Soft Launch

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Soft Launch

by AutumnFoxed

Summary

> “People will assume things.”
>
> Shane tilted his head. “Ilya. They already are.”
>
> Blazing at the very top: ***#HotRivals***. The title read: ***A Comprehensive Timeline of Shane Hollander and Ilya Rozanov (You’re Welcome)***

Shane 'accidentally' soft launches his secret relationship with Ilya. Several coffee cups, a jacket incident, and one extremely obvious rivalry later, fans come to a conclusion: *Shane Hollander and Ilya Rozanov are not straight and not fooling anyone.*

Five times fans almost figure it out, and one time they do.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes

1

Shane was floating, not *literally* - though the bathwater had been so perfectly hot he'd wondered if a person could melt into a puddle of contentment. Everything in the world seemed pleasantly fuzzy at the edges.

Except for Ilya.

They were back in their hotel room now. The bathroom door stood slightly ajar, like an unspoken confession hanging between them. Shane was planted on the edge of the bed, idly scrolling through his phone. Ilya had stationed himself by the window, already fully armored in his Boston Bears sweatpants and a dark t-shirt.

"You're very quiet," Shane said, not glancing up.

Ilya didn't turn. "I am resting."

Almost without thinking, Shane lifted his phone. His jersey was slung haphazardly over one shoulder, looking as relaxed as he felt.

He snapped a quick selfie. He posted it.

Caption: Good night, Montreal 😌

He leaned back on his hands.

"You posted something," Ilya stated.

"Just a picture."

Ilya finally turned. Shane watched Ilya's eyes catch on the screen, on Shane's reflection, then dart to the angle of the shot.

The full-length mirror by the bathroom door was an overachiever. It had generously included a slice of the room behind him. The edge of the bed. And a tall, dark blur standing by the window. A blur with conspicuously broad shoulders, a very familiar posture, and an unmistakable Boston Bears logo plastered down the leg of grey sweatpants.

Ilya stared at the phone as if it had just called him a bad name in Russian.

"Delete the picture," he said.

Shane blinked. "What picture?"

Ilya marched over and loomed. It made Shane want to poke the bear. Literally.

"You know what picture."

Shane tilted the screen away, scrolling with curiosity. “I don’t see anything wrong with it.”

“There is a mirror.”

“Is there?”

Ilya’s jaw did a little flex. “The fans will see.”

“Fans see everything.”

As if the universe itself was desperate to prove his point, Shane’s phone buzzed.

He glanced down. A direct message popped up from a fan account called something like *@hollandersmouthwash*

Curious, Shane tapped on Twitter. The first tweet he saw screamed:

> IS THAT ILYA ROZANOV IN THE MIRROR???

The second, in denial:

> no that’s literally just a coat

The third, someone had quoted the photo with red circles drawn all over it:

> WHY DOES THE COAT HAVE ABS 😲

Shane burst out laughing.

“Is not funny,” Ilya stated.

Shane wiped at the corner of his eye. “It’s a little funny.”

“Delete it,” Ilya repeated, stepping closer.

Shane looked up at him. He saw the tension rigid in Ilya’s shoulders. He could see the comfortable moment they’d been in just minutes ago preparing for an evacuation.

“Nah,” Shane said, his voice gentle but firm. “We’re having a nice time. We’re relaxed.”

“Is different,” Ilya argued.

“Is it?” Shane asked. “Or is it just people noticing what’s already there?”

Ilya looked back at his screen, watching the digital frenzy grow in real time. There were zoomed-in pixel analyses, side-by-side comparisons.

“Look,” Shane said. “If we have to go through this whole thing, we might as well let my fans have some fun with it.”

And somewhere out there in the nosy digital world, the internet collectively leaned toward its screens and became very interested indeed.

2

Shane leaned against the windowsill. One hand was wrapped around a ceramic mug that screamed *HOLLANDER* in bold letters - a fan gift he'd kept. Steam curled up and soothed his throat in a way he deeply appreciated. His voice felt… well-used. Thoroughly enjoyed. In the best possible way.

Across from him, Ilya held a matte-black cup like it was a piece of evidence at a crime scene, his eyes cutting toward the door as if expecting a SWAT team of gossip bloggers to breach it at any second.

"This is unnecessary," Ilya declared, his voice still a bit rough.

Shane took a sip. The warmth spread through his chest. "You're literally drinking it."

"I could stop."

"But you won't," Shane replied. "Because your throat hurts, and you're not a martyr."

With his free hand, Shane casually lifted his phone, aiming the camera. "Hold still."

"What?"

Click.

Ilya went statue-still. "Shane."

"Relax," Shane said, already tapping and swiping. "It's just a picture of coffee."

He'd framed it perfectly: the blur of the city skyline behind him, his own labeled mug front and center. And just at the very edge of the frame, where it could be played off as accidental but was intentional - another cup.

Caption: Fuel ☕

Ilya stared at the phone in Shane's hand as if it had just publicly rated his hockey skills a solid 'C+'.

"Why is my cup in the picture?"

"It's not your cup," Shane said lightly. "It's *a* cup. An inanimate object. It has no passport."

"There are *two* cups," Ilya pointed out.

"Teams exist," Shane shrugged.

As if on cue, Shane's phone buzzed in his hand.

First tweet:

That cup has Ilya Rozanov energy 🍵

“What does that mean,” Ilya demanded.

Another tweet popped up, this one with a zoomed-in screenshot of the black mug’s handle:

WHY DOES SHANE DRINK RUSSIAN TEA NOW???

“They think I’ve changed my entire beverage philosophy for a man,” Shane said. “This is a whole new level of commitment.”

one cup says HOLLANDER. the other says emotionally unavailable russian ;)))

Another:

the black cup is giving ‘I pretend I don’t care but I do’ vibes and I’m here for itttt 😍

To add on it:

THE CUPS ARE BOYFRIENDS

Someone had dug up and posted a side-by-side: the screenshot from Shane’s post next to an official Boston Bears promo photo of Ilya from months ago, holding the exact same model of black mug.

Caption:

tell me why that’s the SAME CUP 🔎

The top reply underneath was simply:

because they’re married LMAOOOO

“…That is not the same cup,” Ilya said finally, his argument weaker than decaf.

Another tweet popped up:

Shane Hollander really said soft launch via beverage. we see you 😏

“They’ve named the strategy,” Shane said, his voice softening with something like affection.

Ilya crossed his arms. “I am never drinking coffee in public again.”

Shane pushed off from the wall and stepped closer, bumping his shoulder gently against Ilya’s tense arm. “You know you don’t have to freak out. Look at them.”

Ilya’s eyes flicked back to the phone screen Shane offered.

The replies weren't snarling or vicious. They were laughing, joking, building elaborate, silly narratives. Someone had already photoshopped the two little cups holding handles. Another had put tiny party hats on them.

Almost defiantly, Ilya lifted his black mug and took another sip.

3

The movie on the hotel TV was terrible. Some ridiculous action rom-com was playing out, full of overwrought dialogue and improbable explosions. Two rival spies spent every other scene hissing *"I despise you!"* while simultaneously risking their lives for one another in ways that screamed the exact opposite.

Shane lay sprawled across his bed, the towel from his shower long since abandoned on the floor. He was only half-paying attention to the movie; the other half of his focus was fixed on the reflective surface of the television screen, where he could watch Ilya's silhouette on the other bed.

Ilya lay propped up with one arm behind his head, his phone held aloft.

On screen, one spy screamed, *"I hate you!"* before throwing herself through a wall of fire to tackle the other spy out of harm's way.

"Subtle," Shane observed, reaching for his own phone out of habit. He angled the camera toward the screen, and snapped a casual picture. His socked foot was a blur at the bottom of the frame. He posted it to his Instagram story.

They watched the terrible movie for another thirty seconds in comfortable silence before Shane's phone buzzed.

"Huh," Shane said, tilting his phone as he navigated to the notifications. "They're… very confident in their detective work tonight."

"What did you post," Ilya asked.

Shane just replayed his own story for him.

There it was: the dark TV screen, the sports highlights, his own foot. And there, in the inky reflection of the television was the rest of the room.

Shane, lounging on one bed.

And, unmistakably, the outline of a second person lying on the other bed.

Ilya leaned forward, squinting at the tiny reflection. "The glass distorts. Is not a clear image."

"Your nose isn't that distorted," Shane said.

His phone buzzed again. Shane switched apps. "Oh, we've made it to Reddit."

The top post in the hockey forum read:

> I AM NOT SAYING IT'S ROZANOV BUT IT'S ROZANOV!!!!!

Underneath, a series of screenshots. Someone had drawn a neon-yellow outline around the reflection's profile.

The top comment declared:

> that is the most ilya rozanov nose i have ever seen. i'd recognize that disapproving slope anywhere

The reply underneath:

> why is he scrolling like he's offended by the concept of relaxation 🤨

And a third, gaining traction:

> THE OTHER BED?? THEY BOOKED A TWO BED ROOM? THE PLATONIC TENSION IS ELECTRIFYING 🤤

"It could be a teammate," Ilya insisted, pacing a short line at the foot of his bed. "Harris. Or Bouchard."

"On a rival team's road trip," Shane said, ticking points off on his fingers. "Wearing your sweatpants yesterday. Drinking from your judgy black mug this morning. The evidence is mounting."

"Circumstantial," Ilya grumbled.

"Okay," Shane said. "Let's consult the jury."

Ilya's eyes widened in alarm. "Shane. Do not - "

But it was too late. Shane's thumbs were already flying across the screen. He added a poll to his existing Instagram story. The text over the same photo read:

> Late-night TV hits different when you're not alone

The poll options below were:

> Agree

> Agree

On the TV, the movie reached its screeching climax. The two rival spies, having dismantled a villain's lair, finally crashed into each other amidst the rubble. They shouted one last accusation before the music swelled and they kissed, passionately and improbably, as a building exploded tastefully behind them.

Shane gestured toward the screen with his phone. “Art imitates life.”

As if summoned by the declaration, Shane’s phone truly erupted. Votes for the poll flooded in. Direct messages poured in:

> THE POLL OPTIONS ARE KILLING ME ROTF 🤣
>
> shane hollander woke up today and chose beautiful havoc
>
> two beds. two men. one reflection. the math is mathing, your honor 👩‍⚖️
>
> this is the least straight instagram story i’ve ever seen and i follow several floral arrangement accounts 🤦

Ilya let his hands fall. “Who looks that closely?”

Shane leaned back against his pillows. “People who care,” he said simply. “A lot.”

Ilya glanced at the TV, then back at the evidence of the frenzy on Shane’s phone.

“They are not… accusing.”

“Not really.”

“They are… entertained.”

“Very,” Shane confirmed.

A moment later, his phone chimed a final time. The poll had ended.

The results: 100% Agree.

4

Shane sat on the bench in front of his stall, his jersey half-peeled down his torso. The game had been good - a little mean, and deeply satisfying.

Across the room, maintaining a very specific three-stalls-down buffer zone, Ilya was unlacing his skates.

Shane lifted his phone and took a selfie. He angled it just right, capturing his own relaxed grin, a glimpse of sweat-damp collarbone. His thumb hovered over the caption box. He typed it without overthinking, the Cyrillic letters feeling surprisingly natural under his fingertips.

> Хорошая игра.

Good game.

He hit post.

Buzz.

Buzzbuzzbuzz.

“Oh?” Shane murmured, his curiosity piqued.

The first reply screamed:

> Since WHEN does Shane Hollander know Russian??

The second, connecting dots at lightning speed:

> THAT’S ILYA ROZANOV’S PHRASE. HIS EXACT POST-GAME PHRASE.

The third, delivered with the confidence of a forensic linguist:

> HE SPELLED IT RIGHT TOO. THIS IS NOT GOOGLE TRANSLATE. SOMEONE TAUGHT HIM.

Across the room, Ilya went rigid. “You posted in Russian.”

Shane blinked, as if searching his memory. “That. Right.”

Ilya was already on his feet, closing the distance between their stalls with purposeful strides. “Why?”

Shane offered a shrug. “It was a good game.”

“That is *my* phrase.”

“Is it?” Shane asked, tilting his head. “I thought it belonged to the entire Russian language. My bad.”

“You are mocking me.”

“I am appreciating a rich cultural tradition,” Shane corrected. “Expanding my horizons.”

Ilya leaned in, bracing a hand on the stall frame. “You are being reckless.”

Shane’s grin was unrepentant. “You taught me.”

“I did not teach you to post it.”

As if on cue, Shane’s phone buzzed again on the bench between them.

New tweets poured in:

> why does shane hollander know colloquial hockey russian??? who is he talking to???
> 🌞

> THIS IS NOT DUOLINGO ENERGY. THIS IS ‘A HOT RUSSIAN WHISPERED THIS IN MY EAR’ ENERGY.
>
> ilya rozanov 100% says that exact phrase in that exact tone after a win. this is a direct quote 🧐

Someone had already posted a fan-made compilation video of Ilya saying “Хорошая игра” in various post-game interviews over the years.

The caption read:

> tell me with a straight face this man didn’t learn it from HIM

Delighted, Shane began deliberately liking the tweets. One by one. *Tap. Tap. Tap.*

Ilya’s eyes dropped to the phone screen. “People will assume things.”

Shane tilted his head, his expression softening into something more genuine. “Ilya. They already are.”

Another notification flashed:

> If Shane Hollander is soft-launching Ilya Rozanov via niche hockey Russian, I will personally bake him a thank-you cake <33

Shane tapped the heart, the little icon glowing red.

A fan had posted a zoomed-in screenshot of his Cyrillic caption.The text underneath declared:

> ilya rozanov ghostwrote this caption and i will accept no other explanation ;P

5

The plan was that they were supposed to be leaving. Shane's phone lay abandoned on the dresser as he patrolled the room with the focused confusion of a man who could find a puck in a blizzard but never his own passport.

Ilya sat on the very edge of the bed, his bag already zipped and waiting by the door.

“You will miss your flight,” Ilya stated, his eyes tracking Shane’s fruitless search.

Shane glanced at the clock, unmoved. “I’ve got time.”

“You always say this.”

“And I’m always right,” Shane replied, his voice muffled as he peered under the bed.

Ilya stood up abruptly. “You are distracting.”

Shane straightened. “I’m literally putting on a shoe. This is the least distracting activity known to man.”

Ilya stepped closer. His hand came up, fingers brushing Shane’s wrist. “You could be faster.”

A laugh escaped Shane. “You’re the one who said we should go.”

“I did not say now,” Ilya countered, his eyes fixed on Shane’s mouth.

Fifteen minutes later, Shane’s shoes were still not on.

After - well, *after* - they found themselves by the door again, slightly breathless, their hair rearranged in ways that spoke of terrible, wonderful timing. Ilya reached out and straightened the collar of Shane’s rumpled t-shirt. His fingers lingered against the fabric, against the skin of Shane’s neck.

“You make leaving difficult.” Ilya muttered, the words lacking any real heat.

“You say that like it’s a bad thing,” Shane murmured, leaning into the touch.

Needing to break the moment before he decided to miss his flight entirely, Shane grabbed the first jacket he saw slung over the back of the chair. He shrugged into it without a second thought.

The texture was off, and the scent… familiar.

Ilya noticed immediately. “That is - ”

Shane looked down. There, emblazoned over his left breast, was the Boston Bears crest.

“Oh,” Shane said aloud. “It’s just a jacket.”

“That is *my* jacket.”

“You left it,” Shane pointed out. “In my room. Abandoned property, really.”

Ilya stepped closer again. “You cannot wear that through an airport. It is a billboard.”

Shane’s phone, still on the dresser, chose that moment to buzz. He sighed, a sound of put-upon obligation. “Hold on, the world demands my attention.”

He snagged the phone and, operating on instinct, raised it. He snapped a quick mirror pic - the jacket hanging open just enough to leave the rival logo glaringly visible.

He posted it to his story. The first tweet he saw:

THAT JACKET IS NOT STRAIGHT. I DON’T MAKE THE RULES

The second:

> WHY IS SHANE HOLLANDER WEARING A BOSTON BEARS JACKET. HAS HE BEEN TRADED. IS THIS A HOSTAGE SITUATION 😳

The third, with finality:

> Oh this is no longer speculation. This is CONFIRMATION. The vibes have been certified ✅

Someone had already crafted the tweet:

> Two rival NHL players wearing each other's clothes?? Nature is healing 🤼‍♂️

Someone else had posted a crisp Getty image of Ilya wearing the exact same jacket at a team arrival two weeks prior.

A third person wrote, simply:

> They didn't even TRY to hide this one LOL

Shane tapped the heart. *Liked*.

With a sound of defeat, Ilya grabbed his own phone from the nightstand and shoved it deep into his pocket as if it were a live grenade.

"I am not speaking to you," he announced.

"For how long?"

"Six hours," Ilya stalked to the door, yanked it open, and stopped. He glanced back over his shoulder, his eyes landing on the dresser.

"…You forgot your passport," he said, the words clipped.

Shane blinked. "I did?" He followed Ilya's look. There it was, plain as day.

With an exasperated sigh, Ilya marched back in, snatched the little blue booklet, and tossed it underhand at Shane's chest. Without another word, he turned and left, pulling the hotel room door shut behind him.

Shane checked Twitter one last time.

Trending at #1:

> #HotRivals

A tweet at the top of his feed read:

> They went from 'maybe they're friends' to 'oh they're together-together' in the span of one jacket. #icons

+1

Montreal had won. Shane's chest heaved, sweat cooling in the chill air, his heart still hammering a wild rhythm against his ribs. Across the red and blue lines, cutting through the noise with those long, predatory strides that always made Shane's breath catch, came Ilya.

His face was a carefully constructed mask of neutrality - the perfect picture of a rival defeated and displeased.

Shane knew it was a lie.

They slowed near the boards. A swarm of cameras descended, hungry for the obligatory post-game showdown, the tense moment of sportsmanship-that-wasn't.

Shane's grin was instant. "We won."

"You always win against me," Ilya muttered.

"That's statistically untrue."

"It feels true."

Shane's smile softened at the edges. "You okay?"

Ilya's eyes flickered over the nearing teammates before he dipped his head just a fraction.

"I am fine," he said, the concession in his tone. "You played well."

From Ilya Rozanov, after a loss on Shane's home ice, it was the equivalent of a sonnet.

They broke apart before the moment could thicken, but the cameras, with their high-definition eyes, had already caught something in the locked gaze.

Later, after the media scrums, when the world had shrunk to the concrete echo of a hallway outside the visitor's tunnel, Shane caught Ilya by the wrist. Ilya let himself be maneuvered, then gave Shane a pointless shove against the shoulder. "You should not be here."

"Tough," Shane said, backing him against the cold wall. Helmets were off now, hair damp and messy. "You're not mad."

"I am furious," Ilya stated, his face doing nothing to sell it.

Shane closed the last inch between them.

The kiss was a reckless spark in the dark. Their breath was still uneven from the game. It was all heat and familiarity.

Ilya's hands came up, fisting in the front of Shane's jersey as if to yank him back for more, before he stopped himself with a visible force of will.

“You won,” he said, the words a gravelly accusation.

Shane laughed. “You say that like I cheated.”

“You always cheat.”

For a long moment, they just stood there, foreheads pressed together, sharing the same air.

Shane pulled back first, a smirk playing on his lips. “I should probably go check on my fans. Gotta gloat.”

Shane didn’t even make it to Twitter before the flood of notifications overwhelmed the screen. He expected to see Montreal’s win trending. His own name, maybe. The game highlights.

Instead, blazing at the very top:

> #HotRivals

Shane turned the phone. A meticulously crafted thread dominated the feed.

The title read:

> A Comprehensive Timeline of Shane Hollander and Ilya Rozanov (You’re Welcome)

Beneath it, a frightening array of evidence:

Timestamped clips from tonight’s game of Shane’s eyes tracking Ilya across the ice after every whistle.

GIFs of Ilya turning and flashing a smile that was definitely not about hockey.

The mirror selfie. The twin coffee cups. The Russian caption. The jacket.

Side-by-side comparisons of their height and stance during the opening faceoff, with circles around where their gloves had almost brushed.

The conclusion:

> They’re together. They’ve BEEN together. The math is done. We 👏 have 👏 solved 👏 it

“…This is insane,” Ilya finally breathed, the words full of awe and horror.

> The NHL’s Worst-Kept Secret Finally Clicks for Fans

> From Enemies to Lovers? The Internet Brings Receipts

The fan reactions were a tidal wave of joyous vindication:

> THE WAY THEY LOOK AT EACH OTHER DURING FACEOFFS IS ILLEGAL IN SEVERAL STATES.
>
> i came for the hockey and stayed for the romance

Ilya exhaled. “They watched the whole game.”

“Frame by frame,” Shane confirmed.

“They checked my face.”

“They think it’s a good face. They’re happy for us, Ilya.”

Ilya’s eyes found Shane’s, then drifted back to the phone, to the cascade of jokes, excitement, and startlingly genuine support. The notable absence of real outrage seemed to settle over him.

“They are… drooling.”

Shane’s laugh was bright. “Yeah. A little.”

Without fanfare, Shane opened Instagram. He simply lifted his hand, laced his fingers through Ilya’s where they rested against his own leg, and took a picture. It was just their hands, intertwined.

One hand bore a Montreal championship ring.

The other, a Boston Bears ring.

The caption was simple:

> Guess you figured it out.

He posted it.

Ilya pulled out his own phone, opened Twitter, and scrolled until he found the tweet he was looking for. It already had seventy thousand likes.

It read:

> honestly this explains EVERYTHING about their ‘rivalry’ energy 😎

Ilya hesitated for only a second before he tapped the heart.

High above the ice, Montreal’s victory banner began its unfurling. But for the first time all night, nobody was looking at the score.

End Notes

I put the 'u' in kudos, you put the 'comment' in commentary? (That made no sense. Please comment and let me know if you liked it!)

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