Finding the Real Shane Hollander

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Finding the Real Shane Hollander

by ultigirl

Summary

Shortly after Shane joins the Centaurs, he begins to realize that things are different with this team. He might not have to keep so much of himself so tightly under wraps, but he's not totally sure what that means. After years of hiding and carefully curating his safe, boring Canadian hockey Golden Boy image, Shane isn't sure who he is or who he wants to be as an out hockey player and the husband of effortlessly sexy Ilya Rozanov. He's worried he will never look the part or feel comfortable in his own skin. During a West Coast road trip, he meets up with Rose for brunch and asks for a little help.

The restaurant Rose had chosen was aggressively Californian—all white linen and succulents and sunlight streaming through floor-to-ceiling windows. Shane felt conspicuous just sitting there, like his Canadian practicality was somehow visible, a beige smudge against all that brightness.

Rose, of course, looked like she belonged. She always did. Today it was a sundress and oversized sunglasses pushed up into her hair, effortless in a way Shane had never figured out how to be.

"So," she said, spearing a piece of avocado from her omelet, "You know I love to take you shopping and dress you up. I'm thinking we hit Melrose after this. There's this new place Miles told me about—very edgy, very now. Then maybe that vintage shop on Fairfax, and—"

"Rose."

She paused, fork halfway to her mouth. "What?"

Shane stared at his eggs. He'd been turning this over in his head for weeks, trying to figure out how to say it, whether to say it at all. But things were different now. *He* was different now. Or trying to be.

"I need help," he said.

Rose set down her fork. "Okay. With what?"

"With—" He gestured vaguely at himself. "This. All of this. I don't know how to—" The words stuck. He forced them out anyway. "I don't know how to be sexy."

For a moment, Rose just stared at him. Then she laughed—a bright, startled sound that carried across the restaurant.

Shane felt his face flood with heat. Stupid. This was stupid. He never should have said anything. He was already pushing back from the table, already constructing the polite excuse that would get him out of here, when Rose grabbed his hand.

"Shane. Shane, wait. I'm sorry." Her grip was firm, her expression shifting from amusement to something softer. "I wasn't laughing at you. I swear. It's just—do you have any idea how ridiculous that sounds coming from *you*?"

"Forget it." His voice came out stiff. "It's fine. I shouldn't have—"

"No, listen to me." Rose leaned forward, not letting go of his hand. "I know a lot of attractive people. It's literally my job to know and hang out with attractive people. And I have never—*never*—met anyone as hot as you who has so little idea how attractive they are." She shook her head, something like wonder in her voice. "Shane. Come on. You pulled both Rose Landry *and* Ilya Rozanov, and you think you aren't sexy?"

Shane's flush deepened, but for different reasons now. "That's part of the problem."

"What do you mean?"

He looked down at their joined hands, trying to find the words. "Ilya is... you've seen him. He's so hot. And it's *effortless*for him—the way he moves, the way he dresses, the way he just exists in the world. He walks into a room and everyone looks at him." Shane swallowed. "And then there's me. Standing next to him. And I worry that when people see us together, I look like his... his boring Canadian little brother."

Rose's expression flickered. "Does Ilya make you feel that way?"

"No." The answer came immediately, certain. "No, he's always telling me I'm beautiful. That I'm sexy. That he can't believe he gets to—" Shane stopped, ears burning. "But that's usually when we're, um. Naked."

Rose's lips twitched, but she didn't laugh this time. "Okay."

"I want to figure out how to be that person when we're *not* naked. How to be sexy beside him, out in the world. For him, but also for—" Shane struggled. "For me. I want to feel like I belong next to him. Like I'm not just... tolerated there."

"Shane." Rose's voice was gentle. "You know he doesn't think that, right? That man looks at you like you hung the moon."

"I know. I know he doesn't think it. But *I* think it. And I don't know how to stop."

Rose was quiet for a moment, studying him. Then: "Okay. Describe an outfit that's made you feel sexy."

Shane opened his mouth. Closed it. Tried again.

Nothing came.

He thought about his closet—the rows of identical dark suits, the game day shirts still in their dry-cleaning bags, the workout clothes and the team-branded everything and the careful, curated wardrobe of a man who'd spent his entire adult life trying to disappear into acceptability.

"I can't," he finally said. "I can't think of anything."

"Nothing? Ever?"

Shane shook his head slowly. "I've spent so much time curating this... this clean cut, golden boy image. The one that's safe. The one that doesn't attract attention or make anyone uncomfortable. And it's not me—it was never me—but I don't..." He trailed off, frustrated. "I'm not really sure how to be the me I want to be now. I don't even know what that looks like."

Rose didn't respond right away. Instead, she looked at him—really looked, the way she did when she was assessing a scene partner or breaking down a script. Shane fought the urge to squirm under her attention.

She was seeing, he knew, the longer hair that he'd been growing out for months now, currently at an awkward in-between stage that made him look less intentionally disheveled and more like he'd simply forgotten barbers exist. She was probably remembering the stylist he'd hired when they were dating—the one who'd dressed him in clothes that fit perfectly and meant nothing, a costume for the role he'd been playing.

And she was noticing—he saw her eyes catch on it—the thin leather bracelet peeking out from under his sleeve. He'd bought it on impulse three weeks ago, shoved in a drawer for a week, and finally started wearing it under his clothes where no one could see. A tiny rebellion. A secret self.

"Okay," Rose said, and there was something new in her voice. Decision. "Change of plans."

"What?"

"I was going to drag you to a bunch of boutiques this afternoon. Make you try on things, give you my opinions, the usual." She pulled out her phone. "But now I have a different idea. If you're up for it."

Shane watched her start typing. "What kind of idea?"

"How about this: I text Miles, get him to call a couple of stylists he likes. People who are good at this—at figuring out someone's vibe, not just putting them in whatever's trendy. They can bring looks to my place, so you don't have to do this in public."

Shane's heart rate picked up. "Rose—"

"And I'll call my hair guy. Because I love you, Hollander, but that grow-out situation needs professional intervention." She was still typing, not looking at him. "Oh, and my makeup artist, if you're interested. Nothing crazy—just, you know. Options. Ways to play."

"Makeup?"

"Don't knock it till you try it." Rose finally looked up, and her smile was warm but challenging. "So? What do you think? Want to spend the afternoon figuring out how sexy the new Shane can be?"

Shane's first instinct was to say no. It was too much. Too visible. Too *gay*, whispered the voice in his head that he was trying so hard to unlearn.

But then he thought about Ilya. About the way Ilya moved through the world—unapologetic, unafraid, taking up exactly as much space as he wanted. About the way Ilya looked at Shane like he was already everything, and how badly Shane wanted to believe him.

"Why would you do this?" he asked. "All of that. For me."

Rose rolled her eyes so hard her whole head moved. "Because you're my best friend, you idiot. Because I love you. And because—" Her grin turned wicked. "I cannot *wait* to see Rozanov's face when I bring him back a sexed-up Shane Hollander this afternoon."

Shane felt a surprised laugh escape him. "You're terrible."

"I'm amazing and you love me." She was already standing, throwing cash on the table for the check. "Come on. We've got work to do."

Rose's house was exactly what Shane would have expected—bright and eclectic and full of plants, with a closet the size of his first apartment. Within an hour, it had been transformed into what she cheerfully called "Shane's Sexy Intervention Headquarters."

The stylists arrived first: a tall Black man named Darius with impeccable cheekbones and a white woman named Petra whose undercut was dyed three different colors. They'd brought racks of clothes, and they studied Shane with the same assessing intensity Rose had shown at brunch.

"Okay," Darius said, circling him slowly. "I see what we're working with. Classic bone structure, great shoulders, but you're hiding everything under—what is this, business casual Canadian?"

"I was going for professional," Shane muttered.

"You were going for invisible." Darius exchanged a look with Petra. "Good news is, we can fix that."

The next few hours were a blur. Shane tried on things he never would have chosen for himself—shirts that actually fit instead of hiding his frame, pants that made his legs look longer, jackets with unexpected details that made him feel like someone worth looking at. Petra put him in a leather jacket that probably cost more than his first car, and Darius found a pair of boots that added an inch to his height and a decade to his confidence.

"See, the thing about clothes," Darius explained while Shane stared at himself in a deep green henley that did something obscene to his eyes, "is that they're not about hiding who you are. They're about *revealing* it. Showing people what you want them to see."

"What if I don't know what I want them to see?"

Darius smiled. "That's what we're figuring out."

Rose's hair stylist arrived next—a tiny, aggressively cheerful man named Tomás who took one look at Shane's hair and made a sound like a wounded animal.

"Who has been cutting this?" he demanded. "No, don't tell me. I don't want to know. Sit down. We're fixing it."

Shane sat.

An hour later, his hair was still long—longer than he'd ever worn it—but it *worked* now. Tomás had shaped it, layered it, done something with products that made it look intentionally disheveled rather than accidentally neglected. When Shane ran his fingers through it, it fell back into place like it was supposed to be there.

"You have *good* hair," Tomás said, sounding personally offended that Shane hadn't known this. "Thick, healthy, nice texture. You just needed someone who knew what to do with it."

Finally, there was Kennedy—Rose's makeup artist, a non-binary person with a shaved head and the kind of calm, competent energy that made Shane feel safe.

"I'm not going to put you in a full face," they said, setting out their supplies. "That's not what this is about. But there are things we can do—subtle things—that just make you look more *you*. More intentional. You game?"

Shane thought about all the years he'd spent being so careful not to draw attention. All the ways he'd policed his own appearance, terrified that anything too noticeable would somehow give him away.

"Yeah," he said. "I'm game."

Kennedy worked quickly, explaining as they went. A tinted moisturizer to even out his skin. Something on his brows that made them look fuller, more defined. A touch of color on his lips—"not lipstick, just a balm, brings out your natural tone"—and something around his eyes that Shane couldn't identify but that made them look bigger, brighter, *more*.

"There," Kennedy said, stepping back. "Take a look."

Shane turned to the mirror.

For a moment, he didn't recognize the person looking back at him.

It was still his face—same features, same structure, same everything. But it was like someone had turned up the contrast, sharpened the focus. He looked... present. Visible. Like someone who wanted to be seen.

"Oh," he said softly.

Rose appeared at his shoulder, meeting his eyes in the mirror. "Well?"

Shane couldn't speak. He was wearing the green henley and dark jeans that Darius had picked out, the leather bracelet now visible on his wrist instead of hidden under his sleeve. His hair fell across his forehead in a way that looked intentional for the first time in months. And his face—

He looked like someone he might want to be.

"I look—" He stopped, shook his head. "Is this really me?"

"It's always been you," Rose said. "We just helped you find it."

Shane turned away from the mirror to face her properly. "Thank you. I don't—I don't know how to—"

"You can thank me by sending me a video of Rozanov's reaction." Rose checked her phone. "Speaking of which, the team should be heading to the rink about now. What do you say we go find your man?"

Shane's stomach flipped. "I can't just show up at the rink looking like this."

"Why not?"

"Because—" He gestured at himself. "I'm supposed to be a hockey player. I'm supposed to blend in. If I show up like this, everyone's going to—"

"Everyone's going to *what*?" Rose raised an eyebrow. "Shane. You're allowed to look good. You're allowed to want people to look at you. That's not a crime. That's not even unusual. It's just being a person who exists in the world."

Shane took a breath. She was right. He knew she was right. But knowing it and feeling it were different things.

"What if he doesn't like it?"

Rose laughed—not the startled laugh from brunch, but something warmer. Fond. "Honey. That man is going to lose his entire mind. Trust me."

The rink was mostly empty when they arrived. It was still early, but Rose had texted someone—Shane didn't ask who—to confirm that Ilya was there.

"He's in the locker room," she reported, steering Shane down the hallway. "Probably waiting for you. You were supposed to meet him here, right?"

"Forty-five minutes ago." Shane's heart was pounding. "He's probably wondering where I am. I'm usually super-early"

"Good. Element of surprise." Rose stopped outside the lounge door, turned to face him. "Okay. You ready?"

"No."

"Perfect. Go get him."

She gave him a gentle shove, and Shane stumbled through the door.

The locker room was empty except for Ilya, sprawled across a chair with his phone in his hand. He looked up when the door opened, his face already arranging itself into the chirp he'd probably been preparing about Shane being late—

And then he froze.

Shane watched it happen. Watched Ilya's expression go from teasing to confused to something else entirely, something Shane didn't have a name for. Watched his lips part, his phone slip forgotten from his fingers, his whole body go still.

"Шейн," Ilya breathed. And then, in English, like he needed to say it twice to make it real: "*Shane*."

"Hey." Shane's voice came out rough. "Sorry I'm late. Rose and I got... distracted."

Ilya was standing now, crossing the room without seeming to decide to do it, his eyes never leaving Shane's face. He stopped close—too close for public, close enough that Shane could feel the heat radiating off him.

"Your hair," Ilya said, reaching up to touch it, his fingers sliding through the newly shaped layers. "And your face, you look—what did you *do*?"

"Rose helped me. Figure some things out." Shane's breath was coming faster now, responding to Ilya's proximity, to the intensity of his gaze. "Do you... is it okay? Do you like it?"

Ilya made a sound that was almost a laugh, except it was too raw for that, too hungry. "*Like* it? Shane, look at you. *Look* at you."

"I wanted—" Shane swallowed. "I wanted to feel like I belonged next to you. Like I wasn't just—"

"Stop." Ilya's hand curved around the back of his neck, firm and possessive. "Stop. You always belong next to me. Always. But this—" His eyes raked down Shane's body and back up again, and Shane felt it like a physical touch. "This is—I don't have words. English is failing me."

"What about Russian?"

"Russian is also failing me. You have broken my brain." Ilya stepped even closer, crowding Shane back against the wall. "Going to kiss you now. And then take you back to the hotel and I'm going to—"

"We're in the locker room," Shane managed, but he was already tilting his head back, already surrendering to the inevitable.

"Don't care." Ilya kissed him—deep and thorough and claiming, the kind of kiss that made Shane's knees go weak and his thoughts scatter. When he finally pulled back, his eyes were dark. "You want to know what I see when I look at you? I see the most beautiful man I've ever known. And now everyone else gets to see it too." He made a frustrated sound. "I want to take you apart. I want to mark you up. I want everyone to know you're mine."

"Ilya—"

"Do you have any idea what you do to me?" Ilya's forehead dropped to Shane's, his breath ragged. "Every day. Every single day. And now you show up looking like *this*—"

Shane kissed him this time, because he could, because he wanted to, because for the first time in his life he felt like someone worth kissing. Ilya groaned into his mouth and pressed him harder against the wall, one thigh sliding between Shane's legs, and Shane stopped thinking about anything except *yes* and *more* and *finally, finally, finally*.

When they finally broke apart, both breathing hard, Ilya pulled out his phone.

"What are you doing?"

"Texting Rose." Ilya's grin was sharp and satisfied. "To say thank you. And also to tell her I'm stealing you for the rest of the night and she can't have you back."

Shane laughed, giddy and overwhelmed and happier than he could remember being. "She's going to be insufferable about this."

"She deserves to be. She gave me a gift." Ilya pocketed his phone and took Shane's hand, threading their fingers together. "Come on. Hotel. Now. I have plans."

"What kind of plans?"

Ilya's smile went molten. "The kind where I show you exactly how sexy you are. For several hours. Very naked."

Shane let himself be pulled toward the door, feeling lighter than he had in years. He caught a glimpse of his reflection in the window as they passed—the new hair, the new clothes, the flush on his cheeks and the brightness in his eyes—and for just a moment, he didn't look away.

There you are, he thought. *There you finally are.*

Later, much later, tangled together in hotel sheets with Ilya's fingers tracing lazy patterns on his chest, Shane said: "I didn't know I was allowed to want this."

"Want what?" Ilya's voice was drowsy, satisfied.

"To be seen. To be... beautiful. I spent so long trying to be invisible that I forgot there was another option."

Ilya propped himself up on one elbow, looking down at Shane with an expression that made his chest ache. "You were never invisible to me. From the very first moment, I saw you."

"I know. But I didn't see myself." Shane reached up, touched Ilya's face. "I'm starting to, though. I'm starting to."

Ilya turned his head, pressed a kiss to Shane's palm. "Good. Because what I see is extraordinary. And I want you to see it too."

Shane pulled him down into a kiss, soft and slow and full of promise.

He was learning. He was becoming. And for the first time in his life, he couldn't wait to see who he'd be.

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