

9:34 a.m. on a Tuesday in a Tampa IHOP

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9:34 a.m. on a Tuesday in a Tampa IHOP

by [ggfj84](#)

Summary

After the Centaurs' emergency landing, Jane stops texting Ilya. The team begins to wonder if their captain's mysterious girlfriend deserves him.

Then Shane Hollander walks into the Tampa IHOP where the Centaurs are having breakfast.

Notes

This isn't a critique of *The Long Game*, but I really, really needed Shane to board a plane and go to Ilya after the emergency landing. Once I read the IHOP scene in *Role Model*, this just spontaneously happened over the course of...three weeks. Also, I wanted Troy at the IHOP breakfast, too, so Ilya went to get him.

Technical note: Shane returns to the hotel after the D.C. game in the novel, but I wrote that the Voyageurs flew to Philly for Reasons.

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

Troy couldn't remember the last time he'd been to an IHOP, but the night before, the Centaurs' plane had to make an emergency landing. The entire team was still shaken, Troy included, so when Ilya Rozanov of all people found him on the beach and said, "You're coming to breakfast," Troy hadn't protested.

So here he was, sharing a booth with some of the Ottawa Centaurs' heavy hitters – Wyatt, Luca, Ilya, of course, and Harris. Even though Harris didn't skate for the team, he was a member of the core group and deserve a seat at the table.

Bood wandered in not long after Ilya and Troy, and the group added an auxiliary table. Evan Dykstra and Nick Chouinard eventually joined, followed by Dillion, Boyle, Holmberg, LaPointe, and finally Young.

Troy felt a bit uneasy, being so close to Harris after their night together. They hadn't talked about what it would mean for them. Were they in a relationship? Was Harris his boyfriend? Did Harris want to be his boyfriend?

Troy had freaked out and left Harris earlier, so sitting next to him – someone way too good and wholesome for Troy – at 9:34 a.m. on a Tuesday in a Tampa IHOP unnerved Troy to no end.

He wasn't given much of a choice, though. Ilya had all but shoved him into the booth, then shoved Harris in right next to him, before climbing into the other side. The captain sat across from them, blocked in by Wyatt, Luca, and Bood.

They chatted about everything and nothing – the food, Chiron, what to do after the meal. They had all lived through a traumatic experience, and they weren't going to waste the day. Since they were in Tampa, it was only natural for the team to head to the beach next.

The team ordered massive breakfast combos, except for Ilya, who ordered black coffee and toast; Troy, who ordered a veggie egg white omelette; and Bood, who ordered the Fisherman's Platter.

"If I want fried fish at IHOP, then I'm gonna get fried fish at IHOP," Bood said, "and you're all not going to judge me for it."

"We are so going to judge you for it," Harris laughed.

"And drive you to the hospital when you get food poisoning," Dykstra added.

When Ilya didn't join him on the ribbing, Troy looked over. His captain was frowning at his phone, opening his messaging app and then closing it again. Troy watched him repeat the action at least three times in one minute.

Ilya looked so dejected. Troy generally liked to mind his own business, but he owed Ilya for helping fit him into the team and finding him this morning.

"Waiting to hear from someone?"

Ilya was secretive about his personal life. He wasn't around on off days. He texted all the time – in the locker room, on the bus, during team parties and events – and Harris had mentioned that Ilya was frantically typing on the plane. Had the special person in his life not answered after their emergency landing?

Did their captain seriously not hear from the one person he loved the most?

“Jane not answering again?” Dykstra asked between sips of his orange juice.

“Jane?” Troy echoed. He couldn't have heard that right.

Ilya looked up, those green-hazel eyes intense and narrowing at Troy as if to say, *Do not say anything*.

“Jane, Cap's long-time girlfriend,” Wyatt clarified. His expression, too, was a calm warning.

Bood didn't see or ignored the silent conversation between those sitting in the booth. “Yeah, she lives in Montreal, and we never get to meet her.”

“My Jane is busy,” Ilya offered, but to Troy, it sounded like a lame excuse. “Works long hours. Has hard job being second-best in what she does.”

He winked in Troy's direction, which confirmed everything Troy was thinking. He had been right, all those weeks ago in New York.

“It's why she can't make games or team gatherings,” the rookie Young offered from the far end of the table.

That really was a terrible cover, but no one seemed to question it further, perhaps because of the dark glower Ilya sent the group. They must all have known Jane was off-limits in some capacity and not to push.

Troy would have left it there and changed the conversation – maybe to the weather or how life-and-death situations could cause spontaneous pancake ordering – but fucking Tanner Dillion of all people didn't know when to quit.

“So Jane hasn't texted you back?”

Ilya let out a sigh; his body crumpled as if breaking under some unbearable weight. “She has not texted me this morning. Is unlike her.”

“Maybe she's at work?” Bood offered, sipping his coffee. “Cassie took a while to get back to me last night.”

“I...We spoke last night. She is up at 6:15. Every day. She has chosen not to message me.”

“Why don't you call her?” Harris offered with that adorable, kind smile he had. Troy was a little jealous it wasn't directed at him, but Harris was friendly with everyone. And Ilya deserved to receive Harris's warm smiles. “I'm sure she'd want to hear from you again.”

“She will call or text when free,” Ilya continued, ruffling his curls. They were already a riot, but now they were even more bedraggled. “There is reason she is not.”

“Run out of her favorite protein brand?” Bood offered.

“Wash a green sock with her Voyageurs’ white shirt again?” Boyle, this time.

“Totally did not see it in the load,” Ilya huffed indignantly, though by the tiny smirk on the captain’s face, Troy could tell he’d done it on purpose.

“Steal her sweatshirt, so she has to wear your Cens’ hoodie back to Montreal?” Holmberg asked.

Oh, that was a pretty genius move.

But why wouldn’t *Jane* text Ilya back? Troy always thought he was an upstanding guy. Maybe Jane was secretly the asshole? Every relationship was supposed to have one, and he would definitely be the asshole in his and Harris’s relationship. If they were in a relationship. Which they weren’t. Or maybe they were? Ugh. He sucked at this stuff.

"How long have you been together?" Luca asked, stealing Troy’s attention.

“It’s gotta be *years*, right, Roz?” Dillon again. Didn’t this guy know when to quit?

“Cap doesn’t need to tell us anything.” Wyatt took a measured sip of his coffee. “Personal lives are just that – personal. Let’s not pry.”

Did Wyatt know, too? Had Ilya told him?

“C’mon, Hazy,” Chouinard, this time. “Aren’t you just a little curious about Jane? She wrangled the Fifth Hottest Man in the NHL.”

“Voting was rigged.” At the expectant looks on the team’s faces, Ilya crumbled. “Yes, it has been years, okay? No need for press release.”

“Still don’t get why we can’t meet her.” Bood shook his head. “We don’t bite.”

Dykstra aborted a sip of his orange juice. “Shit. Is she having an affair? Are you the other man?”

Ilya let out a dry, humorless laugh, though Troy had to pinch himself to not join in. Ilya was the other man, all right, just not the way Dykstra meant.

“It is...complicated,” Ilya seemed to finally settle on. “Tampa is special. We got back together here, almost four years ago.”

“Four years,” Harris echoed with a shake of his head. “Did she come to watch your game here?”

“Something like that.”

The food came then, and the matter was temporarily dropped. The discomfort that sat with Ilya now sat with Troy, too. Ilya checked his phone again. And again. And again. It was obvious to anyone with eyes that Ilya was head over heels for Jane. Why wouldn't he message Ilya back, especially after such a harrowing ordeal?

Ilya's phone buzzed.

There was somehow both a collective sigh and collective cheer from the table.

Jane had texted Ilya back.

"Thank God," Dykstra griped, shoulders slumped. "We do not need a repeat of pre-season last year."

"Pre-season?" Troy echoed, to which Wyatt shook his head. "Don't ask."

Harris put up a hand and stage-whispered, "Ilya drove Jane's Range Rover to work on the day she needed to be back in Montreal."

Ilya shrugged. "She blocked me in."

So what did Jane drive back?

"Don't leave us hanging, Roz," Bood demanded before Troy could ask. "What did she say?"

An adorable, confused line formed between Ilya's eyebrows. "She wants to know where I am." As he typed, Ilya spoke, "At IHOP with 2021 cup winners."

Another buzz sounded two moments later. "Sorry?" he read, then lifted his annoyed eyes toward the team, like they would have the answers. "Why is she sorry?"

Silence overtook the table, everyone fearing the same thing.

Was Jane going to break up with Ilya?

"Maybe she doesn't deserve you," Luca, of all people, offered.

Troy's eyebrow shot up. The entire team looked toward the blushing forward who hastily shoved an entire taco pancake into his mouth.

"He's right," Wyatt said. When Ilya jerked his head back, shocked, he continued, "You've been in this relationship with Jane for years, yet she didn't return your texts for hours and is now making you guess what they mean? I don't care who that person is, Roz. They don't deserve you."

Ilya redirected his eyes toward his plate and took an aggressive bite of his toast. "Is not what you think."

"Doesn't matter what I think. Doesn't matter what anyone at this table thinks. It only matters what you think and feel about Jane, and if they are making you feel terrible after the night we

had..." Wyatt shrugged.

There was an uncomfortable silence at the table for a long moment. Dykstra's shrimp crunched with every bite. Bood asked for the blueberry syrup and proceeded to drown his waffle. Troy shared a long glare with Harris, who looked like he wanted to say something. He wasn't like Troy, who could sit with tension and be happy he wasn't making the situation worse. Harris wanted to fix it.

Troy grabbed Harris's wrist, but it didn't stop his maybe-probably boyfriend from saying, "Maybe Jane's sorry she can't be here with you? In Tampa? Or maybe she's sorry that she doesn't think you'll win the cup this year?"

"She lives in Montreal," Boyle added. "You've said she likes the Voyageurs."

"Is there anything else you can share about her?" Dykstra asked. "If you love her, she's gotta be amazing, Roz."

Ilya's face did something complicated, even heartbreaking, and Troy was about to side with Wyatt – they shouldn't pry – when Bood exclaimed, "Holy shit! Is that Shane Hollander?"

Troy almost choked on his coffee.

Everyone followed Bood's gaze to the front of the restaurant, where Shane stood absolutely frazzled – hair askew, hands shaking, expression panic-stricken. He hadn't even changed out of his game-day suit from the night before, and his nervous eyes ricocheted back and forth as they searched the tables for something or *someone*.

Anytime Troy had seen Shane, he had always been put together, perfect in every way, but here, at 9:34 a.m. on Tuesday in a Tampa IHOP, he was an absolute mess.

And beautiful. Shane Hollander was a total babe, complete wreck or not.

At Bood's exclamation, Ilya whipped around so fast that Troy wondered if he would get whiplash. Shane's eyes locked on the Centaurs' table then, on Ilya, and the two moved as one.

Ilya used the table as leverage to pull his legs onto the bench, and then he jumped over the small wall between the booths. He landed on the empty bench next door and dropped into the walkway, where he and Shane collided. There was no other word for it.

Shane's shaking hands gripped Ilya's cheeks. His shimmering eyes held Ilya's gaze for a long moment. Ilya's arms wrapped about Shane's waist, hands fisted in the back of Shane's jacket, and then Ilya muttered something in Russian Troy didn't understand.

Shane was devastated by it. His face crumbled. The tears in his eyes now coursed his cheeks, and he lunged further into the hold, arms encircling Ilya's neck, face pressed into Ilya's shoulder. Ilya just held him, resting his cheek against Shane's head and simply absorbing Shane's quiet sobs.

Troy knew he should turn away. He shouldn't be watching this intensely private moment between two of the best hockey players in the world, but he couldn't. He was mesmerized as

he watched Ilya Rozanov and Shane Hollander hold each other than they were the only two people in the world.

"Jane is Shane," Luca murmured, as if to himself. "Ilya's Jane is Shane Hollander."

The food began to cool as Shane met Ilya's gaze again and whispered so low Troy almost missed it, "The 6:35 was the first plane out of Reagan. I wouldn't have been here faster if I drove. I checked."

"You were on a plane this morning."

"We had already taken off by the time you texted, and the Wi-Fi was shit. I would have called before I left, but I didn't want to wake you."

"Good call. You would have woken the person I brought back from the bar."

Despite his teary gaze, Shane quipped, "Boodram or Dykstra?"

"You don't think I have game anymore? I landed you."

"Took you seven years."

"Took me less than three minutes in a shower."

For whatever reason, Hollander didn't have a retort for that, though his soft laugh and flushed cheeks were precious.

Ilya didn't spare another glance toward the group. He pressed a quick peck to Shane's lips – just in case any of the Centaurs questioned the nature of their relationship – and wrapped an arm around Shane's waist. Then, he led Shane out of the IHOP and somewhere private.

Still in shock, the team hadn't resumed eating by the time Wiebe entered a few moments later. He came to the end of the table to address the team. "I just met Ilya's girlfriend Jane. Great girl. Nice of her to come all the way to Tampa to see him, don't you think?"

Everyone understood. Jane, the person who snagged the Fifth Hottest Player in the NHL, had come at 9:34 a.m. on a Tuesday to a Tampa IHOP, not Shane Hollander.

"She is pretty," Luca commented, cheeks flushed, before finishing his third pancake taco.

Troy shared a quick glance with Harris, who raised his eyebrows. Troy agreed. "Hollanov" or "Rozander" would totally be announced as Cosmo's Hottest Couple in the NHL if they ever came out.

The TMZ story hit Troy's Instagram feed at 11:25 a.m. Though Troy didn't follow the rag mag TV show, he liked one post three weeks ago about their support for the women who accused Dallas Kent, so now Instagram pushed all their posts into his feed.

The headline was unmistakable. “SHANE HOLLANDER IN TAMPA – BUT WHO WAS HE THERE TO SEE?”

Troy clicked on the link in bio, which took him to a TMZ Live clip.

The executive producer – Charles – stood with sell-out Sports Producer Mike Babcock in front of a screen showing still shots of Shane. Shane looked anxious, concerned, glancing at his phone as he waited for the monorail inside Tampa International Airport. He wore the same suit Troy remembered from the IHOP, and his sunglasses did nothing to hide his identity.

“Who are you showing me here, Mike?” Charles asked. “He can fill out a suit. I’ll give you that.”

“This is Shane Hollander, Captain of the Montreal Voyageurs,” Mike explained. He went on to give Shane’s career highlights – second overall pick in the 2009 NHL Draft, three Stanley Cups, Conn Smythe winner, two-time Hart Trophy winner, sixty-three goals last season because Shane fucking Hollander was a beast.

Troy was disgusted watching Babcock. Eighteen years as a coach in the league, one Stanley Cup, and now the guy shared gossip on players for TMZ. What a fucking asshole.

But Troy needed to see what Mike knew – for Roz.

“Why do I care that Mr. Hollander is in Tampa?” Charles, the executive producer, scoffed. “Maybe he’s visiting his grandmother.”

“You care for a few reasons,” Mike continued and ticked off each reason with a finger. “The Ottawa Centaurs’ plane had to make an emergency landing in Tampa last night. Hollander is still in his game-day suit, which means he left immediately after his game in D.C. Plus, he supposedly came out to his teammates earlier this year.”

Charles’ eyes widened. His face lit up. “Oh, now it’s getting good. So who was on the plane that Mr. Hollander desperately needed to see?”

“Ilya Rozanov.”

Fuck.

Before Charles could ask, Mike filled in the blanks. “The number one overall draft pick in 2009 and supposedly Hollander’s archrival on the ice. He’s the captain of the Centaurs.”

“I’m getting an enemies-to-lovers vibe here, Mike.”

A wicked smile crossed Mike’s face. “Hollander and Rozanov started a charity a few years ago. I mean, they could be just two bros who – ”

“You’re saying they soft-launched their relationship with the charity,” Charles guessed.

Mike nodded. "I'm saying they soft-launched their relationship with the charity, and when the Centaurs' plane almost went down, Hollander was on the next flight to Tampa. Seriously. 6:35 a.m. Spirit."

"He flew Spirit? Oh, man. He must have it bad, but Mike, pics or it didn't happen. You gotta show me proof that Shane Hollander went down to Tampa to see his boyfriend."

"Oh, we have proof." On the screen behind Charles and Mike, the pictures of Shane at the Tampa airport dissolved into a picture of Shane and Ilya holding each other. "This was taken at 9:34 a.m. in a Tampa IHOP. I don't know about you, but that's not how I hug a brother from another mother."

Troy needed to find Ilya.

Neither Ilya nor Shane answered when Troy knocked on Ilya's hotel room door ten minutes later. He didn't hear anyone in the room, so he figured Ilya and Shane must have gone somewhere, maybe down to the beach to hang with the Centaurs.

So Troy went.

The air was warm and salty. The sand was soft and inviting. The whole scene was a complete 180 from the weather in Ottawa, and Troy loved it. He could lay on the beach and soak up the sun all day. He could also watch Harris toss a frisbee with Bood and Dykstra and enjoy the fucking view. That was the one thing he could say about the hockey world. There was no shortage of hot men, on and off the ice.

Eventually, Harris missed the frisbee, and it landed by Troy's bare feet.

"You came to the beach party," Harris cheered, jogging up to Troy. Troy's expression must have shown his discomfort because Harris's warm and adorable expression shifted into concern. "What's wrong?"

"TMZ has pictures of the Tampa airport and IHOP." If anyone needed to know, it was Harris. "Babcock is saying Shane came down to see Ilya."

"As friends, right? Best friends? Absolutely no romantic feelings between them?"

Troy shook his head.

"Fuuuuuccck." Harris glanced back at the ocean, as if it was the cause of his frustration. "Have you seen the lover boys? My boss is going to want to release a statement, and I'm going to need to know what they want to say."

When Troy shook his head again, Harris swore under his breath and then headed off toward Wyatt, who was living it up in a lounge under an umbrella. He stopped halfway there and jogged back to Troy to take his hand.

"Thank you for letting me know. This is going to be a shitshow, so buckle up, okay?"

“A trial run for us then?”

Harris’s eyes widened in shock before his lips lifted. “Yeah?”

“Yeah.” Troy scratched the back of his head. “I think so. What do you think?”

“I think I’m in crisis mode, and now all I’m going to think about is how Troy Barrett wants to date me for real.”

“So good then?” Troy hoped.

Harris pressed a quick kiss to his cheek. “Absolutely.” He then hurried off to see if Wyatt could find Ilya and Shane, shouting backwards, “Good boyfriends get lattes and cake-pops!”

Troy could be a good boyfriend. At least, he wanted to be.

Before Harris wrangled a search party, Ilya graced the beach with his presence, Shane on his heels. They must have gone shopping because both wore swimming trunks that had no business being that short, along with open palm tree shirts, slides, and sunglasses. Ilya also sported a backwards snapback, which if Troy was being honest, worked for him.

“Sorry we are late, everyone! We needed to find Reebok sandals, or someone here might ‘violate his contract.’” He used air quotes, and a smiling, happy Shane shoved him playfully in the shoulder.

“My mom would kill me.”

“Gather ‘round, gather ‘round,” Ilya summoned the team, who came from the ocean, the loungers, the sandcastles. “I would like to introduce you to my boyfriend from Canada who none of you have met before – Shane Hollander.”

Bood snorted. “You have a *boyfriend from Canada*? Really?”

“Yes, is what I just said.”

Ilya clearly had never heard the joke before, and Troy had to bite his lower lip to stop from laughing.

Shane blushed and waved from behind Ilya. “Hey, guys. Um...I know this might be a bit of a shock, but – ”

“Not really.” Dykstra shrugged, his nose already burnt. “I mean, now that we know, it makes sense.”

Ilya shared a quick bewildered look with Shane. “What?”

“Yeah, all the shit-talking and stuff – you were pulling Hollander’s pigtails.” Bood flipped the frisbee in the air.

“And with the charity in the summer...” Luca blushed and then quickly shut his mouth.

Troy empathized. Once you saw what was there, you couldn't unsee it. Shane Hollander and Ilya Rozanov were together and had been for a very long time. Troy saw it all those weeks ago in New York, and now the entire team did, too.

Wyatt stepped up to Shane and put out a hand. "Always good to see you, Shane. Treat our cap well, huh?"

Shane glanced to Ilya, who clearly was taken back, before taking Wyatt's hand. "I'll do my best. He deserves nothing less."

Wyatt seemed to accept that, clapped Ilya on the shoulder, and then headed back toward his lounge.

In the brief silence that followed, Harris jumped in front of the couple. "Sorry, guys. We need to talk. In private. We have a situation."

Shane's eyes widened; Ilya seized his hand with both of his and led him toward a quieter section of the beach.

Troy followed. When Harris shot him a quick, questioning glare, Troy shrugged. "I watched the clip. I know what TMZ said."

"TMZ?" Shane echoed, his voice cracking.

Ilya kissed the back of his hand.

Harris rolled his shoulders back, took a quick, bracing breath, and reported the facts. TMZ had images of Shane at Tampa International Airport. Due to his friendship with the Ottawa captain, the "reporters" – Harris used air quotes – assumed Shane came to Tampa to see Ilya. Asshole Sell-out Mike Babcock concluded they were in a relationship before confirming it with a photo of Shane and Ilya hugging at IHOP that morning.

"Did I miss anything?" Harris asked Troy, who shook his head.

Shane seemed to take the news worse than Ilya, lifting his free hand to cover his face. He turned his back towards the group, though he never let go of Ilya's hand, a tether keeping him grounded.

Ilya sent him a worried frown but spoke to Harris. "What do you suggest?"

"First, I'm sorry this happened to you. You shouldn't have had the decision to come out taken from you."

Ilya nodded, a silent "thank you."

"Second, I need to talk to Wiebe and my boss. They'll need to talk to the owners, and then I'll get in contact with the Montreal Voyageurs' communications team. We'll want coordinate what we say, but that depends on what you guys want to say." He waited a moment, allowing Ilya and Shane to absorb all the information. Then – "Any chance you know what you want to say?"

Ilya waited a full, charged moment before opening his mouth. Shane beat him to it. “We confirm. We’re a couple. We have been together for years, and our records show we’ve never let our personal lives interfere with our professional ones.” He came to stand by Ilya’s side again, his shoulders back and firm, a quiet, gentle smile on his lips. Ilya returned it in a giddy, almost child-like fashion.

“Is that all right with you?”

Ilya seized Shane’s cheeks and pulled him close with a sharp inhale, devouring Shane’s lips in a filthy, heated, and somehow tender embrace. It burned Troy’s cheeks better than the Tampa sun, and this time, he did advert his eyes.

Harris wagged his eyebrows, and Troy marveled at how easily they communicated without words now.

“You sure?” Ilya asked, soft just for Shane.

“I’m sure,” Shane repeated, just a hint of a teasing accent in his voice. He turned to Harris. “We should set a date, right? Because we don’t want an issue with immigration later.”

“Set a date?” Ilya asked, clearly shocked. “Set a date for what?”

Harris lifted his hands. “That’s your call.”

Ilya’s lips curled up in a daring, smug grin. “Hollander, are you seriously asking me – ”

“No, absolutely not.” Shane leaned over to steal a quick, chaste kiss. “When I do it, it’s not going to be on a beach in Tampa after you almost died. It’s not going to be done with us in swimming trunks and palm tree shirts without a ring because fucking Mike Babcock decided to sell out to the media. It’s not going to be in front of your social manager – no offense, Harris – and Troy Barrett of all people.” Shane glanced at Troy. “Hi, Troy. Good to see you again. Stop checking out my boyfriend.”

“What – I don’t – I mean I haven’t – I just – ” Troy whirled to Harris. “It was right when I came. I haven’t – Not since we – ”

Harris bit his bottom lip, his eyes dancing. It looked like he wanted to crack up.

“You are making it weird,” Ilya admonished.

Shane scoffed. “I’m making it weird? He made it weird by checking out *my* boyfriend.”

“Barrett did not know I was your boyfriend. He did not know I had a boyfriend.”

“He knows now, and so does probably the whole world.” Shane huffed. “We need to make it official.”

Ilya’s eyes narrowed, skeptical. “You have a ring.”

Shane mirrored his gaze, yet his voice wasn't half as confident. "W-What makes you say that?"

"Did you stop on the way to the airport?"

Shane scratched the back of his head and glanced away. "J.J. knows a lot of people, okay? And there's a Tiffany's in D.C."

Ilya cupped his boyfriend's cheeks and pulled him into a longer, even more thorough embrace, and geez, it *was* weird. Should Troy watch? Should he look away? And they were on a public beach, and here his captain and Shane Hollander were making out like no one was watching.

"I'm not crying," Ilya murmured against Shane's lips. "You did not propose yet."

"Good cuz I'm not crying either. And the ring is in the room."

Harris leaned closer then. "This is a beautiful movie – one of my new favorites – and I'd love to watch it on repeat. But if you don't have emails from a very mean dinosaur in New York yet, you will soon."

"Right." Shane wiped his eyes, and Troy wished he had a tissue for him. "So what do we do?"

"Let's recap the meeting, so I can get everything into a creative brief." Harris clasped his hands in front of his chest. "You want to confirm you are a committed couple in a statement, possibly with an engagement announcement. I will talk to Wiebe and my boss, who will touch base with the owners. Shane, you should reach out to your team and your agent, so they're not blindsided when I ask to coordinate. Oh, and Troy will not check out Ilya for the foreseeable future." He looked back and forth between Ilya and Shane before glancing back Troy. "We good?"

Ilya nodded. Shane nodded. Troy nodded, cheeks hot.

"All right." Harris put his hand in the middle of the group and then threw it up. "Go Team!"

Ilya led Shane back toward the hotel with a warm, private smile. Harris turned to Troy and heaved a loud sigh. When Troy reached for him, he wasn't surprised that despite the salty air and nearby fried boardwalk food, Harris still smelled of apples and Christmas spices.

"Never a dull moment," Harris laughed.

"But there will be lattes and cake-pops."

Harris raised his head. "Yeah?"

"Of course. I'm going to try to be a good boyfriend, and I hear that's a requirement."

"I dunno. You may already be a good boyfriend..." A teasing glint shimmered in his eyes. "...though you did check out Rozy, I hear."

“Before we were together!” Troy’s cheeks flushed hot. “When I first came, and-and...can you blame me?”

“Oh, hell no. That is one hot man. Cute couple, too.”

“Yeah.”

Shane Hollander dropped everything the moment he heard about Centaurs’ plane, stopped to pick up a ring, and then flew two and a half hours to Tampa to see his boyfriend.

And Ilya must have signed with the shit team that was the Ottawa Centaurs to be closer to his boyfriend.

They absolutely deserved each other. Troy hoped to one day deserve Harris, too.

He’d start today with lattes and cake-pops and then maybe he’d try with dinners and movies and spa retreats. He could be romantic. He could be devoted. He could be honest about his love like Scott Hunter and Shane Hollander and Ilya Rozanov. He wouldn’t hide Harris. He was done hiding himself.

He would come out to everyone. Soon.

Until then, he would support his captain and get his new boyfriend the sugar he needed to survive the NHL and its socially inadequate devices.

The media storm continued for a few hours following the TMZ story. Shane and Ilya were initially benched by the league, but both teams pushed back immediately. Even fucking Coach Theriault read a heated statement during his daily interview with reporters about hockey being for everyone and the team needed their superstar center to stay on top. He also managed to get in a dig about their division rivals, stating how the Centaurs needed Rozanov just to be competitive.

During this time, Troy brought Harris a never-ending line of lattes and cake-pops. He also brought Harris real food – salmon and pork-chops and mashed potatoes – which his boyfriend seemed to appreciate. He also seemed to appreciate Troy just being there, sitting in the room and listening to him grumble or huff when he received a message from the New York offices.

The league rescinded the suspensions by the Centaurs vs. Lightning game. Finally, the “no comment” from Harris and the Montreal Voyageurs’ director of communications became a joint press release, not mentioning speculation about their captains but stating how no one should have their privacy invaded. They provided support for the players involved, asked for respect and privacy, and said both Shane Hollander and Ilya Rozanov would be playing in their teams’ next games.

The Hollanders – Shane, Yuna, and David – all attended Ilya’s game that night wearing Rozanov jerseys.

Minutes after the Lightning game ended, Ilya and Shane uploaded a joint post on Instagram, announcing their relationship with a short statement and four photos. One picture showed them on the first day of their camp in their coaching tracksuits. Another one was at the cottage, Shane and Ilya lying on the dock with Ilya's head on Shane's stomach. Third was an outtake from the CCM ad campaign from all those years ago, the two teenage phenoms laughing and smiling. The last photo captured Shane and Ilya in their game-day suits, kissing and smiling as they held their chains in front of the camera – Ilya's with his mother's cross and new ring; Shane's with the ring's match.

Troy remembered seeing them take that picture outside of the hotel that afternoon. The Centaurs were boarding the bus to the Tampa arena, while the Hollander-Rozanov family huddled to the side of the hotel's overhang. Shane's mother had been the one to snap the photo, Troy thought.

The whole post was adorable, Harris had said, and Troy agreed.

He commented on the post.



IlyaRozanovScores



81245 likes

IlyaRozanovScores: He asked. I said yes. Be jealous. So you all saw the video. Although having the decision to discuss...

TroyBarrett17: Congratulations. Consider having your reception at an IHOP.

IlyaRozanovScores: Good idea!!! We can have pancake tacos as appetizers!!! 🍳🍳🍳🍳🍳

ShaneHollanderHockeyPlayer: No.

IlyaRozanovScores: You don't want me to be happy?

ShaneHollanderHockeyPlayer: They don't pair well with chicken parm and cookies and cream ice cream cake.

IlyaRozanovScores: ❤️❤️❤️❤️❤️

HarrisDroverOttawaCens: Awesome! Excited for the invite! Congrats, guys! 🌈

IlyaRozanovScores: Bring Troy!

IHarrisDroverOttawaCens: 😊

ihop: We'd love to cater. We'll even bring all our syrups. ❤️❤️
💙❤️

ShaneHollanderHockeyPlayer: No.

IlyaRozanovScores: Yes!

YunaHollanderHockeyMom: @ihop Let's chat!

2 HOURS AGO

Epilogue

Once they got back to Ilya's hotel room, Shane called his team, then his mother, before heading into the bathroom to decompress. He'd fucked up everything. His desperate, childish need to cling to Ilya and just hear his heartbeat got them outed by fucking Mike Babcock. Already, the fallout had begun.

A few high-pitched beeps sounded in the main part of the hotel room, followed by the clinking of metal. It repeated again and again until Shane got off the toilet and peeked out at his boyfriend.

In the tiny hallway between the door and the bedroom, Ilya knelt by the safe. He tugged on the door once, twice, before hitting in a four-digit number. The safe complained with another high-pitched squeal. Ilya tried again; the safe squealed again.

Shane let out a quick laugh. “You’re not going to guess it.”

“I will definitely guess it or you will tell me.” Ilya wagged his eyebrows over his shoulder.

Shane shook his head. No doubt, Ilya could get it out of him, especially when Shane couldn’t deny Ilya anything, not now.

Ilya input four new numbers. Another squeal.

“...I’m sorry.”

Ilya tried again. “For denying your boyfriend the ring he’s wanted for years?”

Shane would unpack that later. “For outing us. Outing *you*. You may not be able to go home –

Ilya forwent his siege on the safe and quickly crossed the hallway to seize Shane’s lips in a tender, longing embrace. Shane’s finger sunk into Ilya’s curls, and he savored his boyfriend’s taste and feel, receiving everything Ilya gave him.

When they broke, Ilya pressed his forehead against Shane’s and stared into his eyes. “I am home. Do you understand that?”

Shane glanced away. “Yeah, I get that, but – ”

Ilya gripped Shane’s chin and brought his gaze back. “There is no buts, Shane. *You* are my home, and I am yours. That is why you came, yes?”

Tears glistened in Shane’s eyes, and he whispered the truth in the small space between them, “I needed to hear your heartbeat myself.”

He couldn’t rest until he held Ilya in his arms again, had tangible proof that the best thing that ever happened to him – his entire world – hadn’t been lost in central Florida.

His team. His career. Hockey itself – Shane was willing to forgo it all just to hold his boyfriend in his arms again.

Ilya’s arms encircled Shane’s shoulders and pulled him close until there was no space between them. His warmth, his voice, his heartbeat calmed Shane, who let out a shaky sigh.

“I am permanent resident of Canada,” Ilya murmured into Shane’s hair. “Soon, I will have enough days to become citizen. Or you will make an honest Canadian man out of me. Either way, we’re not in the same situation we were three years ago.” He rubbed Shane’s back in soothing circles. “I even told you then. I would come out anytime you were ready.”

“I am ready,” Shane said, even though his voice shook. He was scared, but he wouldn’t be deterred. “I want to be with you. And I want everyone to know you are mine.”

Ilya pulled back enough to find Shane’s eyes. “Did you buy ring because of the plane or because of Barrett?”

Shane’s cheeks flushed. “I’m not going to answer that.”

“How long have you actually had the ring?”

“I’m not going to answer that either.”

Ilya’s crooked smile was beaming, and Shane soaked in it. “Hollander, I am going to see that ring.”

“*Rozanov*, you are going to practice restraint for once in your life.”

Ilya tsked. “I think I can make you tell me.”

Shane began to tug on Ilya’s swimming trunks. “How about this? If you can make me come hands free within the next ten minutes, I’ll give you the code to the safe.”

A wicked smile overtook Ilya’s face, and he lifted Shane into his arms, crossed the room in three strides, and unceremoniously dumped him onto the bed.

“What the fuck?” Ilya shouted eight minutes later after inputting the code – 1217. “Were you robbed?”

Shane didn’t even raise his head off the pillow, his swimming trunks clinging to one ankle, his palm shirt tight around his biceps. His breathing was still coming down. “Oh, were you looking for something?”

“Where is the ring?”

“Safe,” Shane said with a shrug and a smug grin. “Just not in our safe.”

Ilya prowled forward. He placed one knee down, then the other, climbing onto the bed until he loomed over Shane. “I almost died last night, and this is how you treat me.”

Shane lifted a hand to Ilya’s heart. “Not ready to joke about that. Not yet.”

“Okay.” Ilya dropped to lay upon Shane, his weight a welcome blanket, his lips a welcome warmth. “So what is your plan? We fly back to Montreal and you what? Take me out for nice dinner, bring me home, and then get down on one knee? Will there be electric candles? Do you plan to do it in front of your family?”

“I have to fly to Philly in the morning.” The team actually flew to Philly after the D.C. game and had today off. The Voyageur game versus the Flyers wasn’t until tomorrow night. “I figured I could attend your game tonight.”

Ilya's eyebrows lifted. "You want to come to my game in Tampa?"

"Yes. Can you get three tickets?" Shane's hands ran up and down Ilya's biceps. "My mom and dad are flying in. They want to see you, too."

Ilya's eyes welled with tears, and then he all but collapsed on top of Shane, pressing his face into the crook between Shane's neck and shoulder. His shoulders shook, and warm, fresh tears seeped into Shane's ridiculous shirt.

Shane's own tears stung his eyes. Maybe there didn't need to be dinner and candles and fancy clothing. Maybe there just needed to be the two of them and a ring.

Last night, Ilya had almost died, and that meant Shane had almost died. And he didn't want to live another moment apart. He wanted to know he had Ilya for the rest of their lives.

Shane waited until Ilya's tears dried and then shifted out from underneath him. He put himself back together enough – shirt closed, self tucked away, hair finger-combed – and went to the closet where Ilya's game-day suits hung. The suit for the Panthers' game wouldn't be used until the day after tomorrow, so Shane guessed Ilya wouldn't have any reason to check its pockets.

When he came back, box in hand, Ilya was absolutely beautiful. Still in his open palm tree shirt with his cross glimmering on his chest; curls every which way, green-hazel eyes wide, watching, and glistening; mouth slightly open – Ilya slowly began to sit up as Shane fell to one knee.

"I choose you, Ilya. I promise I will always, always choose you," Shane began, his throat constricting, his own eyes blurring as he spoke. "You are my everything, and I cannot wait another second to ask you to be mine forever. Ilya Grigoryevich Rozanov, will you marry me?"

Later, Ilya will ask Shane how he learned his middle name. Later, they'll receive emails, summoning them to the NHL New York offices. Later, they'll receive notifications from their teams that Weibe and even fucking Theriault pushed back. The Centaurs needed their star center to have any chance at a playoff run, and the Voyageurs wanted to win the President's Trophy for the second year in a row.

Both teams refused to bench their best players, and the captains were expected at their games in Tampa and Philly, respectively.

Later, Shane and his parents would all wear Rozanov jerseys to the Centaurs vs. Lightning game. Later, there would pictures all across the internet of Shane in his fiancé's jersey, wearing a chain with a ring on it because Ilya will see his ring and ask, "Where is yours?" before dragging Shane to the Tiffany's & Co. in International Plaza to buy its match.

Later, there would be cake and candles and even dancing in a backyard wedding in Ottawa, but – *right now* – Ilya scooted to the end of the bed, cradled Shane's cheeks in his hands, and whispered, "Fucking finally, Hollander." He then drew his fiancé into his lap for a heated, desperate, and relieved embrace.

Without breaking the kiss, Shane slid his hand down from Ilya's cheek and settled it over his fiancé's heart. Ilya covered it with his own hand, and no matter what came next, they would tackle it.

Together.

Fin

End Notes

I love these soft hockey boys. ❤️🖤💜

EDIT: I tried to upload a clearer version of the Instagram post. You can see a slightly bigger version [here](#).

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!