Best Laid Plans and the Best Man

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Best Laid Plans and the Best Man

by Strawberrysmilees

Summary

Shane Hollander, CEO of Hollander Events, had every intention of planning the Hunter/Grady wedding with his usual precision—until Ilya Rozanov showed up and turned his rules, his heart, and his life upside down. Flying sparks, one stolen kiss, a few too many policies, and the chaos of a high-profile wedding later, Shane has to decide which rules are meant to be followed… and which are meant to be broken.

[Wedding planner!AU where Shane is organizing Scott and Kip's wedding, and Scott's best man is Ilya Rozanov. Roasts, chaos, and falling in love ensue.]

Notes

Well, hello, y'all! i know I said I was going to get back to my other long-form fic, but instead here I am—back on my Hollanov shit with another installment of "literally no one asked for this but me, and it was supposed to be a short ficlet that somehow turned into a five-day, psychosis-inducing novella."

I'm at the cottage. I have been at the damn cottage. And I will not be leaving the cottage until Season 2 comes out.

Anyway—without further ado, take it away, my love and light: Shane.

See the end of the work for more notes

12 months before the Hunter-Grady Wedding

Of all the things in the world, wedding planning was probably the last thing you'd think of when looking at Shane Hollander. He stood at 178 centimetres tall and was built like a stocky brick shithouse, all solid muscle and sharp, mixed features, with a smattering of freckles spilling across his nose and cheeks. People (usually women) liked to say he looked more like a professional athlete, a hockey player even, and a handsome one at that. Shane didn't know about that, but he supposed it made sense - he was from Ottawa after all, and hockey was as Canadian as maple syrup.

Despite appearances, he was the second generation CEO of one of the most successful wedding planning firms in Canada, with offices in Ottawa, Montreal, and Vancouver, and a newly opened satellite office in New York.

Which was how he now found himself seated at a freshly minted office desk, across from two of the most handsome men he had ever seen. One of whom was, in fact, a professional athlete.

"So we just want something small and intimate. No more than a hundred people—just family and close friends."

Christopher Grady—Kip, as he'd corrected Shane upon entry—rambled on with the unmistakable flushed glow of a man in love, freshly affianced and ready to start the rest of his life. The platinum band on his finger caught the fluorescent light as he spoke. Beside him, Scott Hunter, captain of the New York Admirals, had an arm hooked around the back of Kip's chair and was gazing at him like he was the only living thing in the room. Shane might have been a little offended, if facilitating this exact dynamic weren't literally his job.

"I want it to be classy and timeless, not too over the top. Just something that feels like us, you know?"

Kip's expression was excited and earnest, with a flicker of uncertainty beneath it. He was clearly not the kind of groom who had been dreaming about his wedding his whole life, and he would need a little help finding a vision before bringing it to life.

No matter. That was exactly what Shane specialised in. And given that this was both their first and very high-profile client in America, it was also why Shane was handling the consultation personally.

"Sure," Shane said after a brief beat of silence, jotting a few notes into the notebook in front of him as professional ease slid into place. "We can make that happen. No worries. Do you have any ideas for venues?"

"We'd like to have the reception at the bar where we met," Scott spoke up for the first time. His deep voice made Shane jump slightly. "But we're not too picky about where we hold the ceremony. Something brightly lit, with lots of glass and greenery, if that's possible."

Shane smoothed his expression quickly, scribbling down keywords as ideas for potential ceremony locations immediately began slotting into place.
“Absolutely. There are a few options at different price points and distances, with varying availability. I’ll get you some details by the end of the week. Is there anything else you want to mention up front?”

“Money isn’t really an issue,” Scott continued, and Shane nodded as he spoke, taking notes as fast as his wrist would allow. “We’re hoping to get married soon, maybe by the next off-season, so it’d be great if you could please get us some places with that kind of availability. And we’d like to keep things pretty low profile, which might be hard since a lot of our guests are well known.”

“I can imagine,” Shane said dryly. “There’ll be a few NHL players in attendance, then. Anyone from the Metros or the Bears, by any chance?”

Scott looked taken aback, as though he hadn’t expected Shane to know hockey at all, and nodded hesitantly.
“Yeah. I’ve got friends across the league, and my best man’s with the Bears. You follow hockey?”

Shane scoffed, covering it with a polite cough, ever the consummate professional.
“I was born and raised in Ottawa by a pair of Montrealers. What do you think?”

Both Scott and Kip barked out surprised laughter, and Shane let his expression soften into a small, genuine smile.

“I like you already, Shane,” Kip said, standing as he glanced at the small clock on Shane’s desk. They were right on time. “I’m really looking forward to what you put together for our special day.”

Shane rose as well, offering both men a firm but warm handshake. “At Hollander Events,” he said smoothly, “we endeavour to make your wedding day exactly what you want it to be, down to the smallest detail.”

He walked them out of his office, passing his assistant and best friend Hayden on the way to the frosted glass of the front door.

“So, I’ll send over the welcome packet with a few preliminary concept ideas—things like colour palettes and aesthetic themes for you to think about—as well as the ceremony venues by the end of this week. Then we can reconvene in a fortnight to start putting the vision together.”

Kip took Shane’s hand with both of his own and shook it warmly, while Scott rested a hand on his shoulder.
“Thanks, Shane. We’ll see you then.”

Scott gave his shoulder a friendly squeeze before exiting the office, and Kip squeezed Shane’s hand fondly in turn.

“See you, Shane!” Kip’s grin was nearly blinding as he trailed after his fiancé. Hayden gave a low whistle from his desk.

“Goddamn, they sure are a fine-ass couple,” Shane barked a laugh, strolling back to his office.
“There’s still time if you want to make a move, Hayd,” he added, rolling his eyes as he passed, “they're not married yet. Feel free to shoot your shot, I'd love to watch you get turned down.”

Hayden threw a balled-up piece of paper that sailed through his office door and hit the back wall by Shanes shoulder. he grimaced at the waste, bending quickly to toss it into the waste paper bin at his feet. “Oh, fuck off. I would never leave Jackie or the kids—they’re my whole world! But there’s sure to be a lot of NHL beefcake at that wedding. Can I come and wingman for you?”

“You can come if you’ll be of use,” Shane called as he sat back down at his desk, pulling over his laptop and opening the already half-finished welcome packet. “But no wingman services will be necessary. You know my rule: no fraternising with anyone associated with a client wedding.”

He could almost hear Hayden’s answering eye-roll.
“You are a fucking *riot*, Hollander,” his tone was fondly biting and sarcastic, and Shane felt his lips curl into another small smile.

“Thanks, Hayd. Let’s get to it.”

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10 months before the Hunter-Grady Wedding

The months passed in a blur as hockey season kicked off, with many of Shanes regular check-ins with the happy couple being online or by Kip alone, coming to chat at the office often with drinks or cookies in tow. The next time Shane saw the happy couple for more than a fortnightly half-hour update was at their engagement photoshoot, which they had requested to be “smoothie shop themed.”

Shane had worked in the industry long enough to know not to question a bride—or groom—about strange requests and ideas. He kept his questions to himself and focused on the details: booking out the requested Lower East Side smoothie joint, Straw+Berry, for the day and securing his go-to photographer and friend, J.J. Dagenais, who, by providence, happened to be in town on other business and had availability to shoot.

Typically, wedding planners didn’t stick around for engagement shoots, opting instead to appear at the kickoff and then make their exit. Shane, however, liked to think that the dedication and attention to detail that had made Hollander Events so successful extended to moments like this. Sticking around gave him a chance to observe the couple in a more natural setting—observations that sometimes proved useful later in the planning process.

Like being able to meet the wedding party, who Kip had informed him would be taking part in the shoot the week prior. It was a slightly unconventional choice, but Shane thought it was nice—especially since the maid of honor, Elena, had apparently been pivotal to their getting together and had a lot of insight to provide as an observer of the relationship from its beginning. He had met her earlier at her arrival and was immediately enamoured by her friendly demeanour.

The best man was conspicuously late, although Scott had assured him that he had called with notice and apologies that morning. Shane fought the urge to grind his teeth—punctuality was especially crucial in the wedding industry.

He settled onto a plush couch at the back of the smoothie shop, scrolling through emails and jotting notes in his phone. He was midway through a response to one of the catering companies he'd requested information from when the light shifted around him and he became aware—suddenly and unmistakably—of someone standing in his shadow.

A deep, accented voice cleared its throat.

"Hollander? As in *Hollander Events* Hollander?"

Shane looked up from his phone. His mouth went dry.

The first thing he noticed were the curls—messy, deep gold—framing a striking face. His gaze drifted down past plush eyebrows and bright hazel eyes to full lips and a strong, cleft chin, then back up again before he could stop himself.

He'd seen this man before, usually on TV after a game, clad in black and yellow, curls plastered dark and wet with sweat against his forehead. Now, up close, clean and dry, dressed in a sky-blue polo and charcoal slacks that accentuated a broad chest and trim waist, he was devastatingly handsome. Shane felt momentarily robbed of speech.

Heat crept into his cheeks. He shot to his feet, scrounging around in his pockets for a business card that he held out almost on autopilot.

"Yeah—hi. I'm Shane."

He cursed inwardly at the dry, controlled tone of his voice, wishing he could summon something smoother, more effortless. The tall man eyed him, a bemused quirk already tugging at his lips.

"Okay. I am best man. Ilya Rozenov."

He took Shane's outstretched hand and gave it a firm shake. His wide palm slid smoothly against Shane's, sending a shiver up his spine—one Shane suppressed with considerable effort. The bemused smile didn't fade as he brought the business card closer to his face, examining the shiny light blue cardstock with H*ollander Events*, Shanes title *CEO* and his contact information embossed with matte cream and black lettering.

“I thought Hunter’s wedding planner was woman,” Ilya continued mildly. “You look more like you are also hockey player. Maybe ECHL.”

Shane’s jaw tightened. He withdrew his hand, gripping his phone hard enough to ground himself as irritation flared hot and sharp. Beneath it, something else curled, unsettled by the way Ilya’s gaze tracked him openly, assessing, curious. He tapped the card to his plush lips absently, and slipped it into his back pocket.

“Yeah, I know you,” shane responded tightly. “Captain of the Boston Bears, right?”

He crossed his arms, forcing distance back into the space between them, schooling his expression into practiced indifference. It didn’t seem to matter. Ilya’s eyes stayed on him, unbothered, unreadable.

“For your information, although Hollander Events specialises in weddings, we provide a wide range of event-related services—from coordination to logistics—for birthdays and other functions.” He fixed Ilya with a flat look. “And it is our firm belief that a person’s gender has no bearing on their competence. Present company excluded.”

He stepped past him, close enough that he caught the clean scent of soap and something warm and spicy underneath, and headed for JJ, who had paused the shoot to adjust his camera. An irrational urge to take a deep breath and identify the notes in the scent—musk and cinnamon, maybe—gripped him momentarily, although the irritation quickly took back over.

“And for the record,” Shane added, not slowing, “I played hockey for McGill in college. If I wanted to, I’d probably be in the NHL—seeing as they seem to be letting *any old meathead* in these days.”

He shot Ilya with a scathing glare. It had no visible effect. The infuriatingly bemused smirk remained firmly in place, and Shane—who was not, by nature, a violent or impulsive person—briefly contemplated how satisfying it would be to wipe it off his face. With a punch, or maybe something else.

“Besides,” Shane continued coolly, “with how the Bears did last season—and how they’re doing this one—I’d be more worried about being demoted to the AHL if I were you.”

“You know hockey, and have a temper,” Ilya spoke after him, almost fondly. “Don’t you, Hollander.”

It wasn’t a question.

Shane turned away, spine straight, step final.

“Not at all.”

Behind him, he could feel the weight of Ilya’s gaze linger—unmoved, unrepentant—like a promise or a challenge. He moved over to JJ, who seemed to be finished with his adjustments, looking up to greet Shane with a friendly smile.

“Hey, Shane, how’s it—whoa, what the fuck? Why is your face so red? Are you okay?” Greeting him in their usual comfortable French, JJ’s expression dropped from casual to concerned in a flash.

Shane cursed inwardly again at the red flush that JJ confirmed had not left his cheeks.

“I’m fine. Just a bit hot.” His voice was clipped as he responded in French, and took a deep breath to steady himself before speaking again. “How much longer do you think we’ll go for?”

JJ shot him a final look but didn’t press, letting the smile creep back onto his deep brown cheeks. “Not much longer now. We’re finished with the couple shots and the ones with just the maid of honour. Now we just need a few more with the best man and a group shot or two, and then we’ll be all good!” His small smile grew into a grin. “Should be half an hour, an hour tops, I’d say.”

“Cool, sounds good. What did you think of the best man?” Shane’s considerable effort to keep his tone casual paid off as JJ’s smile cooled a bit, his cheek twitching as he spoke.

“Well, I know you don’t like it when people are late, and he didn’t seem particularly apologetic. Just seems like a typical Russian macho-man type.”

Shane scoffed. “Yeah, kind of a dick, huh?”

JJ barked a laugh, clapping him on the shoulder good-naturedly. “Your words, not mine! I'm surprised, though, its pretty rare that someone ruffles Shane ‘*Mr Cool’* Hollander feathers.” punctuating the improvised nickname with air quotes. Shane flushed again and nudged his friend lightly. “Fuck off”

JJ backed another laugh and continued “Don’t worry. I’m sure you’ll only have to see him like once or twice more for this wedding, and then you’ll never have to interact with the guy again!”

JJ switched to English to call the wedding party together for a few pictures as Shane nodded and stepped back out of the way. He watched the shoot unfold, unable to stop himself from sneaking a glance or two at Rozanov, who flashed him a smirk and a wink when their eyes met.

Once or twice more, huh? That’s a relief… right?

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8 months before the Hunter-Grady Wedding

‘Once or twice more’ ended up being a lot sooner than Shane had anticipated, he thought, as he tried not to stare at the tall Russian man standing beside Kip. They stood side by side, marvelling at the sizable greenhouse, surrounded on all sides by a riot of flowers.

“Wow, they’re all so *beautiful*! Don’t you think so, Ilya?” Kip examined a few of the bunches closest to him—white spray roses—tracing their petals tenderly.

Ilya bent down and gave a different bunch—red tulips—a sharp sniff, his lips settling into that irritating, ever-present bemused smirk.

“Sure, Kip. Is lovely. Flowers is very manly activity for us to do together,” he drawled.

Kip nudged him playfully, and Shane looked on, glancing down at his brown leather wristwatch. The florist was taking their time in the back, and Shane had a Zoom meeting with the board in an hour and a half. He was already on edge. The smirk on Ilya Rozanov’s face—one that seemed to grow more smug every time their eyes met—wasn’t helping the tight, electric feeling gathering beneath Shane’s skin.

“Aww, shut up, Rozanov. You asked to come! Remember? Since Scott’s at an away game this week and you had time to kill before meeting your friend Svet…?” Kip’s ever-cheerful tone was a welcome distraction as he made small laps around the greenhouse.

Shane mentally catalogued the flowers Kip lingered over the longest—white spray roses and bridal roses, peace lilies and waxflowers, eucalyptus—to suggest to the florist when they returned.

“Svetlana,” Ilya corrected over his shoulder as he made his own slow circuit of the shop, sniffing other blooms with exaggerated seriousness. “My Sveta. We are having dinner later. In East Village.”

He stopped at peach peonies, pink ranunculus, white jasmine, pale blue hydrangeas—wiggling his eyebrows at Shane with each overdone inhale. Shane told himself the heat creeping into his cheeks was from the greenhouse. B*esides,* he told himself. *he was meeting a “friend” that was a girl. A girl friend. Maybe even a girlfriend.*

“We should be finishing up in no more than an hour,” Shane said, glancing toward the door. “And the East Village is… a bit of a drive.” He let the sentence trail off, jaw tightening slightly as he hoped Rozanov would take the hint.

Instead, Ilya stretched to his full height and flashed Shane a wider smile, stepping closer until the dark-haired man had to crane his neck to meet his hazel eyes. Shane’s shoulders squared instinctively, his fingers curling once at his side.

“I am here to help my best friend’s fiancé,” Ilya said lightly. “Dinner can wait. If I am late, I will call Sveta and let her know.”

His smile curled into something sharper. Wicked.

“Besides, if I am not here, who will help Kip? He needs someone with…” Ilya paused, eyes dragging deliberately down Shane’s outfit and back up again, “…good taste. Is good I am here and not Hunter. He has shit taste.”

Shane flushed again, this time with anger. His lips pressed thin before he spoke. “That coming from Mr. Black Pants and Black Jacket over there? Just because you dress like the Terminator doesn’t mean you look like him.”

For a split second, Ilya’s eyebrows shot up. Then he barked a laugh, loud and delighted, clapping Shane on the shoulder hard enough to make him rock forward half a step.

“Terminator,” Ilya grinned. “I like this. Is that who you thought of when you looked at me?”

Shane opened his mouth, then shut it again.

“Hey! Leave Shane alone, Ilya!” Kip called, already half-laughing, oblivious to the charged silence humming beneath it all. “Besides, I like the sweater and collar thing, I think its cute. Boyish.”

Shane flashed Kip a shy, grateful smile. Kip winked back. The Canadian man glanced at his watch again, trying hard not to think about how differently his body was reacting to the winks from the two men.

Kip is your client, not your friend. That’s why your body knows there’s nothing to it, Shane told himself desperately, refusing to meet Ilya’s eyes—who had, thankfully, resumed making his rounds around the greenhouse. *And Ilya is just his client’s friend. Part of the wedding party. He’s just cocky and annoying. That’s why your heart is racing.*

“Would you like me to go see what the holdup is with the florist?” Shane offered, moving from his spot by the door toward the back.

Kip shook his head. “Nah, it’s okay. I don’t mind the wait. Shouldn’t be too much longer, right?”

“Sorry about the wait!” A shrill voice cut through the conversation as the florist, a slim woman in her thirties, emerged from around the corner pushing a cart stacked with blooms in careful arrangements.

Shane zoned out slightly as she launched into explanations of scent profiles and flower language, with Kip listening raptly and Ilya, to his surprise, looking genuinely interested.

He was midway through weighing the pros and cons of taking a taxi back to the satellite office versus the subway—factoring in traffic and cost—when his phone buzzed.

Shane stepped behind one of the large sample arrangements by the door—a large crescent moon made from flowers in varying shades of white—to take it, speaking in hushed tones as he nodded apologetically to the occupants of the greenhouse.

“Hollander?” Shane spun around to find Ilya standing there, arms full of sunflowers, eyeing him with open curiosity.

“Oh—sorry. I had to take that. It was the office in Montreal. Is the consult done?”

Ilya nodded. “Kip is very efficient. He saw arrangement he liked and went with it. He is finalising order with florist now.”

Shane hummed, a small measure of relief flooding his chest. “Oh, that’s good. I’m glad he found something he liked.”

Ilya moved closer, shifting the flowers in his arms before shaping his hands into a loose O at his sternum.

“Go like this,” he ordered, gesturing for Shane to copy him.

“Why…?” Shane asked, suspicion flickering—though his body betrayed him, already moving. He shoved his phone into his pocket and mirrored the pose, fingertips touching.

Ilya stepped into his space and placed the large bundle of sunflowers into the cradle of Shane’s hands. Shane gripped them instinctively. Yellow petals filled his vision, blocking out everything else.

“What the fuck?” he murmured.

Ilya slid his hands through the flowers, parting them just enough for their eyes to meet again—only for a moment. Then his attention returned to the blooms. He tugged and adjusted their heads with careful precision.

Shane watched, oddly mesmerised by Ilya’s focused expression, the slight knit of his brows as he worked. The stalks rustled, rough against Shane’s palms.

“There,” Ilya said at last. “Sunflowers suit you.”

Only then did Shane realise the flowers had been arranged to frame his face—petals brushing his cheeks, tucked beneath his chin. He stood frozen, stunned, words abandoning him completely. Shane flushed hard.

“What the fuck, Rozanov?” he finally managed, spluttering after a moment.

Ilya wasn’t listening. He’d already pulled out his phone and was taking an alarming number of pictures, eyes bright with mischief and unmistakable delight.

“Yes, Hollander,” he said warmly. “Stay right there. Perfect. You are so pretty.”

Shane struggled to form a coherent thought as his heart thundered in his chest, blood sloshing loudly in his ears. It could have been 30 seconds or 30 minutes as He stood frozen, gaping, blushing with embarrassment, rage and something he couldn’t identify as Ilya continued taking pictures. “The blush makes me see your freckles more.”

“Hey, Shane, Lily says she needs some details from you to finish the order—where—oh, sorry!” Kip’s cheerful voice cut through the strange bubble Shane had found himself in as he rounded the same corner Ilya had emerged from, booking form in hand.

“How cute! Aren’t sunflowers your favorite, Ilya?” There was a small quirk in his lip that sent a bolt of embarrassment through Shane, and he quickly dropped the sunflowers into a nearby empty water pot.

“Especially today,” Ilya’s voice rumbled across Shane’s chest as he passed the tall man, and he fought back a strange, involuntary shiver.

“Sorry, Kip, I’ll be right there—please delete those, Rozanov.” Shane tried to sound casual as he willed his pulse to slow, but Ilya was still grinning as he flicked through his phone, clearly admiring his handiwork.

“Over my dead body. Come look, Kip! Shane looks like… how you call… a *Cabbage Patch Kid*!” Ilya’s delight rang in his bright tone, and Kip scuttled over to join him, cooing at the impromptu photoshoot.

“Oh, Shane, these are just darling! Do you want to be a flower girl in the wedding?”

Shane left the two men chuckling amongst themselves, reminding himself—again—that Kip was a client. He couldn’t tell him to *fuck off*, not even in a friendly way.

“Thanks for the offer, Kip, but I’ll have to pass!” Shane fought to keep his tone casual and professional as he called over his shoulder, moving toward the cash register where Lily was waiting. “I’ll be too busy making sure your wedding is amazing!”

“My loss!” Ilya called after him, and Shane rolled his eyes.

Maybe he would take a taxi back to the office. he could use the ride to get his heart to settle abit before his meeting with the board.

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5 months before the Hunter-Grady wedding

No matter how fond Shane was growing of New York—and of his reasonably sized apartment only a block from the satellite office in Chelsea—Montréal would always feel more like home. Not as much as Ottawa, or the family’s lakeside cottage in Ontario, but the home of his professional life: the headquarters of the family business his parents had built from the ground up, and the responsibility he felt duty-bound to uphold and grow.

It was almost too convenient that a required trip back to Montréal for his quarterly shareholders’ briefing just happened to coincide with the NHL All-Star Weekend, but he couldn’t bring himself to be too bummed out.

Not when Hayden was happy to be home with his family—who had ultimately decided against moving to America, only to uproot themselves again once the satellite office was settled. And especially not when Shane was able to see his parents, who welcomed him back to his Outremont penthouse with open arms, his plants miraculously still alive.

He was in a remarkably good mood as he sat in the boutique tuxedo shop, until the bell above the door rang. And who should walk in behind Scott Hunter but Ilya Rozanov, wearing his signature casual smirk.

“Hey, Scott—and… oh.” Shane fought to smooth the scowl that had fallen across his face back into something professionally neutral.

“Hey, Shane! Ilya tagged along,” Scott said good-naturedly, patting Shane on the shoulder as he passed him to browse the tuxedos hanging in neat rows at the back of the store. “Figured it was a good time to get his fitting done too, since we’ve got the morning off.”

“Hello, Hollander. Nice to see you again.”

Ilya drifted closer, stopping a little too far inside Shane’s personal space for comfort. He placed a hand on Shane’s shoulder and gave it a squeeze, mirroring Scott’s greeting—except Scott’s touch hadn’t made Shane’s stomach flip.

“Hi, Rozanov,” Shane supplied curtly, nodding.

Both men were bundled in heavy coats with turned-up collars, oversized sunglasses clearly meant to shield them from attention. Shane swallowed, aware of the lump forming in his throat as Ilya unzipped his coat, peeling it off his smooth chest and broad shoulders in what felt like slow motion.

Ilya removed his sunglasses, folding them one-handed with his lips before sliding them neatly into the front pocket of Shane’s button-down shirt. Heat rushed to Shane’s cheeks.

“Wha—”

“Be a dear and hold those for me, will you, Hollander?” Ilya cut in smoothly, winking as he moved past him to take in the boutique. “This place is really nice,” he added, whistling lowly.

Scott barked a short laugh as he followed their exchange, already elbow-deep in one of the racks.

“My family has worked with this boutique for years,” Shane said, finding his footing again. “They grew alongside Hollander Events. The shop offers both ready-to-wear and bespoke, with full measuring and tailoring services to ensure your tux fits like a glove on your big day. François, the owner, will be out in a moment to take you to the fitting rooms. There’s also champagne and refreshments in the other room.”

“Wow, almost like a wedding dress place, huh?” Scott grinned.

“Yeah, like that show on TMZ—*Say Yes to the Dress*,” Ilya chimed in as he pulled a deep midnight ready-to-wear suit from the rack and eyed it thoughtfully.

Shane bit back a laugh. “You watch that?”

“I watch it on planes,” Ilya said solemnly. “To prepare for Hunter becoming a bridezilla. Training purposes only.”

Shane giggled behind his hand as a figure emerged from the back of the store, bespeckled and grinning from ear to ear.

“Ah, Shane. *Mon cher.*”

Shane returned the grin as he moved to greet the older man—clearly in his seventies—with a warm hug.

“Salut, François. *Ça fait un bail*,” he replied good-naturedly, then switched to English for the benefit of the other two men. “It’s good to see you.”

“And you!” François said in his heavily Québécois-accented English, patting Shane’s back before releasing him. “And you’ve brought some guests.”

“Yes, this is—”

“Scott Hunter and Ilya Rozanov,” François interrupted smoothly. “Here for the NHL Finals, I presume.”

Both men nodded, gaping slightly.

“I have tickets to the game tomorrow,” François continued, eyes twinkling, “and perhaps a small bet on you. Don’t make me lose my money—or perhaps the crotch of your pants will be very tight at the wedding.”

Scott broke first, barking out a laugh as he stepped forward to shake François’s hand. “I’ll do my best. Wouldn’t want my fiancé thinking he’s marrying a guy with a small package, now would I?”

Ilya was at his side in an instant. “You can make the crotch small,” he said easily. “Hunter doesn’t have much to work with anyway. I, on the other hand—”

He waggled his eyebrows at Shane, that irritating smirk back in place, dimples cutting deep into his cheeks. “—will need extra room to fit my *extra large* d—”

“Should we get to the fitting?” Shane cut in smoothly, rolling his eyes.

François chuckled. “No time to waste. Groom first, maid of honor after.”

Ignoring Ilya’s mock protests, François placed a hand between Scott’s shoulder blades and steered him toward the fitting rooms at the back.

Shane and Ilya trailed behind, converging in a small waiting room with plush couches and a coffee table spread. Shane plopped down as though in his own living room and picked a cucumber finger sandwich from the spread.

“So your family’s worked with François for many years, huh?”

Ilya sat beside him on the couch, selecting a pink macaron and bringing it to his lips with long, strong fingers.

Shane chewed quickly, squeaking his response around a half-swallowed mouthful. “Yeah. François is really a friend of the family. He made my first bespoke suit—for my university graduation. And the one I wore when I was named CEO a few years ago.”

Ilya nodded, chewing and swallowing thoughtfully. “I thought you were just… what do you call it. A nepo baby.”

Shane snorted, already preparing a scathing retort, but Ilya continued calmly.

“Then I saw your company Instagram. The photos from Rose Landry’s wedding; you planned personally.”

Shane blinked, caught off guard. “You found the Instagram?”

“It was on your business card, Hollander,” Ilya drawled, the edge of his tone making Shane feel faintly ridiculous.

“Oh. Right.”

Ilya continued, unperturbed. “I also saw article in *Vogue*. Rose called you out by name—said you were instrumental in making the day magical. Even the table settings. Screenplays from her films as the centrepieces?”

Shane was surprised Ilya had read that far, his chest warming. “Yeah. Rose is a good friend. And since her husband’s a screenwriter, I thought it would be a nice touch. I’m just glad she liked it.”

He smiled to himself. “My parents were hoping I’d be the groom at that wedding, so it was… nice to put that particular wish to rest with my own two hands. And it reminded me how much I like the delivery side of the business. Operations matter, but bringing a couple’s vision to life—that’s the best part of the job.”

Shane felt a sudden flicker of embarrassment at his monologue but when he glanced over, Ilya’s expression held genuine interest. Curious, not sharp.

“I can see that, Even with Hunter and Kip’s wedding. Kip told me how you fixed the issue with the caterer refusing to serve parmesan chicken. You’re very good at what you do.” Ilya’s comments were simple, matter-of-fact. Shane bit his lip to keep from smiling like an idiot.

“And this place,” he added lightly. “High quality. Classy. Like you.”

Heat climbed Shane’s neck. He spluttered. “Well—thanks, Rozanov. That’s… kind.” He cleared his throat. “You’re also very good at what you do.”

Ilya snorted. “I am just a lazy monkey, good with stick.”

Shane nudged him as he leaned forward to grab another finger sandwich—tuna this time.

“You are literally here for the NHL All-Star game. And I’ve watched your games—it’s like you’re flying on the ice. You’re so fast, and your shots are so precise! Honestly,” Shane was

rambling now, but he couldn't stop. "If me being a Bears fan in Montreal wasn't a death wish, I'd go for you guys all the time."

Shane jammed the sandwich into his mouth to stop himself. Ilya was quiet for a beat, smirk softening into something genuine—the first Shane had ever seen on the Russian man's face.

"Would you like to come to the game tonight?" His tone was low, almost tender, missing the usual sarcastic edge it normally carried.

Shane looked over again, eyes wide with surprise. "You… have seats?"

Ilya nodded.

"I always keep some for friends at the All-Star Game. Never know." He shrugged.

"Is there enough for three people?" Shane bit his lip, stomach churning.

"Sure, I can arrange it," Ilya said with a smile. "Come. Bring whoever. Just… not your girlfriend."

Shane rolled his eyes. "I don't have one. But my parents are hockey-crazy, like everyone else around here, so they'll be thrilled to come."

Ilya opened his mouth as though to say more—but just then Scott emerged from the fitting room in a mock up of his tux, crafted in muslin and marked with bright blue chalk lines.

Shane rose quickly and slipped back into work mode, praising the fit on Scott and making a few measured adjustment suggestions. Scott turned playfully in the mock-up suit while Ilya cheered him on, tossing out a handful of mockingly oversuggestive comments that had both Scott and François shaking with laughter. Shane smiled politely and chuckled along, his eyes carefully fixed on Scott—or the snack table, or his phone.

His mind, however, lingered on his earlier conversation with Ilya. It was becoming difficult to pretend he was just another guy in the wedding party when Ilya had been so… forward. Reading up on Shane and the company. Remembering details like the centrepieces from Rose's wedding—details Shane doubted Rose herself could have recalled on the spot, beyond knowing she'd loved every part of her day. But Ilya Rozanov had remembered. Remembered enough to bring it up casually, halfway through a macaron.

Shane fought back both a flush and a cringe as he replayed the way he'd gushed about the Russian to his face, certain it must have been obvious how closely he'd followed Ilya's career over the years. But instead of looking repulsed by the fanboying, Ilya had seemed… happy. Almost flattered, and not in a mocking way—as though genuine praise wasn't something he heard all that often. Which had to be impossible, considering he was a professional NHL player, a captain no less, for one of the hottest teams in the league this season.

And then there were the tickets. Accepting them probably hadn't been the smartest idea—but Shane knew his parents had been trying, unsuccessfully, to get seats for months. After so

much time away, he also knew they'd be thrilled to trade their usual downtown dinner for seats in the team's allocated section.

It was becoming strangely complicated. Was Ilya Rozanov becoming his… friend? Shane tried to untangle the thought, then shook his head and dismissed it as overthinking. Ilya wasn't a client; he was part of the wedding party, offering a favor because the game was that night and he'd clearly had extra tickets. Shane could—and would—keep it professional.

When Scott finished and switched places with Ilya, the Russian emerged in a similar muslin mock-up. He'd clearly been joking around with François; his round hazel eyes sparkled with the remnants of a half-told joke. Shane recommended sleeve and back tweaks, heart thundering, cheeks warm, as Ilya turned—his round, peachy ass in view.

"Wow, Rozy, how much junk are you keeping in that trunk?" Scott joked good-naturedly, shoving three finger sandwiches into his mouth at once.

Ilya flipped him off playfully.

Between fittings, Shane ducked away long enough to call his mother with the news about the tickets. As predicted, she was ecstatic—though perhaps slightly less pleased that they'd come courtesy of the captain of the fiercest rivals of her beloved metros.

François, efficient as ever, wrapped up both fittings in under an hour. Soon enough, Shane found himself exiting the boutique, order forms completed and filed, final fitting scheduled, delivery arranged for the satellite office in New York.

"So, what now?" Shane asked politely as the three adjusted their coats on the stoop of the boutique.

"I've gotta duck into Fairmount Bagel," Scott spoke up first. "Kip goes crazy over those things whenever I bring them home—as if we don't have enough good bagels in New York." He rolled his eyes behind his sunglasses, though the affection was unmistakable. "I cant keep it fresh until i get home, so I thought he might like a T-shirt or something."

Shane smiled. "You could always bring back maple butter. It's not a fresh bagel, but at least he'll get a little taste of Montréal with his morning toast."

Scott clapped him on the shoulder gratefully. "That's a great idea. Kip's got a pretty legendary sweet tooth. See you back at the hotel, Ilya?"

He jogged off, leaving Shane and Ilya in the wake of a brief, companionable silence.

So," Ilya drawled, "where are you headed now, Mr. CEO?"

"Back to the office. There are a few loose ends I need to tie up if I'm going to make it to the game tonight." shane glanced down at his phone, then frowned. "And—oh, fuck."

"What?" Ilya asked, concern creeping into his tone.

Shane waved him off. “Nothing, nothing. My mom just wants to stop by and say thank you for the tickets. She’s… very excited. They’ve been trying to get some ever since Montréal was announced as the host.”

Ilya quirked an eyebrow. “She is nearby?”

Shane nodded. “Yeah. She was just at the office—it’s right around the corner. And she’s still technically part of the company as a board member, so she comes in sometimes.”

As he finished speaking, a flash of motion in his peripheral vision resolved into Yuna Hollander rounding the corner. “Shane!” she called cheerfully.

He caught her in a bear hug as she reached him, then stepped back and gestured to the man at his side. “Hey, Mom. This is Ilya Rozanov. Rozanov, this is my mom, Yuna Hollander”

Ilya held out a hand, which she shook firmly, her smile warm but assessing.

“Is nice to meet you,” he said, his voice low—almost nervous. Shane’s heart clenched, horrified to realize he found Ilya’s trepidation endearing.

“So you are the man I have to thank for the tickets,” Yuna said, “and for the devastating two–six loss last season.”

Ilya’s lips curled into a wicked grin as Shane watched on, equally amused. “Ah. A Montréal fan. I hope it is some consolation that the Metros knocked us out of the playoffs last year.”

“Almost,” Yuna said briskly. “It will be better when we knock you out this year, too.”

Shane rolled his eyes at her overly intense tone. “Mom, he’s literally gifting us tickets to the All-Star Game.”

“What? He’s still a Bear!” she exclaimed, and Ilya laughed.

“You wound me. is painful to have such a beautiful hockey fan be so brutal. You must be where Shane got his looks and his wit.” He clutched his chest in mock injury as Yuna swatted him playfully, clearly flattered.

“A charming Boston Bear if ever there was one.” She winked, and Shane rolled his eyes fondly.

“Sorry, Rozanov,” Shane said dryly. “My mom cares a bit too much about hockey. It’s a Montréal thing, apparently.”

But Ilya was still smiling, taking it all in stride. “Is intense. Passionate. I like it. Just like you.” His gaze flicked to Shane. “Another thing you got from her.”

Yuna laughed again, looping an arm through Ilya’s and—to Shane’s horror—steering him forward in the direction of the office .“Come. Coffee on me for the tickets—the first of many. Good lattes on the ground floor.”

“Mom, Ilya probably has to get back to the hotel,” Shane said, hurrying after them. “He has a game tonight, remember?”

“Nonsense,” she waved him off without looking back. “It won’t take a minute. We’ll get him an Uber from the office—he’ll have plenty of time. Stop worrying, Shane.”

“Yeah, Shane,” Ilya added almost smugly. “Stop worrying.”

Shane was grateful they weren’t looking at him as heat rushed to his cheeks for what felt like the umpteenth time that day. He merely hummed and trailed behind them, resisting the urge to cross his arms petulantly.

Yuna and Ilya continued down the street toward the Montréal headquarters, chatting animatedly, arms linked as though they’d known each other for years rather than minutes. Shane half-zoned out as they compared notes on the city and hockey, Ilya charming his mother with ease.

“I cannot believe you are mother,” Ilya said. “Your skin is perfect. I thought you might be Shane’s sister.”

Yuna giggled, nudging him with their hooked arms. “Stop, you charmer. I’m old enough to be a grandmother.” She shot Shane a pointed look over her shoulder. “At least, I *should* be—if someone weren’t so picky.”

Ilya glanced back as well, but Shane refused to meet his eye, choosing to stare down at the pavement instead.

“Picky, hmm?” Ilya drawled. “I suppose he must be, since access is clearly not the problem—being a wedding planner. Bridesmaids and all that.”

Yuna shook her head as they reached the building, the historic façade giving way to a sleek modern lobby. She navigated them confidently toward the coffee bar.

“Oh, it’s not even that,” she said brightly. “He doesn’t fraternise with clients.” She collected three paper cups from the barista—when had she even ordered those?—and continued without missing a beat. “Or their groomsmen. Or their cousins. Or anyone who has so much as glanced at a seating chart.”

“Mom,” Shane hissed.

“It’s somewhat standard in the industry,” she went on cheerfully, “but Shane here has a very strict self-imposed rule. Very noble. Very exhausting.” She smiled sweetly at Ilya. “And yes—even after the wedding.”

Ilya’s gaze slid back to Shane, his expression tightening, something more guarded creeping in. “Even after?”

Shane exhaled, shoulders drawing in. “Especially after.”

Yuna nodded, satisfied. “See? Told you.”

She glanced down at her watch and gasped softly. “Oh my gosh, I totally forgot I have a meeting! Shane, be a dear and get Ilya an Uber when he’s ready, would you?”

Shane could only grimace as his mother made a swift exit, pausing to hug him—and then Ilya—in turn.

“I’ll see you tonight at the game!” she called. “You’d better win! Against everyone except the Metros, please!”

“See you, Yuna!” Ilya called after her. “My treat for dinner if you’re ever in Boston—call me!”

“You gave my mom your number?” Shane asked, incredulous and fighting down a grumble as he opened the Uber app.

Ilya glanced at the screen and scoffed. “It’s fine, Hollander. I can get my own Uber.”

“My mother dragged you here and explicitly asked me to get you one,” Shane shot back. “So I’m getting you an Uber. Also—answer my question. Why did you give my mom your number?”

“She is interesting. Smart. Beautiful woman.” Ilya’s mouth curved as he stepped a little closer, eyes dark and intent. “Why would I not?”

Shane swallowed, hoping Ilya didn’t notice the dampness breaking at his temple. He tapped the reserve button on the screen on the Uber before he spoke. “She’s also older. And married. To my dad, who she loves alot and can fight if he needs to.”

Ilya rolled his eyes, and nodded as Shane showed him the screen, and the driver details who was just a minute away. “Doesn’t mean I cannot shoot my shot, yes? Maybe one day I get a Hollander to call me *daddy*.”

Shane opened his mouth to respond, but the words died as Ilya reached for the zipper of his coat.

He should have said something. Should have stepped back. Should have slapped Ilya’s hand away.

Instead, he froze.

It was the look of concentration, he told himself—the way Ilya’s thick brows drew together, the way his usually cool hazel eyes darkened into something molten and honey-like. Ilya moved closer, and Shane gasped softly as fingers brushed his chest, warm and deliberate, reaching into the inside pocket of his jacket and withdrew a pair of sunglasses Shane had forgotten about.

“Forgot these,” he murmured. “Thanks for holding on to them.”

He slid them onto his face, winked once, and turned away, a light chuckling ringing in the air. “See you around, Hollander.”

Shane remained frozen by the coffee bar, flushed from head to toe, for far longer than he would ever admit.

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4 months before the Hunter-Grady wedding

As the big day drew closer, the weeks seemed to invert—from mostly CEO-related operations focused on growing Hollander Events, punctuated by pit stops to support the Hunter–Grady wedding, to full-steam-ahead wedding planning, interrupted only occasionally by CEO things. Shane would be lying if he said he wasn't happy about that. He'd gladly swap budgets and board meetings for venue tours and negotiating multimedia contracts if he could.

Which was why he was particularly jazzed to find himself back in New York, sitting in a small Upper East Side bakery at a long table with Kip and Scott. The table was covered from head to foot in cakes—chocolate, lemon, caramel, carrot, red velvet—each decorated in a different style and colour. The baker, who came highly recommended by friends in the industry, stood to the side, cheerfully explaining each flavour as Kip listened intently and Scott poked at the slice in front of him.

It was a little late in the planning process to be locking in the cake, but the Hunter–Grady couple had been a dream to work with. They'd offered their preferences openly once their vision had solidified, and took Shane's suggestions in stride when he made them. Flexible when they could be, firm when it mattered—it made his job, and his life, remarkably easy.

So Shane wasn't too concerned about the timing. He was confident they'd leave the tasting with an order placed and contract negotiations underway.

The bakery's reputation was solid, and it came with the added perk of including Shane in the tasting as well—an investment in future business, they'd said. So he sat at the long table with a plate of his own in front of him, surrounded by cake and calm, exactly where he liked to be.

"Shane? Did you hear me?"

Kip's friendly tone cut through Shane's musing. He whipped his head toward them and found two sets of eyes peering at him curiously. The baker was nowhere to be found.

"Patty said she would give us a moment to savour the current slices before she comes back with the other ones. I was asking if you liked the lemon cake." Kip raised his fork questioningly, and Shane realised he hadn't touched the last three slices—red velvet, caramel, and lemon, respectively.

"Oh! Um—" He quickly took a forkful of the lemon cake in front of him, biting down and chewing while Kip watched closely. "It's good. Really fresh, but the vanilla buttercream gives it a bit of richness. It would suit a summer wedding really well."

Kip chuckled good-naturedly. "I was just telling you how much I don't like vanilla buttercream—but you're right, I didn't hate it quite as much in this cake." His expression

softened. “You’re just as zoned out as Scott. Though I know why he’s preoccupied. Is everything okay with you?”

Shane flashed him another genuine smile. “Yeah. All good.”

Beside him, Scott’s gaze—hazy and unfocused until now—sharpened at the mention of his name.

“What? What did I do?” he asked, clearly pulled from his reverie.

Shane and Kip shared a smile and a quiet chuckle.

It was late in the regular season, and the Admirals were fighting for a playoff spot—something Shane knew well. Scott was taking very small bites of the tasting slices in front of him, likely trying to stick to his diet as much as he could.

“You have buttercream on your nose. That’s what you did.”

Kip plucked the rogue smear from Scott’s bewildered expression and brought his finger to his lips, licking it playfully. “Yum. That’s my preferred flavour.”

Scott flushed, which was a strange but welcome sight on the burly man. “Kip,” he groaned, mortified.

“Then pay attention.” Kip turned back to Shane. “As I was saying—are you sure you’re okay? Ilya mentioned it was a pretty late night at the All-Star Game. Oh—and I haven’t had a chance to ask. How was it?”

Shane had been trying very hard not to think about the All-Star Game, which Ilya’s and Scott’s team had won in overtime. Or about how he’d been utterly glued to the screen during Boston’s regular-season games afterward, far more than he ever had before. Or about the All-Star jersey he’d bought at the arena—and the name stitched across the back.

So he kept it simple. “It was really great. The whole team played really well.”

That seemed to satisfy Kip.

And it wasn’t a lie—they had won. But Shane hadn’t watched anyone else that night but Ilya: the way he flew across the ice, golden curls plastered to his forehead with sweat; the way his hazel eyes sparked under the visor when the camera found him on the big screen; the wide, brilliant smile as he buried the game-winning shot.

“I’m glad Ilya had extra tickets,” Scott spoke suddenly. “I wanted to give you some too, but they’re hard to come by—even for us. He must’ve paid through the nose to get one, let alone three at last minute.”

Shane’s head snapped toward Scott, who was lifting a forkful of red velvet to his mouth.

“What? Really?” Shane said, faintly. “He said he always had a few set aside. Just in case.”

Kip scoffed fondly. “He’s so full of shit. But he’s actually really sweet—under all the bravado.”

Scott snorted. “He’s an asshole. But I love him. Or whatever.” His eyes flicked back to Shane. “And he hasn’t shut up about you since the All-Star Game. Keeps texting me asking if there’s any wedding stuff happening when we’re in Boston next week. Wants to know if the ‘cute wedding planner’ will be there.”

He made exaggerated air quotes and rolled his eyes. Shane hoped that would distract from the warmth creeping into his cheeks—and the stupid, unmistakable smile he couldn’t quite suppress.

“Scott!” Kip elbowed him hard enough to earn an *oof*. “I don’t think Ilya wanted Shane to know that.”

But the mischievous glint in Kip’s eye said otherwise. He’d noticed Shane’s reaction. Every bit of it.

“He’s single, just so you know,” Kip mentioned faux-casually, clearly enjoying the way Shane’s blush deepened.

Shane cleared his throat, willing the heat in his cheeks to dissipate.

“He’s very charming, that’s for sure,” he said lightly. “He even gave my mom his number.”

He scoffed, inwardly celebrating how casual his words had sounded.

“He’s a big flirt,” Kip said, his tone turning smug, “but he doesn’t usually look at people twice—let alone read up on their background in his spare time.”

Shane decided to try a different angle.

“Oh, I’m sure that’s not true,” he chuckled good-naturedly, waving a hand as he speared a chunk of chocolate cake with his fork. “And anyway, it’s no matter. At Hollander Events, we have a strict no-fraternisation policy with clients and associates.”

“He mentioned that,” Scott added, apparently abandoning his diet as he stacked three different flavours onto his fork. “But he said you had some kind of self-imposed additions—something about even after an event’s happened.”

Shane straightened, slipping easily into CEO mode.

“I have to lead by example,” he said evenly. “How can I expect professionalism from my team if I don’t exemplify it myself?”

He paused, then added, lips stretching into what he hoped passed for a grin rather than a grimace,

“Besides, I prefer to keep business and pleasure separate. Uncomplicated.” He almost added *“usually”* at the end, but the word died on his tongue.

Kip and Scott exchanged a look, then nodded.

“I guess I can understand that,” Kip acquiesced, his shoulders considerably deflating. Shane barked a sudden laugh, touched by their enthusiasm on his behalf.

“Hey now, this isn’t about me—this is about you two! So tell me, how do we feel about the cakes? Should I get Patty for the next round?”

“Sure, that would be great!” Shane stood, glad to be on his feet and useful, but he was not quite fast enough to miss the second exchanged look between the happy couple—conspirioratal and smug, a look that promised trouble for the person on the other end.

He scuttled away, hoping that he wasn’t the person they had in mind.

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1 week before the Hunter-Grady wedding

Shane should have known the other shoe was going to drop eventually. Even so, he was still taken completely by surprise when he found himself alone in the New York satellite office at 8 o'clock at night with none other than Ilya Rozanov.

They were standing awkwardly at a long conference table littered with wedding favours: neat piles of individually wrapped cookies and chocolates, mini hangover recovery kits stacked beside travel-sized rum bottles, little bottles of bubbles, and a cluster of small white candles that smelled strongly of honey and bergamot.

“I’m sorry about this, Rozanov,” Shane said, eyes glued to his phone. A handful of unread messages from Kip and Scott stared back at him mockingly. “They said they’d be here for this, which is why I had all the favours sent here. They didn’t even tell me you were coming.”

“Kip said it would be fun,” Rozanov replied lightly. “Craft night before wedding.”

His tone was playful—almost pouty—but Shane caught the strain beneath it. There was an electricity in the air, buzzing just under the Canadian man’s skin, and it made Shane uncomfortably aware of the space between them.

“Okay,” Shane sighed, dragging a hand through his hair. “I don’t think they’re going to show. You can go, Rozanov, and I’ll sort this out.”

“Alone?” Rozanov quirked an eyebrow. Shane bit his lip.

“Nah. My assistant will help—he’s just out of the office at the moment.” He hoped, briefly, that his well-documented inability to lie had taken the afternoon off. No such luck. Rozanov’s expression sharpened with immediate scepticism.

“I saw no other person in your office. No bag. And there is dust on the reception desk,” he said coolly. “Either your assistant is a slob, or they have been gone for some time.”

“Hayden’s not a slob,” Shane shot back, heat flaring in his chest. “He’s just been out a few days with his family in Montreal—that’s all!”

The irritation faded almost as quickly as it came, replaced by a creeping embarrassment.

“So,” Rozanov said mildly, “you lie to me. You are a terrible liar, Hollander.”

“Whatever. Anyway, my point still stands. I’m literally being paid to do this, so you can go.”

He pulled the chair closer and sat down a little harder than he needed to, scooting himself up to the table.

“I am best man. This is part of my duties,” Ilya said, dragging out the chair beside him and scooting in with deliberate noise. “Besides, it is off-season. I don't have plans today. I can help.”

Shane snorted. “You know best-man duties are organizing the bachelor party and procuring the cigars and strippers, right? Not making party-favour bags.”

“Bachelor party is tomorrow, and Hunter is boring old man who forbade me from getting stripper for his bachelor party. We will probably ended up playing poker most of the night.”

Shane could almost feel Ilya rolling his eyes beside him.

“I buy bring cigars,” Ilya added. “They were good ones. Cubans.”

Shane laughed despite himself and glanced over at him. “Sounds like a fun night! great job, Mr. Best Man.”

A small smile crept across Ilya’s face. “Thank you, Hollander.”

He turned back to the table and made a show of pushing up his sleeves. “Now. How do we do this?”

Shane laughed again and reached for the small plastic favour bags and the roll of cream-colored ribbon.

“Let’s make one first, see how it should look, and then divide and conquer. Deal?”

“Deal,” Ilya said, nodding.

Shane worked quickly, his hands moving with the calm assurance of someone who’d made a million of these kinds of bags before. He measured the ribbon without thinking, took one of each favour from their piles, and arranged them artfully inside the plastic bag so every element showed. He secured the top with a smooth, practiced bow.

When he was done, he held the bag up toward Ilya, watching his expression as the taller man examined Shane’s handiwork.

“Okay,” Shane said. “What do you think? Should we swap the chocolates and the candle?”

Ilya stared thoughtfully at the bag for a moment before lifting his gaze. His warm, honey-coloured eyes met Shane's.

"No," he said. "Is perfect. Well done, Hollander. Kip and Scott will love it." The sincerity in his tone caught Shane off guard. Heat crept across the bridge of his nose, and he fought the instinct to look away.

"T-thanks." He set the bag down on the table between them and began handing Ilya empty plastic bags.

"Okay," Shane continued, finding his footing again. "Let's get the bags filled first, then we'll do the ribbons. You put in the stuff closest to you and pass it to me—I'll do the same. We'll just keep switching."

He was faintly pleased by the confidence in his own voice. This was his element—process, order, momentum—regardless of Ilya Rozanov and the strange, charged energy that seemed to follow him everywhere.

"Bossy," Ilya drawled, his tone softening into something teasing. "But because I am good guy, I will do what you say."

Shane rolled his eyes. "Let's get to it."

They worked in companionable silence for a while, filling the bags, their fingers brushing often enough to send sharp, charged jolts up Shane's arm and down his spine.

Gradually, Ilya began moving faster, filling his bag with exaggerated efficiency and then making a very obvious, wordless show of waiting for Shane.

Shane grinned and sped up to match him, lips curling into a smirk at the frustrated knit of Ilya's brow when Shane beat him to the exchange. Soon they were moving at lightning speed—chaos and breathless laughter as they scrambled to pack the bags and race each other to the handoff.

"Ha! I'm faster!" Shane crowed on the last bag, grinning at the twist of mock irritation on Ilya's face.

"You cheated—your rum is closer than my candles! Is not fair!" the Russian man protested, though Shane caught the unmistakable sparkle of amusement in his eyes.

"I don't need to cheat to beat you," Shane laughed, nudging Ilya with his shoulder. Ilya bumped him back, just as playful.

"Is not beating if the game is rigged," Ilya retorted, sticking out his tongue for good measure.

"You are such a child," Shane said between giggles. "I'll have to cut the ribbon, since I can't trust you with scissors!"

"They trust me with a stick much bigger than scissors," Ilya shot back, laughing too, his broad shoulders shaking with mirth.

“Somehow” the Canadian man moved to roll out the ribbon as the laughter faded, sectioning it in lengths for more efficient cutting. He sighed finally as his chest settled.

“I’m sorry about the playoffs, by the way. Tough break,” Shane said finally.

Ilya shrugged, easy and unbothered. “Eh. Is okay. We will win next year. And the year after. And the year after. There is time.”

Shane laughed again. He couldn’t remember the last time someone had made him laugh this much.

“Good to know. I’ll start my betting now,” he joked, making smooth cuts as he separated the long ribbon into shorter pieces. “I’m sure I’ll have made a fortune off your winnings by the time you retire.”

“You are already rich man,” Ilya said. “Mr. CEO with big fancy office in Montreal.”

“And Vancouver, and Ottawa, Toronto, and here,” Shane added, a little smugly.

“Exactly.” Ilya nodded solemnly. “And since I am best player, I will be winning Stanley Cups for ten more years, which is lot of money from bets. What would you even do with that much money?”

Shane paused, scissors hovering, considering the question seriously.

“I’d reinvest it in the business, I think,” he said at last. “Hire a few more people. Expand our network a bit.”

“Ugh,” Ilya said. “So boring, Hollander. Shouldn't you be doing something fun, like buying a motorcycle or a boat or something?”

Shane nudged him harder, but not enough to hurt. “Oh, fu—shut up. What would *you* do with your money, then, Mr. Hot-Shot NHL guy?”

“You think I’m hot?” Ilya feigned surprise, clutching his chest as a smirk curled across his cheeks. Shane swatted at his shoulder with an eyeroll.

“Seriously, Ilya. What would you do?” Shane pressed, curious—and he froze. *Ilya*. He actually said his name.

For a moment, the temperature in the room seemed to drop. Silence hung heavy. Ilya stayed in his mocking pose, eyes wide with surprise.

Then his expression shifted. Pupils melting into liquid honey, teasing smirk curving into something darker, something that made Shane’s throat go dry.

Ilya leaned closer, sliding two fingers under Shane’s chin to tilt his face. Their eyes locked, heartbeats thudding in unison.

“Well, Shane,” his voice dropped low, rumbling across Shane’s chest, “I would stop counting years.”

Shane was frozen, agape, the scissors clattering quietly from his suddenly limp hands as his perception filled with Ilya. A heady sense of déjà vu struck him, taking him back to that moment in the lobby of his Montreal office—the last time Ilya had been this close.

But this time, there was neither a bell nor an Uber to save him.

“I would have what I want,” Ilya said lowly, after a beat of charged silence. “Who I want.”

“Why would you even want me? When you could have anyone?” Shane’s voice was small, distant. He hardly recognized it as his own, speaking one of his most private insecurities aloud.

But Ilya didn’t miss a beat.

“The one i want is beautiful, with his eyes and his freckles that drive me insane every time we meet. He is smart, funny and witty. He makes fun of me with his little smile, like smug kitten. He notices small details to make people happy—like the flower he added to Kip’s order because he saw it was missing, and even negotiated down the cost with the florist. Or the bowtie he moved to the front of the display for Scott to see, that matches Kip’s eyes.” Shane’s breath hitched slightly. He hadn’t realized Ilya had noticed such minute details.

“He is kind. He makes jokes even when he’s uncomfortable to make other people smile. He cares for his workers and associates. He works harder than anyone I’ve ever seen, because he wants to protect his parents’ legacy. He is efficient, and effective, and so good at his job.” Ilya leaned in, and Shane’s brain short-circuited.

“He wants to be the best. But he doesn’t realize that he already is. Why would I want anyone else, if I could have him?

Shane’s chest felt impossibly tight. His hands shook slightly, and for a moment, he couldn’t breathe. *He actually called me beautiful. He sees all of me.*

“I… I—” Shane started, his voice barely above a whisper. He wanted to reach for Ilya, to close the distance that still somehow felt too far and yet unbearably close. But his brain tangled in disbelief, his insecurities buzzing like live wires.

Ilya’s fingers brushed Shane’s arm, deliberate and grounding. “I like him so much.. Maybe even..” he murmured softly, eyes locked on Shane’s.

Shane’s lips parted, and a shiver ran down his spine. His heart was hammering, and yet, somehow, the warmth of Ilya’s presence calmed the storm inside him. He wanted to speak again, to argue, to deny it—but every rational thought had melted away, leaving only that *moment*—that perfect, electrifying moment where it was just them.

And Shane realized, with a breathless rush, that he didn’t want to stop it.

He wasn't sure who closed the distance first, but it felt like ice on a burn to feel Ilya's lips on his, the relief instantaneous. Shane's hands found themselves instinctively buried in the Russian man's beautiful golden curls, marvelling at how they were somehow softer than they looked. He hauled him impossibly closer, pressing their bodies together as he kissed him with all of the electricity that had been buzzing under his skin since they had met.

Ilya returned the kiss with equal fervour, tugging Shane's hair in turn to tilt his head and deepen the kiss, as though he were trying to claim him, to make Shane undeniably his.

Heat pooled in Shane's belly and chest, the intensity almost scary. He had never felt like this for anyone, for anything before. Something this all-consuming, this wild and wonderful, filling his body from the soles of his feet to the tips of his fingers, and alarmingly close to being in love, had never been part of his life. Not for his family, not for the business—the business he was CEO of, responsible for—and yet here he was, currently kissing the associate of a client as though he were trying to consume him in the conference room of the New York satellite office.

The thought ripped Shane from his laser focus on Ilya's lips, the tongue that seemed to have a sixth sense for where he was most sensitive. He broke the kiss gently but quickly, standing up with a start.

The chair clattered behind him with a thump.

"Shane…" Ilya spoke his name like a statement, a question, and a prayer all at once, his beautiful hazel eyes both placating and pleading.

"I'm sorry, Rozanov. I can't do this. You're Scott's best man, and he's a client. I'm sorry." He moved on disconnected legs toward the door. "Take your time. Don't worry about locking up when you go—they're automatic. I'll finish these tomorrow."

Shane raced out of the conference room, a finger to his lips, cheeks stained bright red and rosy.

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4 days before the Hunter-Grady wedding

The sunlight streaming into Shane's office bounced off the white carpet and straight into his eyes, and it was making him a little crazy.

He'd chosen this building for the floor-to-ceiling windows, for the natural light he'd once imagined would make working feel almost outdoorsy. Today, though, it felt more like being sealed inside a lightbox. No matter where he looked, that suffocating brightness followed him, flattening his depth perception and turning the simple act of staring at his computer into a minor act of endurance.

And he desperately needed to be staring at his computer.

If he wasn't finalising last-minute arrangements for Scott and Kip's wedding, or combing through company performance metrics and IPO proposals, his mind slipped—inevitably—back to Ilya. And Shane very much did not want to be thinking about Ilya.

About the way Ilya's eyes had burned, as if they held miniature suns of their own. About the strong hands sliding into Shane's hair, tugging him closer as they kissed—just enough pressure on his dark curls to coax a gasp from him, to give Ilya the excuse to deepen the kiss. About the heat of that broad chest pressed flush against Shane's, solid and unmistakably there.

The emotions that had crashed over him in that moment had been terrifying. Not a swell, not a warning—just a sudden, merciless tidal wave, filling his senses until he was left gasping, dizzy, overwhelmed.

Almost worse, Shane had realised the next morning, was what came after.

He'd returned to the office, gone straight to the conference room to finish the gift bags, and missed three meetings he hadn't remembered scheduling at all. All the while carrying the hollow, sickening sense that he'd left the air in his lungs—and something far more vital—back in that room with Ilya, while he himself had scuttled away like a chicken.

"Shane?"

Hayden's voice cut through his reverie, startling him. It was closer than Shane had anticipated—Hayden was already sitting across from him, perched in front of the desk, eyebrows drawn together with quiet concern.

"Hayd? When did you come in here?" Shane's voice came out rough, scraped raw by surprise.

"I've been here for the last two minutes, Shane." Hayden's tone was even—too even. He only ever used it when he was deliberately keeping emotion out of his voice. Usually when he was trying not to laugh at something that absolutely shouldn't be funny. "What's going on with you?"

"Nothing's going on with me," Shane said, reflexively matching Hayden's flat tone. His eyes flicked back to his screen. He wasn't really looking. "What's going on with you?"

"Well," Hayden said, unruffled, "I was just saying that I checked the security footage from while I was away. You know—just to make sure I hadn't missed anything."

Shane felt his stomach drop. *Fuck.*

"And," Hayden continued, letting the pause stretch, "the conference room footage from a few days ago…"

His voice trailed off. He looked down at his hands instead of at Shane, as if giving him one last chance to speak first.

"Hayden," Shane started, "it's not what it looked like."

“The kiss isn’t what concerned me,” Hayden interrupted, lifting his gaze to meet Shane’s. “It’s the way you ran out of there. After looking at that guy—whoever he was—like he’d just turned the stars on in the sky.”

Shane’s cheeks burned, a violent flush climbing up his face as he looked away.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he said tightly. “Anyway, it was a regrettable lapse in judgement and professionalism, and nothing more. Please disregard it and get back to work, Hayd.”

“Shane,” Hayden said quietly, and that alone was enough to make Shane’s jaw tighten. “How long have I known you? I know what I saw. That wasn’t professionalism. It was fear. It was cowardice.” His voice hardened. “You like him.”

Shane wanted to get angry. He *should* have gotten angry—Hayden might be his friend, but he was also his assistant. His subordinate. An employee at a company Shane ran as CEO, a company his family had built.

But instead of anger, guilt and shame pooled heavy in his stomach, and he slumped back in his chair.

“So what if I like him,” Shane said, the words brittle. “He’s associated with a client, Hayd. How am I supposed to make Hollander Events the best company it can be if all I’m doing is trying to—”

He broke off, dragging a hand through his hair. “I have a responsibility. To you. To the board. To my family. I can’t get caught up in whatever this is.”

Hayden scoffed. “Shane, just stop. You’re the hardest-working person I know. You took your parents’ cute little boutique wedding-planning firm and turned it into a multinational enterprise. High-profile clients come to us because of *you*.”

Shane met his friend’s eyes again, startled by the ferocity there.

“And that guy wasn’t even the client,” Hayden continued. “It isn’t unprofessional to let yourself be happy. You’ve been hiding behind that word for too long—because you’re too scared to open yourself up to the possibility.”

Silence filled the room as Shane’s thoughts swam, a war raging inside him—between want and shame, guilt and pressure, fear and longing. His life, his job, was good as it was: simple, structured, predictable. He knew what he’d always wanted, unchanged—to be the best, to grow the company, to make his parents proud.

But he also knew he wanted Ilya.

He wanted to dive back into the sea of feeling that had swept him up the other day—had been sweeping him up from the moment their eyes met in that damn smoothie shop. And how much he wanted it was still terrifying.

Hayden’s hand was on the door when Shane spoke again.

“Wait.”

The word came out rougher than he’d intended. Thinner.

Hayden paused, but didn’t turn around.

Shane swallowed. His chest felt tight, like the light in the room had finally found its way inside him.

“I can’t—” He stopped, exhaled sharply through his nose. “I can’t do this wrong, Hayd. I can’t afford to.”

“I know,” Hayden said gently.

“That’s the problem,” Shane said. His voice dropped. “I always know what the right call is. I always know how to be careful. And this—” He gestured helplessly toward the empty space between them. “This didn’t feel careful. It felt like stepping off something high and realising halfway down that there’s no net.”

Hayden turned back then. Slowly.

Shane laughed once, breathless and humourless. “Do you know how terrifying that is for someone like me?”

“I do,” Hayden said. “Because you’ve built your entire life around making sure that never happens.”

Shane sank back into his chair. The fight went out of him all at once, leaving only exhaustion behind.

“I ran because if I’d stayed,” Shane said quietly, “I don’t think I would have stopped.”

Silence stretched between them.

Finally, Shane looked up. His eyes were bright—not with tears, but with something raw and exposed.

“I don’t know how to want something without it feeling like a threat,” he said. “I don’t know how to choose it.”

Hayden’s expression softened. “You don’t have to choose everything right now.”

Shane shook his head. “That’s the thing. I already have.”

Hayden waited.

“I chose the rule because it was easier than admitting I don’t trust myself with this,” Shane continued. “Because if I pretend it’s about professionalism, I don’t have to admit that I’m scared of how much it matters.”

His shoulders sagged.

“I don’t want to be that person,” he said. “The one who hides.”

Hayden stepped closer to the desk. “Then don’t be.”

Shane was quiet for a long moment. And now that he’d admitted—out loud—that he wanted something beyond the company, a new fear gripped his heart.

“But… what if…” His voice shrank. “What if I’ve already fucked it up beyond repair? What if he doesn’t want me anymore?”

“I think I can answer that.”

The new voice cut cleanly through the room—rough, deep, amused.

Shane’s head snapped toward the door.

Scott Hunter stood there beside Hayden, leaning casually against the doorframe. Sunglasses hid his eyes, and one hand was curled around a plastic to-go cup filled with something pastel blue. "Geez, its bright in here"

“Scott, hi…” Shane stood quickly, moving to greet him, but Scott waved him off, crossing the room instead. He moved slowly to the chair Hayden had vacated and lowered himself into it gingerly.

“I hope you don’t mind that I let myself in,” Scott said, “and listened to your discussion. I actually came because I wanted to apologise for not showing up the other night. I tried to convince Kip that it was more rude than romantic, but he's like a dog with a bone sometimes.”

As he spoke, he slid his sunglasses up onto the top of his head, revealing bloodshot eyes nestled into his sunken face. It was clear that he hadn’t seen sleep in a while. Hayden dropped into the chair beside him, eyeing Scott with open curiosity.

“Whoa,” Hayden said lightly. “Big night?”

Scott chuckled. “Bachelor party. Last night. Planned by my best man.”

Shane’s stomach flipped.

“And,” Scott added, lifting the cup slightly, “by the guy who was here the other day. In the conference room.”

He took a sip of the blue drink—blueberry something, judging by the sharp-sweet scent that filled the office—and Shane nodded slowly.

“He said it was supposed to be low-key,” Shane said, confusion bleeding into his voice. “Cuban cigars and poker.” He paused. “And—wait. How did you know about that?”

Scott scoffed loudly and clutched his head, like the motion caused him actual physical pain.

“Well,” he said, “my best man apparently interprets ‘low-key’ as ‘*cowfest*,’ because he got about three drinks in and couldn’t stop *mooing* about you.”

Hayden barked out a laugh. “Really? What did he say?”

“He told us all about the conference room—in detail,” Scott said, shaking his head. “Spoiled the wedding favors for all my groomsmen. He also went on a fifteen-minute rant about your lips—and, Jesus, Shane, it got to the point where we were actually going to call you and have you come to the Ritz so we could all kiss you and verify his description. We ended up going out instead, ‘cause I thought we might be able to drown him out with clubbing.”

Shane felt his cheeks heat up again. He turned to Hayden, who was snickering openly now, panic and bile rising in his chest. “See, Hayd—Scott’s bachelor party got ruined, and it’s all my fault! This is why I don’t—”

“Woah, slow down there, Hollander. I never said it was ruined.” Scott paused to take another sip of his drink, then let out a small sigh of relief. “It was priceless, actually. Rozanov—the notorious womanizer—*mooing* all night about the *'cute CEO with the beautiful freckles*'. I have so much blackmail material; next season is going to be *cake*.” His lips curled into a smirk.

But Scott had said something Shane couldn’t unhear. He leaned back in his chair, frowning.

“Womanizer, huh? I mean… he was meeting a girl when he was late for the engagement shoot. I thought that was his girlfriend…” Scott laughed and groaned again, sliding the sunglasses back onto his face.

“Look, Ilya might be Slavic, a little crazy, and physically incapable of not being an asshole most of the time, but he has *never* talked about anyone the way he talked about you. He didn’t even look at anyone last night. He turned down anyone who tried—or just talked their ear off about you until they left him alone. I didn’t even think it was possible for him to be… *smitten* like that, but the way he looked at you in Montreal at the fitting, and how he was talking about you last night…I’m a believer now.”

He took a final deep sip, polishing off the drink with another sigh. “I know you have a policy or something about not fraternizing, so I thought I’d come down here and see if there was something I could sign—as the client, like a waiver or something—that could make it safe for him to shoot his shot properly.”

“You would do that?” Hayden asked, eyeing Scott with no small amount of awe.

“He’s my best friend,” Scott said, earnest now, “and I really like you, Shane. I think I’d like anyone who can make him smile like that.”

“He makes me smile, too.” Shane admitted tenderly as he watched as Hayden and Scott shared a smug grin.

Then suddenly, Hayden's expression burst into shock and realization. He turned to Shane, eyes and mouth agape.

“Wait, was the guy you kissed *Ilya Rozanov?! The Boston Bears Ilya Rozanov?!”*

Shane and Scott burst into laughter, and for the first time that day, the lightbox prison of his office felt more like the interior of a cloud - bright, light and filled with possibility.

At The Hunter-Grady Wedding

As much as Shane had wanted to call Ilya immediately—or run to his house, or to a mountaintop, to scream about his feelings—the last few days before Scott and Kip’s wedding had been filled with a flurry of last-minute scheduling adjustments, pickups and drop-offs, and a hundred other things. He hadn’t even gotten a chance to see Ilya at the rehearsal dinner, completely preoccupied with making sure the program ran smoothly: from décor to catering to the toasts. Afterwards, he’d returned to the office to tie up a few loose ends before the big day.

The wedding itself had been absolutely beautiful, the ceremony held in a greenhouse-inspired church draped in silk ribbon. Scott and Kip stood at the altar, gazing into each other’s eyes as though the room were empty save for the two of them. Shane had the strangest sense of déjà vu from their first-ever wedding consult, but this time there wasn’t even a hint of insult—because his eyes weren’t on them. His gaze was fixed on the tall man in the perfectly fitted black tux to Scott’s left.

He looked somehow even more devastatingly handsome than the day they’d first met, golden locks arranged artfully on his head, eyes sunken into Shane’s favourite liquid honey, sparkling with joy for his friend and his new husband. Shane even thought he saw a hint of tears as Scott and Kip promised to love each other until their final days, though Ilya had clearly willed them down with nothing but a clenched jaw and a quiet clearing of his throat.

Shane had no such luck—sue him, he was a crier.

But Shane was, as he had perhaps prided himself on a little too much, a consummate professional. He was focused on delivering the perfect wedding all the way to the end.

Which was how he found himself later in the back of the Kingfisher Bar, standing by one of the cocktail tables and nursing a ginger ale as the reception devolved into a boisterous party around him.

“Shane!” Pulled once again from his musings, he was greeted by a flushed, clearly very intoxicated and beaming Kip, whose tuxedo jacket and bow tie had gone conspicuously missing. Kip threw an arm around Shane’s shoulders, half-hugging him and half propping himself upright as he gushed loudly in his ear.

“Thank you *so* much—this has been the most magical wedding ever, and everything was so beautiful, right down to the *surprise smoothie bar* you organised! I’m gonna recommend you

to everyone I know, and their friends, and their parents, and their grandmas—"

Scott joined them, in a similar state of undress to his newly minted husband.

"Yes, thank you so much, Shane. It was everything we wanted it to be. You really are the best." He slid an arm around Kip's waist, gently pulling him off Shane, and flashed him a grateful smile.

"Yes, you are," Kip agreed fervently. "And now that the wedding is done, can we just be friends? Like, real friends?"

He planted a heavy hand back on Shane's shoulder. Shane chuckled, good-natured.

"Of couse! As much as I'm going to miss having such great clients, we were already friends, Kip. But now we can talk about things other than seating arrangements when we meet for coffee."

Kip's smile—albeit very drunk—was radiant. "Yay! In that case, in honour of us becoming best friends, I have to take you to Ilya. He's absolutely smitten, and I want him to be happy, and I want you to be happy, and I want to go to another wedding soon, so you *need* to go to him! You said we aren't your clients anymore, so it's kosher, right?"

Shane couldn't help laughing at Kip's rounded eyes and pleading tone.
"It's okay. I wanted to talk to him anyway. You stay here and enjoy the party, and I'm going to go find him, okay?" The newly married man seemed satisfied with his answer, nodding hazily and draping himself against his new husband.

"Okay, good! Go, go, go!" Kip waved Shane off with a flick of his wrists, turning affectionately toward Scott.

"He's outside, for a smoke," Scott called over his shoulder just before Kip captured his lips in another kiss, and then they were lost to the world, wrapped in each other.

Shane shook his head, good-naturedly, and slipped around them, making a beeline for the door that stood between him and the man who had taken root in the softness of his chest—and would not let go.

And standing in front of the bar, taking what looked to be the last puff of his cigarette, was Ilya Rozanov. He was nothing less than utterly stunning, tux jacket slung over his shoulder, bow tie hanging loosely around his neck.

"Smoking isn't good for you, you know," Shane said shyly, meeting Ilya's gaze.

"Good thing I'm stopping now." He dropped the cigarette to the ground and stomped it out, the embers dying quickly.

"What do you want, Hollander?" Ilya's tone was even, measured. Shane was reminded that their last meeting had been far from ideal.

Shane bit his lip. “Well… I wanted to say sorry first. For running away like that. It was cowardly, and I regret it.” He hesitated, then added, “And I wanted to tell you about a recent policy change at Hollander Events.”

“Oh?” Ilya raised an eyebrow, curious. “What policy change?”

“Some of the excessive restrictions on the non-fraternising policy—the one about interactions after a contract ends—have been lifted. Specifically, restrictions on dating associates of clients.”

Ilya’s expression shifted from confusion to something warmer, almost hopeful.

“That’s a lot of English, Hollander, and I’m drunk. Say it again, simply,” he said softly, and Shane stepped closer.

“Well… basically, it’s now possible for employees of Hollander Events to go on dates with associates of clients… if they’ll still have me.” Ilya’s eyes widened in surprise, warm and bright.

“Ilya,” Shane began again, more steadily this time, “I’ve been an idiot. I—” He stopped, letting the confession hang. “I shouldn’t have run the other day. I shouldn’t have hidden behind all that professionalism crap. I just…” He exhaled sharply, chest tightening. “I want this. I want you… and I’ve been scared out of my mind to admit it.”

Ilya’s smile softened, gentle and unguarded. “I was beginning to wonder if you’d ever say it.”

Shane blinked, surprised. “Say what?”

“That you want me,” Ilya said simply, stepping closer, closing the distance Shane hadn’t realized had felt like miles. “You don’t have to hide it anymore. Not from me. Not ever.”

Shane’s hands trembled slightly at his sides. All the fear, hesitation, and carefully constructed rules melted away under the steady, sure gaze of the man before him.

“Ilya…” His voice broke, raw with emotion, but he didn’t step back. “I’ve wanted this since the moment I met you. I don’t care anymore about rules, or clients, or—anything. I just…” He stopped, letting the weight settle. “I like you.”

Ilya slid his hands to Shane’s waist, pulling him close. One hand rose to cradle Shane’s cheek, gentle and precise. Shane’s heart raced like he was running—either away from something, or toward something precious.

“Shane… you’re so… beautiful,” Ilya whispered, voice warm, brushing his lips against Shane’s forehead. “I like you so much.”

“Ilya…” Shane breathed, eyes closing instinctively. When their lips finally met, it was soft, dizzying, and full of longing.

Shane’s hands threaded into Ilya’s hair, while Ilya’s arms wrapped around him, steady and sure, holding him close. Their kiss deepened in slow, measured strokes—intimate and electric

without spilling into the world around them.

Eventually, they broke apart just enough to rest foreheads together, panting lightly, caught in the closeness of one another.

“Wanna get out of here?” Shane asked, voice low and tender.

“Only if you promise to come dinner next week,” Ilya teased, eyes warm. "with me."

“How about breakfast tomorrow, and then dinner next week?” Shane countered, fingers intertwining as he guided Ilya back toward the bar.

“Wow, Hollander… bold,” Ilya said, smirking. “What would Yuna say if she saw her sweet boy now?”

Shane laughed, swatting him playfully. “You asshole. Don’t talk about my mother when I’m about to take you somewhere private.”

Ilya tugged him close again, teasing, “And what exactly are we doing at this ‘private’ place?”

Shane grinned, brushing a hand along Ilya’s jaw. “Let’s say bye to Kip and Scott first. Then… you’ll see.”

As they leaned into another kiss—gentle, heated, and full of promise—Shane knew this was just the beginning. What started as “I like you” was already growing into something far deeper, something that looked more like *“I love you,”* and “*I want you forever.”*

And he couldn’t wait.

End Notes

Annnnnnd that's the fic!

I seriously don't even know where this came from in my brain. It was supposed to be a 2k-word little ficlet, and somehow it turned into one long shot that took me a week to pump out! But I do love a good AU (as you can probably tell from my catalogue), so no regrets.

These two damn gay hockey players are literally consuming my every waking thought—I actually feel like I'm losing it. It doesn't help that Hudson and Conner are doing so well and are everywhere at the moment, but also it does, because I can just look at them and enjoy the aesthetic beauty. I fucking love them so much it's ridiculous.

But here we are, and if you read this far, I hope you liked it! Comments and kudos are like light and air, and if you have any interactions to spare, I will gratefully consume them.

As always, this is dedicated to my bear—thanks for putting up with me writing every day after work. I love you.

This is definitely not my last Hollanov, but I'm hoping the next ones are actual ficlets… who knows, though—the psychosis continues, so get on board!

From the cottage,
Strawberry-chan

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!