felt.

For how real it was.

"*Ilya—*" he sobbed, the name tearing out of him like it had been lodged there all along. "I—I'm gonna—"

Whatever he'd been trying to say dissolved as it tipped over all at once, too big to manage, too deep to hold back. Ilya reached up to hold his hand as his hips stuttered, body going rigid for a split second before everything gave way.

It hit him like a wave breaking. Heat. Relief. Release. The noise he made wasn't pretty. It was raw and wrecked and full of everything he hadn't known how to say—how long he'd been lonely, how badly he'd wanted this, how completely Ilya had undone him.

His mind went blissfully blank, only sensation and the grounding knowledge that Ilya was there, steady and unyielding and real, holding him through it as he came onto his sheets, and the pleasure finally burned itself out.

Shane collapsed into the mattress afterward, numbed, breath coming in uneven pulls. His fingers loosened. His shoulders sagged.

Ilya moved up Shane's body slowly, savoring the aftermath. His mouth followed the path he'd just wrecked him with, soft kisses pressed to the small of his back, up his spine, lingering at each dip and curve.

Shane trembled under him. From the way Ilya wasn't pulling away. Wasn't done.

“Good,” Ilya murmured against his skin. “So good for me.”

The praise slid through Shane like a second wave.

Ilya’s lips pressed between his shoulder blades, then up to his neck, his hands smoothing over Shane’s hips in a slow, grounding touch. No urgency. Just possession and care wrapped together.

Shane rolled onto his back when Ilya guided him, breath still uneven, chest rising and falling hard. Ilya followed, settling over him, kissing down his sternum, his stomach, then back up again like he couldn’t decide where he wanted to taste him most.

“You have no idea,” Ilya muttered softly. “How long I’ve wanted you like this.”

Shane’s hands slid into his hair, fingers trembling. He could barely focus on anything except the weight of him, the warmth, the fact that this wasn’t a fantasy anymore.

“Oh my god, Ilya,” he breathed, voice wrecked and dazed.

Ilya huffed out a quiet laugh at that — low and pleased — before leaning down to kiss him again.

Shane kissed him back lazily at first, still floating — then the need crept back in. Different now. Hotter. Greedier.

He pulled Ilya closer.

“Fuck me,” Shane said, breath catching on the words.

Ilya’s mouth paused at his jaw. A smirk curved there.

“Mm,” he hummed. “You’re so fucking desperate.”

Shane whined at that, hips shifting restlessly beneath him.

“I want to make you feel good,” he rushed out, flushed and needy and unfiltered. “Make you cum,” he continued.

“I want you to fuck me.”

The words hung there — raw and shameless.

Ilya’s control snapped quietly.

He kissed Shane again, harder this time, one hand sliding firmly to his hip, the other bracing near his shoulder. There was no more teasing in the way he moved now.

“You’re going to ruin me,” Ilya muttered against his mouth.

He hovered over him for a second, breathing hard, eyes dark and intent.

“Lube,” he asked quietly, like he already knew the answer.

Shane’s hand slid blindly across the mattress, still hazy, still shaking a little as he reached for the nightstand. Ilya didn’t give him the space — his mouth was on him the whole time, kissing him slow and deep, like he couldn’t stand not to be touching him.

Shane fumbled it into his hand and passed it over without looking.

Ilya took it, popped it open with one hand, eyes never leaving Shane’s face. He poured some into his palm and leaned back in, hands warm and steady, letting it spill over Shane’s hole, rubbing his two middle fingers around it.

Shane gasped softly, arching up without thinking.

Ilya kissed him again, harder this time, like he was claiming the sound.

“You need fingers first?” he asked.

Shane shook his head frantically “No,” he choked out. “Just you.”

He hummed in acknowledgment, poured some lube over himself and tossed the bottle aside, shifting closer. Shane felt the weight of him settle in, Ilya guided his legs up and back, folding him in close. His hands hooked under Shane’s knees, holding him there, knees to chest.

The position stole the air from Shane’s lungs.

“Tell me if it’s too much,” he said softly.

Shane nodded.

Ilya pushed in slow, and they both gasped at the same time.

It was involuntary — the sound pulled from them the instant the space between them disappeared, the instant it became real. Ilya froze there, leaning down between Shane’s legs and pressed his forehead to Shane’s, breath shuddering as he fought the instinct to move too fast.

Shane’s hands slid down, gripping hard at Ilya’s thighs, anchoring himself like the sensation was too big to handle alone.

“Fuck—” Shane whispered, eyes fluttering shut.

Ilya felt it everywhere — the heat, the closeness, the way Shane fit around him. His jaw clenched as he forced himself to stay still, every muscle screaming to keep going, to take more, to lose control.

Shane’s breathing evened just enough for him to find his voice again. He opened his eyes, dazed, overwhelmed — and utterly sure.

“Move,” he whispered.

That was all it took.

Ilya started slow, letting Shane adjust, letting him feel every inch of it. Shane let out a sound that was half a sob, half a moan, his grip tightening like he needed the proof that Ilya was really there.

Ilya pulled back and pushed in again, painfully slow. He watched Shane’s reaction to him, his thighs twitching, hands clutching the sheets, eyes closed and mouth slack.

He picked up the pace finding a good rhythm, thrusting in and pulling Shane’s hips down against him at the same time. They moved together, no space, no distance, just heat and breath and the sound of each other falling apart.

Shane’s fingers dig into him, mouth open, words barely forming.

“Oh my— so hot—” he gasps. “God, you’re—”

Ilya groans into his neck, losing whatever composure he’d been clinging to. “Fuck, Shane—” he breathes back. “Been wanting this— fuck—”

Shane’s laugh breaks into a moan, head tipping back. “Me too— couldn’t stop thinking about you—”

“Yeah?” Ilya’s voice is rough, wrecked. “Couldn’t stop thinking about this.”

Shane nods helplessly, hips lifting, chasing him. “Wanted you so bad—”

Ilya kisses him hard to cut him off, swallowing the rest of it, forehead pressing to his. “Taking me so well,” he mutters, almost disbelieving. “So fucking hot.”

Shane whimpers at that, his eyes roamed over Ilya’s carved torso, watching him fuck into him, his eyebrows falling into a submissive upturn as he takes it in. “You’re so thick—”

Their words dissolve into broken sounds after that, half said things, swallowed moans, breath stuttering in sync. Every time one of them tries to speak, it turns into a gasp instead.

“*Shane—*”

“*Ilya—*”

It’s messy. Desperate. Overdue.

Eventually the pace breaks. It’s relentless, sloppy.

Shane’s hands are clawed into Ilya’s waist now, nails digging in, body arching up like he can’t get close enough. His thoughts are gone. Completely gone. There’s nothing left but heat and rhythm and the feeling of being split open in the best way possible.

“Holy shit—” he’s babbling, voice wrecked. “I can’t— I’m so—”

His legs start shaking, trembling where they’re hooked around Ilya. Sweat slicks their skin, makes everything slide and burn and cling at once.

Ilya bends down, presses his mouth hard to Shane’s, swallowing the broken sounds spilling out of him. He doesn’t know how he’s lasted this long. He doesn’t know how they’re both still upright. All he knows is Shane beneath him, coming undone in his hands.

“You gonna cum?” Ilya asks, voice rough, breath hot against his mouth.

Shane’s head snaps back against the pillow.

“*Yes—*” it comes out nearly screamed. “Yes, yes, I’m gonna cum—
i’mgonnacumimgonnacum—”

Ilya groans low at that. “Me too.”

He kisses him again, deep and consuming, then pulls back just enough to see him.

“Look at me,” he says, urgent but steady.

Shane’s eyes are fluttering already, threatening to roll back.

“Don’t close them,” Ilya murmurs, brushing his thumb over Shane’s cheek. “Look at me and cum sweetheart.”

It’s too much.

Shane tries — tries *so* hard — eyes blown wide, locked into Ilya’s eyes as everything breaks at once. His mouth falls open, face scrunching, a broken, desperate sound tearing out of him as he finally lets go, hot cum pumping out onto his stomach.

His whole body goes tight, shaking, clenching down around Ilya, making him stiffen in Shane, his orgasm ripping through him as well.

Ilya curses under his breath, forehead dropping to Shane’s as he loses himself, breath breaking, body going rigid before collapsing forward.

They don’t move.

They just stay there, foreheads pressed together, breathing the same air, heartbeats hammering against each other.

Shane’s eyes are still half-open, dazed, trying to process that it actually happened.

Ilya presses a soft peck of a kiss to his nose, then again to his forehead.

Neither of them move right away. Ilya stays hovering over him for a second longer, like he's making sure Shane doesn't drift too far away, then shifts carefully to the side, pulling Shane with him without breaking contact. Shane follows easily, limbs loose like he's finally let go of something he's been carrying for years.

Ilya presses another kiss to his forehead.

"You okay?" he murmurs.

Shane blinks, eyes still unfocused, then lets out a quiet, stunned laugh. "I think so," he says hoarsely. "I feel... really good. Kinda gone."

Ilya smiles at that, soft and fond, and tucks Shane closer, one arm wrapping around his back, the other brushing soothingly over his shoulder. The touch is grounding now — steady, reassuring, here.

"You did so good," he says quietly, grounding.

Shane nods immediately, curling into him like it's instinct. His forehead presses to Ilya's chest, listening to the solid thump of his heart. It calms something deep in him.

"Can you—" Shane starts, then stops, suddenly shy.

Ilya tilts his head down. "What is it?"

"Can you stay?" Shane asks, barely above a whisper. "Tonight. Just... stay."

There's no hesitation.

"Yes," Ilya says. "I'm not going anywhere."

The relief on Shane's face is immediate. He exhales like he's been holding his breath all day — all *year* — and relaxes fully into Ilya's arms.

Chapter End Notes

thoughts. now. im begging.

Chapter 7: Dusk Till Dawn

Chapter Notes

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

Shane wakes slowly, the way you would when there's nothing pressing you out of sleep.

The light in the room is gentle, diffused through sheer curtains that softens everything it touches. It pools across the ceiling, drifts down the walls, settles lazily over the bed like it has nowhere better to be. For once, neither does he.

He's warm under the covers, but also warm in a deeper way, the kind that sinks into his chest and stays there. He becomes aware of it in pieces, the steady rise and fall of breath behind him, the weight of an arm draped across his waist, a thigh hooked loosely over his own. Ilya's sleep is heavy and unguarded, his hold instinctive, like Shane belongs there by default.

Shane doesn't move right away. He just exists.

The room feels different this morning. Not quieter, exactly, but calmer. The house isn't looming or echoing. It isn't reminding him of its size or cost or the fact that it was never meant to hold just one person rattling around inside it. It feels settled, like it's finally being used for what it was built for, holding someone.

He turns carefully in Ilya's arms, slow enough not to wake him. The sheets whisper softly as he shifts. When he faces him, he almost laughs — the sound catches in his chest, too full to come out.

Ilya asleep is something else entirely.

His curls are flattened on one side, unruly on the other. His mouth is slightly open, lashes dark against his cheeks. There's a faint crease between his brows that disappears the moment Shane brushes his thumb over it.

He leans in without thinking, presses a light kiss to Ilya's neck. Then another. He follows the curve of his jaw, the corner of his mouth, gentle, like he's allowed to be here. Like he doesn't have to ration it.

Ilya stirs, makes a quiet sound in the back of his throat, half asleep. His arm tightens reflexively around Shane, pulling him closer.

"Mornin'," Ilya murmurs, voice thick and low and accented.

Shane smiles so wide it feels ridiculous. "Morning."

Ilya blinks awake slowly. Confusion flickers briefly, then fades the moment his eyes focus on Shane. Whatever he sees there makes something soften in his expression.

He reaches up, cups the back of Shane's neck, and kisses him properly — slow, warm, grounding. Shane melts into it, every anxious thought dissolving like it never mattered in the first place.

"How'd you sleep?" Shane asks quietly when they pull apart.

Ilya hums, thumb tracing idle circles at his hip. "Good. Really good."

They don't rush. There's no urgency pressing at them. They stay tangled for a while longer, trading small touches, murmured nothings, lazy kisses. Shane feels light and fuzzy. Giddy in a way he hasn't felt since he was young — the kind that makes the world feel freshly washed.

When they finally get out of bed, the house greets them like it knows what's changed.

The hallway feels warmer. The floors cool but welcoming beneath his bare feet. Light spills through the windows in clean, confident lines. Everything looks the same and yet, it all feels softer, like it's leaning toward him instead of away.

In the closet, Ilya stops short.

The space stretches out in front of them, meticulously organized, expansive in a way that usually makes Shane feel small. Today, it just feels... amusing.

"Your closet is bigger than my apartment," Ilya says, turning slowly.

Shane laughs, leaning against the doorframe. "It's also climate controlled."

Ilya looks at him. "For clothes?"

"For longevity," Shane replies automatically, then pauses — and laughs at himself. "Keeps the clothes in good condition. It's my favorite part."

Ilya grins, steps closer, hooks a finger into the waistband of Shane's shorts. "You're cute when you do that."

Shane flushes, pleased all the way down to his bones.

He pulls out a pair of sweatpants and hands it over to Ilya, and grabs a silk robe to cover himself. They dress together, Ilya keeps brushing past him on purpose — a hand at his lower back, fingers skimming his side. Shane lets himself enjoy it. He isn't overthinking. He isn't bracing.

The house hums quietly around them.

For once, Shane isn't fighting it.

He isn't fighting anything.

They drift downstairs with no agenda. No rush. Just the quiet domestic choreography of two people figuring out how to occupy the same space, Ilya following him like a puppy around

the house.

He follows close behind Shane through the hallway, one hand resting lazily at the small of his back. When Shane pauses at the bottom of the stairs, Ilya bumps into him on purpose, chest to spine, chin dropping onto his shoulder.

"Lead the way," he murmurs.

Shane smiles, warmth pooling low in his stomach.

He's shirtless beneath the silk robe, the fabric cool and slippery against his skin, tied loosely at the waist. His slippers scuff softly against the hardwood. Ilya, shirtless in Shane's black sweatpants, looks like he belongs here in a way that makes Shane's head spin, broad shoulders, bare feet, hands always finding some part of him.

They move into the kitchen together.

The room is flooded with light. The massive window above the sink frames the backyard like a painting — the pool catching the morning sun, rippling gently in the breeze. It looks unreal from here. Blue and glittering and calm.

Shane pauses at the counter, taking it in.

For once, the house actually feels lived in.

"What are we making for breakfast?" Ilya asks, fingers sliding under the edge of Shane's robe, warm against his waist.

"Pancakes," Shane decides immediately. "If that's okay."

Ilya hums approval and moves to the stove while Shane gathers ingredients. Flour dusts the counter. Milk sloshes carelessly into the bowl. The smell of butter melting in the pan fills the air.

It's simple, but it feels enormous.

Ilya stands focused at the stove. He steps up behind him, presses his chest against Ilya's back, wraps his arms around his waist.

"You look very serious," Shane says into his shoulder.

"This is important work."

"Don't burn them."

Ilya flips the first pancake.

They both stare at it.

The underside is black.

Shane bursts out laughing, the sound bright and unrestrained. Ilya swears under his breath and tries to salvage it, but it's too far gone.

"You had one job," Shane teases.

Ilya turns, scoops a small piece from a less-charred section, and presses it against Shane's mouth.

"Eat."

Shane obliges, still laughing, chewing dramatically. "Smoky," he says thoughtfully. "Decadent."

The second pancake comes out perfect.

They stand shoulder to shoulder, stealing bites before they ever make it to plates. Shane drizzles syrup too generously and it runs down the side of his fork, slipping onto his lower lip and chin before he notices.

Ilya does.

He steps closer without a word, thumb brushing the sticky line first, then leaning in to kiss it away slowly.

Shane inhales sharply, heat flaring beneath his skin.

"You're ridiculous," he murmurs, breathless.

Ilya smiles against his mouth. "I just like kissing you."

They eat at the island, legs brushing, trading pieces back and forth. Sunlight shifts across the counter as the morning stretches on. Outside, the pool glows quietly, like it's waiting.

When they finish, they clean together without thinking — Ilya washing dishes, Shane drying. The window over the sink catches their reflection faintly, bodies moving in sync.

Shane gathers the scraps from the counter — eggshells, burned pancake fragments, paper towel — and walks to the trash can by the pantry.

He opens the lid.

The shattered security panel sits beneath a layer of breakfast debris, black plastic cracked jaggedly in half, wires exposed like veins.

The sight of it lands like a cold fingertip at the base of his spine.

His breath catches. The kitchen noise dulls. The sunlight feels too bright. For half a second, everything that felt light caves in. His pulse pounds in his ears.

"Shane?"

Ilya's voice floats toward him, casual, unaware.

Shane blinks hard.

Forces his shoulders to loosen.

The house still remembers.

His husband will notice.

He pushes the trash down with his hand until the panel disappears from view, and the house feels warm again when he turns around.

He forces it to.

Ilya stands at the sink, sleeves pushed up, soap bubbles sliding down his forearms.

Shane walks back over, slipping his arms around Ilya's waist again like nothing happened.

Ilya leans back into him automatically, turning his head to press a quick kiss to Shane's cheek.

"You okay?" he asks softly.

Shane nods.

"Yeah," he says, and even manages a smile.

Shane stays wrapped around Ilya for a moment longer than necessary, chin resting lightly between his shoulder blades, breathing him in.

Ilya rinses his hands at the sink, then twists slightly in Shane's arms. "I was thinking," he says casually, "It's nice out. We could actually spend some time at the pool."

Shane blinks.

"The pool?" he repeats.

Ilya hums. "Yes. Sun's out. Water's clean. Feels like a waste not to enjoy it."

Shane lets out a small, incredulous laugh. "I've... never actually used it."

Ilya turns fully now, eyebrows lifting. "You're joking."

Shane shrugs, suddenly sheepish in a way that's almost funny. "Yeah I just—" He gestures vaguely. "Look at it."

Ilya stares at him for a beat.

"So," he says slowly, a grin starting to creep in, "I've been maintaining a pristine, very expensive pool for... nothing?"

Shane snorts despite himself. "I guess?"

Ilya laughs outright now. "That is crazy Shane."

"Oh?" Shane's eyes flicker, something playful waking up behind them. "Then what do you suggest, pool boy?"

Ilya's grin turns teasing. "I suggest we find a way to use it."

Shane tilts his head, pretending to consider it.

"Hm," he says. "Well if i'm getting pool boy services, then you're not dressed appropriately."

Ilya pauses. "You have swim trunks for me?"

Shane clicks his tongue. "Better."

"Oh?" Ilya crosses his arms. "And what is better, sir?"

Shane's smile turns slow. Dangerous.

"Wait here."

He slips away before Ilya can respond, quickly shuffling against the floor. A minute later, he reappears, sunglasses in hand — In the other—

A small bright blue piece of material.

Ilya stares.

Shane holds it up between two fingers like it's evidence. "Uniform."

Ilya lets out a disbelieving laugh. "You cannot be serious."

"Oh, I'm extremely serious," Shane says, stepping closer. "This is a high-end property. Appearances matter."

"You want me to wear speedo?"

"I want my pool boy to look professional."

Ilya glances from the speedo to Shane's bare chest, then his eyes, and back again. "You're really enjoying this."

Shane takes a wine glass from the nearby cabinet, eyes never leaving him. "Immensely."

Ilya takes it.

"Fine," he says. "But if I'm doing this, I expect excellent working conditions."

Shane's grin widens, corking open a bottle of wine and pouring some. "I tip generously."

Outside, the sun hits them full on, bright, warm, indulgent. Shane settles into a lounge chair like he's posing for a photo, sunglasses slipping on, one leg crossed over the other. Wine rests lazily in his hand.

Ilya emerges a moment later in the speedo, towel slung over his shoulder.

Shane makes a very deliberate sound. Something between appreciation and approval.

"Wow," he says. "You clean up nicely."

"Careful," Ilya replies, grabbing the pool skimmer. "Harassment lawsuit."

"Oh," Shane says. "We wouldn't want that."

Shane lowers his sunglasses and just stares.

"Damn," he breathes, dramatic as hell. "Those thighs are criminal, honey."

Ilya drags the skimmer through the water like he didn't just hear that.

"Criminal?" he repeats. "For cleaning your pool?"

"For existing in that uniform," Shane says, waving his wine glass vaguely. "It is wildly inappropriate. Whoever put you in that should be ashamed."

Ilya glances over his shoulder, slow smirk forming. "What happened to professionalism, sir?"

Shane sits up straighter, feigning offense. "I am being as professional as possible."

"You're lusty for your employee."

"I'm evaluating performance."

Ilya snorts. "Right, my mistake."

Shane doesn't even pretend to deny it. "And wow that ass."

Ilya shakes his head, bending to "scrub" the same spotless tile again, exaggerated and slow.

"You want me to turn around too?" he asks lightly. "Give you the full inspection?"

Shane inhales sharply like he's personally attacked. "If you insist."

Ilya turns halfway, stretching his arms over his head just to be obnoxious.

"The harassment lawsuit is still on the table" he says.

"Oh, that only applies if I touch," Shane says sweetly.

He takes another sip, then squints at Ilya critically.

“You know what?” Shane adds. “I think the uniform is distracting.”

Ilya pauses mid-motion. “Distracting.”

“Yes,” Shane nods solemnly. “You should probably clean the pool without it.”

Ilya laughs outright. “Absolutely not.”

“Think of the efficiency,” Shane argues. “Less fabric. More mobility.”

“Sir you cannot treat the pool boy this way.” Ilya says firmly.

Shane opens his mouth to respond when his phone buzzes beside him.

He glances down.

And freezes.

I WAS ABOUT TO STOP BY

WHO THE HELL IS AT YOUR HOUSE RIGHT NOW

Shane bolts upright, fingers flying.

DO NOT COME HERE

DO NOT COME TO MY HOUSE ROSE

SERIOUSLY

Three dots appear. Disappear. Reappear.

HOPE THE D IS FIRE!!!!

Shane locks his phone and drops it face-down like it might explode. He drags a hand down his face, exhales, then forces himself to relax back into the chair.

When he looks up, Ilya is watching him, amused.

“Everything okay, boss?” he asks lightly.

Shane lifts his chin. “Fine. Continue working.”

Ilya smiles — slow, knowing — and goes back to the pool. Shane stands after a moment, drifting closer, circling him like he's appraising merchandise.

“So,” Shane says, standing now, robe falling open in a way that is absolutely deliberate. “You wanna get out of that uniform?”

Ilya's eyes drag down Shane's bare chest, then back up.

“Sir,” he says, voice lower now, playful but edged, “if I clean this pool without my uniform, that's a premium service.”

Shane steps closer.

“Oh?” he says, intrigued.

Ilya leans casually on the skimmer handle. “Hazard pay. Performance fee. Very expensive.”

Shane finishes the rest of his wine in one slow swallow, sets the empty glass aside.

“I can afford expensive,” he murmurs.

Ilya's smirk deepens. “You'll need a lot more money than that.”

Shane closes the distance completely now, crowding him just enough that the teasing becomes something else. Heat. Real heat.

He reaches out and slowly drags his fingers up Ilya's arm, teasing, like he's testing a theory.

“You could also,” Shane says softly, “do something else for the money, Mr. Pool Boy.”

Ilya doesn't move away.

“And what might that be, sir?” he asks.

The air tightens. Sun hot. Pool water glinting behind them. The ridiculousness of it all hanging by a thread.

Shane doesn't answer.

He just grabs the front of Ilya's speedo waistband lightly, letting his fingers slide beneath it and kisses him.

All the exaggerated teasing collapses into something heavy and real, mouths pressing hard, hands gripping instinctively.

The kiss breaks, but neither of them steps back.

“So,” Shane says quietly, voice stripped of the exaggerated lilt, “what happens when the pool boy stops pretending he’s working?”

Ilya steps closer, walking Shane backwards slowly until Shane’s back is against the lounge chair.

“He makes sure the client’s... satisfied,” Ilya replies, low.

Shane’s breath hitches — just once.

“Careful,” he hums, echoing himself from earlier, but it lands differently now. “You’re going to get me in trouble, Mr. Pool Boy.”

Ilya smiles. “I think,” he says, “you like trouble.”

Ilya’s fingers find the tie at Shane’s waist.

He pauses just long enough to look at him.

Shane’s chest rises and falls slowly, eyes dark, not joking anymore.

“Go on,” he murmurs.

Ilya unties the silk slowly. Steady. The fabric loosens under his hands and slips open, falling away enough to bare warm skin to the sun.

Shane pulls him back down by the back of his neck and kisses him again — deeper now, heavier. The robe slides further open as Ilya’s hands settle at his waist, then along his ribs, grounding him there in the chair.

The sun feels hotter suddenly.

Shane breaks the kiss first, breath uneven.

“Okay,” he says softly, forehead resting against Ilya’s. “It’s getting a little hot.”

Ilya’s thumb drags slowly along Shane’s side. “You are just now noticing?”

Shane huffs a breathy laugh. “I mean the sun.”

“Sure.”

Shane’s hand slips down Ilya’s arm, lacing their fingers together.

“Maybe,” he says, voice low again, “we should get in the water.”

Ilya studies him for a second — flushed skin, open robe, that look in his eyes that isn’t joking anymore.

“Yeah,” he agrees quietly.

He stands first, tugging Shane up with him. The robe falls off Shane's shoulders and is forgotten in the lounge chair as they walk hand in hand toward the pool stairs.

The first step into the pool is cool — sharp against heated skin. Shane inhales softly at the temperature shift. Ilya stays close, fingers still linked with his, guiding him down the steps.

Water climbs slowly — ankles, calves, knees.

By the time it reaches Shane's waist, Ilya is already crowding him gently, walking him back toward the wall near the stairs.

Shane's back meets cool tile.

Ilya steps in close, water rippling between them, one hand sliding to Shane's waist again — firm, grounding.

"You sure about this?" Ilya asks, voice low, not teasing.

Shane looks up at him, wet lashes, lips parted.

"Just kiss me."

That's all it takes.

Ilya leans down and kisses him again — slower this time, deeper, the water shifting around them as he presses closer. Shane's hands slide up over his shoulders, pulling him in without hesitation.

The pool amplifies everything — the sound of breath, the soft splash when hips shift, the way the water cools the heat just enough to make it sharper.

Ilya's mouth drifts from Shane's lips to his jaw, then back again, unhurried but hungry.

"I love kissing you," Shane murmurs against his mouth, the confession slipping out before he can overthink it.

Ilya stills for half a heartbeat.

Then his grip tightens.

"Yeah?" he says softly, thumb tracing a small circle at Shane's hip beneath the water. "I can tell."

Shane smiles, bright and a little breathless, and leans in again, chasing his mouth like he doesn't want to let it go. They kiss like that for a while — unhurried, playful, mouths meeting and parting, laughter sneaking in between soft touches.

Shane lets out a soft, involuntary sound, something between a sigh and a purr, his head tipping back against the stone as Ilya's mouth traces lower.

"Mm," Shane hums, fingers tightening in Ilya's hair. "The pool boy is very dedicated to his job."

Ilya hums against his skin, the vibration making Shane's stomach flip.

"I am very ambitious," he murmurs, voice low and almost teasing — but there's something deeper in it now.

His mouth drags back up Shane's throat slowly, teeth grazing just enough to make him shiver.

Under the surface of the water, Ilya's hand slides along Shane's hip, exploring.

Shane's breath stutters the moment he feels it rub against his hard cock — the subtle, deliberate pressure through the water. His fingers clutch tighter at Ilya's shoulders as the touch becomes unmistakable.

A gasp breaks out of him.

"Ilya—"

His voice is thin and wrecked already.

Ilya's mouth pauses at the hollow beneath his ear, breath warm there, while his hand continues its slow, confident movement below the waterline.

Shane presses closer, desperate for more contact, more heat.

The pool ripples around them, and Shane's entire body hums — caught between the cool water and the heat of Ilya's touch, clutching onto him like he might float away without it.

Ilya pulls back just enough to look at him.

"Sit," he murmurs, voice steady but dark.

Shane obeys without thinking.

He braces his hands behind him and shifts up onto the edge of the pool, water streaming down his body, skin still buzzing everywhere Ilya touched him. The sun hits him full-on now, warmth spreading over his chest, his shoulders, his throat.

Ilya stays where he is in the water, looking up at him.

That alone nearly wrecks him.

Shane's breath comes fast, uneven. He watches Ilya move closer, watches the way his attention narrows, focused completely on him like this is the only thing that exists. He pulls Shane out of his shorts, immediately taking him in his mouth. Shane's hips jerk forward before he can stop himself.

"Oh—" His head falls back immediately. "Ilya— fuck."

Ilya's hands are firm at his thighs, grounding him, keeping him right there. He bobs his head slowly, deliberately — drawing the desperation out of Shane.

Shane can't stay still.

His body rocks instinctively, chasing the sensation, fingers clawing at the edge of the stone, knuckles white. Every nerve feels lit up, like he's been waiting for this attention his entire life.

"You're— you're so good," he breathes, voice shaking. "Jesus—"

Ilya hums lowly in response, the sound vibrating straight through him. Shane whines at it, helpless, utterly undone by how attentive it feels, how present.

"I love—" Shane cuts himself off with a broken sound, eyes squeezed shut.

His words dissolve into breath and noise and feeling. His hips jerk again, sharper this time, pleasure coiling tighter and tighter until it feels overwhelming.

Ilya's hands tighten, steadying him as his body starts to give way, his legs trembling where they're hooked at the pool's edge.

"Oh my god," Shane gasps, laughing breathlessly through it. "I— I'm gonna—"

He can't finish the thought.

Ilya massages into his hips and thighs as he continues sucking Shane, his whole body responding without restraint.

Ilya pulls back just before Shane can tip over the edge.

Shane makes a soft, wrecked sound at the loss, chest heaving, legs trembling where they're still hooked over the pool's lip.

Ilya presses a kiss to his thigh — firm, grounding — and looks up at him, eyes dark and intent.

"Come here."

A firm hand at Shane's waist, easing him back down into the water until his feet find the shallow step again. The cool wraps around him, calming and electric all at once. Shane exhales shakily as Ilya leans in and kisses him again.

His hands slide to Shane's hips, tugging him closer as he works his shorts down and away. The water ripples as fabric disappears, drifting lazily toward the deeper end.

Ilya steers him toward the stairs.

Guides him forward.

Shane braces himself on the warm tile, palms flat, breath already stuttering. The steps lift him just enough — his back arched, his body open, the waterline kissing just below him.

Ilya's mouth finds his back, then his shoulder, then the curve of his spine. Kiss after kiss, electric, reverent. Shane shivers at every one.

The water shifts as Ilya settles behind him, close enough that Shane can feel him there — solid, grounding, exactly where he wants him. He pauses, presses his forehead briefly to Shane's back.

A check-in without words.

"You good?" he murmurs quietly.

Shane nods, grip tightening on the edge of the pool. "Yeah. Please."

Ilya moves with care, with intention — the water sloshing softly around them as he pushes in deep. Shane gasps, fingers curling hard into the tile, the sensation stealing his breath as his body adjusts.

"Oh— fuck," he breathes, half-laughing, half-lost. "Yeah. Like that."

The pool echoes with the splash of movement as Ilya's thrusts pick up. Shane clings to the edge, body rocking instinctively, trusting Ilya completely as he sets the pace behind him.

Inside, deep in the wall of the kitchen, a dormant system attempts to reconnect.

A soft internal hum.

A flicker of red.

The signal doesn't complete.

Fifteen minutes later Shane and Ilya are breathing heavily against each others mouths, loose and relaxed.

They don't rush back inside, but when they finally do, it's slow and loose-limbed, like their bodies are still catching up to them. Shane has a towel slung over his shoulder, hair still damp, skin warm from the sun. His shorts cling a little where they didn't fully dry, and he doesn't bother fixing it. Ilya doesn't either — sweatpants pushed low on his hips, chest still faintly slick, curls darker with water.

Ilya perches on one of the barstools at the island, Shane stands between his legs without thinking about it, like it's the most natural place in the world to be. Ilya's hands settle at the backs of his thighs, thumbs idly brushing.

He's talking about something mundane. Work, maybe. A client who complained too much. A story about one of his friends. His voice is relaxed, warm, the edges of it softened.

Shane nods in the right places.

He hums occasionally.

But mostly, he just looks at him.

He runs his fingers through Ilya's damp curls, slow and gentle, pushes them back from his forehead. He kisses his temple. His cheek. The corner of his mouth. He presses his forehead there and breathes him in like he's trying to memorize it.

Ilya pauses mid-sentence, amused.

"Are you listening?"

Shane blinks, smiles softly. "Mm. Yeah."

Ilya snorts, unconvinced, and keeps talking anyway, clearly content to be the sound filling the space. Shane keeps touching him, tracing his jaw, brushing his thumb over his lip, enamored in a way that feels almost embarrassing.

Then Shane's phone rings.

The sound cuts clean through the moment.

He startles slightly, hand freezing in Ilya's hair. His first instinct is annoyance.

"Probably Rose," he mutters, already reaching for it. "She's been—"

He stops.

The screen lights up.

It's his husband.

His chest tightens instantly, breath catching so sharp it almost hurts. His stomach drops, nausea blooming fast and hot. The warmth of the house, the ease of the moment — it all vanishes like it was never real.

Ilya notices immediately.

"Hey," he says quietly. "What is it?"

His fingers tremble around the phone. His heart is pounding so hard it feels like it's pressing against his throat, like if he swallows wrong he might actually choke.

"Fuck," he breathes. "It's— it's him."

Ilya goes still for half a second.

Then he reaches out and takes Shane's free hand, lacing their fingers together, grounding. He stands and steps in behind him, close but careful, pressing his chest to Shane's back. He kisses his shoulder once, light and steady.

“Answer,” he murmurs. “I’m here.”

Shane nods, even though his hands feel numb.

He answers.

“Hey,” he says, forcing his voice to stay light. Normal. “What’s up?”

The response is immediate. Sharp.

“Shane. What are you doing?”

The question hits him like a slap.

“N-nothing,” Shane says too fast, then winces internally and slows himself down. “I’m at Rose’s. I’ve been here a few days.”

There’s a pause on the line.

Just enough time for dread to crawl up his spine.

Then, calmly,

“The cameras are completely out.”

Shane’s breath stutters.

His vision blurs around the edges, like the room is pulling away from him. His stomach twists hard enough that he has to brace his weight more fully into Ilya behind him.

“What did you do, Shane?”

“I—” Shane’s tongue feels thick, useless. His mind races, scrabbling for a lie, something clean and believable, but nothing forms fast enough. The pressure builds, like a rubber band pulled too tight in his chest, threatening to snap.

He opts for the truth — or something close enough to survive.

“I broke it,” he says, voice shaking despite his effort. “It was an accident. I was moving stuff and... I bumped it with a ladder. It fell off the wall.”

His fingers tighten painfully around Ilya’s hand.

Behind him, Ilya presses closer, if even possible, arms wrapping around his waist, chin resting briefly against his shoulder. The contact steadies him just enough to keep going.

“It shattered,” Shane adds quickly, like more detail will make it more believable. “I didn’t know what to do.”

Another pause.

Shane's heart is racing now, sweat prickling at his hairline. His mind is already spiraling ahead imagining suspicion, imagining anger, imagining the moment everything collapses.

Then his husband exhales.

"Really?"

"Yes," Shane says immediately. "I'm sorry. I should've told you. I just— I was nervous."

A beat.

"Well," his husband says slowly, "as long as you didn't do it on purpose. Tear my eighty-thousand-dollar security system off the wall on *purpose*."

A thin, humorless laugh on the other end.

"I'll call someone to fix it."

Shane freezes.

For a terrifying second, he's sure — *sure* — that he knows. That this is a test. That something is about to snap.

"I didn't," Shane says quickly. "I swear. It was an accident."

"Okay," his husband replies. "Then it's fine."

Just like that.

"I'll handle it."

The call ends.

Shane doesn't move.

For a second, he can't breathe at all. His legs feel weak, useless. The fear drains out of him all at once, leaving him hollow and shaking.

He sinks back into Ilya fully.

Ilya tightens his arms around him, solid and warm, murmuring something soft into his hair. Shane closes his eyes, and turns to press his face into Ilya's shoulder, chest heaving as he rides out the last of the adrenaline.

Ilya doesn't loosen his hold when Shane sags into him — if anything, he tightens it just a fraction, grounding without crowding. One hand settles warm and steady at Shane's lower back, the other brushing once, slow, up his spine.

"Hey," he murmurs, low and close. "You okay?"

Shane nods against his shoulder even though his chest still feels tight. “Yeah. I mean—” He exhales, shaky. “I think so. I just hate that feeling. Like I’m about to get caught.”

“Makes sense,” Ilya says easily. No judgment. No digging. Just acknowledgment.

Shane swallows. “I feel guilty,” he admits quietly. “And stupid. And paranoid. All at the same time.”

Ilya hums, thumb tracing a lazy, reassuring line at his side. “That’s a terrible combo. Wouldn’t recommend.”

That pulls a small laugh out of Shane, thin but real. “You’re not helping.”

“I am,” Ilya says. “I’m distracting you.”

Shane lifts his head enough to look at him. “With jokes?”

“With excellent ideas,” Ilya corrects. His mouth curves, soft and familiar now. “Like this one, we do nothing for a few hours.”

Shane blinks. “Nothing?”

“Nap,” Ilya says. “Big one. Lights out. Reset your nervous system. No thinking. No spirals.”

Shane considers it for half a second before his shoulders drop. “God,” he breathes. “Yes. I would love that.”

They drift back upstairs, and Shane crawls into bed still damp at the edges, Ilya following, tugging the covers up around them like it’s instinct.

Shane falls asleep almost immediately, tension melting out of him the second Ilya’s arm settles around his waist again.

When he wakes, groggy and hot and disoriented, it’s dark.

Shane blinks, feeling stale, staring at the ceiling until his brain catches up. The curtains glow faintly with reflected city light. The room feels different — cooler, heavier, like time has slipped without asking permission.

“Jeez,” he mutters softly.

He stretches, joints popping, body pleasantly heavy.

How long did we sleep?

He rolls onto his side, reaching blindly for his phone on the nightstand.

The screen lights up.

9:24 PM.

Shane squints. “What the—”

Four hours. They’ve been asleep for four hours.

He exhales, half amused, half stunned, thumb already swiping out of habit—

A notification, sitting there quietly like it’s been waiting.

Landed early.

Chapter End Notes

DUN DUN DUNNNNNNNNN

Chapter 8: Holding On and Letting Go

Chapter Notes

trigger warning: shane's husband lmao.

Shane goes still so fast it's like someone hit pause on him.

For a split second, he doesn't understand what he's looking at. The screen is too bright in the dark room, the letters too clean. His brain lags behind his eyes.

Landed early.

He chokes out a noise, and his heart kicks.

Dadum.

Thirty minutes ago. The timestamp sits beneath the text like a bad omen.

They live forty-five minutes from the airport.

Dadumdadum.

His heartbeat turns uneven, no longer a steady rhythm but a series of panicked blows — heavy, then faster, then faster.

He can feel it in his throat now. In his temples. A hot, rushing pressure that makes his ears ring faintly, like the room just dropped underwater.

His stomach drops so violently it's almost nauseating. A cold rush floods his limbs, chasing the warmth of sleep away in an instant. His hands go damp. His fingers tingle.

The house feels different now.

Exposed.

He looks at the door like it might open at any second. Like headlights are already cutting across the walls. Like footsteps are already on the stairs.

Dadumdadumdadumdadumda—

"Oh—*oh* my god," he whimpers out.

Next to him, Ilya shifts in his sleep, arm tightening instinctively around Shane's waist.

Shane jerks upright so fast the mattress creaks.

"Ilya." He shakes him.

Nothing.

"*Ilya*—" He shakes him harder. "Ilya, wake up."

A groan. "Mmm."

Shane sits up fully and slaps his palms flat against Ilya's chest — not hard, but enough to jolt him.

"*ILY*— *get up*."

Ilya comes up with a startled gasp, eyes wide and unfocused, heart clearly spiking. "What— what the fuck?"

"You have to go," Shane blurts, voice cracking. "He's back. He's already on the way. You have to get out. Like now."

Ilya blinks at him.

Once.

Twice.

Then, "Your— your husband?"

"Yes!"

"Right now?"

"Yes!"

"In the house?"

"Not yet— stop asking me questions and *get up*!"

Shane grabs Ilya by the forearm and hauls. The blankets go with him, half the sheet ripping off the bed and tangling around Ilya's legs.

"Shane— Jesus— okay, okay—" Ilya laughs, half panicked, half disbelieving as he stumbles, adjusting his boxers and rubbing his eyes. "I'm awake, I'm awake—"

"No you're not," Shane snaps. "You're moving too slow."

"Well I was asleep."

"And now you're an intruder who needs to get the fuck out!"

Ilya snorts despite himself. "Shane relax."

"This is not a joke," Shane says, already scooping up clothes off the floor and throwing them at Ilya's head. "Shirt. Pants. Shoes. Where are your shoes—"

A sneaker bounces off Ilya's shoulder. "Ow— shit Shane!"

"You're missing a sock," Shane says, already kneeling, already panicking.

"I don't need both socks."

"You absolutely need both socks."

"I do not!"

"You're not leaving a fucking sock in my house!" Shane physically shoves the sock at him.

They collide in the doorframe, nearly trip over each other, bounce off the hallway walls.

Shane grabs Ilya's wrist and starts dragging him toward the stairs.

"Keys?" Shane demands, stomping down the steps, Ilya right behind him.

"Yes."

"Wallet?"

"Yes."

"Phone?"

"You threw it at my face."

"So yes." Shane says.

The stairs feel endless. The house feels awake. Every step echoes too loudly, like it's tattling.

At the bottom, Shane skids to a stop.

"Are you leaving anything?"

"No, Shane."

The front door swings open and cold night air rushes in, sobering and sharp. The driveway lights glare like a stage.

They spill outside, Shane still gripping Ilya's sleeve like he might vanish if he lets go.

They reach the car, and everything slows.

The panic doesn't disappear, but it takes a backseat, giving way to something heavier.

Shane stops moving.

"I—" His voice cracks. He swallows. "I don't know when I can see you again."

Ilya's expression softens immediately. He cups Shane's face with both hands, thumbs warm against his cheeks. "Hey. It's okay."

Shane looks at him, eyes bright and shiny, breath still coming too fast, trying to find the words.

"You're okay," Ilya says quietly. "You didn't do anything wrong."

Shane laughs once — thin, disbelieving. "I'm cheating on my husband in his house."

"Okay," Ilya concedes. "You did one thing wrong."

Despite himself, Shane snorts.

He pulls Ilya in for a kiss, fast at first, desperate, like he's trying to cram hours into seconds. Then slower. Lingering. His hands clutch Ilya's jacket, his hair, his shoulders. Ilya clutches his face, his hair, his waist.

They keep kissing like they don't know how to stop.

"I need you to go," Shane whispers against his mouth.

"I know."

Neither of them moves.

Finally, Ilya pulls back just enough to breathe. He presses one last kiss to Shane's forehead.

"Go," Shane murmurs. "Please. Before I lose my mind."

"I'm not mad at you, Shane," he says. "Text me."

"I will."

Ilya gets into the car. The engine turns over. Headlights wash over Shane, too bright, too final.

Shane stands there as the car disappears down the driveway, and for a second, just a *second*, he almost runs.

His body actually leans forward, instinct overriding logic. He imagines it so clearly it makes his chest ache, sprinting down the driveway, barefoot on the cold concrete, yanking the

passenger door open before the car reaches the gate. Sliding in, slamming it shut. Saying nothing except, *Drive*.

He sees it. The two of them pulling away together. No luggage. No plan. No explanation. Just gone.

The fantasy burns bright and fast and then collapses under the weight of reality.

The silence presses in. The night hums. Somewhere, a sprinkler clicks on, a dog barks in the distance, and suddenly he can feel the cool night air nipping at his skin.

When he finally turns back toward the house, it feels wrong. Like stepping into someone else's life.

Shane wanders from room to room, touching things without really seeing them. The couch. The counter. The back of a chair.

Then—

The *ring*.

“Oh fuck,” he breathes.

Panic spikes again, smaller but sharp. He drops to his knees by the kitchen island, scanning the floor like he's lost something alive.

There—near the cabinet. Catching the light.

He snatches it up and slides it onto his finger just as headlights bloom through the front windows.

A black chauffeur van pulls into the driveway.

Shane watches from the hallway as it comes to a stop at the front of the house, luggage is unloaded, his husband steps out and adjusts his long black trench coat, already surveying the house.

Shane takes a deep breath, pastes on a smile and opens the door.

“Hi.”

His husband looks surprised — then pleased. “You're home.”

“Of course,” Shane says, leaning into the hug offered to him. “I couldn't miss you coming back.”

The hug is familiar, a hand rests at Shane's lower back.

“I thought you were staying at Rose's,” his husband says as they walk inside, staff lugging in bags.

Shane doesn't hesitate. "I came back early."

Accepted.

They stop in the living room, his husband shrugging out of his coat. Shane steps forward automatically, taking it, folding it over his arm like muscle memory. He leans in and presses a kiss to Shane's cheek.

"You look good," his husband adds absently, eyes flicking over him once, approving but distant. "Did you do something different?"

Shane swallows. "Just... showered."

"Mm." A hum, noncommittal. "Jet lag is killing me. Muriel was a *nightmare* — I don't know why they insist on rerouting through—" He waves a hand vaguely, already moving past Shane and deeper into the house. "—and the chauffer got there late because apparently no one understands urgency."

The house seems to straighten itself around his husband's presence, like it's snapping back into place. The air shifts. The quiet becomes occupied.

His husband keeps talking as he walks, voice carrying easily through the space.

"I'm telling you, if they'd just listened to me from the beginning, we wouldn't be renegotiating contracts so late in the game. But no, everyone wants to reinvent the wheel. Exhausting." He stops briefly in the entryway of the kitchen, glancing around. "They come fix the panel yet?"

"Tomorrow," Shane says. "Installers are coming in the morning."

"Good." A nod. "I don't like loose ends."

He keeps walking, talking. Shane follows a step behind, coat draped over his arm, heart oddly hollow.

"The return flight was early, I told them to move it up. I hate landing and having to wait around. Waste of time." He checks his phone again, thumb scrolling. "I might need to head back out again next week. Tokyo this time. Depends on how this deal shakes out."

Shane murmurs something agreeable. He isn't sure what.

His husband finally pauses, rubbing his face with both hands, fatigue cracking through the polish just a little.

"God, I'm starving," he says. "Did you eat?"

"Not really," Shane replies.

"Figures," he says lightly. "We'll do something simple. Pasta, maybe. Or order in, but honestly, I just want real food."

Shane nods.

"I'll shower quickly," his husband adds over his shoulder, loosening his cuffs. "You start something, yeah? I'll be down in fifteen."

"Okay," Shane says.

His husband disappears down the hall, footsteps steady, familiar.

The house exhales.

Shane stands there for a second too long, coat still in his hands, listening to the sound of the shower starting upstairs. The water rushes through the pipes, loud and grounding and final.

He sets the coat down carefully.

Then he turns toward the stove, already feeling the ache settle in his chest, the quiet comparison he doesn't ask for, the absence that's already screaming.

Dinner.

Of course.

Shane goes through the motions automatically, pasta in boiling water, sauce warming, a salad tossed without really thinking about it. The motions are ingrained. His husband's voice carries down the hall the entire time once he gets out of the shower, narrating a meeting that apparently went spectacularly because he steered it back from the brink.

By the time they sit down, the house feels properly occupied again.

They sit side by side, his husband pulls his chair in close, knee brushing Shane's immediately. Shane shifts without being asked, lifting his legs and draping them loosely over his husband's lap like he's done a hundred times before. It's automatic. It's muscle memory.

A hand settles over his calf.

Possessive. Casual. Present.

"And then," his husband continues, twirling pasta onto his fork, "he tries to argue value with me. With me." A short laugh. "I had to explain basic leverage to a man who's supposedly been in the industry for twenty years."

Shane nods, chewing, watching the way his husband gestures with the fork mid-story.

"That must've been frustrating," he offers.

"It was insulting," his husband corrects, though he smiles as if to soften it. His thumb moves absently against Shane's leg, tracing slow lines across the skin. "But it worked out. It always does."

He glances at Shane then, like he's remembering to.

"How was your week?"

Shane opens his mouth.

"It was—"

"I assume Rose is still spiraling about that shoot?" his husband interjects smoothly. "She always does before a big one."

The question dissolves before it can exist.

"Yeah," Shane says anyway. "She was stressed."

"I told you," his husband says, nodding as if that confirms something. "She overthinks. That's why you're good for her."

He spears a bite of pasta and holds it up toward Shane's mouth.

"Open," he says.

Shane leans forward and takes it.

"Good?" his husband asks.

"Yeah," Shane says. "It's good."

"Of course it is." A faint smile. "You cook better than half the places we pay too much for."

The compliment lands gently. Almost warmly.

His husband leans over and presses a quick kiss to Shane's forehead.

"You're wasted in this house," he says lightly. "You should've been a chef."

The words are meant to be affectionate.

Shane smiles.

Internally, something tightens.

The hand on his calf slides higher, fingers pressing into muscle, kneading absently. It should feel comforting. Instead, it feels like something being claimed.

He has the sudden, irrational urge to shove the hand away.

To peel it off.

To sandpaper the place on his forehead where the kiss landed.

Instead, he leans back slightly into the touch, adjusting his legs so they rest more comfortably across his husband's lap.

The performance is seamless.

"You seem... quiet." his husband says, chewing.

"I'm just tired, it's late." Shane replies. And although he had just woken up from a long nap, he wasn't lying. He was tired again.

"You always say that when I get back," his husband teases lightly. "What, do I exhaust you?"

Shane forces a small laugh. "Maybe."

His husband grins and squeezes his leg in response, pleased with himself. "You like when I'm home."

It's said casually. Assumed.

Shane doesn't answer.

He looks at their plates instead.

There is the faintest flicker of something in his chest. Not longing exactly, but a childish, unwanted hope. A hope that maybe this time his husband will actually look at him. Actually ask him something and wait for the answer. Actually notice.

He is his husband, after all.

But the moment passes.

"Like I said I might need to go again next week," he says, setting his fork down. "To Tokyo. If they don't finalize the numbers by Friday, I'll fly out myself. Can't trust anyone else to close it."

Shane nods.

"Of course."

Another squeeze at his calf. A kiss to his temple this time.

"You're good to me," his husband says.

The words feel almost genuine.

Shane smiles again, because that's what's required.

They finish eating.

His husband pushes his plate away first, leaning back in his chair with a satisfied exhale. "Gosh, I'm sleepy."

He stands, brushing his hands together lightly. "I'm going up. Come to bed when you're done, yeah?"

"Okay," Shane says.

His husband leans down, kisses him once more, soft, habitual, and then heads upstairs. The house swallows the sound.

Shane remains at the table, his plate is still half full, growing cold, and the chair beside him is empty.

He gathers the plates without speaking, carries them to the sink. The faucet runs, loud in the silence. Soap bubbles bloom over porcelain.

That morning, there had been two sets of hands here.

Laughter.

Shoulders brushing.

Now it's just him.

He dries his hands on a towel and stands there for a moment longer than necessary, staring at his reflection in the dark window above the sink.

Then he turns off the light and heads upstairs.

The mattress dips as Shane slides in.

His husband is already warm, close, an arm looping around Shane's waist automatically. He goes still, staring into the dark, listening to the steady sound of someone else's breathing.

A hand drifts over his hip. Then lower.

"Mmm," his husband murmurs, nosing at the back of Shane's neck. "I missed this."

Shane inhales slowly. Counts it. Exhales.

"I'm really tired," he says, carefully.

There's a pause, not long, but noticeable.

"Oh, come on," his husband says lightly, lips brushing Shane's shoulder. "You're always so eager when I get back. It's my favorite thing about you."

The words land wrong.

His hand presses closer, fingers curling like they already know the shape of Shane's body. Like Shane is expected to respond on cue.

Shane's stomach twists.

"I just—" he starts, then stops. Tries again. "I've had a long day."

His husband huffs a quiet laugh. "You always say that."

The hand slides up, thumb grazing skin. A kiss is pressed to Shane's neck — meant to be affectionate, maybe teasing — but it feels practiced. Automatic. Like checking a box.

Shane closes his eyes.

All he can think about is how different this feels from the way Ilya's hands had rested on him earlier. How Ilya had waited. Had asked without asking. Had felt present.

This feels like obligation.

"Hey," his husband murmurs, voice dropping. "What's wrong with you tonight?"

Shane stiffens just enough for it to be noticed.

"I said I'm tired," he replies, firmer now. Polite. Controlled.

Another pause.

The arm around him loosens.

His husband pulls back slightly, enough that Shane can feel the absence of warmth. Enough to make a point of it.

"...Alright," he says, tone shifting into cooler, faintly irritated. "Whatever, Shane. Be that way."

The words sit between them, sharp edged.

The bed creaks as his husband turns onto his side, back to Shane. A deliberate movement. A withdrawal meant to be felt.

Shane lies there, untouched now, staring into the dark.

He doesn't chase the arm back around him.

He doesn't apologize.

He lets the silence stretch, heavy and cold, his heart pounding with the strange, awful clarity of it all.

This is what he has.

This is what he almost forgot he hated.

Eventually, his husband's breathing evens out, sleep coming easy. Shane stays awake much longer, rigid beneath the covers, his body pressed against someone who feels very far away.

In his mind, unbidden, comes the memory of a different weight. A different warmth. A voice that hadn't expected anything from him.

Tomorrow the cameras will be fixed. Tomorrow everything will look exactly the way it's supposed to again.

He presses his face deeper into the pillow and lets the feeling exist without trying to solve it. Want. Grief. Guilt. Relief. All of it tangled together, unresolved and alive.

He falls asleep thinking of Ilya.

Ilya gets a few blocks away from the house and pulls his car over. He sits, staring into the open street, it's dark. Suburban rich people dark. No street noise, no neighbors on porches, no life. Just polished silence and security lights.

At the first stop sign he almost turned back. Not even consciously—his hands just twitched, the steering wheel resisting him like it knows the way.

Don't be stupid, he told himself, jaw tight.

Forty-five minutes from the airport. Thirty minutes since the text. Ten minutes since Shane's mouth was on his, frantic and helpless and sweet like he didn't know how to let go.

He sees it again, the way Shane looked in the headlights—barefoot, robe loose, hair a mess, eyes too bright. Like he wanted to disappear with him. Like staying was taking more effort than leaving ever would.

Ilya's chest aches hard enough it makes his ribs feel too small.

He still feels warm from their bodies together, from the rush. He still smells faintly like Shane's expensive soap. His skin still feels like Shane's hands are on it. Like if he looks down, he'll see fingerprints.

He drives again until he spots an empty lot—some closed storefront, a dark strip mall, one flickering light on a pole that turns the asphalt the color of old piss. It's nothing. It's perfect. He pulls in like he's being chased.

He parks in the farthest corner.

The engine dies, and the silence crashes down on him all at once.

For a long second he sits there, staring straight ahead, fingers still curled on the wheel like he forgot to let go. His pulse is loud in his ears, the only sound besides the ticking of the cooling engine.

His hands start shaking.

Not fear. Not exactly.

Aftershock.

“Fuck,” he mutters to the empty car, voice low and hoarse.

He drops his head forward until his forehead touches the steering wheel. Just for a moment. Like the wheel can hold him up.

He tries to replay it in order, everything that happened after the text, the scramble, the way Shane physically shoved clothes at him like his life depended on it, the way he'd snapped and stammered and cursed and then kissed him like he was trying to leave teeth marks in the moment.

It's funny. It's insane.

It makes Ilya's mouth curve despite himself.

Then the curve dies.

Because the truth under it isn't funny at all.

That he was in another man's bed. In another man's house. He was pressed mouth-to-mouth with Shane by his car while the possibility of the husband pulling into the driveway hovered over them like a knife.

He should feel triumphant, maybe. Smug? Maybe?

He feels... dirty.

Not because Shane is dirty. Shane is—Shane is soft. Soft where you expect sharpness, gentle where you think there'll be teeth. He's funny without trying, a little weird about it, but that's Ilya's favorite part.

He's warmth, sincerity. Someone who feels too much and has learned to hide it, not someone who deserves to be hidden himself.

If there's guilt in this, it isn't about being with Shane.

But the situation—

Ilya exhales through his nose, slow.

He reaches into the center console with hands that finally move again, fumbling for his cigarettes. He finds the pack, taps one out, holds it between his fingers for a beat like he's deciding if he deserves it.

Then he lights it.

The first drag hits his lungs sharp and familiar.

His shoulders loosen a fraction.

The smoke curls up in the cabin, pale in the dim light. He cracks the window and cold air slides in, sobering and mean. It tastes like nothing and it helps anyway.

He takes another drag.

Shane's face flashes again in his mind—how he looked when he said *I don't know when I can see you again*. Like it was an apology. Like it was a promise he couldn't keep.

Ilya's jaw clenches.

He hates that he left, hates that he had to.

If Shane had said take me with you, Ilya thinks, his chest tightening, *I would've done it*.

That thought sits in his body like a weight.

He takes another drag and the cigarette trembles slightly between his fingers, because Shane didn't say that.

Shane said *go*.

So Ilya went.

Because in the daylight, this is what it is, an affair. A secret. A risk. Something that could ruin them both if it cracks the wrong way.

Ilya stares out at the empty lot, the closed stores, the dead quiet.

He thinks of his own apartment, small, cheap, lived in, just enough. He thinks of Shane's house, massive, curated, too much.

Ilya drags smoke into his lungs again.

He can't decide what he's angriest at.

There's the husband, obviously.

The money.

The ownership.

The neglect.

But there's another anger under that, quiet and sharp.

At himself, his own fault.

Because he knew. From the first day. He knew Shane was married. He knew this wasn't right. This couldn't end well. He knew he wasn't supposed to want a man like that—beautiful, expensive, unreachable.

He's already imagining futures. Already imagining a version of Shane that doesn't flinch when his phone buzzes. Already imagining Shane in his apartment, complaining about the lack of closet space and still smiling because at least no one is watching him.

Ilya's throat goes tight again.

He taps ash into the console.

This is gonna hurt me, isn't it?

"Idiot," he mutters at himself, but there's no bite in it.

His phone sits in the cupholder, screen black. He keeps glancing at it like it's going to light up on its own. Like Shane's going to text *I'm sorry* or *I hate this* or *come back*.

Nothing.

Because Shane is probably downstairs right now, putting his ring back on like it's part of his skin. Smiling at a man who doesn't see him. Performing.

The thought makes Ilya's stomach twist.

He takes one more drag and then stubs the cigarette out, hands suddenly restless, needing something to do.

He picks up his phone.

His thumb hovers over Shane's name.

He stares at it for too long.

If he texts, he risks pulling Shane's attention when he can't afford it. If he doesn't text, he risks letting the silence become a habit, letting Shane fall back into the life that's designed to swallow him.

He types anyway.

home safe.

He pauses.

Then adds, softer.

you okay?

He stares at the message, then hits send before he can overthink it.

The bubble goes.

Delivered.

His chest tightens like he just stepped too close to an edge.

He puts the phone face down on his thigh and stares out the windshield again, waiting for his heartbeat to slow.

It doesn't.

He picks the phone back up almost immediately because he's pathetic.

Still nothing.

Ilya exhales, half laugh, half curse.

He leans back in the seat and closes his eyes for a second.

He tries to imagine walking away. He tries to picture telling himself this is too messy, this is too dangerous, you don't do secrets. God knows what this wealthy successful man could do to you if he finds out. He tries to picture deleting Shane's number and going back to chlorinated mornings and empty nights and pretending this didn't happen.

His body rejects it instantly.

Because he can still taste him, feel him, hear him.

Because Shane's face when he kissed him at the car wasn't casual. It was grief. It was hunger. It was a person who'd found air and then got shoved back underwater.

Ilya opens his eyes and starts the car, he needs to get home.

Chapter 9: No Way Out of Wanting

Chapter Notes

short chapter don't hate me

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

Shane wakes feeling stuck, the bed is empty on the other side. Cool sheets. Indentation already gone.

He groans to himself and forces himself over on his back, blinks at the ceiling, the light brighter than it should be. His head feels thick, like he slept too long.

He rolls back over and reaches for his phone.

11:07 AM.

"Jesus," he mutters.

A notification sits there waiting.

home safe.

you okay?

Sent last night. Not followed up. No pressure.

Shane stares at it for a long second, something warm spreading through him before he can stop it. The smallest smile touches his mouth. It feels disobedient.

He types back before he can overthink it.

miss u already.

He stares at that, too. Debates deleting it.

He sends it anyway.

The message whooshes away. His heart does something stupid and hopeful in his chest.

Then he remembers where he is.

He pushes himself upright and drags a hand through his hair, lightly smacking his cheeks, begging for some life to re-enter him.

The sound of male voices drifts faintly up the stairs when he opens the bedroom door. Tools clink. Something drills. The house doesn't sound like itself.

He walks down slowly to find two men in navy polos stand on ladders in the entryway, wires exposed in the wall like veins being stitched back together. One of them glances at him politely, then goes back to work.

At the kitchen island, his husband sits with a mug of coffee, scrolling through his phone like he owns the air in the room.

He looks up when Shane appears.

"Morning."

Shane steps in closer automatically. "Morning."

His husband stands and leans in for a kiss. It's soft. Routine. Familiar.

"You looked exhausted," he says, brushing a thumb under Shane's eye. "I let you sleep."

"Thanks."

"I figured you needed it."

Shane nods, glancing past him toward the open wall.

"They almost done?" he asks lightly.

"Yeah they're replacing the panel and recalibrating the feeds," his husband says. "I told them to check the blind spots in the back too. No sense in having weak points."

Blind spots.

Shane's stomach flips.

"Mm," Shane hums.

A drill whirs to life again.

The house feels like it's being sealed.

By noon, the installers are leaving.

The wall looks perfectly untouched.

"System's live," one of them says.

Shane is already looking at it.

The small black dome in the corner of the kitchen sits dark for half a second longer, then the red light flickers on.

Blink.

Blink.

Like an eyelid peeling back, like it just opened its eye, looking directly at him.

He doesn't move.

His throat tightens automatically, instinctive. His pulse ticks once, sharp and low in his chest.

The lens is glossy and unreadable, but he knows what it means. Timestamped. Archived. Reviewed if necessary. Watched.

For a brief second, something old in him stirs. Fear. Anxiety. The kind that makes you adjust your posture, check your face before someone else does. The kind that makes you behave.

He can feel it rising, that familiar tightening—*be good, be quiet, don't make a mess*—

Then it shifts slightly.

Because he's standing in the exact same kitchen where, for the past 2 days, the island had been dusted with flour and laughter. Where hands had grabbed at hips. Where heat had him on his knees taking Ilya deep into his mouth on the kitchen floor.

Right there.

Two steps from where his husband is now standing with a coffee mug and a satisfied nod, probably thinking he's gathering Shane right back into the box he wants him in.

But the camera didn't catch the way he trembled, or the way his fingers had clutched into a head full of curls, or the way he threw his wedding ring across the kitchen and hoped it fucking broke when it hit the floor.

The red light blinks again.

The memory vibrates through him, low and electric, and something like smugness festers in his stomach before he can stop it.

You missed it, he thinks.

You were blind.

His husband taps something on his phone. "All set," he says casually. "Full coverage again."

Shane keeps staring at the lens.

It feels like it's staring back.

Irritation.

Frustration.

A quiet, simmering refusal.

He's being watched again.

Fine.

Then he'll learn where it doesn't look.

They drift outside in the early afternoon.

His husband stretches out on one of the lounge chairs by the pool, sunglasses on, already on a call before he's fully seated.

"Yes, I saw the numbers—no, that's not what I said—"

His voice carries over the water, sharp and confident and bored.

Shane lingers by the patio table with a glass of water he doesn't need.

The pool glitters in the sunlight.

Yesterday, the water had been laughter and fun and hands gripping tile.

Today, it's corporate background noise.

His husband gestures as he talks, fingers slicing through the air. "That's not how I run my company," he says, tone sharp and superior.

Shane pulls his phone from his pocket without thinking.

A message.

you alive?

He types.

yeah. camera guys were here.

Three dots appear almost instantly.

They disappear.

Reappear.

is he going to hurt you shane?

The sunlight off the pool makes it harder to read. He tilts the phone slightly, watching the glare slide off the glass.

Hurt you.

He feels the words settle somewhere low in his chest.

Across the patio, his husband is mid-sentence, voice smooth and even. "No, that's not how I need it to be done," he says, calm and firm. A pause. "Because that would be inefficient."

A short laugh follows.

There is nothing violent about the scene. Nothing volatile. Just money and strategy and confidence carried easily on a man who is used to being listened to.

Shane looks at him and then back at the message.

Hurt you.

The idea feels almost misplaced. Like someone asking if he needs an umbrella while they're both standing under clear sky.

His husband has never hurt him.

Not like that.

Never raised a hand. Never grabbed him hard enough to bruise. Never cornered him or shouted until his ears rang. If anything, his husband prides himself on composure. On being rational. On not being one of those men.

Shane swallows.

So why does the question make his stomach tighten?

Maybe not because it's true, but because Ilya *thought* it might be.

From the outside, is that what this looks like?

The house with its cameras in every corner. The way Shane panics at the chance of conflict. The way he lowers his voice when he talks on the patio. The way he folds himself into agreeable shapes at dinner.

Maybe it reads wrong.

His husband isn't dangerous.

He's just disciplined. Structured. Particular. He likes order. He likes predictability. He likes knowing where things are, where people are. He likes outcomes he can control. That's why his company is so successful. Maybe that's why he thinks his marriage is as well?

But Shane remembers the soft and flirtatious sound of the woman telling his husband to come back to bed over the phone. He also remembers the other times he's smelled sweet flowery perfume on his husband's clothes, and found lace panties stuffed in the back corner of a drawer he thought Shane wouldn't be touching.

So no, he isn't oblivious.

Shane watches the way his husband gestures while he talks, taking a sip of his bourbon. His movements are precise and practiced. He doesn't look angry. He looks certain.

Shane used to love that certainty.

The first year of their marriage felt like being folded into something solid. A life already built. A rhythm already set. He'd admired it — the decisiveness, the way it seemed his husband wanted to do anything to keep him safe. To put him first.

Somewhere along the way, admiration turned into adjustment.

Because it was easier, and his husband always seemed so sure that he knew best.

Shane shifts a bit, the sun warm against his bare legs. The air smells faintly of chlorine.

Is that abuse?

The word feels too loud. Too blunt. It doesn't fit cleanly over what this is.

His husband doesn't belittle him. He doesn't call him names. He compliments him. Thanks him for dinner. Kisses his forehead. Tells him he's lucky. Tells him he's taken care of.

You're good to me.

He meant it.

Shane knows he did.

But there's something about the way those words land that feels less like affection and more like assessment. Like performance reviews handed out at the end of a quarter.

He looks down at the phone again.

is he going to hurt you shane?

No. He isn't scared of his husband. He could probably beat his husband's ass, really. He's never once thought, *I'm in danger*.

He's thought, *I can't breathe*.

And that's different.

Isn't it?

Shane exhales slowly, thumbs hovering over the keyboard.

He types,

no.

Stares at it.

Deletes it.

Types again.

no. he's never hurt me.

Too defensive.

He erases that too.

He glances up at his husband, who is now leaning back in his chair, one ankle crossed over the other knee, sunglasses reflecting the sky. Relaxed. Composed. Entirely in control of his own world.

Shane looks back at his screen and types carefully.

he's not violent.

He pauses, considering.

The blinking cursor waits.

He adds,

he just likes control.

He reads it once.

It feels honest without being dramatic.

He hits send.

Across the patio, his husband says something sharp and amused and ends the call with a decisive tap. He sets his phone down and stretches his arms above his head, satisfied.

Ilya's reply comes almost immediately.

okay.

just had to ask.

Shane reads it twice.

Another message comes through.

i'm missing you.

Shane's stomach tightens.

Another bubble.

like. a lot.

The corner of his mouth lifts despite himself.

He types back,

oh really?

A beat.

what are you missing the most?

He shouldn't be smiling like this. He shouldn't be leaning forward in his chair like he's about to hear a secret.

Three dots.

your mouth.

Shane's smile drops a bit and his pulse kicks once, sharp.

Another message.

the way you look at me when I kiss you.

His throat goes dry.

And then—

you in that robe.

Shane shifts in his seat instinctively, glancing toward the house as if someone might have heard that through glass and sunlight.

He types,

the robe??

yeah.

bare chest. hair a mess. that wine glass in your hand.

Heat floods up his neck.

He shouldn't answer this.

He absolutely shouldn't.

Across the patio, his husband laughs sharply at something said through a speaker. "Well do you want to make money or not," he says, crisp and confident. Another phone call. Does he ever get tired of talking to people on the phone all day?

Shane types anyway.

you liked that?

The response is instant.

i loved that.

A pause.

i loved you pushing me against the car like you didn't want to let me leave.

His breath stutters.

He looks down at his lap, at his bare thighs in the sun, at the way his body is responding before he realizes, his cock hardening.

Shit.

He types slower now.

you weren't exactly eager to go.

A second later.

i would've stayed.

Shane sighs.

He shouldn't keep this going here.

He stands abruptly, chair scraping faintly against stone.

"Going inside," he says casually, though his husband doesn't look up. He just waves a distracted hand mid-sentence, already absorbed.

Shane slips through the back door and into the house, the sudden coolness of the interior making his skin prickle.

His phone buzzes again.

tell me what you're wearing right now.

He exhales.

Up the stairs.

Each step feels louder than it should.

The cameras.

He's hyper-aware of them now, little red eyes in the corners. Watching.

He reaches the bathroom at the end of the hall, closes the door softly, locks it.

Sits on the edge of the bathtub for a second.

Then changes his mind and lowers himself onto the closed toilet lid instead, back against the cool tile wall.

He types,

nothing dramatic.

just shorts.

Another buzz.

prove it.

He rolls his eyes, but his hand is already sliding under the waistband.

you're bold today.

i'm desperate today.

The word makes his stomach flip.

He shifts, thighs pressing together slightly.

What are you going to do about it? Shane types.

The image loads.

For a split second Shane doesn't process what he's looking at. Then he does. Ilya's hard cock, leaking at the tip, plastered across his phone screen.

"*Holy—*" he chokes, nearly dropping the phone.

He jerks it away from his face like it burned him, fumbling to lock the screen. His heart is pounding so loud it feels like it's shaking the walls.

What the fuck.

He stares at the blank phone screen in his hand, chest rising and falling too fast.

He drags a hand over his face, half horrified, half electrified.

He was not prepared for that.

Heat floods low and fast, his pulse kicking hard in his stomach.

Jesus.

His phone buzzes again.

He flinches.

Unlocks it cautiously.

you like?

Shane lets out a breathless, incredulous laugh.

He types back,

shit, ilya.

Almost immediately,

what?

Shane hesitates. His pride wants to play it cool.

His body will not cooperate.

He types,

i want you so bad.

The words feel reckless.

True.

His phone lights up again.

yeah?

Shane swallows.

He looks at the image again before he can stop himself.

This time he doesn't jerk away.

He lets himself look, and his mind wander.

To the kitchen. The cold marble under his knees. The way Ilya's hands had threaded into his hair, grounding but demanding at the same time.

The way he'd looked at him — focused, dark-eyed, breath uneven.

Shane bites his lip hard, his hand traveling to his bulge, palming slowly.

He remembers the weight of him in his mouth. The warmth. The taste. The way his hands had braced against Ilya's hips like he needed something solid to hold onto. The way Ilya had groaned out his name.

He remembers being pushed back into the mattress moments after that, breath knocked from his lungs, sheets twisted in his fists, Ilya's voice low and steady in his ear like he was the only thing in the room that mattered, fucking him into the mattress so hard he thought he was going through the damn thing.

His mouth actually waters at the memory.

"Fuck," he whispers under his breath.

He shouldn't be thinking about this here.

He shouldn't be reacting like this here.

He knows he needs to make it quick.

Downstairs, his husband is still outside on the phone. Completely unaware that upstairs, Shane's pulse is racing and his head is swimming with images that have nothing to do with him.

His phone buzzes again.

show me how bad you want me.

Shane exhales slowly, shaky, nearly whimpering.

He's insane Shane thinks.

He adjusts himself in the small space of the bathroom, quickly shimmying his pants down just enough for his cock to spring free, closing his eyes and wrapping his hand around it and pumping slowly.

He lets out a choked breath at the contact, pressing his lips together to attempt to stay quiet, moving his hand a bit faster and twisting his wrist with it.

He opens his eyes again, seeing Ilya's cock there again, thinking about Ilya being there with him while he touched himself, whispering filth in his ear and kissing down his neck.

He opens the camera, pressing the red record button and lets it roll for a minute, capturing his clear need.

He sends it, adds a message with it,

i have to be quiet.

His heart is pounding so hard he's sure it's audible.

The reply comes fast.

god.

Another message.

wish i was there.

And then,

you're so pretty like that.

That one hits deeper than anything else.

Shane's eyes flutter closed for a second.

Pretty.

He presses his head back against the tile, trying to steady his breathing, trying to keep the sounds in his throat from betraying him.

His phone vibrates again.

don't stop.

He swallows.

The house feels enormous and too quiet.

Shane's entire world narrows to the glow of his screen and the voice in his head that sounds suspiciously like Ilya's.

He types with shaking fingers,

this is crazy ilya.

A second later—

i keep thinking about your mouth on me.

His breath catches.

Another message.

how desperate you were to make me cum.

how good you tasted when i finally got my fucking hands on you.

Shane bites his lip again, he's frozen staring at Ilya's messages come through.

His phone buzzes again — a short clip. Ilya, breathing uneven, jaw tense, his hand moving fast against his dick, some kind of lube making the more erotic squelching noises he'd ever heard.

Shane inhales sharply, shoulders pressing into the tile behind him.

He types,

you're going to get me caught.

good.

Another message.

let him watch you cum for me.

Heat floods through him again, low and urgent.

He types,

i'm close.

The reply is immediate.

yeah.

me too.

His pulse is everywhere now — in his throat, in his ears, in his hands.

The phone vibrates again.

Incoming call.

Shane freezes.

He stares at the screen, heart hammering.

This is insane.

He shouldn't.

He *really* shouldn't.

But he needs it.

He swipes to answer before he can think too hard.

"Ilya—" he whispers.

On the other end, Ilya doesn't speak at first. Just breath. Low. Controlled. Rougher than usual.

"Shane— fuck" Ilya murmurs quietly. "Missed your voice."

"Ilya i'm so close," Shane breathes back.

Downstairs, a door opens and shuts.

His nerves spike. The anxiety pangs through him for a split second, but it turns him on all the more.

Ilya keeps talking, voice low and steady in his ear.

"Yeah?" Ilya murmurs. "Tell me what you're thinking about."

Shane hesitates for half a second. Then the words tumble out, raw.

"I'm thinking about you," he whispers. "About you holding me down. Making me take it."

A slow exhale comes through the speaker.

"Go on."

Shane swallows, pulse pounding.

"I'm thinking about how you fuck me," he admits. "Like—like you need me."

"Mhm," Ilya's voice drops, softer. Hungrier. "What else?"

The endearment comes next, quiet and tender.

"Tell me, sweetheart."

Shane moans at the pet name, cutting himself off as quick as possible.

"Don't—" he whispers weakly.

"You like that," Ilya says, low and certain.

Shane's voice breaks slightly when he answers.

"I'm thinking about—" he admits, pushing through his moans. "About when you— you grabbed my face and made me look at you."

Another quiet, approving hum on the other end.

"I want you," Shane babbles out, straining to keep his voice a whisper. "I want you pinning me down. I want you so deep inside me I can't think. Making me scream your name."

A sharp inhale on the other end.

"Fuck—" Ilya's voice drops lower. "You want me to fuck you again?"

"Yes," Shane says immediately. No shame. No pause. "I want you to ruin me. I want it so fucking bad."

Shane can hear cluttering in the kitchen, the sink turn on and off, the fridge opening and closing.

"God," Ilya mutters. "I can hear it in your voice."

"I'm gonna cum," Shane admits, breath breaking. "Don't stop talking."

“You’re so gorgeous Shane,” Ilya says, rough and steady. “So desperate for me. You sound so good like this. Keep going. Let me hear it.”

Shane chokes on a sound, trying to stay quiet.

“Ilya—”

“That’s it,” Ilya breathes. “Say it. Let go.”

Shane's breath stutters.

"Are you gonna—" he whispers again.

"Yeah," Ilya answers quietly. "I am."

The words hit him like a spark to gasoline.

Shane clamps a hand over his own mouth, trying to swallow the sound clawing up his throat.

“Oh my—” he chokes, cutting himself off, shoulders tensing as he finally gives in.

“Ilya—”

On the other end, Ilya lets out a low, wrecked sound — half moan, half curse — Shane’s name dragged out of him like it’s been pulled from somewhere deep.

“Shane—”

They’re both trying to keep it contained. Trying to breathe instead of cry out. The strain of it makes everything sharper.

Shane’s back arches against the cool tile, body going rigid, then shaking as his orgasm rolls through him. His breaths come in broken pulls, quiet but uncontrollable.

On the other end, Ilya exhales hard through his teeth, like he’s biting back more than he’s letting through. Another softer sound — Shane’s name again, almost reverent this time.

Then just breathing.

Heavy. Uneven. Shared through a thin line of connection.

Shane drags his hand down his face, trying to steady himself, heart still slamming.

Downstairs, a chair scrapes faintly across the floor.

Reality snaps back into place.

Shane swallows, still catching his breath.

“I have to—” he whispers urgently. “I have to go.”

“Shane—” Ilya starts.

But Shane ends the call, staring at his reflection in the dark screen for half a second before forcing himself upright, already reaching for composure.

His face is flushed. His pupils blown wide.

He looks wrecked.

He swallows hard and forces himself into motion, grabbing toilet paper, cleaning himself off. The bathroom smells faintly like soap and sweat and something warmer he tries not to think about. He wipes his hand once. Twice.

Then he sees his wedding ring, and the smear of cum along the edge of it.

He actually lets out a soft, incredulous huff of laughter.

I'm the worst. He thinks sarcastically.

He takes it off and wipes it clean carefully, like he's erasing something.

When he slides it back onto his finger, it feels colder than before.

By the time he unlocks the bathroom door, his breathing has settled. His pulse is manageable. His face almost normal.

Almost.

He walks downstairs slowly, aware of every camera dome he passes. The red lights blink quietly, steady, obedient.

In the kitchen, his husband is seated at the island, a plate in front of him. Fork in hand. Shirt sleeves rolled neatly to his forearms.

He looks up when Shane enters.

“There you are,” he says easily. “Thought maybe you took a nap.”

Shane gives a small smile. “Bathroom. Upset stomach”

“Mm.”

His husband gestures lightly with the fork. “Sit. Eat something.”

Shane obeys automatically, sliding onto the stool beside him.

The plate is nudged toward him without ceremony.

His husband's hand rests briefly on his thigh, just above the knee. A small squeeze. Casual. Familiar.

It's the kind of touch that used to ground him.

Now he feels nothing.

No flinch. No comfort. No warmth.

Shane looks down at the hand on his leg, then at the gold band on his finger.

He waits for something to stir.

Guilt.

Affection.

Fear.

Shame.

Anything.

There's only a strange, hollow quiet in his chest. Like a room after furniture's been removed.

His husband continues eating, talking lightly about a meeting later in the week. Numbers.
Travel. Tokyo.

Shane nods along.

His gaze drifts back to the ring.

It looks exactly the same.

Shiny. Solid. Secure.

He turns it once around his finger.

Still nothing.

Across the room, the red camera light blinks.

Steady.

Watching.

Shane lifts his eyes to it.

Then back to his plate.

Detached.

The emptiness doesn't scare him, it isn't intimidating him.

It feels like a door left open. Like a room full of possibility, and in that space, his want for Ilya isn't shameful or frantic, it's bright. Alive. There's only one thing that feels sharp and certain, the memory of Ilya's voice in his ear, saying his name like it meant something.

Chapter End Notes

okay so i'm actually trying to plan how the rest of this story is gonna go i've been in here freestyling for the past 9 chapters. IF THIS CHAPTER WAS BORING DONT HATE ME DONT GIVE UP ON ME HANG TIGHT HANG IN THERE PLSPLSPLSPLSPLS.

also, i'm on twt/x @coziebabiee if any of u wanna follow me on there or dm me abt the book or abt my other fics or fangirl queen out w me abt hollanov/hudcon. THANK U GUYS LOVE U GUYS SEE U NEXT CHAPTER

Chapter 10: Best Behavior

Chapter Notes

DOUBLE FEATURE chapter 11 is also posted.

The next day, his husband springs lunch on him the way he springs everything else on him.

Shane is standing at the kitchen island in one of his silk robes, coffee gone lukewarm beside him, scrolling absently through nothing on his phone when his husband comes downstairs dressed already, pressed slacks, open collar, watch glinting in the morning light.

“Well I told them we’d meet for lunch,” he says, smoothing his shirt. “They’re in town until tomorrow, don’t wanna miss it.”

Shane looks up.

“We?”

His husband glances at him with just enough amusement in his face to make Shane feel faintly ridiculous for asking.

“Of course we.”

That’s that.

No *are you up for it?* No *do you want to come?* No room to say that he had other plans, even if the only plans were wandering through the house in slippers and texting Ilya in broad daylight while the cameras blinked overhead.

Shane lets his thumb rest against the rim of his mug and forces out a neutral, “What time?”

“An hour.”

Shane huffs.

Then his husband is moving again, back to the room, finishing getting dressed.

Shane stays where he is.

An hour. Right.

His coffee tastes stale when he drinks it.

Across the kitchen, the little red light in the corner blinks once, then again, patient and unbothered. Watching.

The house is too bright for how tired he feels.

He doesn't know whether it's from sleeping too late, from not sleeping enough, or from the strange, feverish static still left in his body from yesterday—the cameras, the sexting, his husband downstairs while Ilya's voice was in his ear making him cum.

He sets the mug down harder than he means to.

The sound disappears quickly into the room, swallowed by marble and vaulted ceilings and the kind of silence money buys.

He hates that he has enough time to get ready.

He hates more that he does it anyway.

The restaurant sits along the marina, all pale stone and white umbrellas and glass walls that make everything inside seem brighter, cleaner, more expensive. It smells faintly of citrus and chilled wine and salt carried in from the water. Beyond the terrace, boats sway lazily in their slips, sleek and polished, all chrome and lacquer and names painted in discreet gold lettering.

Lunch, his husband had said.

But nothing about the place suggests lunch in the ordinary sense. There are no children, or ketchup bottles, or chipped water glasses sweating onto napkins. Just linen and polished silver and waiters who move like they've been trained never to make a sound.

By the time they arrive, most of the party is already there.

Shane recognizes the men immediately—partners, investors, some assortment of wealthy middle-aged confidence packaged in navy jackets and expensive loafers. Their wives sit in a loose curve of cream and beige and gold jewelry, all of them beautiful in the heavily maintained and doctored way.

There are air kisses.

A hand on his forearm.

“Oh my god, you look incredible.”

“That color is gorgeous on you.”

“Have you done something different with your hair?”

Shane smiles the way he always does, easy and bright and just self-deprecating enough to be likable. He lets himself be drawn into the wives' orbit, lets one of them touch the sleeve of his shirt, lets another ask where he got his sunglasses.

“It was the only pair in the house I could find that weren’t his,” he jokes lightly, nodding toward his husband.

They laugh.

It is easy. It is always easy.

That’s part of the problem.

They’re seated at a long table near the windows. The wives talk first about the usual things—someone’s renovation, someone’s trainer, someone’s daughter starting at a private school in the fall. Their voices flow around him in a practiced current of polished complaint and softened bragging.

Shane knows how to participate in this too. He knows when to widen his eyes in sympathy, when to laugh, when to say that’s insane in the exact tone that means I understand completely while also meaning absolutely nothing.

One of the wives leans in and says that her wine cellar had to be redone because of contractor incompetence and another complains that their architect is impossible and keeps trying to “modernize” everything.

“Obviously I said no,” she says, taking a sip of sparkling water like she’s survived something heroic.

“Obviously,” Shane echoes.

Across from them, the men are having an entirely different lunch. Markets. Forecasting. Whose deal went sideways because someone got sentimental and whose didn’t because they stayed disciplined.

His husband belongs to that side of the table in a way that feels effortless. His voice carries without ever becoming loud. The others angle subtly toward him when he speaks. Even the pauses seem to belong to him.

Shane has watched this for years.

Once, it had impressed him. The certainty. The way rooms tilted.

Now it just feels familiar.

His phone buzzes in his lap.

He doesn’t move right away.

Another buzz.

His stomach flips.

He keeps his face perfectly still, nodding at something about limestone countertops, and eases the phone into his palm beneath the tablecloth.

you've been quiet. you okay?

The message is so sweet it almost makes him smile. Ilya's checking on him.

He types one-handed, hidden beneath linen and shadow.

define okay

Then a reply.

somewhere fancy? eating fancy fish eggs and cheese

He glances up. Nobody is looking at him. One of the wives is showing another a picture of a backslash. His husband is explaining something about leverage with one hand curved around a wine glass.

Shane tips his phone slightly and snaps a photo low and quick, white tablecloth, gleaming silver, the blurred blue of the marina beyond, his own thigh in the lower corner where the fabric of his trousers pulls faintly when he shifts.

He sends it before he can think too hard.

The reply comes almost immediately.

wow. looks boring.

Heat blooms low and quiet in his stomach. He smiles softly. His husband glances over.

He takes a sip of wine to cover it.

i'd drag you out of there in five seconds

oh my god please do Shane thinks.

Something in his chest gives a small, guilty thud.

He can see it too easily, Ilya walking in here sun tanned and broad shouldered and entirely unbothered by the room, taking one look at the table and one look at Shane and deciding he didn't belong in it. Whisking him away.

His phone buzzes again.

i want to see you again

Shane's pulse kicks, and he can't help it, the corner of his mouth turns.

i want to see you too

At the same moment, his husband's voice cuts cleanly through the table.

"Give me that."

Everything in Shane stills.

He looks up.

His husband is looking directly at him now, hand extended across the linen, not a trace of anger in his face. If anything, he looks faintly amused. Polished. Social.

"Your phone," he clarifies, because of course he does. Because what's humiliation without perfect manners.

The table shifts around the moment. Not openly. Nobody stares. Nobody gasps. One of the wives picks up her wine. One of the men clears his throat and studies the marina.

But Shane can feel the awareness sharpen. Feel the shape of the pause.

He hears himself say, lightly, "I was just answering—"

"Give it to me."

Same tone, soft and certain, a small smile stuck to his face, but Shane can see it in his eyes.

Give me the phone, Shane.

Shane places the phone in his husband's hand.

The second it leaves his fingers, heat surges through him, embarrassment and anger burning hot and electric. He keeps his face pleasant while his husband turns the phone over once without even looking at the screen.

"Sorry," his husband says to the table with a small smile, as if apologizing for a charming inconvenience. "We try not to work during meals."

A few polite laughs.

We.

His husband slides the phone neatly into the inside pocket of his jacket.

"For the rest of lunch," he says quietly, just to Shane. "You don't need it."

The blood rises so fast it almost makes Shane dizzy.

He smiles.

"Of course."

His voice sounds normal.

He folds his hands in his lap and listens to the conversation resume around him, but the anger comes in hot waves now—thick, pulsing, almost physical.

It isn't just that he took the phone. It's that he did it like training. Like correction. Like everyone at the table was expected to understand who was being handled and why.

One of the wives touches Shane's wrist a little later and tells him, in a low affectionate voice, that he's "so lucky" because his husband is brilliant.

Shane smiles again and says, "Yes. He is."

What he feels is not luck.

What he feels is rage.

It sits under his skin all through the rest of lunch, hot and bright and humiliating. It throbs there while someone orders another bottle, while his husband tells a story about a failed negotiation and the table laughs in all the right places, while dessert menus are declined because everyone is "being good."

Shane says almost nothing the rest of lunch, the anger says enough.

After lunch they walk quietly together to the car, the chauffeur closes the car door behind them with a soft, expensive thunk.

The sound of the city outside dulls instantly.

Leather. Cool air. The faint smell of cedar and clean cologne.

His husband reaches into his jacket pocket and hands the phone back without looking at him. "Here."

Shane snatches it more than takes it.

It's small, childish maybe, but he can't help it. His fingers close around the phone too fast, too tight.

His husband notices.

Of course he notices.

"Relax," he says, not unkindly.

Shane lets out a breath through his nose. "I was relaxed."

His husband turns his head slowly, one eyebrow lifting. "Were you?"

The chauffeur's eyes remain fixed on the road.

Shane stares down at the phone in his hands and then says, because if he doesn't say it now he'll feel it rotting in him all afternoon, "You *embarrassed* me."

“I embarrassed you?”

“Yes.”

It comes out sharper than he planned.

His husband’s expression doesn’t change much. That’s the thing about him. He doesn’t react. He recalibrates.

“You were texting through lunch.”

*“You *took* my phone.”*

“Because you couldn’t put it away.”

“You corrected me in front of everyone.”

His husband’s gaze flicks briefly toward the driver, then back to Shane. His voice lowers a fraction.

“We’re not doing this in the car.”

Shane laughs once—a short, dry sound with no humor in it.

“Of course not.”

Silence fills the rest of the drive.

His phone sits in his hand, screen dark.

He doesn’t check it.

He just stares at his own reflection in the black glass and feels the anger slowly condense into something harder.

By the time they pull into the driveway, he knows he is not going to let this dissolve the way everything usually does.

Inside, the house greets them with its usual stillness.

The door closes. The staff take the coats. Somewhere deeper in the house, an ice machine hums. The little red eye of the camera in the hallway blinks once, then again.

His husband sets his keys down on the entry table and finally turns to him fully.

“You were out of line.”

Shane laughs softly, disbelieving. *“I was out of line?”*

“Yes.”

His husband's tone is still controlled, still maddeningly level. "I'm not going to sit there while you look bored and disengaged in front of people I do business with."

"I wasn't bored."

"You were on your phone."

"I was answering a message."

"At lunch."

"Yes. At lunch."

His husband exhales through his nose. "You don't check your phone while we're hosting." Hosting.

As if Shane was there in service of the table, not merely seated at it.

He feels the anger rise all over again, hot and ugly and long overdue.

"You didn't have to take it from me," he says.

His husband steps closer, not threatening, not loud. Just filling the space the way he always does.

"You don't seem to understand how it reflects on me."

On me.

Not on them. Not on Shane. Not on the marriage.

On him.

Shane stares at him.

"I'm not an extension of your company."

His husband's jaw tightens. Slightly. "No. You're my husband."

"And that means what, exactly?"

The question lands between them with more force than its volume deserves.

His husband blinks once.

"It means there's a standard."

The words are so clean they almost don't register.

Then they do.

“And I didn’t meet it?” Shane asks, looking at him like he’s a dumb piece of shit.

What the fuck do you mean there’s a standard?

“You were being inconsiderate to everyone there.”

Shane shakes his head slowly, feeling his own pulse in his throat. “No. I was texting.”

“In front of my partners.”

“In front of your partners,” Shane says with a shrug. “Boohoo.”

The distinction hangs there.

His husband studies him the way he studies markets, like there must be a reason for this deviation and he only needs another second to identify it.

“You’ve been pushing lately,” he says.

Shane lets out a slow breath.

“I’m just talking. Breathing.”

He sees it in the brief stillness of his husband’s face. Calculating.

A tiny fracture in the expectation of obedience.

“You’re overreacting,” his husband says at last. “It was lunch.”

“You are overreacting. It was humiliating.”

“You’re just sensitive.”

Shane almost rolls his eyes.

Maybe once he would have backed down, apologized, let the whole thing be smoothed over by dinner or a forehead kiss or some nice piece of jewelry ordered online two days later.

Now all he feels is tired.

“No,” he says quietly. “I’m just done pretending that shit doesn’t bother me.”

His husband’s eyes sharpen. “Watch your tone.”

Shane hesitates, he’s heard that plenty of times. He nearly backs down out of habit.

“I’m not a child,” he says. “And I’m not one of your employees.”

His hands tremble just slightly, he hides it, holds himself together.

His husband stares at him.

Then, after a long second, exhales and smooths his expression back into something cooler.

“This is unnecessary.”

“For who?”

Another pause.

Then the dismissal.

“We’re done with this,” his husband says. “I have work.”

And he turns away.

Just like that.

No explosion. No apology. No resolution.

Shane stands where he is and watches him disappear into the office.

He waits for the familiar collapse after confrontation—for the sick rush of panic, for the instinct to fix it, to smooth it over, to make himself easier again.

It doesn’t come.

What comes instead is sharper.

Anger, yes.

And under it is something muted. Just muted. Numbed over.

The house grows quiet the way it always does after one of their arguments.

Not the quiet of peace. Not the soft, comfortable silence that settles in homes where people forgive each other easily. This quiet feels engineered. Structured. Like the house itself is designed to swallow conflict before it has a chance to echo.

The walls take it in without protest. The high ceilings hold the last sharp edges of their voices for a moment and then smooth them away, the way this house smooths away everything—noise, mess, discomfort. Everything absorbed and sucked into marble and glass and polished wood until it becomes something smaller, something manageable.

From the hallway corner, the camera blinks once.

The little lens sits there like an eye that has seen this scene before. Seen the arguments begin, seen them end, seen Shane step back, apologize, soften. The house knows the rhythm by now. It knows how these things usually resolve.

The camera blinks again, patient.

Waiting for him to fall back into place.

His phone buzzes in his hand, he forgot he was still holding it.

The screen lights up with three unread messages.

you alive?

Another.

or did the plastic face housewives finally kill you

And then

shane?

The tightness in his chest loosens slightly before he can stop it. He hasn't been able to have a full conversation like he wants to with Ilya these past few days. The last time he saw him feels like weeks ago, he's constantly leaving him on delivered or having to cut conversations short before they even begin.

He makes his way to the kitchen, sinks down onto one of the kitchen stools and types back.

barely

Three dots appear instantly.

there you are

is it that bad?

Shane huffs a quiet laugh under his breath.

he took my phone

There's a pause on the other end long enough that Shane imagines Ilya's face when he reads it—brows pulling together, mouth flattening, that specific look he gets when something annoys him but he hasn't decided whether it's funny yet.

he what?

Shane leans his elbows on the marble.

confiscated it like a teacher

A second later

you are serious?

Then another message.

you want me to fight him?

Shane actually smiles.

The image is ridiculous enough to break through the anger for a moment—sunburned pool boy marching into a marina restaurant and throwing punches over a confiscated phone.

tempting Shane replies.

just say the word

Shane stares at that for a second.

There's something comforting about the simplicity of it. The way Ilya approaches things like they're straightforward problems with straightforward solutions.

He types back.

i handled it

Then,

oh yes? you fight him instead?

Shane laughs, thinks about the hallway. About not stepping back, and the way his husband's face changed for just a second. Maybe he should've punched him.

yeah i slammed him

Another buzz.

wow proud of you

The words land softly.

my shane is so strong

Shane stares at them longer than he means to, his smile plastered big and wide across his face.

my shane.

He hides his face in his hands and blushes, then fans himself, trying to cool down.

he quickly texts back

shut up

Then he locks his phone and lets it rest on the counter.

Shane stands in the kitchen for a moment longer before drifting into the living room.

The late afternoon sun stretches long bars of light across the floor, warming the pale wood and the low cream couch that always looks untouched, like nobody actually lives here. The pool glitters faintly through the glass doors outside, the water still as glass.

Shane drops onto the couch with a quiet exhale and reaches for his laptop from the coffee table. He flips it open more out of restlessness than purpose, the screen glowing softly in the dim room.

For a while he just scrolls.

News articles he doesn't read. A shopping site he clicks through absentmindedly. An email notification he opens and immediately closes again.

His husband's voice carries faintly through the house from somewhere down the hallway—already back on a call, already back to sounding confident and composed, like the argument was nothing more than a brief inconvenience.

Shane leans back into the couch cushions and keeps scrolling.

Anything to let the anger drain off a little.

He opens his email next, skimming through the usual clutter—charity newsletters, sales notifications, a reminder from the estate manager about who knows what.

Near the bottom of the inbox, something catches his eye.

An old email thread from their lawyer.

The subject line is something boring and official.

Estate and Asset Documentation

Shane clicks it mostly out of idle curiosity.

A few attachments open into a shared drive— it's documents from when they first got married, the legal paperwork that had felt important at the time and then immediately faded into the background of life.

He scrolls slowly.

The language is dense and dull, paragraphs of legal phrasing he barely understands.

Halfway down the page there's a section listing shared assets.

Accounts. Investments. Property.

The house appears there in the middle of the list.

Just another line.

Address.

Estimated value.

Ownership structure.

Shane pauses for a moment, reading it without really thinking about why. The house is worth ten million dollars.

The number looks strange written out like that.

Too big. Too abstract to feel like anything real.

Outside, the pool water ripples faintly as a breeze moves across it.

Somewhere deeper in the house, his husband laughs at something someone says over speakerphone.

Shane scrolls past the page.

Closes the document.

For a moment he just sits there with the computer open on his knees, staring at the screen without actually looking at it.

Shane shuts the laptop and sets it back on the coffee table.

The living room falls quiet again, the house settling comfortably back into itself, and Shane's mind starts running.

A house is still just a thing, and things can always belong to someone else.

Divorce crosses his mind, drifts through his brain slowly, almost experimentally.

He hasn't really let himself think about it before—not seriously. It had always existed as something abstract, something other people did when things got ugly enough to justify it. When there were screaming fights or broken trust or obvious lines crossed.

He still doesn't know if that's what this looks like.

His husband has never done anything dramatic enough to point to and say that's the moment everything broke. Shane needs reason, good reason, to be throwing this all away. Undeniable reason.

They have a life that functions perfectly well on the outside. A house that looks exactly the way it's supposed to, and.. and well Shane can't think of anything else other than that.

Shane lets out a slow breath.

Something inside him feels done.

It's not loud and angry and red yet, but he's feeling it get there. Maybe he should stop while he's ahead.

He thinks about Ilya then, almost against his will.

About the way his name sounds in Ilya's mouth. The way his body had reacted yesterday like it remembered something it had been waiting years to feel.

The sweetness.

The ease.

The way Ilya looks at him like he's actually there.

Shane rubs his thumb against the edge of the couch cushion.

He doesn't know if Ilya is the future.

That part still feels too big to say out loud, even in his own head.

Maybe this thing with Ilya burns out in a few months. Maybe it's just heat and novelty and the thrill of finally breaking the rules he's been living under for years.

Maybe it's not.

But even if it isn't, even if Ilya disappears tomorrow. Shane knows one thing now without a doubt.

He can't stay here.

Not like this.

Not inside a life where every movement feels rehearsed, every conversation feels managed, and every room in his house seems to be quietly watching him behave.

The thought of leaving it all makes his stomach twist, because what's on the other side of that?

He pictures it for a moment and the image refuses to stay still.

Apartments.

Moving boxes.

Explaining things to people.

Lawyers.

His husband's face when the conversation finally happens.

It's terrifying.

But it's also the first future he's imagined in years that doesn't feel like it's already been decided for him.

Chapter 11: Apartment 204

Chapter Notes

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

Shane wakes to the sound of a zipper sliding shut.

At first it doesn't register. The room is still dim, washed in the soft gray of early morning. The sheets are warm around him, the pillow cool against his cheek. For a few seconds he lies there blinking aimlessly.

Then the zipper slides again.

He looks towards the noise.

His husband is standing at the end of the bed.

His suitcase is open on the bench beneath the window, shirts folded into neat rectangles, a leather toiletry bag already tucked neatly into one corner. His husband moves through the room with calm efficiency, picking up his watch from the nightstand, looping the band around his wrist, smoothing the cuff of his sleeve.

Shane pushes himself up slowly on one elbow.

"What are you doing?"

His voice is rough with sleep.

His husband glances over briefly, like the question surprises him.

"Packing."

Shane squints toward the window, trying to make sense of the light. It's earlier than he expected to be awake.

"For what?"

"Tokyo."

The word lands between them.

Shane's brain takes a second to catch up.

"Today?"

His husband finishes folding a shirt and lays it carefully in the suitcase before answering.

"Yes."

Shane sits up a little more, the sheet slipping down around his waist.

“You’re leaving now?”

“Yes.”

There’s a small pause after that. The room feels strangely neutral, awkward almost.

The argument from yesterday flickers through Shane’s mind — the driveway, the tension that had thickened the evening air, the way his husband’s voice had gone flat and controlled when Shane refused to drop the subject, and the silence that followed.

Now his husband moves around the bedroom like nothing happened at all.

Shane watches him close the suitcase.

“You were just going to leave while I was sleeping?” he asks.

His husband pauses with his hand on the handle.

“I might have woken you before I left.”

The answer is calm. Practical. Reasonable.

Shane stares at him for a moment.

“Okay...”

His husband straightens, adjusting the cuffs of his shirt.

“I moved some meetings around,” he says. “It makes more sense to go now instead of later in the week.”

The explanation floats in the air between them.

Shane nods once, slow.

“Right.”

His husband checks his watch.

The quiet stretches for a moment longer before he picks up the suitcase and wheels it toward the door.

“I’ll let you know when i’ll be back,” he says.

Shane follows him down the hallway without really deciding to.

The house feels cool and silent around them. Morning light spills through the windows in the foyer, the marble floor pale and reflective underfoot. Outside, the driver is already waiting in the circular driveway, the black car idling softly.

His husband pauses by the door.

“You’ll be fine here,” he says, almost absently.

“You always are.”

He leans down, pressing a quick kiss to Shane’s temple, then he opens the door.

The morning air slips into the house. A few birds chirp.

A moment later the door closes again.

Shane’s stood a bit stunned, he didn’t even walk his husband to the car or do the ‘i’ll miss you’ and ‘i’ll miss you more’ thing. His husband just closed the door in his face.

Shane stands there listening as the car pulls away down the drive, the quiet hum of the engine fading into the distance.

And then there’s nothing.

The silence that settles over the house feels enormous.

Shane doesn’t move right away. He stands there, half asleep, rubbing his eyes.

What?

He just left, literally just—

He left.

Wait he *left*. He’s *gone*.

Something in Shane perks up. He jumps to life, eyes focused and the last bit of sleep completely shaken off. He starts to reach into his pocket for his phone, but he stops before he can jump ahead.

Because somewhere in the back of his mind is the tiny, cautious voice reminding him that his husband sometimes comes back. Forgotten documents. A call that needs privacy. A sudden change of plans.

So he calms down and waits.

Five minutes pass.

He walks into the kitchen and pours himself a glass of water he doesn’t drink.

Ten minutes.

He glances toward the driveway through the tall windows.

Still empty.

Fifteen minutes.

His pulse starts to climb.

Twenty.

He finds himself pacing slowly across the kitchen floor, hands in his pockets.

Thirty minutes.

The realization spreads through him slowly at first, then all at once.

He's gone.

Really gone.

The feeling hits Shane in the chest like a sudden rush of air after being underwater too long.

His lungs fill deeper.

His shoulders loosen.

The whole house feels different somehow, lighter, quieter, like something heavy just lifted off the roof.

"Oh my god," he mutters to himself, half laughing under his breath.

He pulls his phone from his pocket.

For a second he just stares at the screen.

Then he types.

he's gone

Three seconds later his phone buzzes.

really?

Shane grins.

to tokyo

The reply appears almost immediately.

should i come over?

Shane looks up instinctively.

The small black camera in the corner of the kitchen blinks its red light back at him.

He types back quickly.

no. cameras

A pause.

Then he adds,

give me your address

The response comes instantly.

Ten minutes later Shane is halfway across town.

Traffic moves around him in the steady rhythm of a normal morning, people heading to work, stopping at lights, sipping coffee behind the wheel.

His pulse hasn't slowed since he left the house.

Every few minutes he catches himself smiling for no reason.

He feels ridiculous, and exhilarated. Like he just got away with murder.

The thought loops through his head the entire drive.

He's gone.

The words feel unreal.

He drums his fingers on the steering wheel as he makes his way down the road, he feels like he's just been set free from a cage.

Twenty minutes later he pulls into an apartment complex with a parking lot full of cars.

Shane can't find a parking spot so he parks in the handicap spot.

His heart is pounding again by the time he climbs out of the car.

He makes his way down the sidewalk quickly, and takes the stairs two at a time, tripping halfway up because he's moving too fast.

"Shit," he mutters, grabbing the railing to steady himself.

Second floor.

Apartment 204.

He stops outside the door, breathing a little harder than he should be.

Then he knocks.

There's a pause.

Then the door opens.

Ilya stands there in a black t-shirt and sweatpants, hair slightly damp like he just got out of the shower.

For a second neither of them moves.

Then Shane lunges forward and throws his arms around him, the force of it pushes them both back into the apartment.

Ilya swings the door shut behind them and Shane is already kissing him, face smushed against his own.

Ilya laughs softly against his mouth, surprised, pulling back a bit.

"Okay," he murmurs. "Good morning to you too."

Shane pulls back just long enough to look at him.

"I couldn't wait."

"I see."

Shane kisses him again, arms wrapped around his neck, pulling him closer.

Ilya's hands slide automatically around Shane's waist, steady and warm. Then he pulls back again.

"You drive all the way here just to tackle me?"

"Yes." Shane says breathlessly.

Ilya shakes his head slightly, amused, before leaning in to kiss him again.

This time slower.

Shane melts into it without even realizing he's doing it.

Something in his chest finally loosens, the tight knot that had been sitting there all week, coiled under every conversation and every quiet moment in the house.

Being here feels like breathing again, and when Ilya's arms tighten around him, Shane presses closer without hesitation, letting himself sink into the warmth of it.

For the first time all morning, his heart finally begins to slow.

Shane doesn't realize he's still smiling until Ilya's mouth curves against his.

The kiss is soft, relieved, breathless. Shane's hands slide up into Ilya's hair, tugging slightly, pulling him closer like he's trying to close the last inch of space between them.

Ilya hums quietly at the back of his throat and pulls Shane in by the waist.

Shane feels warm all over. The adrenaline from the drive over hasn't worn off yet, if anything, it's buzzing through him even harder now that he's here, that this is real, that Ilya is standing in front of him and kissing him like he's been thinking about it all week too.

His hands start roaming without permission.

Across Ilya's shoulders. Down his back. Gripping the fabric of his t-shirt.

"Missed you," Shane murmurs into the kiss, the words half lost against Ilya's mouth.

"I missed you too—"

But Shane talks right over him, almost urgently, trying to climb onto him.

"Missed you so much."

Ilya laughs softly against his lips at that, the sound warm and a little breathless, his hands slide along Shane's sides, pressing against him as he slips his tongue into his mouth.

Shane's jacket suddenly feels like too much.

Without really breaking the kiss, he shrugs it off his shoulders, tugging one arm free and then the other. It slides down his arms and drops somewhere on the floor behind them with a quiet thump neither of them pays any attention to.

Ilya's hands find his waist again.

Shane presses forward instinctively, nudging Ilya backward a step.

Then another.

Ilya lets himself be pushed, smiling slightly into the kiss like he's aware of exactly what's happening and enjoying it.

"Someone is impatient," he murmurs.

Shane just kisses him again instead of answering.

They move like that down the hallway, step by step, mouths still tangled together, hands sliding and adjusting and pulling each other closer whenever there's a chance.

Shane bumps lightly into the wall once, barely noticing.

Ilya reaches back blindly with one hand, pushing open the door at the end of the hall.

The bedroom.

Shane barely registers the room itself, just the shift of space around them, the softer light from the window, the quiet of being somewhere more private.

He barely gives Ilya time to breathe before he pushes him back onto the bed.

Ilya bounces against the mattress with a surprised laugh, but his hands are already coming up to catch Shane as he climbs over him. Shane kicks his shoes off somewhere behind him without looking, settling himself right in Ilya's lap like that's exactly where he belongs.

Their mouths find each other again immediately.

The kiss is hungry now, the week of quiet tension finally burning off all at once. Shane leans into it fully, grinding down into him a bit.

Ilya's hands are everywhere.

One slides up Shane's back, the other settles firm at his waist, fingers gripping instinctively like he's memorizing the shape of him again.

Shane feels light in a way he hasn't in days. Maybe longer than that. There's a quiet happiness blooming in his chest that he can't quite hide, even between kisses.

He pulls back just long enough to trail his mouth down the side of Ilya's neck.

Ilya exhales softly, head tilting back to give him space, his hands slipping beneath Shane's shirt to roam over his warm skin.

Shane presses slow kisses along the warm skin there, breathing him in, his hands drifting across Ilya's shoulders like he can't stop touching him.

He feels safe here. Wanted. Alive.

His mouth grazes the curve of Ilya's collarbone before he lifts his head again to look at Ilya, smiling slightly, in disbelief that Ilya is right here in front of him.

"Hi," he murmurs, a little breathless, a smile stuck to his face, a sparkle in his eyes.

Ilya laughs softly.

"Hello Shane."

Shane gives him another soft kiss, their lips breaking with a soft 'chu'. Shane leans back, just enough to tug his shirt up and over his head, tossing it somewhere toward the floor. Ilya follows a second later, pulling his own shirt off and dropping it beside the bed.

The room suddenly feels warmer.

Shane doesn't hesitate before leaning back in again, his mouth sliding against Ilya's, his hands sliding over Ilya's pecs as he presses himself closer into his chest and Ilya closer into the mattress.

He dips down again, kissing along his chest and settling on his neck where he licks and sucks softly.

Behind him, Ilya's hands slide lower, settling over Shane's hips before drifting further down.

One hand squeezes his ass.

The other lands a light slap there.

The sound is soft but sharp enough to surprise him.

Shane lets out a startled little moan before he can stop himself, then immediately breaks into a breathless giggle.

Ilya is smiling to himself now, clearly pleased.

"You like that?" Ilya asks, letting both of his hands run over his ass, squeezing, kneading.

Shane nods his head, still grinning, still sucking softly on Ilya's neck, and Ilya lands another smack on Shane's ass.

"So soft," Ilya says absentmindedly, leaning up to kiss Shane's shoulder, and Shane doesn't stay at his neck for long after that.

He kisses his way downward slowly, letting his mouth linger along the warmth of Ilya's chest, then his stomach. Each brush of his lips makes Ilya's breathing shift just a little, deeper, slower, his hands grabbing wherever he can.

He glances up once through his lashes as he moves lower, clearly enjoying the way Ilya's composure is starting to slip.

"Shane..." Ilya exhales quietly.

There's a different edge in his voice now — a low warning, or maybe encouragement. His hand slides into Shane's hair without thinking, fingers curling there in a loose grip. Shane likes it.

He presses another slow kiss to the warm skin of Ilya's stomach before his hands find the waistband of the sweatpants.

Ilya's expression has changed completely now. His jaw is tight, his eyes darker, watching Shane with a focus that sends a warm thrill straight through Shane's chest.

"Missed you," Shane murmurs again, softer this time, pressing a wet kiss right above his waistband, making Ilya tense a bit.

Then he tugs the sweatpants down.

The sight of Ilya already hard makes Shane's breath catch in quiet satisfaction.

Shane grabs Ilya's leaking cock loosely at the base, slapping it on his tongue a few times, the soft wet spank against his tongue making his own dick twitch.

Ilya exhales sharply as Shane presses his lips to the head in an open mouth kiss, before wrapping his lips around him completely, his fingers tightening slightly in Shane's hair.

Ilya tips his head back against the pillows with a low groan that escapes before he can stop it.

"Fuck," he mutters.

Shane smiles faintly, clearly enjoying himself. He loves giving Ilya head, he loved it the first time, the control of it, the way Ilya reacts to every small movement, every shift.

He takes his time.

Too much time, probably, because after a moment Ilya lets out a quiet impatient laugh.

"You're fucking with me on purpose."

Shane pulls back just enough to look up again, mouth curved in a playful grin.

"Maybe."

Ilya shakes his head slightly, but his hand slides more firmly into Shane's hair now, guiding him just a little closer again.

Shane stops teasing, he himself can't wait much longer, he needs Ilya badly. He takes him into his mouth again, bobbing his head at a quicker pace, stroking what he can't reach with his mouth.

"There you go," Ilya grits out, "That's it."

Shane hums in response, his free hand sliding up Ilya's stomach and chest while he moves, touching him everywhere he can reach.

The sound pulls another low groan out of Ilya's throat.

"Oh—" he breathes. "Fuck yes."

His hand tightens in Shane's hair, guiding him slightly, his composure already starting to crack.

Shane challenges himself to take it deeper, enjoying the way Ilya's voice keeps breaking, and the way his dick chokes him.

"Fuck," Ilya groans, dragging a hand down his face. "You're so fucking good at this."

Shane can't even hear Ilya over his own mind going wild. He's thinking about the thick solid length in his mouth, how good Ilya is gonna feel inside him, how he wants to stay here forever.

he tastes so good.

want him to cum down my throat, cum inside of me.

wanna be full of his cum.

Ilya's grip in Shane's hair tightens. It stings a bit but he loves it.

yes, pull my hair

let me make you feel good.

He's salivated and relaxed his throat so much that he's worked his way down to deep throating Ilya, and he's only pulled back into himself upon feeling the tremble of Ilya's thighs next to his head, and Ilya tugging harder to pull him off.

"Fuck Shane stop, stop," Ilya begs.

He finally pulls back, looking up as Ilya blinks down at him, breathing hard, completely thrown by the sudden pause.

"Jesus—"

But Shane is already moving again, leaning up between his legs, their mouths crash together again immediately.

The kiss is breathless now, desperate, Ilya thinks Shane might actually eat him. Shane drags his mouth against Ilya's, catching his tongue in his mouth and sucking softly, moaning around it.

He reaches down to stroke Ilya slowly again, feeling his hand slip against the wet skin, Ilya's hand immediately flying down to stop him.

"Wanna touch you," Shane whines into the kiss.

"Don't wanna cum yet," Ilya explains, pulling back from the kiss and looking at Shane with dazed eyes. Shane is really taking Ilya for a loop right now.

Shane's eyes are focused, predatory almost.

"You wanna cum inside me?" Shane asks, voice low, a smug smile creeping onto his face.

Ilya nods, and Shane kisses him again, before leaning back and tugging his own pants and boxers down his legs, kicking them off the side of the bed without even looking.

Ilya watches him for a second, clearly a little overwhelmed.

"You are acting like you've never been touched before," he mutters with a laugh.

Shane climbs back in Ilya's lap and kisses him again.

“I just need you,” he murmurs.

The words hit Ilya like a spark.

His hands slide up Shane’s thighs, gripping firmly as he exhales slowly.

“God,” he mutters. “You will kill me.”

Shane smiles against his mouth.

“Do you have lube?”

Ilya reaches toward the nightstand.

“Yes,” he says, voice low again.

Shane grabs the bottle from Ilya, popping it open and pouring some over Ilya’s dick, then letting it pour over Ilya’s abs and rubbing it in, entranced by the slickness and the shine.

Ilya takes the lube from his overly eager hands and watches him, eyes dark now, breathing already uneven. There’s something almost amused in his expression too, like he’s enjoying the way Shane has completely taken over the moment.

“You are really in charge today, hm?” Ilya murmurs.

Shane doesn’t answer.

He just shifts closer, settling himself over Ilya again, one hand braced on his chest while the other moves between them, grabbing Ilya’s cock and lining it up with himself.

Shane adjusts himself, then lowers down.

Both of them let out a sound at the same time.

A sharp inhale from Shane.

A deep groan from Ilya.

Shane freezes for a second, eyes squeezing shut as he takes him in inch by inch, and settles fully against him.

“Fuck,” he breathes.

Ilya’s hands come up immediately, gripping Shane’s hips.

“So tight,” he murmurs, voice rough.

Shane laughs weakly, breath still shaky.

“You’re so big, Ilya.”

The smug look that spreads across Ilya's face is immediate.

"Mhm," he says, almost lazily.

His thumbs drag along Shane's hips.

"Not used to this, hm?"

Shane shakes his head slightly, his eyes closed trying to catch his breath.

"No."

Ilya tilts his head, watching him carefully now.

"Yeah," he murmurs. "Nobody fucking you like I do,"

His hands slide lower along Shane's waist.

"Nobody stretching you out like this?"

The question makes Shane feel like his skin is tingling.

"No," he whines quietly.

Ilya's smile widens slightly.

"That's what I thought."

Shane starts moving before he can overthink it.

Slow at first, a small shift of his hips.

Both of them inhale sharply.

"Fuck," Ilya groans.

Shane keeps rocking, a little quicker this time, his hands braced against Ilya's chest for balance.

Ilya's head tips back against the pillows.

"Faster, Shane."

Shane's breathing is already getting heavier.

He moves again, the rhythm building naturally now, the tension between them turning into something warmer, rougher.

"God—" Ilya exhales.

His hands slide down Shane's back until they settle firmly over his hips again, guiding him just slightly, pulling his hips against him as he fucks up into Shane.

"Yeah... like that."

Shane leans forward, palms flat against Ilya's chest now as he moves, little panting moans escaping him.

Their bodies press closer with every shift.

Heat building, breath growing louder, their stomachs brushing against each other with every roll of their hips, the slickness transferring from Ilya to Shane.

Ilya's hands drift lower again, gripping Shane's ass firmly.

A sharp smack lands there, and Ilya can feel the recoil against his hand.

Shane gasps, half laugh, half moan.

"Hmph fuck—"

Ilya grins up at him.

"You're so fucking slutty," he hums.

Shane just keeps rolling his hips against Ilya, fucking himself down on his cock harder.

"Ilya," he groans. "You feel so good."

Shane's head tips back slightly, his mouth parted, words spewing out of him.

"Yes," he whispers. "Oh my god—"

Sweat is already starting to gather along Shane's neck.

"So good—"

His hands tighten against Ilya's chest, the pleasure taking over. The warmth, the pressure, the way Ilya fills him so perfectly makes his head spin and his stomach twist.

"Oh my god, yes."

Ilya laughs softly, breathless.

He's cute.

"Yeah?"

Shane nods quickly, barely able to get the word out.

"Yes."

Shane's hands slide back until he's gripping the headboard behind Ilya, leaning forward over him now. His body moves almost on instinct, chasing the feeling that keeps sparking through him every time their hips meet.

The sound of their moaning fills the room.

Sheets shifting. Skin brushing against skin.

Shane's brows furrow as another wave of heat rolls through him.

"Unh, Ilya—"

Shane laughs breathlessly but it breaks into a moan before he can finish it.

The movement between them grows rougher, more desperate. Shane's pace stutters for a moment.

He exhales sharply, leaning forward again.

"I—" he pants. "Hold on—"

Ilya notices immediately.

"Cant take it can you," He teases.

"You want to switch?" he asks quietly, voice still low and steady despite the heat in his eyes.

Shane nods quickly.

"Yeah."

They stop just long enough to shift.

The movement is quick and clumsy, both of them laughing breathlessly as they rearrange themselves across the bed.

Ilya guides him down gently face first into the pillow, one hand warm at the small of Shane's back.

"Here," he murmurs. "Come here."

Shane settles forward against the mattress, still catching his breath, his pulse racing in his ears.

"Please," Shane whimpers.

Ilya sinks himself back into Shane, watching his cock disappear into him, feeling him clench desperately around him.

"Shit," Shane whispers, gripping the sheets beneath his hands.

Behind him, Ilya exhales slowly.

Shane's breath stutters as Ilya starts thrusting into him, deep and long strokes, pulling all the way back out and pushing all the way back in.

"Please Ilya— faster—" He whines out, pushing his ass back against Ilya.

Ilya's hands tighten on Shane's waist and he fucks into him a little quicker, his thumbs press deep into the small dimples at the base of Shane's back, before one hand presses up more, pushing him down and arching his spine just a little more. The movement pulls a broken sound out of Shane almost immediately.

"*Fuck*— yes like that," He babbles, his voice half buried in the pillows beneath him.

His fingers clutch at the sheets before one hand reaches back, searching blindly until it lands over Ilya's hand resting at his waist. He squeezes there without thinking, grounding himself in the contact.

Ilya groans, his hips snapping harder, the headboard starting to knock against the wall. His neighbors can definitely hear that.

God he's driving me insane. Ilya thinks.

"So needy for me," he murmurs, breath warm and uneven. "Just for me."

"Just for you," Shane gasps out.

His grip tightens slightly, holding Shane steady as the pace deepens.

Shane's head drops forward into the pillows again, squirming slightly against Ilya.

"Holy shit," he pants. "You're so deep—"

Ilya smiles softly behind him, the sound rough around the edges.

"Yeah, baby?" he murmurs.

He drops over Shane's body, his hand tangling in his hair and tugging hard, pulling his head off the mattress. Shane's hands come down to hold himself up.

"Just like you wanted me," He grits out into Shane's ear.

Shane nods quickly, his voice loud and whiny and raw. Shane didn't know he'd like having his hair pulled this much.

"*Yes*—" he breathes. "Yes, just like this."

It's overwhelming in the best way.

His body responds instinctively now, pushing back into the warmth behind him without thinking, chasing the feeling that keeps sparking through him with every movement.

“Oh my *god*,” he groans.

This dick is so fucking good.

“You missed this that much?” he murmurs.

Shane lets out a helpless sound.

“Yes—”

The word is barely coherent.

“Fuck yes.”

The sound of skin slapping and lube squelching runs them both wild.

“I know, baby,”

He keeps his grip tight on Shane’s hair.

“Been thinking about this all week, haven’t you?”

Shane tries to nod.

“Yes—“ He whines. “Been thinking about you,” He pants, barely able to get a full sentence out. “About your cock.”

Ilya’s voice softens, but the teasing edge is still there.

“You missed getting fucked like this?”

Shane’s response is immediate, desperate.

“Yes.”

The word comes out half-whine, half-groan.

“Missed you so much.”

Ilya kisses his neck, clearly enjoying the reaction.

“You’re making a mess of yourself,” he mutters against his skin.

Shane’s fingers tighten against the sheets.

“I— I’m gonna—”

He can barely get the words out.

“Ilya, I’m gonna cum—”

Ilya's hand slides up Shane's back again, steadying him.

"Cum for me," he murmurs.

His voice is warm now, coaxing.

"Come on, Shane."

Shane's breathing stutters again.

"Ilya—"

The name tears out of him as he cums, his fingers clutch the sheets, his body locking hard for a moment before he shudders hard against Ilya, the sensation washing through him all at once.

"Oh my god—"

Behind him, Ilya groans low in his throat, his grip tightening instinctively around Shane's waist as he feels him come apart, clenching and unclenching around him as he slows down his thrusts.

"Yeah," he murmurs, voice thick now. "That's it... there you go."

Shane's head drops forward into the pillows as Ilya lets go of his hair, breath heavily as the orgasm rolls through him.

But he doesn't pull away, instead he presses back harder, desperate for more, his voice still shaky.

"Ilya—"

Ilya exhales sharply behind him, not expecting him to keep pushing for it.

"Shane—"

Shane's hand reaches back again, fingers finding Ilya's wrist and gripping tight.

"Don't stop," he pants.

The words tumble out of him without hesitation.

"Want you to cum—"

Ilya groans again, the sound deeper now, rough around the edges.

"Sweetheart..."

Shane turns his head slightly, his voice still breathless.

"Cum in me," he begs quietly.

The words make Ilya's stomach coil.

Ilya drops his forehead briefly against Shane's shoulder.

"Yeah?" he mutters.

Shane nods immediately, still trembling from the aftershocks.

"Yes—"

Ilya lets out a broken laugh, half disbelief, half desire.

His hands tighten on Shane's hips again, thrusting shallowly into him.

Shane squeezes his hand again, his voice soft but urgent.

"Please."

Ilya groans low, the sound slipping out before he can stop it as he thrusts a few more times into Shane, the last of his control giving out.

"Shane—"

The name comes out like a confession.

His grip tightens, his breath hitching as he spills himself into Shane.

Ilya collapses briefly against Shane's back.

The room is filled only with their breathing — heavy, uneven, both of them still catching up with the rush of sensation.

Shane laughs softly into the pillows, exhausted and giddy all at once.

Ilya's hand slides up Shane's spine again, slower now, gentle.

"Will you always be like this when you miss me?" he murmurs with a quiet laugh.

Shane exhales into the pillow, the corner of his mouth lifting even though he's clearly exhausted.

"Maybe."

Ilya hums, amused.

"Good to know."

Shane turns his head slightly, glancing back at him over his shoulder.

"Shut up."

Ilya's grin spreads slowly.

"Never."

Ilya shifts slightly behind him.

He pulls out carefully, his hands steady on Shane's hips as he moves. Shane lets out a small, tired sound but doesn't protest, his body still heavy against the mattress.

Ilya watches his cum leak out of Shane, tearing his sight away from it before he gets hard again.

Fuck.

Shane is still bent into the bed, hair a mess, ass sky high, breathing slow and deep.

A faint smile tugs at Ilya's mouth.

He gives Shane's ass a light smack.

"Stay there," he murmurs.

Shane groans softly in response, his voice muffled against the pillow.

"M'not moving."

Ilya chuckles and slips off the bed, disappearing briefly into the bathroom.

When he comes back, he's holding a warm damp rag.

Shane barely lifts his head when the mattress dips again.

"Hey," Ilya says quietly.

He brushes a hand over Shane's back first, slow and gentle, checking in before anything else.

"You okay?"

Shane makes a soft sound, somewhere between a hum and a sigh.

"Yeah, just fuzzy."

His voice is quiet and a little dazed.

Ilya smiles to himself.

"Okay."

He cleans him up carefully, unhurried, the movements gentle and attentive. Every so often he presses a kiss against Shane's shoulder or the back of his neck, little affectionate gestures that feel more instinctive than deliberate.

“You still okay?” he murmurs after a moment.

Shane nods slightly against the pillow.

“Mhm.”

His brain still feels pleasantly fuzzy, like everything inside him is humming softly.

Ilya brushes the rag aside once he’s finished and runs a hand slowly down Shane’s spine.

“You did really good,” he says quietly.

Shane lets out a breathy laugh.

“I did?”

“You did.”

Ilya leans down and presses another slow kiss to his skin, and he slowly drops to the mattress, stretching out and trying to fight the sleep he wants so badly.

Shane turns his head just enough to glance back at him, eyes a little heavy but warm.

“Missed you,” he murmurs again.

Ilya huffs a quiet laugh.

“I noticed.”

Shane reaches lazily until his fingers find Ilya’s wrist, holding there like he just wants to feel him.

“Seriously,” he adds softly. “I missed you.”

Ilya’s expression softens a little.

“I missed you too,” he murmurs.

Shane just hums in response, still half buzzing from everything, his mind drifting somewhere warm and quiet while Ilya’s hand continues moving slowly along his skin.

They go through the motions, getting redressed and changing sheets and flirting, and Shane gets to fall asleep in his favorite place, Ilya's arms.

When he wakes again, the room is warm with early afternoon light.

He blinks slowly, taking a second to remember where he is. The sheets are soft, unfamiliar. Then he feels the arm around him.

Ilya is awake.

Shane realizes it when fingers slide lazily through his hair.

He tilts his head up a little.

“Hi,” he murmurs, voice still sleepy.

“Hi,” Ilya answers.

His voice is quiet, rough from sleep.

Shane shifts closer automatically, one leg sliding between Ilya’s. Ilya’s arm tightens around him without thinking, pulling him in. Shane presses a slow kiss to his mouth.

It’s soft. Lazy.

Ilya hums into it.

“Good afternoon,” he mutters when they separate.

Shane squints toward the window.

“What time is it?”

“Almost two.”

Shane groans softly and buries his face against Ilya’s shoulder.

“Oh my god.”

Ilya laughs under his breath.

“You still tired?”

“Mhm.”

Shane kisses his shoulder lazily.

“You wore me out.”

“Wow,” Ilya says dryly. “Very dramatic.”

Shane lifts his head just enough to glare at him.

“You did.”

Ilya shrugs a little, smug.

“I think you like to be wore out.”

Shane rolls his eyes, but he’s smiling. He settles back against him again, fingers tracing idle patterns across Ilya’s chest.

For a while they just lie there like that in a quiet, warm, peaceful silence.

Ilya's fingers slow in Shane's hair.

"Can I tell you something?" he asks.

The tone is different now.

Shane tilts his head back to look at him.

"Yeah."

Ilya sighs.

"This week sucked," he says.

Shane frowns slightly.

Ilya's hand keeps moving through his hair, but his gaze drifts past Shane, floating around the room.

"I didn't realize how much it would mess with my head," he says. "Not hearing from you."

Shane shifts a little closer.

"I tried to text when I could."

"I know," Ilya says quickly. "I'm not saying that you didn't."

He pauses.

"But there were long gaps."

Shane nods quietly.

"I know."

Ilya's thumb brushes absently along Shane's temple.

"Every time you didn't answer," he says, "my brain went somewhere stupid."

Shane looks at him.

"Like what?"

Ilya shrugs.

"Like maybe something happened," He sighed. "Or maybe you changed your mind."

He gives a small, humorless laugh.

“Or maybe I’m just sitting like an idiot while you live your actual life.”

Shane winces a little.

“That’s not—”

“I know,” Ilya says.

His voice stays calm, but serious now.

“It’s just my brain.”

Shane is quiet.

Ilya looks back down at him.

“And the phone call.”

Shane’s stomach tightens slightly.

“You hanging up so fast.”

He exhales.

“I get why you did it. It just...”

He searches for the words for a second.

Then shakes his head slightly.

“I don’t know. English is leaving me right now.”

Shane gives a small, sympathetic smile.

Ilya huffs a quiet laugh.

“It didn’t feel good.”

The room goes quiet again.

Shane nods slowly.

“Yeah,” he says softly. “I get that.”

Ilya watches him for a moment.

“I am not trying to rush you,” he says. “Or tell you what to do.”

Shane nods again.

“I know your situation is complicated.”

Shane lets out a quiet breath.

“Complicated is one word.”

Ilya’s mouth twitches slightly.

“But I can’t keep doing it forever,” he says gently. “Like... this.”

Shane looks up at him.

Ilya holds his gaze.

“I don’t want to feel like someone you hide,” he says. “Or like I’m just waiting around.”

Shane’s chest tightens.

“I like you,” Ilya continues. “A lot.”

He squeezes lightly at the back of Shane’s neck.

“And I don’t want to feel like I’m in the background.”

The words sit between them.

Shane nods slowly.

“I understand.”

And he means it.

But inside, something else is happening entirely.

Because the second the words leave Ilya’s mouth, Shane’s mind starts racing.

He can feel it immediately.

The clock just started ticking.

The pressure.

Everything that felt warm and safe an hour ago suddenly feels fragile.

Because Ilya’s right, and Shane knows it.

He can’t keep this going the way it is, sneaking across town and texting under tables and pretending the rest of his life doesn’t exist.

Something has to change, and soon.

The realization hits him hard enough that his stomach flips.

He presses closer to Ilya anyway, resting his forehead against his chest like he's trying to buy himself a few more minutes of peace.

But inside his head, the panic has already started.

I need to figure this out.

Before it explodes.

"But for now..." Ilya says, pulling Shane from his thoughts completely.

"...I want to take you on a date."

Shane blinks.

"A *what?*"

Chapter End Notes

hi guys how are yall feelinnng  

Chapter 12: The Ordinary, The Extraordinary

Chapter Notes

fluff and feelings incoming... dialogue heavy

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

“Me?”

Shane’s voice lifts slightly with the word, equal parts surprised and amused. He’s half tangled in the sheets, hair a little messy, eyes soft with sleep and the lazy warmth of the afternoon. He props himself up on one elbow and looks down at Ilya like he’s not entirely sure he heard him right.

Ilya lays on his back fiddling with the sheets, he doesn’t miss the expression.

“Oh— no,” he says, glancing toward the corner of the room. “Sorry. I meant the lamp.”

Shane stares at him for a second before letting out a quiet laugh and nudging his shoulder.

“Shut up.”

Ilya’s mouth curves, pleased with himself.

Shane settles back down beside him, still smiling a little.

“Really?”

“Yes, really.”

The humor in Ilya’s voice softens just a bit. He shifts onto his side so they’re facing each other properly, one arm draped lazily across Shane’s waist.

“I was going to ask more romantically,” he admits. “But I don’t know... it just came out.”

Shane watches him for a moment, the corners of his mouth tugging upward again. Something about the awkward honesty of it is unexpectedly sweet.

He leans in and kisses him.

Just a quick, easy press of lips.

When he pulls back, Ilya is already starting to talk again.

“It will not be fancy,” he says, almost apologetically. “I know you are used to—”

“Ilya.”

Ilya pauses.

“What?”

Shane huffs out a soft breath, brushing his fingers through his hair.

“All the money stuff,” he says. “Stop. I’m not judging you.”

Ilya waits.

“I haven’t always lived like this,” Shane adds quietly, gesturing vaguely toward the window, the city beyond it, the kind of life he’d been dropped into years ago. “And it’s not even my money anyway. It’s my husband’s.”

Ilya hums thoughtfully.

“Okay,”

There’s no judgment in his voice. Just curiosity.

“So what did you do before your husband?”

Shane shifts slightly in the bed, the question pulling his thoughts backward for a moment.

“Well,” he says with a sigh, “I moved out when I was eighteen.”

Ilya’s eyebrows lift.

“Really?”

“Yes,” Shane says with a faint smile.

“I worked as a waiter for a few years in Calgary.”

Ilya hums thoughtfully.

“Then I moved to Vancouver,” Shane continues. “For a few more years.”

He glances up at the ceiling, thinking back.

“I lived there for a while and somehow ended up working in architectural development.”

Ilya tilts his head.

“Big words here.”

Shane nods, and something in his expression brightens a little.

“Like buildings. Making buildings. I love interior design, and I love architecture.”

The way he says it carries a quiet enthusiasm, something sincere and almost boyish.

“I always have. Buildings and designing spaces, the way cities grow... all of it.”

He laughs softly.

“I never got to go to school for it or anything, but I managed to sort of wiggle my way into an entry-level job at a firm.”

“Wiggle,” Ilya repeats with amusement.

“Yes,” Shane says. “Under the table kind of thing.”

“But I loved it,” he adds after a moment. “I really did.”

Ilya watches him closely.

“What happened?”

Shane exhales.

“I met my husband there.”

Ilya doesn’t interrupt.

“He was working with the head of the firm on budgets,” Shane says. “Consulting.”

A small shrug follows.

“And he swept me off my feet, I guess.”

The words come out lightly, but there’s something quieter underneath them.

“And now I’m here.”

Ilya nods slowly, accepting that.

After a moment he asks, almost casually,

“Why didn’t you go to university after?”

Shane glances at him.

“Your husband has money, yes? Could pay.”

Shane hesitates.

Then he answers gently.

“He didn’t really want me to.”

He didn't let me

Ilya waits.

“We talked about it,”

I begged

“But it just... didn't really make sense, I guess. He already made so much money.”

Didn't really matter

Ilya studies him for a moment, then simply nods.

“Okay.”

A beat passes.

Then Ilya squints at him slightly.

“How old are you, then?”

Shane pauses.

The question catches him off guard.

They've been wrapped up in each other for weeks now—talking, texting, sneaking moments together—and somehow neither of them had asked something as basic as that.

That seems... important.

“Thirty,” Shane says.

Then he looks back at Ilya, an eyebrow raised.

“How old are you?”

Ilya glances up at the ceiling like he's thinking.

Then he says,

“Eighteen.”

Shane freezes.

“...*what*.”

“I graduated early in April,” Ilya continues calmly. “My friends dad got me the pool job.”

Shane jerks upright on the bed, out of Ilya's arm.

“*WHAT?*”

Ilya looks at him, completely composed.

“What.”

“What do you mean what?” Shane squeaks. “You’re *eighteen*?!”

“Yes.”

Shane stares at him in horror.

“Ilya—”

“You’ve been very happy so far,” Ilya adds thoughtfully, his hands out, palms up as if to say *what’s the issue?*

Shane shudders in disbelief.

“ILYA—”

“You were saying such nice things about my cock earlier—”

Shane slaps his hand over Ilya’s entire face.

“Stop talking.”

Ilya doesn’t move Shane’s hand, his voice comes out muffled.

“Shane—“

“No,” Shane groans.

He drags his other hand down his face.

“Ilya, seriously. You *cannot* be eighteen.”

Ilya finally moves Shane’s hand.

“You seemed fine with it.”

“I didn’t know!” Shane curls into himself.

Ilya holds the serious expression for about two more seconds.

Then he breaks.

He starts laughing.

Shane furrows his brows at him.

“Ilya are you lying?” Shane asks panicky, searching his face frantically.

Ilya is cracking up.

“Ilya, have I really been fucking a teenager or no?” He grits out.

“*Ilya!*”

“I am kidding,” Ilya says, still laughing. “Relax.”

Shane drops back onto the mattress with a dramatic groan.

“Holy shit.”

“I am twenty-two.”

Shane exhales loudly, taking in another deep breath and trying to calm his heartbeat down.

“Jesus Christ.”

Then he looks at him again, blinking.

“...that’s still kind of young.”

Ilya tilts his head, a bit of worry threads through him.

“Is that a problem for you?”

Shane hesitates. What did he expect? A man in his late twenties or early thirties to be a pool boy? Of course he’d be a little younger.

“I— I mean... I guess not.”

Ilya’s smile spreads slowly, he leans up on his elbow and reaches his hand out to rub over Shane’s bare torso.

“So,” he says, amused, “handsome older gentleman.”

Shane groans.

“Oh my god.”

“Cougar, maybe.”

“I am not a cougar.” He glares at Ilya.

“Preying on innocent young pool boy.”

“Ilya.”

Shane sits up and shoves him lightly.

“Stop it.”

But Ilya just laughs and lunges forward, grabbing him around the waist, and tackling him back down into the bed.

Shane lets out a surprised laugh as they tumble into the pillows together, half wrestling, half tangled up again.

“Wow you are very strong for old man,” Ilya says.

“Fuck you.”

Shane grabs the back of his neck and pulls him down.

The teasing energy melts away quickly as their lips meet, replaced by something slower, softer. Shane feels it almost immediately—the familiar flutter starting up again low in his stomach, the same warm dizzy feeling he keeps getting around Ilya.

Ilya kisses him lazily at first, one hand resting at Shane’s waist, thumb moving absentmindedly against his side. Shane slides his arm around his shoulders, drawing him a little closer, their legs tangling in the sheets.

They let themselves have the moment, quiet kisses and warm skin and the comfort of being close again after the long week apart.

Shane hums softly against his mouth.

Ilya eventually pulls back and looks at him.

“So,” he says.

Shane blinks at him.

“So?”

“The date.”

Shane smiles immediately.

Right.

“The date,” he repeats back.

Ilya stays settled between his legs.

“Will you say yes? Will you go on a date with me, Shane?” He asks, smiling as he notices Shane’s face turning pink.

“Of course I will, Ilya.”

Ilya leans down to kiss Shane again, he can’t help himself.

“What were you thinking?” Shane asks.

Ilya thinks for a second.

“Something small,” he says. “Ice cream.”

Shane’s eyebrows lift.

“Ice cream?”

“Yes.”

Ilya shrugs.

“Then we come back here. Watch movie. Eat snacks.”

He pauses thoughtfully.

“Wine for you.”

Shane laughs softly.

“And for you?”

“Vodka,” Ilya says immediately.

“Of course.”

“And then maybe,” Ilya says with a thoughtful expression. “After the movie— or during the movie—” He continues.

“I can make you make all those pretty noises for me.”

He leans down to kiss Shane’s neck a few times, and then his ear.

“Can take my time with you.”

Heat coils low in Shane’s stomach. He exhales shakily, his eyes fluttering shut.

“Mm yeah, yeah, sounds good.” He hums out.

Ilya pulls away, and the simplicity of it all makes Shane giddy.

Ice cream.

A movie.

Snacks.

No suits, or dim restaurants, or sitting up straight in a chair while someone refills his glass every ten minutes.

Just something normal.

The thought makes his smile widen.

“That sounds perfect.”

Ilya notices the expression instantly.

“You like this idea.”

“I *love* this idea,” Shane says honestly.

He massages into Ilyas biceps and shoulders a bit, getting excited.

“Do you know how long it’s been since I’ve had a normal date?”

Ilya tilts his head.

“How long?”

Shane thinks about it for a moment.

“...I genuinely don’t know.”

Ilya smiles a little at that.

“Then it is a good plan.”

Shane nods.

“It’s a very good plan.”

Ilya studies him for a second longer, clearly pleased with the reaction.

Then he suddenly pushes himself up off the mattress.

“Okay.”

Shane looks up at him.

“Okay?”

“We start now.”

Before Shane can ask what that means, Ilya grabs his wrist and tugs him upward.

“Come on.”

Shane laughs as he’s pulled off the bed.

“Where are we going?”

“Shower.”

“Oh.”

Ilya glances back at him over his shoulder.

“You smell like sex.”

Shane gasps in mock offense.

“Ilya!”

“It’s true.”

Shane shoves him lightly as they walk down the hall, both of them laughing.

“You’re stupid.”

But he follows him into the bathroom anyway, still smiling.

At the ice cream parlor, Shane finds out something new about Ilya.

He’s a fucking garbage disposal.

They’re sitting at one of the small metal tables outside the shop, the kind bolted loosely into the sidewalk that wobbles every time someone shifts their weight. The late afternoon sun has softened into a golden, almost syrupy light, people wander past with dogs and strollers and dripping cones of their own.

Across from him, Ilya is absolutely annihilating his ice cream.

Chunky Monkey.

Huge scoops.

Halfway gone before they even got to the table.

“You’re inhaling that,” Shane says, watching him.

“I am hungry.”

“You just ate 4 cookies inside.”

“Those were snacks.”

Shane laughs under his breath and takes a slower bite of his own ice cream.

Vanilla.

He had tried to order something interesting, but he can never really seem to choose anything other than vanilla.

“Vanilla is classic,” he’d said defensively.

Across the table, Ilya eyes the cup with a smug smile.

“You see,” he says thoughtfully, “this is how I know you are old.”

Shane pauses mid-bite.

“What?”

“Old people eat the boring ice cream.”

Shane squints at him, his jaw drops in playful offense.

“It is *not* boring. It’s *good*. It’s *vanilla*.”

“Yes,” Ilya nods seriously. “I am sure your buddies in the nursing home agree.”

Shane laughs in shock, he can’t believe Ilya is making fun of him like this. He loves it.

“My buddies in the nursing home have excellent taste, thank you.” He responds with attitude.

“Do they also eat dinner at four?”

“Five,” Shane says primly. “We’re not animals.”

Ilya snorts.

“You’re no better than me scarfing your ice cream down in thirty seconds.” Shane continues.

“It was delicious thirty seconds.”

“You didn’t even chew.”

“You don’t chew ice cream.”

“You chew the chunks.”

“Oh I forgot about those,” Ilya says with a smile, looking into his nearly empty ice cream cup. “Maybe I did forget to chew.”

Shane shakes his head and takes another bite of his ice cream.

After a moment, Ilya scoops another spoonful from his own cup.

“You want to try mine?”

Shane glances at the spoon.

“What is it again?”

“The Chunky Monkey. Banana, chocolate, peanut butter.”

Shane shrugs easily.

“Sure.”

He leans forward a little.

Instead of offering the spoon, though, Ilya lifts it to his own mouth.

Shane blinks, thinking Ilya is still messing with him.

“Wh—”

Before he can finish the thought, Ilya leans across the small metal table and grabs lightly at the front of Shane’s shirt, tugging him closer.

Shane’s eyebrows lift in surprise.

Then Ilya kisses him.

The movement is quick but firm, warm lips pressing against his before Shane can properly react.

There’s the cool sweetness of ice cream still on Ilya’s tongue, the faint taste of banana and chocolate slipping between them as the kiss deepens just enough to push the flavor into Shane’s mouth.

It’s cold.

Sweet.

Unexpectedly intimate.

Shane makes a quiet surprised sound against his mouth before instinct takes over and he kisses him back without really thinking about it.

The kiss only lasts another second.

Then Ilya pulls away slowly.

Shane’s still leaning halfway across the table, his hand braced against the metal edge, blinking as his brain is trying to catch up with what just happened.

Ilya wipes his mouth where the ice cream spilled, and studies his face.

A slow smile spreads across his mouth.

“It’s good?”

Shane stares at him.

For a moment he doesn't say anything.

Then he swallows, licking a little melted ice cream from the corner of his lip.

"...mhm," he says finally.

He nods once, still a little flustered.

"Yeah."

Another small beat passes.

"Good."

Ilya leans back in his chair like nothing unusual just happened.

For a minute they just sit there eating.

Or well—Shane eats.

Ilya finished his ice cream now so he's just leaning back in his chair, watching Shane slowly work through his cup.

He taps the table lightly with his fingers.

"So."

Shane glances up.

"So?"

"My life is very exciting," Ilya announces.

Shane smiles faintly.

"Oh, is it."

"Yes."

Ilya gestures broadly with his empty spoon.

"I wake up. I clean pools. I clean more pools. Sometimes I eat lunch. Then I clean pools again."

Shane snorts.

"Wow."

"I know."

Shane laughs and takes another bite of his ice cream.

“But seriously.” Shane says.

Ilya raises an eyebrow.

“Tell me more about you.”

“You want my whole life?”

“Maybe start with the basics,” Shane says.

Ilya watches him for a second, amused.

“Okay.”

He shifts in his chair, stretching his legs under the table.

“I grew up in Russia.”

Shane nods.

“Where?”

“Moscow.”

Shane nods slowly, clearly filing that away somewhere in his brain.

“And then you moved here?”

“Six years ago.”

“That’s a big move.”

“Yes.”

“Why Canada?”

“My aunt lived here,” Ilya says. “She helped me come.”

Shane nods.

He waits.

Not pushing, but clearly listening.

After a moment he asks gently,

“Do you ever go back?”

Ilya looks down at the table for a second.

“No.”

“Why not?”

Another small pause.

Then Ilya shrugs.

“My father knows I like men.”

The sentence comes out simply.

Like he’s said it before.

Shane’s expression softens a little.

“And that’s... not great there?” Shane asks.

“No,” Ilya says quietly.

Shane nods slowly.

“That makes sense.”

Ilya taps his spoon against the table again, thinking.

“I miss it sometimes,” he adds.

Shane looks at him.

“What do you miss?”

Ilya stares out toward the street for a second.

“My mom is buried there.”

Shane stills.

“Oh.”

“She died when I was twelve.”

The words are calm, but there’s something heavy behind them.

“I visited her grave a lot then,” Ilya says. “Bring flowers. Clean the stone.”

He shrugs lightly.

“Normal things.”

Shane nods.

“Sometimes I want to see her again. Make sure it is clean. Put new flowers there.”

He pauses, then quietly.

“I don’t know if anyone is putting flowers there.”

Shane watches him quietly for a moment, an ache in his chest.

Then he nods.

Shane finishes the last bite of his ice cream and wipes his hands on the napkin.

Then he leans forward again.

“Any more questions?” Ilya asks with a small smile.

Shane laughs softly.

“What do you actually want to do?”

Ilya squints.

“With my life?”

“Yes.”

Ilya leans back again, thinking about it for a moment.

“I don’t want to clean pools forever.”

“That seems reasonable.”

“But i’m not sure past that,” Ilya says.

Shane smiles and nods again, Ilya finds amusement in watching Shane try and figure him all out.

“You look very interested in my life.” He says.

Shane shrugs.

“Yeah.”

“Why? It is so sad.”

Shane smiles a little.

“Because I like you.”

The words come out easily, like fact.

Then Ilya smiles too.

For a moment the noise of the street fades into the background while the two of them sit there in the warm afternoon light — Shane leaning forward slightly, completely absorbed in the conversation, learning these small pieces of Ilya.

Then Ilya suddenly stands.

“Wait here.”

Shane blinks.

“Why?”

“Just wait.”

And before Shane can ask anything else, Ilya disappears back toward the street.

Shane watches him go, confused.

Five minutes pass.

Then ten.

Shane checks the time on his phone.

“Did he—”

He’s halfway through the thought when Ilya suddenly reappears from behind him.

“Hello.”

Shane jumps slightly.

“Jesus—”

Ilya is holding something behind his back.

“What are you doing?”

Ilya reveals it.

A small bouquet of daisies and light colored roses wrapped in brown paper.

Shane stares.

“...what are those.”

“I think it is called flowers.”

Shane laughs in disbelief, standing and taking the bouquet from Ilya.

“You disappeared to get me flowers?”

“Yes.” Ilya smiles gently.

Shane turns the bouquet slowly in his hands. Amazed.

“They’re so pretty.”

Ilya shrugs casually.

“I am very romantic.”

“I didn’t realize.”

Shane smells the roses, then reaches out to Ilya, grabbing the back of his neck and pulling him into a deep kiss. Ilya’s hands snake around his waist, naturally settling on his ass.

“Thank you, Ilya.” Shane says when they break apart.

Ilya just kisses him again.

Eventually they head back to Ilya’s apartment, once the sun has set.

The movie plays quietly in the background.

Light from the television flickers across the living room, dialogue drifts through the air, some dramatic argument between characters neither of them are really paying attention to.

Shane lies stretched across the couch.

His head rests against the armrest, his body angled slightly so Ilya can fit against him comfortably. Ilya is half draped over him, settled between his legs with his head resting on Shane’s chest like the most natural thing in the world.

Like they’ve done it a million times.

Shane’s fingers move slowly through his hair.

The motion is absentminded, gentle and repetitive. His fingertips slide through the fluffy curls, over and over, the quiet rhythm grounding him.

On the coffee table, the daisies and roses sit in a drinking glass filled with water.

Bright pastel petals, cheap stems. Shane can’t stop looking at them.

Beside them are scattered snacks, an empty vodka glass, and Shane’s half-finished wine.

The room smells faintly of sugar and salt and the lingering soap of the shower they took earlier.

The movie says something funny.

Ilya laughs.

It's a soft, surprised sound. Shane feels the vibration of it through his chest.

He laughs because Ilya laughs.

"That was stupid," Ilya says, still watching the screen.

Shane hums.

He has absolutely no idea what just happened, his attention has drifted far away from the movie.

His fingers keep moving through Ilya's hair, and slowly his thoughts begin to wander.

To the ice cream shop.

To the park.

Shane swallows.

His gaze drifts back to the flowers.

The daisies and roses and various accent plants. The way Ilya had disappeared like a goofball to get them and bring them back. It was ridiculous and so, *so* perfect.

Something inside his chest begins to shift.

It's subtle at first.

A quiet, creeping awareness.

He tries to place the feeling, tries to understand why the day is sitting so heavily in his chest even now, hours later.

When was the last time he had a day like this?

Not a vacation or some carefully curated evening at a restaurant, a real day. A simple one.

Ice cream melting too fast in the summer heat, laughing wholeheartedly, walking through a park.

His mind searches.

Dinner parties.

Business events.

Private clubs.

Expensive trips, gifts.

Beautiful things.

So many beautiful things.

But none of them felt like today.

None of them feel like this.

And really he wants—

Shane's throat tightens slightly.

He wants someone who *listens* when he talks about architecture like a lunatic.

Someone who notices when his eyes light up.

Someone who disappears down the street and comes back with flowers like it's the most obvious thing in the world to bring someone *flowers* on a *date*.

He wants someone who makes him laugh until his stomach hurts, who kisses him across sticky ice cream tables unashamed.

Someone who makes ordinary days feel like they matter, and makes jokes to fuck with him and then kisses him all better afterwards.

Shane blinks at the ceiling, then looks down at Ilya.

At the quiet rise and fall of his shoulders as he breathes, he feels the comfortable weight of him.

Something inside Shane's chest pulls painfully.

He isn't stupid, he knows one day doesn't change everything, and life is more complicated than this.

But sometimes it only takes the one day, the one person looking at you the right way to realize how long you've been invisible.

His chest tightens again.

And before he can stop it, his vision blurs.

His fingers pause in Ilya's hair.

He tries to breathe normally, he doesn't want to ruin this moment.

He doesn't want Ilya to feel like he's responsible for whatever storm is suddenly building inside his chest.

But the thoughts keep coming.

A tear slips quietly down the side of his temple.

Then another.

He wipes one away quickly.

Tries to steady himself.

But the more he tries to hold it in, the worse it gets.

His breath stutters.

A quiet snuffle escapes him.

Ilya moves, the movie fades from his attention instantly.

He lifts his head from Shane's chest.

"Shane?"

Shane turns his head slightly, but Ilya sees his face. The tears.

The way he's trying to breathe normally and failing.

Concern floods his expression immediately.

"Shane," he says softly.

He pushes himself up, one hand coming to Shane's cheek.

"Shane, sweetheart—"

His thumb brushes gently under Shane's eye, catching a tear before it can fall.

"Are you okay?"

Shane tries to answer.

But Ilya is looking at him like he's in physical pain from seeing him cry, like he'd do anything right now to make it all better, and everything inside Shane gives way.

The tears come harder now, his face crumples, his hand comes up to rest over Ilya's already cradling the side of his face.

Shane squeezes his eyes shut.

"I'm sorry," he breathes.

"No— hey," Ilya murmurs gently. "Did I do something?"

Shane shakes his head quickly.

"No."

His voice cracks.

He opens his eyes again as the sobs tear out of him.

“I have to divorce him—” Shane cries.

The sentence lands between them like a confession. Ilya’s breath catches.

“I have to divorce him, Ilya,” Shane says again, his voice trembling, words spewing out of him.

“I can’t do it anymore.”

His hands clutch weakly at the front of Ilya’s shirt, whining.

“I— I want to be here.”

He hiccups.

“I want to be here forever.”

forever.

Ilya shifts, pulling Shane up into his arms, guiding him gently into his lap.

Shane collapses into him, arms tights around him.

Ilya holds him, one arm wrapped firmly around his back, the other brushing slow circles along his shoulder, rocking them gently.

“Shh,” he whispers softly.

“It’s okay.”

Shane presses his face into his shoulder, trying to breathe.

Ilya just holds him.

It doesn’t take long for the tears to slow.

Shane pulls back slightly, embarrassed now.

“I’m sorry,” he murmurs hoarsely, sniffing. “I didn’t mean to—”

“No.”

Ilya shakes his head softly.

“You’re okay.”

He watches Shane’s face for a moment.

Then a small smile appears.

“I just impressed you a lot with my ice cream date, huh?”

Shane lets out a broken laugh through the last of his tears.

“Yeah,” he says quietly, because it’s true.

“Yeah, you did.”

He wipes his face, breathing slowly now.

Then he looks at Ilya again.

Serious and determined, still sniffing, his cheeks red.

“I’m going to figure it out,” he says softly.

“I promise.”

Ilya watches him for a moment.

Then he nods.

“Okay.”

His hand squeezes Shane’s gently.

“Yes.”

“I trust you.”

Ilya pulls him closer and presses a soft kiss to his mouth, lingering there for a moment.

When he pulls back, his forehead rests lightly against Shane’s.

“I’m here,” he murmurs.

His voice is quieter now. Softer.

“Whatever you need.”

Shane’s fingers tighten slightly in his shirt.

The movie continues quietly in the background, Shane leans forward until his forehead rests against Ilya’s shoulder.

Ilya pulls him in tighter, the flowers sit on the coffee table, petals glowing softly in the flicker of the television light.

Ilya glances at them briefly.

Then back to Shane.

Warmth spreads through his chest, and they just sit there together in the quiet.

Chapter End Notes

have you guys been catching the heated rivalry parallels throughout the book or am i missing the mark 🤔. lmk which you've noticed so far if any. ALSOOOO i've got loose plans for the way this wraps, i'm gonna say we've got like 5ish chapters left give or take.... anything could change but i just wanna put it out there we're in the last leg!

Chapter 13: The In between

Chapter Notes

MORE FLUFF for the most part. The last of said fluff.....

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

“Fuck yes—”

The words fall out of Shane before he can stop them, his head tipping back against the arm of the couch, breath catching hard in his throat.

“*Ilya—*”

Ilya doesn’t stop, doesn’t even look up.

He’s between Shane’s legs, one hand braced against his hip firm to keep him in place, the other working him open, fingers hooked and pushing against his prostate, fucking into him rough and focused.

He’s been thinking about this all morning, and now he’s watching his fingers pumping in and out, the way Shane’s whole body reacts to it, his thighs tense and shake, his hips stuttering against the couch, voice breaking into uneven, helpless sounds he can’t hold back anymore.

“It’s good, sweetheart?” Ilya murmurs, finally glancing up at him.

Shane’s eyes roll, his hands scrambling for something to hold onto, landing on Ilya’s shoulders, gripping tight.

“Yes—please, don’t—don’t stop, just—”

His sentence falls apart completely as his body jerks, his thighs quivering closed instinctively before Ilya nudges them back open again.

“Relax,” Ilya says, low. “You can take it.”

Shane moans, his back arches slightly off the couch. “Oh my god—”

It’s so overwhelmingly good, a buzzing heat pulsing through his skin.

The morning so far had been quiet—Shane woke up deep in thought, paced Ilya’s apartment, phone pressed to his ear, voice tight, clipped, careful. Call after call after call, each one leaving him a little more wound up than the last.

Ilya watched, patient at first, but after the fourth phone call he asked Shane what he was calling so many people for. Why he wouldn't just come back to bed with him and have a lazy day.

Shane wouldn't really answer, "Just figuring some stuff out." He'd say with a sigh. He hadn't let Ilya take care of him, so now Ilya has to force him to.

Shane's knees fall back wider without him even realizing it, his body already chasing the feeling, his breathing heavy, like he can't quite catch up to what's happening to him.

"Ilya—" he whines, softer this time, quiet, nearly silent. "You're so fucking good at this.." He trails off into a groan.

"Yeah?" Ilya says again, leaning up to press a kiss to Shane's mouth.

Shane lets out a strangled sound that might be a laugh, might be something else entirely.

"Yes," he breathes. "Yes—fuck—yes—"

Ilya's mouth curves slightly at that, kissing him again before sitting back up. His thumb presses into Shane's hip, grounding him there when he tries to twist away from the intensity of it.

"Stop running," he murmurs.

Shane shakes his head weakly, even as he obeys.

"It's too much— Ilya, I can't—"

"Yes, you can."

Ilya leans in then, pressing a kiss to the inside of Shane's thigh—slow, soft, tender, like he has all the time in the world.

The contrast makes Shane choke on a breath, his grip tightening, fingers digging in.

"You sound so pretty for me," Ilya hums against Shane's skin.

Shane huffs out a breath that breaks into a quiet, shaky whimper, his head falling back again, his body locking in a way Ilya can already recognize.

"You're gonna cum aren't you," Ilya asks teasingly, his expression shifting into something smug and satisfactory. "hm? Gonna cum for me?"

Shane can only nod weakly, his hands sliding up into Ilya's hair without thinking, tugging, holding him there like he needs it.

Like he needs him.

"Ilya—please—"

Ilya looks up at him again, taking in the flushed skin, the way Shane's lips are parted, the way he's curled in on himself and completely lost in it.

Then his back arches hard off the couch, his grip tightening in Ilya's hair like he's holding on for dear life, his entire body jolting as it hits him all at once.

"Holy shit—!"

It tears out of him, louder than he's probably ever let himself be, his head thrown back, eyes squeezing shut as the sensation crashes through him.

His thighs shake violently where they're spread, his hips jerk unevenly, his whole body convulsing around the feeling as it builds and builds and doesn't stop.

"Baby—oh my god—"

Baby?

"I'm here," Ilya says soothingly, kissing his cheek, his forehead, wherever he can. "I got you. Just let me have it."

Every muscle in Shane's body is tightening, clenching, gasping for air as he cums, spurting warm across his stomach and chest.

Ilya loves the way Shane locks up, the way his body clamps down around his fingers hard enough to make his breath hitch for a second, the way he completely loses control in his hands.

It's exactly what he wanted.

To pull him out of his head.

To make him feel something else.

Ilya's hand tightens slightly at Shane's hip, steadying him as the aftershocks roll through him, slower now but no less intense, his body still trembling, still reacting.

"Good," Ilya murmurs, softer now.

"See?" he adds quietly. "You're okay."

Shane doesn't answer right away.

He can't.

He's still catching his breath, chest rising and falling too fast, body slack but shaking, his hands loose around Ilya now.

But he nods. Barely.

It's softer now—little tremors that run through him every few seconds—but they don't stop completely, his body slow to come down from the orgasm.

He blinks up at the ceiling.

Then at Ilya.

Then back at the ceiling again like he's trying to process what just happened and absolutely failing.

"...what the fuck," he breathes.

Ilya huffs a quiet laugh.

"You okay?"

Shane looks back at Ilya, eyes still a little unfocused, just staring at him.

"I think I blacked out," Shane mutters.

"Mm," Ilya hums. "You did a little."

"Shut up."

But there's no bite to it.

Ilya smiles a little at that, softer now.

He leans down, pressing a slow kiss to Shane's chest, then another just above it, lingering there for a second before pulling back.

Shane's breath stutters again at the contact, his body still sensitive.

He looks dazed. Completely gone.

Ilya shifts closer, one hand settling warm against Shane's side, the other moving slowly over his thigh, massaging out the tension there in slow, steady motions.

Shane exhales shakily, his eyes drifting shut for a second as he relaxes into it without thinking.

"...that was the best orgasm i've ever had," he murmurs.

Ilya just hums again, pleased with himself.

"You flatter me."

His thumb traces slow lines along Shane's hip, then back again, his touch firm but gentle now, undoing all the leftover tension press by press.

Shane melts further into the couch.

Every muscle in his body feels loose, heavy, completely spent. There's a warm, floaty exhaustion settling over him, pulling him under.

"I feel like—" he swallows. "I feel like I'm floating to the ceiling."

"Don't leave me sweetheart," Ilya leans down, brushing another soft kiss to his shoulder. "Need you here."

Shane huffs weakly.

"I like when you call me sweetheart."

Ilya smiles against his skin.

"I like when you call me baby."

Shane's eyes widen for half a second.

When did I—

"I—I called you baby?" Shane asks.

Ilya just chuckles.

"Yes, maybe when you blacked out," He joked.

Shane smiles and nods hesitantly in agreement.

Ilya keeps touching him, slow and repetitive, hand moving from his thigh to his side to his stomach and back again, steady and grounding, like he knows exactly what Shane needs without being told.

"I wouldn't mind you calling me that more." Ilya admitted.

Shane's hand lifts lazily to catch at Ilya's shirt, keeping him close.

"Okay."

He doesn't even realize he's doing it.

"Stay," he murmurs, barely audible.

"I am," Ilya says softly.

He presses another kiss to his chest.

Then another.

Then one to his jaw.

Shane's breathing evens out a little more with each one.

Ilya reaches for a napkin from the coffee table, gentle now as he cleans him up, unhurried, careful not to overstimulate him, his touch light where it needs to be, steady where it matters.

“Not as romantic with dry napkin but,” He does a little awkward smile.

Shane just watches him.

Still a little out of it.

Still kind of stunned.

“...it’s okay baby,” he says quietly, his voice cracking into a soft whisper.

Ilya glances up at him.

Then he smiles to himself, balling the napkin up and tossing it back on the coffee table for now.

Then he leans just enough to grab Shane’s clothes from the floor, tossing them lightly over Shane to give him some decency.

“You should put these back on,” he says.

Shane groans softly but doesn’t move right away, his limbs still heavy.

“Mmm. No.”

Ilya nudges his thigh.

“Come on.”

Shane sighs dramatically, finally pushing himself up a little, still slow, still a little shaky as Ilya gives him space. He pulls his clothes back on with Ilya’s help, movements lazy and uncoordinated.

Ilya watches him for a second.

Then—

“I have to go to work soon.”

Shane pauses mid-motion.

“...what?”

Ilya shrugs slightly.

“In a couple hours. I might be gone most of the day.”

Shane’s face immediately drops into a pout, his brows pulling together.

“Ilya,” he whines softly, dragging out his name. “You didn’t tell me that.”

“I tried to,” Ilya says, shifting closer again.

He leans, kissing him quick and warm.

“But you would not put your phone down today.”

Shane huffs.

“I was busy.”

“You were ignoring me,” Ilya counters, amused.

Shane smiles faintly against his mouth.

“Mm. Never.”

They kiss again, slower this time, Shane still a little soft and sleepy, leaning into him like it’s the easiest thing in the world.

“Well what am I supposed to do all day while you’re gone?” he asks, voice still a little hazy.

Ilya thinks for a second.

Then his mouth curves.

“You can sit here and look pretty,” he says casually. “Be my at home husband for the day.”

Shane narrows his eyes slightly, but there’s a smile tugging at his mouth.

“Your at home husband.”

“Yes.”

Ilya nods, completely serious.

“Very important job.”

Shane lets out a soft laugh.

“Wow. Promotion.”

“Or,” Ilya continues, “you can go see your friends. You have friends, yes?”

Shane squints at him.

“I have friends.”

“Mm.”

Ilya gestures vaguely toward the window.

“There are also wooden pallets behind the complex if you want to go,” Ilya gestures vaguely
“Make a building, however you say.”

Shane immediately grins, teeth flashing.

“Asshole.”

Ilya laughs.

“Yes.”

“How long are you gonna be gone?”

Ilya shrugs.

“Not forever. Maybe... four hours.”

Shane groans softly.

“That’s forever.”

“It’s not forever,” Ilya says, amused, leaning in to press one more kiss to his mouth. “You will survive.”

Shane hums against his lips, not entirely convinced—

but he doesn’t pull away.

A few hours later, the apartment feels a little more settled.

The light has shifted, softer now, slipping in through the windows at a lower angle, catching on the edges of things and making everything look a little slower, a little heavier.

Shane’s gotten dressed for the day.

Not fully put together—his hair still a little messy, shirt slightly wrinkled—but presentable enough, something between just got ready and still not entirely here.

Ilya grabs his keys from the counter, slipping them into his pocket.

“You’re coming?” he asks, glancing at Shane.

Shane nods, already moving toward the door.

“Yeah. I have to—” he pauses, like he’s deciding how much to say. “I’m gonna go back to my place for a bit.”

Ilya watches him for half a second.

Then nods.

“Okay.”

No questions.

They head out together, the door clicking shut behind them, footsteps echoing lightly as they make their way down the stairs. It’s quiet in the building, the kind of mid day stillness where everyone’s either at work or still asleep.

Shane stays close to him without really thinking about it.

Their shoulders brush once. Then again.

Neither of them says anything.

By the time they push out onto the sidewalk, the air feels warmer, brighter, piercing after being inside all morning.

Shane exhales, squinting slightly in the light.

Then—

“Oh shit—“

Ilya glances over.

“What?”

Shane is already turning, looking down the street.

“My car.”

They walk over together, rounding the corner of the building—

And there it is.

Parked in a handicap spot.

With a bright white ticket tucked under the windshield wiper.

Shane stops dead.

“...you have got to be kidding me.”

Ilya presses his lips together, trying not to laugh.

Shane strides over, yanking the ticket free and unfolding it.

He scans it once.

Then again.

His face drops.

“What the hell.”

Ilya leans casually against the side of the car.

“How bad?”

Shane doesn’t answer right away—just keeps reading, jaw tightening slightly.

Then, flat,

“Two hundred and fifty dollars.”

Ilya makes a strained noise.

“That is a lot of dollars.”

Shane flips the ticket over, reading the fine print now, quieter.

“Parking in a designated accessible space without permit...” he mutters. “City code—whatever—”

His eyes move down the page.

“Due within fourteen days,” he continues, voice tightening slightly. “Failure to pay results in late fee... additional seventy-five dollars...”

He exhales sharply through his nose.

“...and possible registration hold.”

Ilya winces exaggeratedly at that.

“That sounds... bad.”

Shane just stares at the ticket for another second, stunned.

Then crumples it slightly in his hand.

“Great,” he mutters. “Love that.”

Ilya can’t help it—he laughs.

“Why would you park in handicap spot, Shane?”

Shane shoots him a look.

“I was distracted.”

“Oh really?” Ilya says with a smirk, pushing off the car and making his way toward Shane.

Shane smiles at Ilya approaching, sighing and rolling his eyes softly as Ilya's hands settle at his waist.

“Yes really...” Shane mutters, trailing off in embarrassment, avoiding eye contact.

Ilya grabs his face and lifts it gently, pressing a firm kiss to his lips, humming into it and breaking away with a soft smack. Shane melts.

“I was not thinking about parking violations.” Shane murmurs.

Ilya smiles and lets his hands drift lower, drumming softly against Shane's ass.

“You should think about them. They cost money.”

“Oh my god, thank you,” Shane says dryly. “That's so helpful.”

“You're welcome.”

Shane glares at him for a second longer, then sighs, smoothing the ticket back out with his fingers instead of fully destroying it.

“...two hundred and fifty dollars,” he repeats under his breath.

Ilya tilts his head slightly, pulling back from Shane a bit.

“I think your husband will survive it.”

Shane pauses.

Just for a second.

Then tucks the ticket into his pocket.

“Yeah,” he says lightly. “I'm sure he will.”

Ilya doesn't push it.

Shane leans in again, kissing him—warm, passionate, lingering just a second longer than necessary.

Ilya's hand comes up automatically, to cradle his face.

When they pull back, they stay close.

“Four hours,” Ilya reminds him.

Shane exhales softly.

“Yeah yeah, I'll be back.”

“Okay.”

A small pause.

Then—

“Try not to break more laws while I am gone” Ilya adds.

Shane groans.

“Oh my god, go to work.”

Ilya laughs, pressing one last quick kiss to his mouth before stepping back.

“Bye, Shane.”

“Bye.”

Shane watches him go.

Then he exhales, turning back to his car, hand slipping into his pocket, brushing against the folded ticket.

A small, irritating reminder, waiting.

When Shane makes it to his house, it’s quiet per usual.

He lets himself in, the door clicking shut behind him, walking straight in like he just happens to be passing through.

He doesn’t take his shoes off, he scuffs his feet across the very expensive, very delicate hand knotted rug as he makes his way into the kitchen for a glass of water.

His eyes flick up to the corner of the kitchen out of habit, to the camera.

For a split second, it doesn’t register, he thinks nothing is there. He does a double take.

Then his brain catches up. It’s still there.

Shane huffs out a quiet breath, almost a laugh, shaking his head at himself.

“Wishful thinking.”

He looks away.

Keeps walking.

He drops his keys onto the counter with a careless clatter, louder than usual, the sound bouncing through the open space.

He doesn’t react to it.

Then he grabs a glass and lets the cabinet slam back shut, filling it with some water from the fridge, gulping it down before tossing the glass into the sink. The glass cracks, but Shane is already on his way upstairs.

By the time Rose pulls into the driveway, Shane's halfway through his closet, hangers knocking together as he moves too fast to be neat about it.

A pile is already forming on the bed.

The front door opens without knocking.

"Hello?" she calls.

"Upstairs!"

Her footsteps come quick, familiar, and then she's in the doorway, taking in the mess, the movement, him.

"Okay," she says immediately. "What is happening."

Shane glances at her, already smiling.

"Hi."

"Hi?" she repeats. "You called me and said get here now and this is what I walk into?"

He laughs, tossing a shirt onto the bed.

"It's been forever." She says.

"It's been like a week and a half."

"Exactly."

"That's not forever."

"It feels like forever," she shoots back, stepping in. "You vanished."

Shane just shrugs, still moving, pulling another hanger free.

"You're dramatic."

"Whatever. Start explaining," she says, pointing at him. "Now."

He doesn't even pretend to fight it.

"Okay—okay."

Rose lights up instantly.

"Okay, start from the beginning."

Shane laughs under his breath.

“I’ve been seeing him.”

Rose freezes.

“...him.”

Shane glances at her, grin widening.

“Yes. Him.”

Her entire face changes.

“Oh my god.”

“I know.”

“Oh my *god*.”

“I *know*.”

She grabs his arm, shaking it once.

“Like actually seeing him?”

Shane nods.

“Yes.”

Rose lets out a small, contained squeal, dropping his arm and pacing once, needing to burn the energy off.

“I knew it,” she says. “I knew something was going on since the bar!”

Shane snorts, turning back to the closet.

“He’s—” he starts, then hesitates just slightly. “He’s really good.”

Rose spins back around.

“Good how.”

Shane gives her a look, raises his eyebrows.

Rose’s eyes widen.

“*Oh*.”

“*Yeah*,” Shane responds. “I nearly saw Jesus this morning.”

“Okay,” she says quickly, holding up a hand. “We will revisit that.”

“No we won’t.”

“We absolutely will.”

Shane shakes his head, smiling despite himself, grabbing another shirt.

She gestures around the room.

“What’s going on here.”

Shane lets out a soft laugh, turning back to his closet like if he keeps moving it’ll make it easier to say.

Shane lets out a breath, something softer settling into him now that he’s saying it out loud.

“I like him.”

Rose’s expression shifts.

Not surprised but attentive, nodding along.

“How much.”

Shane huffs a quiet laugh.

“I don’t know.”

“That’s not an answer.”

“I know.”

He drops the shirt onto the pile, finally turning to face her fully.

“He’s really sweet,” he says, almost immediately. “Like—actually sweet, not in a weird way. He just... does things without making it a big deal.”

Rose doesn’t interrupt.

Shane barely notices.

“He listens,” he adds, a little quicker now. “Really listens. Not just waiting for his turn to talk. I’ll say something and he remembers it later and brings it up again and I’m like oh my god why do you remember that.”

A small, helpless laugh slips out of him.

“And he’s funny,” he continues. “But not like—trying to be funny. He just is. Half the time he’s making fun of me, actually.”

Rose raises an eyebrow.

“Healthy bullying?”

“Yeah,” Shane insists, smiling. “Yeah. He’s—he’s just—”

He gestures vaguely with his hands, like the words aren’t enough.

“Warm,” he settles on. “Everything with him feels warm. Even when he’s being annoying.”

Rose’s expression softens a little.

Shane keeps going.

“And he does these little things,” he says. “Like—he’ll just grab me. Or kiss me in the middle of saying something. Or—he got me flowers yesterday.”

Rose’s eyebrows shoot up.

“Really.”

“He disappeared,” Shane says, laughing under his breath. “Like an idiot. Just left me sitting there and I thought he was ditching me or something and then he came back with flowers.”

He shakes his head slightly, still smiling.

“They weren’t even expensive or anything. Just daisies and stuff. But he looked so proud of himself. So happy to give them to me.”

Shane doesn’t stop.

“And he—” he hesitates for half a second, then keeps going anyway, softer now. “He makes me feel like I’m... not too much.”

The confession sits between them.

Shane looks down briefly, then back up, like he didn’t mean to say that out loud.

“And he’s easy,” he finishes, quieter. “Being around him is easy.”

There’s a small silence.

Then—

Rose tilts her head slightly.

“...so you like him a lot.”

Shane freezes.

Just for a second.

Then he huffs out a breath, a little smile breaking through despite himself, his cheeks starting to color.

“Shut up.”

A small beat passes.

Then—

“I’m staying with him.”

Rose blinks.

“You’re what.”

“I’m going to stay with him,” Shane repeats, calmer now. “For a bit.”

“For a bit,” she echoes, watching him carefully.

“Yeah. That’s why I’m packing.”

“And your husband?”

Shane doesn’t hesitate this time.

“I’m divorcing him.”

The room goes still.

Rose doesn’t speak right away.

She just looks at him, her jaw drops a bit.

“...Shane.”

“What.”

“Are you serious?”

He nods.

“Yes.”

“How long have you been thinking about this.”

Shane hesitates.

“...longer than I want to admit.”

Rose exhales slowly, crossing her arms.

“Okay,” she says. “Okay.”

She starts pacing once, not frantic—just thinking.

“This is big.”

“I know.”

“This is, like, your entire life.”

“I know.”

“And you’re just—doing it.”

Shane shrugs, but it’s not careless.

“I have to.”

Rose stops pacing.

“Because I don’t want to live like this anymore.”

It’s simple, but it’s everything.

Rose’s expression shifts again.

She nods, once.

“Okay.”

Then she gestures around.

“So where are you going to live.”

“With Ilya.”

“I mean long term.”

With Ilya.

“I don’t know yet.”

“With what money.”

“I’ll figure it out.”

“Shane.”

“I will,” he insists, softer now, not defensive—just certain.

Rose studies him, realizing he genuinely must have been thinking about this for a long while now.

“You don’t sound scared.”

Shane pauses.

Then lets out a small breath.

“I was.”

“Was?”

“Yeah.”

He looks around the room briefly, then back at her.

“But I’m not anymore.”

Rose swallows slightly.

“...okay,” she says again.

Then, because she can’t help herself—

“Have you told Ilya?”

“Sort of,” Shane responds, fiddling with a tshirt in his hands. “I told him I want to get divorced, but I don’t want to stress him with logistics.”

Rose nods slowly, following him as he moves toward the bed.

“That’s... fair,” she says. “I mean, it’s a lot.”

“Yeah.”

Shane starts actually packing now, he grabs a bag from the closet floor, shakes it out, and starts placing things inside.

T-shirts first.

Then a hoodie.

Then another.

Rose leans against the dresser, arms crossed loosely, watching him.

“So what’s the plan, then,” she asks after a second. “Like, actual next steps.”

Shane shrugs lightly, not looking up.

“I’ve been making calls.”

“What kind of calls.”

“Stuff. Legal things. Financial things.”

Rose tilts her head.

“You sound like you know more than you’re saying.”

Shane glances at her, a small smile pulling at his mouth.

“I probably do.”

“Shane.”

“I just—” he exhales, dropping another folded shirt into the bag. “I don’t want to say it out loud yet. Not until it’s done.”

Rose nods.

“Okay.”

She pushes off the dresser, stepping closer, picking up one of the shirts on the bed and folding it more neatly before handing it to him.

“You’ve always been like this,” she says. “You disappear for a bit and then come back with a plan no one saw coming.”

Shane huffs a quiet laugh.

“Yeah, well.”

“Last time it was moving cities.”

“This is... slightly bigger.”

“Just a little.”

They fall into an easy rhythm after that.

Folding.

Packing.

Moving around each other without thinking about it.

The conversation softens, drifting in and out—small comments, half-finished thoughts.

Nothing as heavy as before, there’s nothing left to say right now.

Shane zips one bag halfway, then moves to the dresser, pulling out a few more things.

Rose doesn't push him again.

She just stays there with him.

A little while later, Shane steps back, looking at the bed.

Two bags.

Not everything, but enough for now. He can come back for the rest.

"Okay," he says quietly.

There's a small pause.

Then Shane reaches for the waistband of his pants, already moving toward the bathroom.

"I need to change," he says. "These are annoying."

Rose snorts softly.

He disappears into the bathroom, the door left half open.

A minute later, he steps back out in softer pants—looser, more comfortable.

He drops his old pants into the laundry bin without thinking.

The fabric lands in a soft heap, the folded parking ticket still tucked in the pocket, buried under denim and cotton.

Shane runs a hand through his hair, glancing back at the bags.

Then at Rose.

"Ready?"

Rose smiles.

"Yeah."

And just like that, they leave it behind. For now.

Before they leave, Shane hesitates at the doorway.

"Oh wait," he says suddenly.

Rose turns, already halfway down the hall.

"What."

Shane glances back toward the bedroom, then past it—further down.

“Just—one second.”

He moves quickly this time, purposeful, heading into the office.

The room still looks the same, clean, organized, untouched.

Shane goes straight to the desk.

He starts opening drawers, flipping through folders—neater than his closet, everything labeled, structured, easy to follow.

His fingers pause over one.

He pulls it out.

Then another.

He doesn’t read them fully.

Just skims—enough to recognize what they are.

Marriage certificate, financial statements, something with both their names on it.

His jaw tightens slightly.

“...yeah,” he mutters under his breath.

He grabs a few—more than he needs, probably—and tucks them under his arm, then he turns and leaves.

Rose is waiting by the front door when he comes back, eyeing the papers.

“Oh,” she says. “We’re doing documents now.”

“I’ll need them.”

She raises an eyebrow.

“Do you know what any of those are.”

“Some of them,” Shane says honestly.

“Reassuring.”

Shane huffs a quiet laugh, grabbing his bags.

They step outside together, the late afternoon air cooler now, the light starting to dip.

Rose turns to him at the bottom of the steps.

“...you’re really doing this.”

Shane nods.

“Yeah.”

She looks at him fondly for a second, then steps forward and pulls him into a quick hug.

It’s not dramatic.

Just tight.

“I’m proud of you,” she murmurs.

Shane exhales softly, hugging her back.

“Thank you.”

She pulls away, giving him one last look.

“Call me if everything explodes.”

“I will.”

“Or if it goes well.”

“I will.”

Rose smiles.

“Okay.”

Then she heads for her car.

Shane watches her go for a second, then he turns, bags in hand, and heads for his own.

By the time he gets back to Ilya’s, the sun has dipped lower, the sky shifting into that soft, evening gold.

He balances the bags awkwardly as he makes his way up the stairs, bumping his hip lightly against the door when he reaches it.

He knocks with his elbow.

A moment passes, then the door swings open.

Ilya’s standing there, and he immediately frowns.

“You are late.”

Shane blinks at him.

“...hello to you too.”

“I came home,” Ilya says, stepping aside to let him in, but still looking mildly offended. “You were not here.”

Shane steps inside, dropping the bags with a soft thud near the door.

“Well, it’s not like I have a key.”

Ilya pauses.

Then—

“...oh.”

Shane watches the realization hit him in real time.

“Yes,” Ilya says slowly. “A key.”

He nods once, like he’s filing it away as something important.

“That is a problem.”

Shane smiles a little.

“I will have to get you one,” Ilya adds, more firmly now, like it’s already decided.

Something in Shane’s chest shifts at that, small, quiet, and warm.

He glances around the apartment, then back at Ilya.

The bags by the door.

The way Ilya’s already making space for him without asking.

A *key*.

The thought settles somewhere deeper than he expects.

He swallows lightly.

“Okay,” he says with a smile.

Ilya nods once, satisfied.

Then, like nothing just happened—

“You brought things.”

“I did.”

“Good.”

A little later, they’re in the kitchen.

It’s becoming a pattern.

Ilya stands at the counter, chopping something with more force than necessary, while Shane leans beside him, sleeves pushed up, half-helping, half-watching.

“What are we making,” Shane asks.

“Food,” Ilya says.

“Helpful.”

Ilya smirks slightly.

“You like surprises.”

“I like knowing what I’m eating.”

“You will eat it anyway.”

Shane snorts.

“True.”

He reaches over, stealing a piece of celery off the cutting board.

Ilya nudges his hand away.

“Stop.”

“No.”

“Shane.”

He just smiles, popping it into his mouth anyway.

They move around each other easily.

Too easily, maybe.

Like they’ve already done this a hundred times.

Ilya glances at him after a minute.

“You were busy today.”

Shane hums.

“Yeah.”

“Phone calls.”

“Mm.”

Ilya sets the knife down, wiping his hands on a towel.

“What kind of calls.”

Shane doesn’t look at him.

“Just stuff.”

“What stuff.”

“Boring stuff.”

Ilya watches him, something twisting in his chest.

“That is not an answer.”

Shane finally glances over, offering a small, easy smile.

“It’s nothing you need to worry about.”

That lands wrong, Ilya’s expression shifts just slightly—barely there, but different.

“I didn’t say I was worried,” he says.

Shane tilts his head.

“You sound a little worried.”

“I’m not,” Ilya replies quickly.

A beat.

Then, quieter—

“I just don’t like not knowing.”

Shane softens a little at that, stepping closer, his hands gripping loosely around Ilya’s waist.

“I know.”

Ilya doesn’t move away.

But he doesn’t lean in either.

Shane nudges him.

“It’s just temporary,” he says. “I promise.”

Ilya looks at him for a second.

Then sighs and nods.

“Okay.”

But it’s not the same as usual.

He picks the knife back up, turning back to the cutting board.

Shane watches him for a second longer, digesting the moment.

Then reaches over again, stealing another piece of celery just to make him react.

Ilya swats his hand away this time.

“Stop it.”

Shane smiles.

“Make me.”

Ilya laughs, the moment smoothers over, mostly.

Ilya keeps chopping, but the rhythm is a little off now, too sharp, too fast.

Shane steps away and starts doing other things, he listens to Shane move behind him—
opening a cabinet, closing it, humming under his breath like nothing in the world is wrong.

Like everything is easy.

Like it’s always has been.

Ilya’s jaw tightens just slightly.

He doesn’t look at him.

It’s nothing he tells himself.

It’s probably nothing.

People make phone calls.

People have lives.

People have things they don’t explain right away.

That’s normal.

...right?

The knife hits the cutting board a little harder than it needs to.

He slows it down.

Forces his hands to move normally again.

Shane laughs softly—he dropped something, Ilya didn't even see what—and the sound pulls at him in a way that makes his chest ache.

Because he likes that sound too much. He likes *him* too much. Maybe that's a problem.

Ilya finally glances over.

Shane's leaning against the counter, relaxed, comfortable, scrolling on his phone like he belongs here.

Ilya looks away again.

You don't know him, something in the back of his mind says, quiet but persistent.

Not really. Not all the way.

You know how he laughs, how he sounds when he says your name. You know how he looks at you.

But you don't know what he's doing on those calls.

Who he's talking to.

What he's setting up.

If he's divorcing his husband, shouldn't he be able to share that with Ilya? Ilya said he would be there for Shane, for anything he needed. Why is Shane not letting him in?

Ilya swallows.

He doesn't like that thought.

Doesn't like how quickly it gets under his skin.

Shane doesn't feel like someone who's lying or hiding something bad.

But people don't always feel like what they are, and Ilya has been wrong before.

He takes a deep breath, shoves it all down. He's just being insecure, paranoid.

He glances at Shane again.

Shane looks back at him this time, catching him staring.

Smiles. Blows a kiss.

Just like that.

Warm.

Simple.

He wants to believe that this is simple.

That Shane is exactly what he seems, and there isn't something sitting just out of reach that could ruin this before it even has time to become real.

Ilya looks back down at the cutting board.

Don't do this, he tells himself.

Don't ruin it.

So he doesn't say anything.

Doesn't ask again.

Doesn't push.

He just cooks.

Lets Shane steal food off the counter, laugh about it. Let's himself fall into it again.

Like he didn't just feel the ground shift a little under his feet.

Chapter End Notes

hows the crowd doing... 3 chapters left confirmed. Will try an speed run and get them out, i'm excited to post them...

Chapter 14: A House Without A Name

Chapter Notes

big time jump lowkey

A month passes without either of them noticing. Everything just falls into place.

It starts with the smallest things.

The cabinet with the chipped mugs. The drawer that gets stuck if you pull it too fast. The way the bathroom light flickers once before it fully comes on.

He learns all of it naturally.

Mornings are soft and unstructured.

Ilya wakes first most days, slipping out of bed carefully. The apartment is colder in the early hours, the tile biting under his feet as he crosses into the kitchen, turning on the stove more out of habit than hunger.

He reaches for two mugs instead of one. Coffee. Eggs. Whatever's left in the fridge that can be turned into something edible.

Then he hears Shane before he sees him.

The shuffle of feet.

The quiet drag of a hand along the wall.

Then Shane appears in the doorway, hair a mess, eyes barely open, wearing something that definitely belongs to Ilya. Shane only ever wears Ilya's clothes these days.

He leans against the frame like it's the only thing holding him up.

“Доброе утро.” (good morning) Ilya says.

Shane smiles.

“Morning, Ilya.”

He makes his way over slowly, stopping just close enough to steal something from the pan without asking.

Ilya doesn't even look at him when he smacks his hand.

“Stop.”

“No.”

“You will burn yourself.”

“I already did.”

“Well don’t do it again.”

Shane huffs a quiet laugh, shaking his hand out before leaning in a little closer anyway, pressing a kiss to Ilya’s shoulder, neck, jaw, and finally to his lips.

It’s easy.

They build a life in pieces.

A hoodie left over the back of the couch.

A pair of shoes by the door that weren’t there before.

A phone charger plugged into the outlet on Shane’s side of the bed.

His side.

One night he just ended up there, and then the next night, and the next, until it becomes something neither of them questions.

They go grocery shopping together, Ilya walks ahead, grabbing things with no real plan, while Shane trails behind with the cart, trying to understand how someone can function without a list.

“That’s not a meal,” Shane says, as Ilya tosses cereal into the cart.

“It can be.”

“It’s Trix.”

“Yes.”

Shane sighs, long and dramatic.

“I care about balanced meals.”

“You ate pizza with me last night.”

“Well today’s a new day.”

Ilya laughs under his breath, shaking his head, and Shane smiles and gives up, letting Ilya have his cereal.

It's not perfect, for obvious reasons, but it feels right. It feels good.

But then there's the other thing.

After Shane cried to Ilya about the divorce, he immediately started making phone calls. At first, it was easy to ignore.

A phone call in the morning, another in the afternoon.

Shane stepping into the other room for a few minutes, voice low, calm, controlled.

To Shane it feels easier this way. Contained.

If he says anything out loud too soon—if he brings Ilya into it before it's finished, before it's real—then it becomes something fragile. Something that can go wrong.

Shane doesn't want this to go wrong. Shane *can't* let this go wrong.

He wants to hand it to him complete.

Finished.

Certain.

Ilya doesn't ask.

He tells himself it's normal, he's probably figuring things out with the divorce.

Regardless, people have things, lives.

But the calls don't stop. They get more frequent, stretch longer, get quieter.

Shane starts stepping outside.

The door closing behind him.

The sound of his voice disappearing completely.

Sometimes Ilya comes home and Shane isn't even there, he leaves without telling Ilya anything, and when Ilya asks him about it he just says something along the lines of '*I thought I would be home sooner.*'

What the fuck kind of answer is that?

"Where were you?" Ilya asks, watching Shane walk through the door and set his things down.

Shane shrugs, already walking past him.

"Just out."

“Doing what?”

“Some personal stuff, i’m still trying to figure it out, i’ll tell you soon.”

He smiles when he says it.

“Gimme kiss baby.” He says easily, reaching for Ilya. Ilya kisses him, and it melts the fight out of him.

Another day, when it weighs on him again, he can’t help but bring it up.

“What are the calls about,” Ilya tries.

“Just stuff.”

Shane doesn’t understand what answer Ilya is actually looking for. The details feel unnecessary, it’s all in progress anyway.

“What stuff.”

“Boring stuff.”

The answers never change.

Just stuff.

Boring stuff.

Personal stuff.

Nothing you need to worry about.

The words start to wear thin and sound suspicious, but Shane is still Shane. It throws Ilya for a loop.

He’s still warm, affectionate, still reaching for him without thinking, kissing him in the middle of sentences.

Still laughing, still soft in the mornings, still pulling him close at night like there’s nowhere else he wants to be.

But then there’s these small moments where something slips. Where his attention drifts.

Where his phone buzzes and his entire body goes still for half a second before he moves, going serious and excusing himself. Sometimes he looks a little anxious before answering.

Ilya notices, he notices everything about Shane. He just doesn’t know what to do with it.

He tells himself not to make it into something it isn’t, to not be that person, he trusts Shane, and Shane trusts him.

But sometimes, maybe most of the time if he's honest. He can't help it. He thinks it's Shane's husband. It's the only thing that makes the most sense to him. Shane's anxious over these calls, these *overbearing* calls. He disappears with no explanation, has to go to his house and come back.

The day Ilya finally cracks, Shane is weirder than usual.

And he's dressed.

Actually dressed.

Not in one of his t-shirts, not in something soft and worn-in and comfortable.

It's clean, structured, freshly pressed and polished, and he's moving too fast.

Picking things up, putting them down, checking his phone, looking at the time.

Ilya leans against the counter, watching him.

"Shane what's going on."

Shane doesn't look up.

"Nothing."

"You're dressed like you're going somewhere."

"I am."

"Where."

Shane finally glances at him.

"My house."

The word sits between them. Heat coils in Ilya's stomach. Heavy and burning.

Dressed fancily, anxious, going back to your house for something apparently I can't know about.

And he expects me to think he's not going back to his husband right now.

Were the calls ever about the divorce?

"Why." Ilya starts, keeping his composure.

"I just have to handle something."

"What."

"Stuff."

Something in Ilya tightens. This is bullshit.

“I’m coming.”

Shane freezes.

Then quickly,

“Oh—no, no, you stay here.”

Ilya straightens.

“Why.”

“It’s just quick. I’ll be back soon, it’s okay.”

“Then i’ll come with you.”

“No.”

The word is sharp.

It cuts through the room before Shane can soften it.

They both hear it.

A pause stretches.

Ilya pushes off the counter.

“Why can’t I come.”

“It’s not—” Shane runs a hand through his hair, panic setting in but it manifests as frustration.

“It’s just something I need to handle.”

“You’ve been saying that for a month.”

“I know.”

“So what is it.”

“It’s nothing—”

“Stop saying that.”

Shane looks at him, thrown.

“I’m not trying to fight with you.”

“I’m not fighting,” Ilya says, but his voice is tight now, controlled in a way it won’t stay for long. “I’m asking you what you’re doing.”

“And I told you.”

“You didn’t.”

“I did—”

“You keep saying ‘stuff,’ Shane. That’s not an answer and you know it.”

Shane exhales sharply.

“It’s just something I want to take care of by myself.”

“Like what.”

“Why does it matter.”

As soon as it leaves Shane’s mouth, he knows it came out wrong. Not why does it matter to *you* but why does it matter *right now*, when he’s still in the middle of fixing it.

Ilya goes still.

“...why does it matter.” he repeats disappointedly.

Shane’s expression shifts immediately.

“That’s not what I meant—”

“Then what did you mean.”

There’s a moment.

Shane doesn’t understand Ilya’s issue.

“Ilya, I get you’re curious but I told you it’s okay and i’m going to handle it. I’ve been handling it,” He says, adjusting the cuffs of his sleeve. “It’s not a big deal.”

“It is to me.”

“Why?”

Ilya lets out a breath that feels like it’s been sitting in his chest for weeks.

“Because you won’t tell me anything.”

“I’m not hiding anything—”

“You are.”

“I’m not—”

“You will not let me come with you.”

Shane's frustration spikes.

"I just need you to stay here."

"Why."

"Because I asked you to."

"That's not good enough."

Shane drags a hand down his face.

"Ilya—please."

The plea is desperate, he needs Ilya to just trust something he doesn't know how to explain yet.

"I'll be back soon," he says. "I just want to get it all straightened out and not worry you about it."

Ilya looks at him.

At the way he won't explain. Won't reassure him. At the way he's already halfway out the door, and something feels off.

His chest tightens.

"...okay," he says finally.

It hurts.

Shane exhales, relief immediate.

"Thank you."

Ilya nods.

Steps back.

Shane steps forward. He wants a kiss. Ilya kind of pulls back, but he can't get himself to say no. He kisses Shane, but makes it quick.

Shane smiles, and grabs his keys, moving toward the door.

Then he pauses for a second, like he wants to say something else.

He considers telling Ilya what he's doing. Just a piece of it. But it's not finished yet, it's not real yet. He doesn't want to get Ilya's hopes up, and he's never been good at sharing things halfway anyways.

So he doesn't.

“I’ll be back later.”

The door shuts.

Silence fills the apartment.

Ilya stands there, not moving, barely breathing properly.

“Блять.” (fuck)

He drags a hand down his face, pacing once across the room.

What the fuck is he doing?

The question sits in his chest, heavy and unanswered.

He laughs once, short and empty.

So this is where it starts to hurt me, huh.

The thought settles in.

He looks around the apartment.

At the things Shane has left behind. He’s everywhere now. In everything.

“...maybe I should just end it,” he says quietly.

The words sound wrong the second they leave his mouth.

But they don’t go away.

Across the city, Shane is driving with both hands tight on the wheel.

The sun is shining bright by the time he pulls into the neighborhood. The streets are too clean. The hedges too square. The houses sit back from the road in manicured elegance, long driveways and curated landscaping.

He knows every turn by heart.

His body still knows how to come here, even now, even after everything, even after a month of sleeping somewhere else and waking up in a different kind of life.

The gate opens for him with the same mechanical grace it always has.

For a second, just a second, he has the absurd thought that maybe the house will reject him. Maybe something in it will know what he has come here to do and lock him out in protest, like a jealous old thing with too much memory.

Instead, the driveway curves open before him exactly as it always does.

He parks. Cuts the engine.

He sits there in the silence for a moment with his hands still on the wheel, staring through the windshield at the front of the house.

It looks beautiful.

It always has.

Tall windows catching the last of the light. Pale stone. The kind of house people use phrases like dream home about, the kind of place that looks like stability from the outside.

Shane lets out a slow breath.

His pulse is racing anyway.

After an entire month of calls and meetings and hesitations and legal language and signatures and phone numbers scribbled in margins, he is finally here. At the edge of something real.

He gets out.

The front door unlocks beneath his hand with a soft click.

When he steps inside, the sound of his shoes on the floor travels farther than it should.

The house isn't fully empty, not in the technical sense. The furniture is still there. The rugs. The art on the walls. But it feels emptied of something else, something harder to name. A role he used to slip into the second the door shut behind him. The polished, agreeable, well-kept version of himself that belonged here.

His footsteps echo again.

He shuts the door and stands in the entryway, listening.

The quiet is different now. It doesn't lean on him. Doesn't ask anything of him. It doesn't make him straighten his shoulders or lower his voice or remember himself into place.

It just exists.

His eyes flick instinctively to the camera in the corner.

For the briefest second, his brain skips over it again. It looks so still, so ordinary, that it might as well be a smoke detector or an ugly little speaker. He takes two steps before the recognition catches up, a stupid delay that makes him nearly smile.

Right.

The camera.

Of course the camera is there.

But the old instinct never fully arrives. He doesn't feel watched, exactly. Not in the way he used to. The red light blinks once, small and mechanical, and he finds he doesn't care enough to adjust himself for it.

He tosses his keys onto the console table, harder than he means to. The sound rings through the foyer and into the long hallway beyond.

He leaves it there.

He moves through the house slowly, to really look at it. To walk through it as himself for once, not as a husband circling his own life on soft feet.

The living room is immaculate. The sofa still holds its shape perfectly, untouched except for the faintest dip in one cushion. The coffee table has been cleared. The flowers are gone. Somewhere, recently, someone dusted.

He brushes his fingers over the back of one chair as he passes.

He heads into the kitchen. Light spills through the huge windows at the back, laying across the marble island. The pool glows a muted blue outside. The sight of it tugs unexpectedly at his chest. That rectangle of water. That gleaming, ridiculous thing. The beginning of all of this.

He laughs under his breath.

"Wow," he murmurs to no one.

His voice sounds fuller in here than it usually does.

He walks toward the staircase, then stops at the bottom and looks up. The upper hallway disappears into shadow and warm light, into bedrooms and closets and bathrooms that used to feel important because they belonged to the life he was told he had.

He doesn't go up.

Instead, he stands there with one hand lightly on the banister and lets the years come to him in flashes.

Meeting his husband at the firm. The authority of him. The ease with which he'd filled a room. The money, yes, but not only that. The confidence. The feeling of being chosen by someone who seemed to know exactly what he wanted and exactly how the world worked. Back then, it had felt like safety. Like being plucked out of all his uncertainty and set down somewhere expensive and polished and permanent.

Then marriage.

The move.

This house.

His own things slowly disappearing inside someone else's taste. His own wants flattening into suggestions, then preferences, then silence. How years can pass while you're still telling yourself you're grateful.

He blinks hard and looks away from the stairs.

No.

He isn't doing that now.

Not today.

Today is not for mourning something that was already dead.

Today is for leaving.

That thought comes with such startling clarity that it almost steadies him more than anything else has.

Leaving.

Not dreaming about it. Not crying about it. Not confessing it into somebody's shoulder at the end of a perfect date.

Doing it.

Actually.

A smile flickers, small and disbelieving, at the corner of his mouth.

He thinks of Ilya immediately.

Of the apartment that never seems warm until he steps inside it. Of the shared coffee in the mornings and the pointless bickering and the way Ilya says his name when he's annoyed. Of his bed. His shirts. His laugh. His stupid beautiful face. The key comment from earlier replays in Shane's head and something tender unfolds in his chest all over again.

A key. I will have to get you one.

The thought of belonging somewhere that simply, that quietly, makes his throat tighten.

He hopes Ilya will be happy.

The hope comes suddenly, almost childlike in its sincerity. He hopes when he walks back into that apartment later, all breathless and done and free, that Ilya will look at him and understand. That whatever this month of secrecy has carved into them can be smoothed over by the shape of what Shane has done. That Ilya will be proud. That he'll laugh first, maybe. Or cry. Or kiss him so hard Shane loses his balance a little.

He hopes—fiercely, stupidly—that this really can be the beginning of the life they’ve both been circling without naming.

The crunch of tires on the driveway pulls him back.

He turns toward the front of the house.

A black SUV. Then another. Doors opening. Voices. Movement.

His heart jumps.

This is it.

The front door swings open before he can overthink himself into stillness.

“Shane!”

The voice comes bright and practiced and warm.

Mrs. Jocelyn sweeps up the front walk in a cream blazer and tasteful heels, phone already in one hand, oversized sunglasses pushed up in her hair.

Shane smiles before he can stop himself.

“Mrs. Jocelyn.”

“Oh, don’t give me that,” she says, opening her arms. “After all the fighting we’ve done this month, I think I’ve earned a Claire.”

He laughs and steps into the hug anyway.

“Claire, then.”

“That’s better.”

She pulls back and looks at him head to toe, assessing in that sharp, affectionate way she has.

“Well?” she says. “How’s it going? Are you so excited?”

The question lands, and to his own surprise, Shane realizes he is.

Not nervous.

Excited.

“I think I am,” he says, and hears the truth of it in his own voice.

Claire’s grin widens. “Good. Because after almost five weeks of yes, no, maybe, not yet, and wait, i think you owe me some excitement.”

Shane covers his face for a second. “Oh my god.” He huffs out a laugh. “It was overwhelming.”

“I know, I know,” she says, dropping his hand and smiling, “But you made it, Shane.”

That quiets him.

Because yes.

He did.

After a month of stalling and circling and waking in the night with panic clawing at him and then lying there with Ilya’s arm over his waist and his mind running faster than he could keep up with.

He landed.

He made it happen.

It is happening.

Claire turns slightly, gesturing behind her. “Come meet the Delaneys.”

The family steps forward. The husband in a navy suit that probably costs more than it should. The wife in cream silk, elegant and a little overdone, but lovely. Their daughter—maybe ten, maybe eleven—stands between them with a headband and patent shoes and the serious expression of a child trying very hard to act grown up.

They are exactly the kind of family who would buy this house.

“Hi,” Shane says, and offers the polished smile that used to come so automatically in rooms like this. It still arrives now, but it feels like he’s borrowing it rather than becoming it. “I’m Shane.”

Introductions follow. Hands shaken. Pleasant things said.

“It’s such a gorgeous house,” Mrs. Delaney says, looking past him into the entryway. “We absolutely fell in love with it.”

Shane glances back too.

For a strange second, he sees it through her eyes. The sweep of the staircase. The high ceilings. The curated light. The illusion of a life inside it that looks clean and complete and enviable from the threshold.

“Yeah,” he says softly. “It’s... a good place.”

And he means it.

Just not for him.

The little girl slips past her parents slightly, craning her neck up toward the second floor.
“Does the upstairs have a movie room?”

Claire laughs. “Come on, let’s go look.”

She turns back to Shane, already in motion. “I’ll take them through the upstairs and bring the folder back down. You can start with the disclosures and the transfer documents on the island—same stack we went over.”

“Perfect,” he says.

“Don’t get cold feet while I’m gone.”

“Claire.”

“I’m kidding,” she says, not sounding entirely like she is. “Mostly.”

They disappear up the staircase in a drift of perfume and polished voices and excited little footsteps.

Then Shane is alone again.

He heads into the kitchen.

The folder is waiting where she set it down earlier, thick and clean. He opens it carefully, laying the pages out across the island. Contract. Transfer forms. Disclosure acknowledgments. Brokerage copies. Signatures needed in too many places.

He stands there reading over the papers first, running over everything one more time because that’s who he is, he likes words when they’re on paper and mean one thing and stay there.

Near the middle of the packet, the sale price sits in black print so matter-of-factly it almost knocks the breath out of him all over again.

10.3 million dollars.

He stares at it.

Not because he didn’t know—not really. Claire has said the number more than once. His lawyer has said it too. It has lived in voicemail messages and legal summaries and spreadsheets and projected fees.

But on the paper, here, in this kitchen, with summer light slipping across the marble and the house waiting quietly around him, it feels different.

Real.

Ten million dollars.

For the house.

For *his* house.

His mouth parts slightly on a breath that turns into a laugh before it fully forms.

The way he found out stays in the back of his mind. Buried in old documentation after an anxious midnight internet spiral, followed by increasingly frantic calls to people who actually knew how to read the legal architecture of a marriage.

Somewhere in those first years—god knows whether for tax reasons or vanity or some complicated move by his husband’s advisors—the property had been put solely in Shane’s name. A gesture, everyone had called it. Protective. Smart. Convenient.

No one had expected Shane Hollander to ever do anything with that fact except be grateful.

So here it is, he can do whatever he wants with it.

Sell it.

Leave.

Take the money and go.

No permission. No approval. No signature from the man who had acted like the house itself was part of his body.

The realization thrills him now in a way it hadn’t before. Before, it had felt theoretical. A possibility too dangerous to fully believe in.

Now it feels like a door already opened.

He imagines walking back into Ilya’s apartment later tonight and saying it out loud.

I sold it. I did it. It’s done. We have freedom and ten million dollars.

He imagines the look on Ilya’s face—shock first, then understanding, then that soft, wrecked kind of joy that makes his eyes go bright.

He imagines a future all at once. A stupid, fast flood of images.

A different apartment first, maybe, bigger than Ilya’s but not obscene. Windows. Plants. Books. Shane sketching at a table while Ilya cooks and complains about how many bowls he’s using. A key on a key ring. Groceries. Ordinary mornings. Space that belongs to them because they decided it would.

His heart pounds.

He signs the first page.

Then the second.

He flips to the next document and reads with a strange kind of hunger now, as if each clause and line item is another inch of air returning to his lungs.

Overhead, distant voices drift down from the second floor. Claire's cheerful pitch. The Delaneys' polite admiration.

Shane smiles despite himself.

This family is already moving in. Already imagining.

Good.

Let them have it.

He doesn't want it anymore.

He reaches for the next page.

Then he hears a quiet movement behind him. It catches his attention but not enough to look toward the noise.

Must be the house doing some weird stuff.

Then he hears a voice. Firm, calm, questioning.

"Shane."

One word.

Nothing loud in it, but his body goes cold so quickly it feels like the room has tilted.

The pen stills between his fingers.

He knows that voice.

He would know it underwater. Half asleep. *Dead.*

Slowly—too slowly—he looks up.

Turns.

And there, in the entryway to the kitchen, framed by the immaculate house Shane is in the middle of selling out from under him, is his husband.

Chapter 15: Not a Lot, Just Forever

His husband stands in the doorway stoic as ever, like the house isn't completely emptied out.

He looks the same, perfectly put together, suit pressed, his face composed.

They stare at each other, Shane's hand is still curled around the pen, his heart thumping rapidly against his chest.

"...what are you doing here," Shane manages.

It comes out quieter than he wants. He doesn't want to look weak in front of this man. Not now, not ever again.

His husband tilts his head slightly, like he's considering the question.

"That's interesting," he says. "I was about to ask you the same thing."

His gaze drifts past Shane to the papers spread across the island. He doesn't know exactly what they are but by the looks of the house, he thinks he could guess.

Something calculatory flickers across his expression, Shane unconsciously shifts to cover the papers.

"I got a call," he says lightly, his eyes meeting Shane's again. "About a parking ticket."

Shane doesn't move.

Oh my god.

"A very small, very stupid parking ticket," he continues. "Unpaid. Apparently for quite some time."

I forgot about the ticket.

His husband takes a step in Shane's direction, the sound of his dress shoes click against the tile too loud.

"I pay for the cars," he adds, almost conversational. "The insurance. Which means I get notified when something like that happens."

Another slow step.

Shane's fingers tighten around the pen, he pushes back into the counter, wanting to back away but having nowhere to go.

"And imagine my surprise," his husband says, voice still calm and even, "when the address attached to the ticket wasn't near here."

A pause.

“Or anywhere I recognized.”

Shane’s heart is pounding so hard it feels like it’s in his throat, he’s nearly nauseous.

“It was at an apartment complex,” he goes on. “Across the city.”

He lets that sit, sees if Shane has anything to say. Upon more silence, he continues.

“Do you want to tell me what you were doing there?”

There it is, the question, the trap.

Shane doesn’t answer, or rather, he can’t. His mind is moving too fast, tripping over itself, trying to catch up to how quickly this has shifted. The house, the papers, Claire and the family upstairs.

Ilya.

The image hits him hard and sudden—his apartment, warm and lived in, the sound of his voice in the mornings, his touch, his care. The thought of it steadies Shane, reminds him what he’s fighting for, and what it means to him.

The man watches him carefully.

“Oh,” he says, almost amused now. “You’re not going to answer.”

Shane exhales slowly, grounds himself, loosens his grip on the pen and sets it down.

When he looks back up, there’s something different in his expression. Still scared—he can’t help that—but there’s something under it now. Something firmer.

“Well I guess there was really no point in asking,” the man says. “I already know.”

A moment passes.

“I’m just curious how much of this you were planning on telling me.”

The words press in.

Old instincts rise up automatically, explain, smooth it over, make it make sense, don’t escalate, don’t—

Shane stops it, he swallows. Takes another breath. Heat flares sharp and sudden in his chest, cutting through the fear.

“I’m done.”

The words come out steadier than he feels.

His husband blinks once like he misheard him.

“...what?”

“I’m done,” Shane repeats.

There’s a tremor in it, but he doesn’t let it break.

“I don’t want anything to do with this anymore. With you. With—” he gestures vaguely around the house, the kitchen, the life “—any of it.”

Silence drops between them thick and heavy. Shane forces himself to keep going.

“I’m sorry I did it like this,” he says. “I know it’s—messy. But I don’t—” his voice tightens, then steadies again “—I don’t want to see you again. I just want to be done.”

For a moment, his husband just looks at him. Then he laughs, disbelieving.

“Oh,” he says. “Oh, really.”

He takes another step closer.

“Is that the conclusion you came to *before* or *after* you let the pool boy fuck you?”

The words are ugly, deliberately said to humiliate, and they do. For a second Shane freezes, wants to curl in on himself.

Then he forces something in himself to flip.

That’s what he wants, don’t give him what he wants.

A hot anger flashes through him. His body feels like it’s in overdrive, if he doesn’t get mad he’ll cry. He’ll apologize. He’ll give in.

So he gets mad. He gets angry. With each breath in he lets it fill him, sharp, burning anger.

He lets out a breath through his nose, jaw tightening.

“Before,” he grits out.

His husband pauses, just slightly.

Shane takes a step forward now, voice cutting.

“It was before,” he repeats. “I felt like this before.”

“But yeah,” he adds, “him fucking me better than I’ve been fucked our entire marriage probably helped.”

Silence.

The man stares at him, then scoffs, like he's brushing it off, like it doesn't offend—but something flickers in his eyes anyway. Irritation.

"Right," he says dismissively. "So what—you're just selling the house and what? Running away?"

"I'm selling the house," Shane says, flat. "And I'm leaving."

Shane gestures toward the entryway.

"You need to go. So I can finish up here."

The man lets out a short laugh.

"Go?" he repeats.

"You're trespassing," Shane takes another step forward. "You need to get off my property."

"Trespassing, is that what we're calling it now?"

"Yes," Shane says. "That's exactly what we're calling it."

"I'm not leaving."

Shane's jaw tightens.

Upstairs he hears movement, Claire and the family unaware.

His husband tilts his head slightly toward the sound, almost curious.

"...you know," he says, glancing toward the ceiling, "I could go up there."

Shane stills.

"Make a scene," he continues casually. "Explain the situation. See how well you manage to sell this place after that."

No.

Absolutely not.

I'm not losing this.

Not now. Not like this.

Shane steps forward, closer. "Get the fuck out," he says, low and serious.

His husband's expression shifts.

Surprised, almost amused.

He steps forward too, closing the space between them, Shane instinctively backing away.

“Shane,” he says, quieter now. “Is that how you’re going to treat the man who’s been taking care of you all these years?”

His hand comes out, grabs Shane’s wrist.

Shane’s entire body tenses.

“Let go,” he says, immediately trying to pull back, yet the man's grip tightens like a handcuff.

“Hey,” he murmurs with fake concern, stepping in closer, guiding—no, pushing—Shane back.

Shane’s spine hits the counter, his breath catches, the man leaning in, close enough that Shane can feel it when he speaks. He’s disgusted, and so so angry.

“I’m sorry,” the man says softly. “I know you’ve been lonely.”

“I shouldn’t have left you like that.”

His grip tightens just slightly.

“Just let me fix it.”

It’s wrong, something about what he’s saying is so wrong. Shane doesn’t believe him for a second, but heat crawls up Shane’s neck, his heart racing.

All he ever wanted was for his husband to say something like that to him and mean it. He lets himself live in it for the tiniest second, and come to terms with what he wanted never being what he got.

Now he wants out.

God, he wants out.

I should’ve just let Ilya come.

The thought hits him hard and fast. But he didn’t, so now he has to handle it himself.

Shane shoves him. Hard.

“Get off me.”

His husband stumbles back half a step, then immediately comes forward again.

“Shane,” he says, sharper now. “I don’t want to hurt you, but you’re not leaving.”

His hand reaches again, grabbing, trying to pin him.

Shane fights back, hands pushing, twisting, trying to break the grip, their bodies knock against the counter, the stools, the papers shifting, sliding—

“Get the fuck off me—are you crazy?”

“Stop—”

Shane pushes him to the floor, and puts distance between the two of them, chest heaving.

“CLAIRE!”

The word rings through the house loud and sharp. His husband freezes, breathing heavily from the floor before standing slowly

“...oh,” he says, something dark flickering in his expression. “*You’re* going to make a scene out of this?”

“CLAIRE!” Shane yells again.

Footsteps, fast, pattering down the steps.

Claire appears quickly, brows furrowed in confusion.

“Shane? What’s—”

She stops, glancing around, taking in the scene. Her expression changes upon seeing the man, the tension, the space between them.

Then professionally and alert, she asks,

“What’s going on?”

Shane doesn’t hesitate.

“There’s a trespasser,” he says, voice still tight, still shaking just slightly. “Can you call the police and have him removed?”

Claire looks between them, then back at Shane. They make eye contact, and something knowingly and silently is exchanged between them.

She turns, already reaching for her phone—

“Claire—”

The man's voice cuts in. Calm again, controlled, sweet?

He lifts his hands slightly, stepping back.

“No need, ma’am,” he says, almost polite now. “I apologize for the disturbance. There’s no need to call the police.”

Claire pauses.

Looks at him, then at Shane.

“I’m fine to just leave,” he adds, the words smooth—but there’s something bitter underneath them. Something tight.

Shane doesn’t move or speak, his chest is still rising and falling too fast, his pulse hasn’t calmed.

The man glances at him one last time, the composure he had with Claire slipping, the corner of his mouth twitches.

“You will have *nothing*.” He says quietly.

Then he turns and walks out, the sound of his footsteps fading, the front door opens and then shuts.

Shane takes a deep breath, trying to feel his hands again, trying to come back into his body.

Claire exhales softly, lowering her phone.

“...was that..” She starts.

Shane nods.

“do you want me to still call?” she asks carefully.

Shane shakes his head.

“No,” he says, voice rough. “No, it’s—he’s gone.”

Claire nods.

“Okay.”

Footsteps start again, the family begins coming downstairs.

The husband first, then the wife, the daughter trailing slightly behind, all of them looking a little confused, a little cautious.

“Is everything alright?” Mrs. Delaney asks.

Shane forces himself to straighten.

To breathe.

“Yeah,” he says. “Yeah, sorry about that.”

He glances briefly toward the door, then back at them.

“I deactivated the gate code earlier so you all could come in easier,” he lies. “Must’ve been someone who slipped through.”

A small, easy shrug.

“Good thing for the security system here,” he says. “Right?”

They nod, accepting it. Not fully convinced maybe, but not pushing.

“Let’s get these papers finished shall we?” Claire asks gently.

Shane nods, the family nods.

“Yeah. Yeah, let’s finish this.”

The rest moves quickly.

Shane doesn’t bother lingering on anything, trying to get to know the family anymore. He planned to be warm and welcoming but all of that is kind of out the window now.

Claire walks them through the process, her voice steady and practiced, filling the space where Shane can’t quite think straight yet.

The Delaneys smile. Ask questions. Make small comments about paint colors, about furniture placement, about how excited they are.

Shane nods and smiles when he needs to, and eventually it’s over.

“It’s done,” Claire says finally.

The words hit harder than he expects.

Done.

Shane nods, swallowing.

“Yeah,” he says quietly. “Yeah.”

He shakes hands with the husband, slight side hugs for the wife and for Claire.

Once everyone has left, Shane quickly leaves, and the second he’s in the car, the door shuts, everything hits him all at once.

The stress of selling the house, the hope for the future, the confrontation, the fear, the adrenaline.

‘You will have nothing.’

He whimpers as he thinks of what had been said to him.

The house, the signatures.

The fact that it's actually over.

His breath stutters.

It's over. It's over it's over it's over.

He breaks.

He leans forward, forehead dropping to the steering wheel, and it just comes out. Sharp, uneven sobs ripping through him before he can stop them.

He cries, hard and messy, like his body doesn't know what else to do with all of it.

Minutes pass, or maybe longer, he's not sure, it all blurs together.

But slowly it shifts, he calms down, gets deep breaths in, and relief floods through him. Real, overwhelming, bone-deep relief.

The house is gone.

That life is gone.

He doesn't have to come back here, or be that version of himself anymore.

He did it.

He actually did it.

A shaky laugh breaks through the tears, half-hysterical, half-disbelieving.

"Oh my god," he whispers to no one.

He sighs and leans back against the seat, his chest still hurts, his head still spins, there's a soft lingering unease from the man's threatening words, and what it might mean.

Though he's done for now, there are still pieces of that life attached to him. Loose ends. Things that haven't fully let go of him yet.

But it doesn't stop him. Even if there are fragments left, he can deal with them.

One by one.

The thought settles into him slowly.

"It's okay..." He whispers to himself.

He wipes at his face.

Takes a breath.

Then another.

Ilya.

The name alone calms him more than anything else has.

He needs him, needs to see him, needs to touch him. To tell him what he's done. He needs to go home.

Shane starts the car, and pulls out of the driveway without ever looking back.

By the time he reaches the apartment, he's calmed down, his feelings have settled, all he can think about is telling Ilya.

He races up the stairs, out of breath by the time he reaches the door to the apartment, swinging it open.

Shane barely remembers unlocking it, he just knows he's inside now and Ilya is there in the kitchen, exactly where he left him.

For a second, everything in Shane's chest loosens.

There he is.

Home.

"Ilya—"

It comes out breathless, relieved, he's been holding it in for hours.

He steps forward immediately, crossing the space like it's nothing, it's instinct, he just needs to touch him—

but Ilya doesn't move.

Neither toward him nor away. He just stands there, with a look on his face. A look Shane hasn't seen on him before, maybe.. maybe confusion? or hurt? Why would he— is he tearing up?

Shane slows.

"...hey," he says softer, reaching anyway, fingers brushing for his wrist.

Ilya lets him touch him but he doesn't close the distance, doesn't pull him in or kiss him.

Ilya's eyes drag over him slowly. Taking in the view. Shane in front of him, looking happier than he left, shirt wrinkled, skin flushed, hair messier.

Shane still smells faintly like outside. Like sweat. Like something else.

Ilya swallows.

"...you look like you had a good time."

The words are quiet.

Shane blinks.

“What?”

Ilya shrugs, like it doesn't matter.

“Where were you,” he asks instead, flat.

Shane exhales a small, disbelieving breath.

“I told you—I had to handle something at my house.”

“Right.”

Ilya nods once.

Then looks back at him.

“...was it worth it?”

Shane's brows pull together.

“Ilya, what are you—”

“You couldn't answer your phone,” Ilya cuts in, still calm, still controlled. “You wouldn't let me come. You've been disappearing for a month after telling me you wanted to be with me.”

His voice doesn't rise. He sounds so defeated.

“My phone? I—” Shane gestures panicked, “I didn't— I don't even know where my phone is —”

“Right.” Ilya responds.

That almost makes it worse.

“And now you come back looking like that.”

The implication lands.

Shane freezes, looking down at himself.

“...what are you saying?”

Ilya lets out a short, humorless breath.

“I'm not saying anything,” he says. “I'm asking.”

Shane stares at him.

“No, you’re not,” he says quietly. “You already decided.”

Ilya’s jaw tightens.

“Then tell me I’m wrong.”

Shane opens his mouth—

and for a second, nothing comes out.

Because how is he even supposed to start this?

“I wasn’t—”

“You weren’t what?” Ilya asks. “You weren’t with him?”

Shane flinches.

“...no.”

“You weren’t at that house?”

“I was, I told you that but not—”

“So you were there.”

“Yes but that’s not what I—”

“You wouldn’t let me come,” Ilya cuts in again, sharper now. “You wouldn’t tell me anything. You just expected me to sit here like a puppy for you?”

“What? No, Ilya that’s not—,” Shane says quickly.

“Then why didn’t you tell me?”

“I was going to—”

“When?” Ilya snaps, a crack in his voice.

“After it was done?” he continues. “After whatever this is was finished and easy for you to explain?”

Shane shakes his head, tears filling his eyes again. He doesn’t know what to do right now, or how he even got here to begin with.

“It’s not like that Ilya—”

“Then what is it like, Shane?”

His voice rises now, Shane’s lip quivers.

“You leave, you disappear, you shut me out, you won’t answer anything, and then you come back—” his voice breaks slightly, but he pushes through it, “—and you expect me to just stand here and act like nothing is happening?”

“I’m not asking you to—”

“Yes you are!” Ilya cuts him off. “You are.”

Shane’s chest tightens.

“Ilya, I just— I wanted to handle it—”

“You don’t get to just decide that!”

The words come out louder than anything else has.

“You’re not letting me talk—“ Shane tries, a tear falling.

“You don’t get to decide what I can handle,” Ilya says, breathing harder now, disregarding what Shane said. “You can’t shut me out of your life if you want to do this together.”

“I wasn’t—”

“You were.”

A heavy silence lands, Ilya looks away from Shane completely.

“I don’t even know what’s real with you right now,” Ilya says quieter, as if ashamed to even admit that.

Shane stays quiet, it seems Ilya needs to just get it off his chest, and as much as Shane wants to combat this before Ilya says to hell with him and kicks him out, he listens.

“I don’t know where you go,” Ilya continues. “I don’t know who you’re talking to. I don’t know what you’re doing.”

His voice tightens.

“I cannot tell where I stand with you these days, Shane.”

Shane’s stomach drops.

“Ilya—”

“Or if you even want me in your life the way I want you in mine,” He says, a tear falling. He tries to look away towards the wall but Shane catches his face, wiping the tear.

He snuffles, breathing deeply, trying to hold himself together, Shane’s hand is so warm against his face, he leans into it.

“Shane, I love you.”

He admits through a shaky voice and fading tears, almost like he didn't mean to say it.

The room goes still, completely still. Shane's breathing stops.

Ilya looks at him like he regrets it the second it leaves his mouth, looking at Shane to see if he said the wrong thing but not keeping eye contact for long.

His hand comes up to pull Shane's hand away from his face.

Embarrassment fills him slowly but his pride doesn't allow it to take over. He doesn't take it back. He chooses to be truthful, even through Shane's silence.

"I love you," he says again, quieter now, aggressively wiping at his eyes, like he can force it all away. "And you've been shutting me out like I don't matter."

Shane's entire world tilts.

Everything clicks into place all at once, all too late.

The calls, the distance, the way Ilya's been watching him, asking him so many questions. The way he pulled back earlier and he's pulling back now.

Shane can feel it. The clock still ticking. The time running out.

Five.. four... three...

He has so much to say to Ilya he doesn't know where to start. He needs to fix it.

two..

"Shane I can't—"

one.

"I sold the house." Shane blurts out. "I wasn't with him."

The words come out fast.

Desperate.

"I wasn't with him, I wasn't with anyone, I swear to you."

Ilya doesn't respond, he just looks, still guarded and hurt, giving Shane room to explain.

"I was trying to leave him," Shane says, voice breaking slightly. "I've been trying to leave him for a month."

Ilyas brows pull together softly, a small frown twitches at his mouth, somewhere between a what? and a really?

“I didn’t tell you because—” Shane runs a hand through his hair, pacing once, trying to get it out right. “Because I didn’t want to say it and then have it fall apart. I didn’t want to get your hopes up. I didn’t want to—”

He exhales sharply.

“I wanted to finish it,” he admits. “I wanted to hand it to you when it was real. I didn’t wanna,” He stumbles over his words. “wanna give you a bomb, I wanted to show you I was serious. About this. About us.”

Ilya’s expression shifts.

Just slightly.

“What are you talking about.”

Shane looks at him.

Really looks at him.

“I *sold* the *house*.” He says again, emphasizing it, his voice pitching up like he’s trying to punch the words into Ilya so they stick, so he believes him.

Silence.

“I went there today,” he continues, breath uneven. “That’s what all the calls were. Lawyers. Agents. Paperwork. I was trying to figure out if I could even *do it* without him.”

He lets out a small, almost disbelieving laugh.

“It’s in my name,” he says. “The whole thing. I didn’t even know.”

Ilya just stares.

Still processing.

“So I sold it,” Shane repeats, softer now. “And everything in it. It’s done. I signed everything today. It’s over.”

Ilya blinks quickly, tears welling up in his eyes again. Everything he thought he knew shifting.

“I’m out,” Shane says, sniffing, the last of the weight finally lifting off of his chest. “I’m actually out.”

“Come here.” Ilya reaches for Shane, yanking him into his chest, hugging him tight as Shane begins to cry harder into his shoulder.

“I’m sorry, Shane.” Ilya apologizes, running his hand through Shane’s hair, his own tears silently falling.

Shane whines a bit into his shoulder, “I’m sorry too, Ilya.” He chokes out. “I’m sorry I’m so sorry,” He goes on.

“I didn’t mean to hurt you, I didn’t sleep with anyone. I wasn’t choosing anything over you, I was trying to choose you.”

Ilya looks away for a second, runs a hand over his face, because now everything feels different. So many thoughts he’s had for an entire month that made so much sense to him are complete bullshit.

Of course it is.

“...you should’ve told me,” he says finally, just tired.

“I know.” Shane says, kissing Ilya’s shoulder where he’s been crying, turning his head and kissing up the side of his neck, to his jaw, and finally his mouth.

“I love you too,” He kisses him again softly. “I love you so much.”

Ilya’s body threatens to break down, just give out completely into tears. To hear Shane say it back— it just—

“Fuck, Shane.” A few more tears spill, he presses in to kiss Shane harder.

“I thought I was doing something good,” Shane admits when they break apart. “I’ve never felt like this for someone and I guess I don’t know what I’m doing. I’m sorry.”

Ilya lets out a breath.

“It’s okay.”

“I’m yours,” Shane says.

“I know.”

They look at each other, eyes red and puffy, cheeks wet and salted, taking each other in. The truth of it, the mess, the intention behind it, yet the damage it still caused.

Ilya’s upset yes, that Shane took it upon himself to do it all alone, and to keep it so secretive, but Ilya understands him.

“...please don’t do that again,” Ilya says.

Firm.

Clear.

“I won’t baby,” Shane says immediately. “I won’t, I promise.”

“Even if it’s messy?” Ilya asks.

“Right.” Shane nods.

“Even if it’s not finished.”

“Yes.” He nods again.

Silence settles between them.

“You scared me,” Ilya murmurs.

“I know,” Shane whispers back.

They stay like that for a moment, no rush, just breathing, holding one another. When they pull apart it’s not far.

Ilya admires Shane for a second longer, quieter now, something softer settling where all that tension was sitting.

“You look like shit,” he mutters.

Shane huffs out a laugh.

“Yeah,” he says. “I feel like it.”

“But you’re mine,” Ilya says, kissing Shane.

“Mhm..” Shane agrees, muffled against his lips.

They part with a soft smack, but still close.

“Does this mean I can be your boyfriend now?” Shane asks.

“I would hope so.” Ilya responds.

“Well you haven’t really asked me or anything... so...”

Ilya smiles, his hands coming up to cup Shane’s face, wiping the rest of the wetness from beneath his eyes.

“Shane Hollander,” He starts, Shane closes his eyes and laughs, already knowing where this is heading.

“My very pretty, very handsome, sexy older man— dill I think they call it—“

“Ilya.” Shane cuts him off, trying to be stern but he can’t help his smile.

“What?” Ilya grins. “It’s accurate.”

Shane shakes his head, but he doesn’t move away.

Ilya kisses him to make it better. It works.

“My dramatic, always in his head and makes me worry and have heart attack for no reason man...”

Shane lets out a quiet laugh, eyes closing briefly.

“Ilya—”

“...my stubborn, overthinking, tries to handle everything alone—”

“Okay, alright—”

“—but still shows up, still tries, still chooses me anyway—”

Shane’s smile grows just slightly, Ilya’s words making his heart swell, as technically unromantic as they are.

Ilya’s thumbs brush under his eyes again.

“My... *sweet*, confusing, frustrating—” he huffs quietly, shaking his head like he can’t even find the right word, “—kind, loving, *strong* man.”

Ilya drops his forehead gently against Shane’s. His voice drops just a little.

“*My Shane.*”

Shane exhales, something in his chest pulling tight.

Ilya watches him for a second longer, then—

“Will you make me really happy...”

A small pause, his mouth twitching like he’s trying not to smile.

“...and be my boyfriend?”

The last part comes out softer, real.

Shane doesn’t hesitate.

“Yeah,” he says, smiling, voice warm and steady. “Yeah, I will.”

Ilya nods once, satisfied.

“Good,” he murmurs.

And then he kisses him again.

Chapter 16: Shane's Monologue

Chapter Notes

I listened to Adrienne Lenker while writing this...

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

Shane taps the mic once.

It echoes a little.

“Hi everyone,” he says, smiling faintly. “Okay... I’m not gonna make this super long, I promise.”

A few quiet laughs ripple through the room. Glasses clink softly.

He glances out, his mom is already crying, tissue clutched in hand.

He exhales.

Shifts his weight, a hand rubbing over his back. He glances beside him to Ilya, so handsome in his suit and tie, white gold wedding ring on his hand.

He smiles a bit, Ilya smiles back, then he starts.

“I didn’t really think I’d be standing here,” he admits. “Not like this.”

A small pause.

“I think for a long time, I thought my life was already... decided.”

He gestures vaguely, like he doesn’t need to explain it fully.

“Like I had already stepped into something, and that was just... it. You know?”

A few people nod.

Shane looks down for a second, then back up.

“So I just wanted to kind of uplift anyone in here who may be feeling the same for any reason.”

A beat.

“To tell you that,” He swallows. “You don’t have to shrink yourself,” He continues. “To fit the shape of a life someone else imagined for you.”

He huffs a quiet breath.

“You don’t have to pretend that the ache in your chest is just restlessness or boredom or um,” he pauses.

“Something that will pass.” He smiles. “It didn’t pass for me.”

A few soft laughs.

“There’s this voice inside everyone,” he continues, more thoughtful now. “It speaks, maybe it’s been speaking for a long time.” He shrugs, looking more at the floor now than at the audience.

He taps his chest lightly.

“Sometimes it’s quiet, like wind through tall grass. And sometimes it’s stubborn, knocking against your ribs like,” He gestures vaguely. “Like a bird— a bird that knows there’s open sky somewhere through the clouds.”

He glances up again, everyone’s eyes on him. He looks down at his hand briefly, the ring. The new ring, the one that’s the metal he actually likes, the one that symbolizes the person he actually wants.

“You might try to ignore it. That voice.” He says quietly. “Many of us do. We decorate the cage, tell ourselves it’s fine. It looks okay. It must be enough.”

He lets that sit.

“But whatever is living inside you, whatever need, or desire, isn’t meant to live its life inside you, pressed against the bars of someone else’s expectations.”

The room quiets.

Shane’s voice softens a little.

“I learned it partially when I came out as gay. That I had to be true to myself. Then again, later in life.” He glances at Ilya. Their eyes meet, Ilya teary eyed.

Shane reaches out, putting a hand on Ilya’s shoulder, massaging gently.

“I had to find peace,” He says looking at Ilya. “And peace doesn’t grow in the shallow waters of greed, or appearances, or lust, or the endless hunger to be admired.”

People nod along, just listening.

“The shallow waters can sparkle at first, can look calm, or safe,” Shane says, thinking to the younger him, the Shane that had met his ex husband, and had thought what he was offered

was everything he'd need or want.

"But they're thin. You stand in them long enough and you feel how little life moves there."

He feels a tear slip down his cheek, his hand immediately coming up to wipe it away.

"Whoa i'm crying," He jokes. Laughs echo across the room. Ilya stands with him, his hand wrapping around his waist.

"Anyway, you don't find peace in shallow people, or situations. Peace grows quietly in the places you tell the truth," He continues.

"It grows the moment you allow yourself to want something others may not understand. Like a person, or a job, or a belief." He exhales, clearing his throat, more tears falling.

"And if you're afraid. If you feel too old, or too late, or too uncertain to begin again," He says.

"Just know the world is wide, and astonishing, and endlessly patient,"

"It doesn't close its doors to you because you took longer to arrive. It doesn't ask you why you waited."

He looks over the crowd, he knows some of these people personally, knows their stories, their fights, their outcomes. He knows his own story manifests in many different ways, for many different people.

"Everyday someone begins again. Everyday someone gathers courage in their hands like wildflowers and decides that their life belongs to them, and to walk into the life that's been calling their name."

He smiles through his tears, pressing his hands to his eyes for a moment, Ilya leans to kiss the side of his head.

"I just needed the courage to actually do it. To leave behind what I didn't want,"

He lets out a quiet breath.

"And... someone who made it feel worth it."

That pulls a few soft reactions from the room.

Shane looks at Ilya again.

"And I got that."

"I got you."

Silence settles.

Shane smiles a little, almost shy now.

“I didn’t want a version of my future...”

He exhales.

“...where I didn’t come home to you.”

“So I didn’t choose that one.”

A small laugh escapes him.

“I chose this instead.”

He gestures lightly around them.

The room.

The people.

The life.

“And yeah—it was messy, and scary, and not graceful at all sometimes...”

A few knowing smiles.

“but it was honest. And it was mine.”

He looks back at Ilya.

“And it was you. And I’d do it again.”

He turns back toward the room.

“I love you guys, everyone in here. Thank you for being here, for listening, for encouraging, supporting, everything else.”

He smiles and turns the microphone off, getting a little too overwhelmed to have anything else to say. Everyone claps, Ilya wipes a few tears from his own face and pulls Shane in, kissing his cheek, his forehead, anywhere he can.

“That was beautiful, malysh.” He whispers in his ear.

“Thank you, I love you.” Shane whispers back.

“I love you too.” Ilya says back with a squeeze.

It’s been two years since he sold the house and walked away from his old life, and it’s felt like 50 years have gone by in the best way.

He took the money, the money from the house, the money from his old belongings, from the divorce, and he built the life he wanted.

Quickly he and Ilya moved out of Ilya's apartment at the time, and bought a house, something cute and decent in a quiet neighborhood, Shane built a shed for the backyard with Ilya's help, he built and planted a garden, planted bushes of roses and daisies, all while Ilya complained of where his backyard bar is supposed to go.

"Well, we can't put a bar in the middle of the garden." Shane would say, taking Ilya a little too serious and trying to figure out how to make it work.

"I know malysh, I am just joking," Ilya would say back. "I like to mess with you."

Ilya's father passed in these two years. From dementia. Ilya didn't attend the funeral.

Shane paid to have Ilya's mother exhumed, though, and the remains were transported from Russia to Canada. Ilya had them cremated and reburied in their backyard. He says hello to her most mornings, and he puts flowers there, flowers from Shane's rose bushes or daisy bushes, or for special occasions he buys more flowers.

Everyday gets better and better, Shane was able to start college again, online though, the traditional college experience felt a little silly to be partaking in at his age.

He's nearly halfway through his degree for architectural engineering, it actually is a lot harder than he initially thought but he makes sure he studies, so he's fine. And Ilya gives him kisses to get through studying, so that helps too.

Ilya decided not to go to college when Shane asked if he would. He just couldn't see it for himself, but he's still progressing in his career. He switched pool companies and really got along with the owner of the company Cliff Marleau, so now he's networked himself into a contractor position in said company.

"That's so something that would happen for you," Shane said when Ilya told him. "Yes, Marleau and I build pools together and then we drink and hangout after and then I get to come to you, I'm living the dream." He responded.

They learned each other well in those two years, they were desperate to know every little thing about each other.

Not just the easy parts, but the frustrating ones, and the quiet ones. They argued. They figured it out. They stayed.

That part mattered the most.

Ilya still came home smelling like chlorine and sun and something a little rough around the edges, tossing his keys wherever he felt like and complaining about whatever went wrong that day.

Shane still hovered in the kitchen, or at his desk, or halfway through a sketch, listening even when he pretended not to be.

And at some point, without either of them saying it out loud, it all became... theirs.

Not borrowed or temporary or sneaky. Not something that could be taken away.

Something they chose, and kept choosing.

Every day.

Chapter End Notes

my babies 😊 Thank you to everyone who has read this, i dont even know what to say, this has been so fun and i have so many more au ideas! If you wanna talk to me abt my fics my twt is @coziebabiee. u all are so great and i've had such fun with every chapter. i'm also posting Shane's full poem/speech next as a standalone.

The message here is to be yourself! choose you! always choose you! even when it's hard. Be true to yourself, listen to yourself! No matter what your truth is live in it, and live in it for yourself! Shane learned this here, it's also a key theme of HR itself. and maybe I wrote from my own heart as well, love letter to myself if u will. OKAY LOVE U GUYS BYE SEE U NEXT AU (vampires...? hollanov and hudson..? idk we'll see what i cook up)

Chapter 17: Shane's Message to the World

Chapter Notes

This is the full poem as a standalone of what Shane said at his and Ilya's wedding in the epilogue.

You do not have to shrink yourself
to fit the shape of a life
someone else imagined for you.

You do not have to pretend
the quiet ache in your chest
is only restlessness
or boredom
or something that will pass.

There is a voice inside of you
that has been speaking
for a very long time.

Sometimes it is quiet—
no louder than wind
moving through tall grass.

Sometimes it is stubborn,

knocking softly against your ribs
like a bird that knows
there is open sky somewhere.

You may try to ignore it.
Many of us do.

We decorate the cage.
We tell ourselves
this must be enough.

But something living inside you
was never meant to spend its life
pressed against the bars
of someone else's expectations.

And peace does not grow
in the shallow waters
of greed
or appearances
or the endless hunger
to be admired.

Those waters sparkle at first.
They look calm.
Safe.

But they are thin.

Stand in them long enough
and you begin to feel
how little life moves there.

Peace grows quietly
in the places where you tell the truth.

It grows the moment
you allow yourself to want something
that others might not understand.

And if you are afraid
if you feel too old
or too late
or too uncertain
to begin again

The world is wide
and astonishing
and endlessly patient.

It does not close its doors to you
because you took longer to arrive.

It does not ask you
why you waited.

Every day
someone begins again.

Every day
someone gathers their courage
like wildflowers in their hands
and decides that their life
belongs to them.

To love openly.
To live honestly.

And to walk, at last,
into the life
that has been calling your name
all along.

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