

too much information

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by [lorebearleaf](#)

Summary

Roz is out of his gear much faster than he usually is and he's unlocking his phone with an urgency as if something were on fire.

"Bro, you good?" Cliff asks while he's still in the process of getting out of his own gear.

Ilya looks up from his phone with a somewhat wild look in his eyes.

"I cannot reach Jane." Ilya says and there's nearly no volume to it at all. It's more of a whisper than anything else.

Cliff Marlow notices some things and connects some dots.

Notes

I've wanted to write a "Cliff Marlow Finds Out About Shane Hollander/Ilya Rozanov" fic for so long and here it finally is.

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

Chapter 1

Crashing into another player isn't uncommon, getting yelled at by said player's teammates' isn't uncommon either. Cliff didn't mean to knock Hollander to the ground or rather, Cliff really didn't mean to make Hollander go down the way he just had. It was an accident, mostly.

While Hollander's right-hand man, Pike, already makes his way towards his own team's captain, all while he is hurling insults at Cliff, Cliff looks towards his own captain. He always does it, looking for his captain's lead, when he's not quite sure how to act on the ice. Usually, being here, skating and competing against their rivals, is easy. It's something Cliff looks forward to.

The moment Ilya had contacted Cliff to let him know he'd finally be back, Cliff had really been looking forward to seeing his friend and captain again. It doesn't mean Cliff isn't still worried about Ilya regardless. That guy is even worse than Cliff is himself when it comes to bottling up his emotions. Here, Cliff really isn't looking forward to Connors dragging him to therapy for real because that dude swears up and down that the suck-it-up dudebro behavior most of them got going on will come to bite them in the ass someday.

Connors is the only one out of the entire team who grew up with several sisters. Apart from that his parents are probably the only ones who are still together and haven't gotten divorced unlike most others. The bar is so low, as Connors always says himself.

Like the good buddy Cliff is, he tried to reach out to Ilya while his friend was dealing with some family stuff back in his home country. Ilya at first hadn't even really told Cliff why he had suddenly packed his bags to fly to Russia, only that it had something to do with his father's declining health.

Then, Ilya had gone radio silent while he was in Russia, dealing with his family and the funeral of his father. Because apparently that's what had happened. Cliff never asked about all the details and that's why he hadn't known that it was as rough as it was.

Cliff has seen Ilya angry, mad even but seeing him grief and heartbroken is something else altogether. It doesn't fit the image Cliff has had of Ilya Rozanov in his head for years but he knows this version of Ilya is just as valid as that of the snarky and quick-witted captain.

Then, there's the thing with Ilya's longtime fling. That Jane girl whom Ilya only ever sees a couple of times a year. From what Cliff has learnt about her, via endless teasing of his captain about his love life, Jane is apparently a businesswoman who is constantly traveling from one city to another and she never really stays in one place for long. Other than that, Cliff knows that Ilya is usually really looking forward to seeing Jane in person whenever they do end up being in the same place.

Jane seems to have a morbid kind of humor. She seems funny and witty and not at all shy to speak her mind, or well, to text Ilya what she's really thinking. Cliff might have caught a glimpse or two of their usual chat history in the last couple of years.

However, lately there seemed to be less texts than usual and eventually there came a time when Cliff was sure there were none at all.

Cliff is sure when it started. After all, when Connors and Cliff showed Ilya that first clip of Hollander maybe dating Rose Landry, Ilya had reacted with something like barely veiled disgust. He had seemed upset, somewhat hurt even.

That last part had confused Cliff quite a bit. Of course, he had made a comment about it to Connors. Like he always does. Connors is Cliff's gossip buddy after all.

Connors had grinned at Cliff then and asked whether there might be a chance that none other than Rose Landry might be the infamous Jane whom Ilya had been texting with for several years by then.

If that's the case, then Cliff would say Ilya might have fallen head over heels in love with her and was now mad and jealously watching another man parading his girl around.

Hollander. Right, the guy is still lying motionless on the ground.

Hollander just had an accident and there is no Rose Landry anywhere in sight. There's only Hollander. As is, there's currently no one other than Pike on the ice who is loudly voicing his own worries about Hollander. It really wasn't Cliff's intention to knock Hollander out, he hadn't been aware the other player probably hadn't seen him coming. He had looked back, which is something no one should be doing in the middle of a game. Hollander had looked at the player behind him and right then, Cliff cannot help but to look for guidance from his captain. He still hears Pike hurling insults at him, hears the other players snarling at him to calm down. Cliff barely even feels it when Pike's fists make contact or when their respective teammates pry that guy off of him.

Cliff watches his captain. He knows Hollander was looking at Roz. He knows the one right behind Hollander was none other than Cliff's own captain. Why did Hollander make such an amateurish mistake of looking back while still going forward?

Cliff knows Ilya wouldn't want anyone to have an accident like this. That kind of explains why Ilya looks crestfallen right now. But that's not entirely it. He looks more terrified out of his mind than anything else. Ilya looks as if he had frozen in place, unable to move, unable to breathe or do anything other than to stare down at Hollander's prone form.

Cliff had thought Hollander had offered his condolences when he saw the two captains exchange a few words. He had thought they were doing their usual thing, exchanging chirps and were good-naturedly, or not so good-naturedly, cussing each other out before the game.

The medics are there within moments. They reach Hollander just as Cliff tries to keep himself still to not swing at Pike. This wouldn't help anyone right now. Cliff cannot get in a fistfight right now. They've got a game to continue. Besides, Cliff vows then and there, if only to himself, to check in with Ilya after the game. Something is off after all. He cannot put a finger on what it is though.

Still. Cliff watches his captain watch the other captain and he watches Ilya get pushed back without even fighting it, without saying anything. Roz looks so alarmed and Cliff hears someone shout something about how Hollander's emergency contacts need to be notified.

Cliff remembers having teased Ilya about how Cliff himself is still Ilya's only emergency contact who is almost constantly by his side. It's not true anymore, after all Cliff knows Ilya made some changes some time ago. There's at least one other name on the list of people Ilya wants to get notified in case something happens to him.

Ilya's childhood best friend, Svetlana, is certainly on that list. Cliff knows a few things about her. She is quite famous all on her own after all, without anyone even needing to mention who her father is most of the time. Cliff also knows she is certainly way out of Ilya's league and that she'd fight anyone for his sake, even Ilya himself. Cliff might have had a bit of a crush on her himself in his younger years, however back then he was still certain Roz had a thing with her. Cliff isn't going after taken ladies, especially not if they are with his friends.

Then, there's certainly another woman on that list of people who may be notified in case something happens to Ilya. Cliff is sure of it. He knows Ilya well enough after all these years of having been on his team and of having been his friend, that Ilya isn't one for huge emotional gestures. To Ilya, adding someone as his emergency contact is basically like asking her to be his girlfriend.

Only that there's a big chance that Jane is actually a quite well-known actress who is dating a fellow hockey player. She wouldn't come, if only to not alert the press about who she might be dating or two-timing if that's really the case.

Cliff's thoughts about likely cheating girlfriends and rival captains get interrupted when he hears what's being said via the loudspeaker announcement.

There's surely a lot of admiration there. Cliff almost snorts at how absurd those words are. Ilya never really says that he'd outright punch Hollander in the face. But that doesn't mean he would go out drinking with him or even want to become his buddy or something. They surely do not have much more in common other than being hockey players and the respective captains of their teams.

So sure, Cliff notes ironically as he watches his captain's retreating form, Ilya surely admires the guy who stole his Montreal Jane or his Rose or whatever.

Then, roughly two and a half hours later, after the game, which they had to finish after all, Cliff somewhat eats his own words.

Roz is out of his gear much faster than he usually is and he's unlocking his phone with an urgency as if something were on fire.

"Bro, you good?" Cliff asks while he's still in the process of getting out of his own gear.

Ilya looks up from his phone with a somewhat wild look in his eyes.

“I cannot reach Jane.” Ilya says and there’s nearly no volume to it at all. It's more of a whisper than anything else.

Cliff knows something’s up. Ilya hasn’t mentioned Jane in weeks and now her name in his mouth sounds like something precious that could break any moment.

“Oh shit. What happened to your girl?” Cliff curses loudly without meaning to, and just like that the noise in the locker room dies down a little. There’s several pairs of eyes watching them somewhat worriedly.

Ilya has been acting weird ever since Cliff crashed into Hollander. Surely, just like Cliff had done, the rest of the team must have thought it was caused by the aftermath of his father’s passing or whatever else which might have triggered Roz’s initial staring off into space like that. Maybe seeing someone getting injured had reminded their captain of how fleeting life is or whatever other kind of poetry Connors likes to spew while he’s anything but sober.

Cliff should probably stop hanging out as much with that guy as he does.

“Shut the fuck up everyone!” Connors, out of all people, yells and the last chatter dies down immediately.

Then, Connors addresses their captain, “What’s with your girl, cap?”

Ilya seems to close off at that some more and even while the team’s captain does have a pokerface, it’s currently not a great one.

“Accident, she’s been taken to a closeby hospital.” Ilya eventually mutters while he still clutches his phone as if his life depends on whether he gets a message or not.

“You, you and you!” Cliff barks out, pointing at the guys closest to him, “Get our captain’s things! You,” and here Cliff points at Connors, “You’ve got an international licence, right?”

Thankfully some members of Connor’s family are from around here. It means he keeps one of his cars at said relatives’ place. For once, Cliff doesn’t tease Connors about his preference to drive his own cars - he’s similar to Roz in that regard. However, they have vastly similar taste in the vehicles they usually purchase.

“It’s not that serious!” Ilya tries to say, most likely to get his team to stop fussing and trying to help.

His protests fall on dead ears.

After all, Connors nods and everyone starts moving. Cliff Marlow will later on recall that as the moment when his brain finally connected all the dots and properly started moving all the collected pieces in his mind together to form one big picture.

However, as it is, in that moment without really thinking about anything other than his friend’s evident distress, Cliff changes out of his gear in record time as well. He grabs his

powerbank from his bag and chucks it as his captain who catches it probably only due to his fast reflexes.

“What the hell Marlow?” Ilya hisses at Cliff.

“Make sure your phone doesn’t die in case one of her friends tries to contact you again!” At Ilya’s bewildered look, Cliff elaborates, “That’s how you found out before the game, about her having been in an accident, right? Seeing Hollander go down the way he did, it reminded you of Jane, didn’t it?”

Ilya seems to recall his own words then.

“Yeah, right. Yeah, Hollander, sure.”

It sounds as if Ilya only now remembered why he had been so down and it’s a bit strange but far from the strangest thing Cliff has seen someone do after a game. It’s not uncommon to be told life changing news right before a game and when it’s bad news it really sucks.

Cliff ignores Ilya for a moment then, in lieu of making sure to tell Connors to get his car ready so that they can drop their captain off at the hospital his lady love is staying at. After all there’s been a betting pool going on for years now when their captain will finally settle down with Jane.

Jane and Rose Landry being the same person seems impossible now.

“What if Jane doesn’t want to see me?” Ilya asks, away from and out of earshot of the others, just when Cliff drags him out towards the parking lot.

“She’ll be happy to see you, dude.” Connors answers enthusiastically and he nearly makes Cliff jump at his silent approach.

That tiny dude can get quite scary if he wants to be and his ability at sneaking up on people certainly doesn’t help.

Connors dangles his car keys between his fingers and glares at Cliff.

“One wrong word about my car and you’re walking, is that clear?”

“What?” Cliff asks right back. “You’re still driving around as a twink on the go?”

Cliff takes the following punch to the arm gladly, after all it got a bit of a humourless chuckle out of their captain.

“Why don’t you just let that twin go?” The second punch lands just as hard as the first one, making Cliff huff a bit and Cliff knows Connors is pulling his punches right now and still being nice, unlike Cliff.

Yeah, that is why Cliff still hangs out with the guy. He quite likes his feistyness and temperament.

“I call shotgun.” Ilya says to Connors who ends up grinning from ear to ear right when he unlocks his car from quite a distance so that their captain may take his claimed seat.

Cliff hauls Ilya’s backpack into the trunk of the car a moment later and shuts it with a loud thud.

“If you break my car, you’re gonna buy me a new one, Cliff!” Connors threatens and he looks like an angry kitten and he would certainly deal as much damage as such a little feline would.

The thing is Connors can get quite handsy however, when he’s intoxicated and that is surely a thought for another time (for when Cliff isn’t entirely sober anymore either). Last time, he actually ended up falling asleep sprawled all over Cliff, hugging him like an oversized teddybear. Cliff hopes he won’t ever see any pictures, taken by the rest of the team, appear anywhere, especially not online.

When the car is entirely closed and their captain unable to hear them, that’s the sole reason why Cliff leans forward and whispers something so that only Connors can hear him, “You still owe me for breaking my headboard, don’t you remember?”

Their team is used to how they act, to how close they are and how gay jokes and fake flirting basically sums up their usual and well-known dynamic. It’s just what they, Cliff and Connor, grew into and it has made several guys within the team quite uncomfortable in the past. But Cliff certainly won’t stop acting the way he does with Connors. It’s all fun and games anyway and they are both as straight and comfortable in their sexuality as can be. There really isn’t any attraction between them. Mutual admiration maybe but nothing else other than that, maybe it’s similar to the antagonistic frenemy-bond of Roz and Hollander.

After all, Cliff and Connor, they fight like cats and dogs, not unlike Hollander and Boston’s very own captain.

Connors rolls his eyes, like he always does when he is contemplating whether it will be worth it to try and keep teasing back. He really did break Cliff’s headboard some time ago - albeit from jumping onto Cliff’s bed with way too much enthusiasm which had resulted in a nasty bruise and in the aforementioned top of headboard literally breaking right off.

“Let’s get our captain to reunite with his Jane.” Connors eventually says when he is mere steps away from his car but then he freezes.

“His Jane.” Connors repeats, mumbling it more to himself than saying it for Cliff to hear and Cliff gently pats his shoulder. Maybe the events of the day are only now catching up with Connors and diminish his usual cheer a bit.

“Dude, I got it the first time.” Cliff says softly.

“No, Cliff!” Connors turns back around to Cliff and then he glances back at the car and at their captain sitting inside it, waiting for them to catch up. “Oh holy fucking shit!”

“CC what the hell is going on?” Cliff doesn’t raise his voice, he doesn’t want to alert their captain but Connor is acting weird (more than is the norm, even for him), “Why are you

being more cryptic than usual?”

“Our captain’s with Hollander!” Connors whispers, and it’s more of a fake whisper that sounds more like a quiet yell.

“Of course he’d be with him, even if he doesn’t like him, he’s worried.”

Cliff still feels bad himself. There’s probably family members and Hollander’s very public girlfriend fussing over him right now. The guy is in good hands by now, most likely.

“Holy fuck, you cishet guys are so dense.” Connors curses under his breath and it ignites the figurative lightbulb in Cliff’s mind and lets him contemplate, for just a moment, how Shane and Jane sound awfully similar - but no, surely not, that’s absolutely ridiculous. Yeah, wow, sure, absolutely, that’s a random joke, even for Connors.

There is no way Shane Hollander is Ilya’s longtime on-again, off-again lover or secret girlfriend or whatever. He’s a man after all. Hollander is a dude and Ilya is also a dude. They cannot be a thing. Ilya is a womanizer through and through.

“Get in the car Cliff!” Connor commands then, shooing Cliff off towards his own side of the car, meaning the driver’s side. “We’ll talk about this once we’ve dropped Rozy off at the hospital!”

“Had a fun domestic quarrel out there, guys?” Ilya greets both of them once Cliff is busy trying to fold himself into the back of the car, in the process he very much inwardly curses the lack of at least two more car doors.

Not everyone is as tiny as Connors after all or as cute. Okay, no. Cliff doesn’t need that right now. That’s a thought for another time. It doesn’t matter right now just as much as it doesn’t matter whether the person Ilya is so clearly worried about is a man or a woman or identifies as something else altogether.

Cliff knows Ilya loves this Jane person, even if he doesn’t say it. It’s still evident by how he clutches onto the necklace he never takes off for anything. He then plays with the cross between his fingers during the entire drive to the hospital without seeming aware of even doing it in the first place.

Connors promises Ilya that he will take his things back to Ilya’s home. Cliff adds he will make sure to not let Connors know Ilya’s hotel room’s doorcode which Connors counters with a “You asshole know that we’re rooming together, it’s me who shouldn’t let you in!”

The usual banter doesn’t lighten their captain’s mood. It perhaps only makes it worse.

Teasing someone, laughing together about jokes that sound harsh but really aren’t meant that way, shoving one another like schoolboys would, pulling pigtails in a metaphorical sense because one doesn’t know how else to approach one’s crush-

Okay, holy shit, Connors was right.

Ilya Rozanov is, most likely, head over heels in love with Shane Hollander.

“Good luck, captain!” Connors tells Ilya when he gently but firmly kicks him out of the car, without any actual kicking being involved at all. Though it’s Connors, so Cliff isn’t so sure if he wouldn’t really go that far and actually kick their captain, just to make sure their captain takes a leap of faith and makes sure his love is okay.

Shane Hollander. Montreal Jane.

Shane and Jane and yeah, that does make sense. Cliff feels a bit as if he had missed something quite obvious for years and only now figured out what he couldn’t see for so long.

They are back inside the car, minus their captain when Cliff notices something else.

“Our captain is in love with Montreal’s captain and I nearly broke that guy in half!” Cliff only then remembers and this is so not his thing to be thinking about so many things one after the other and to be making so many observations one after the other. Cliff isn’t stupid, or so he hopes but emotional things and interconnected relationships usually aren’t his go-to topic.

“Nah, not you. I bet the nearly breaking someone else in half might be their thing,” Connors mumbles while he steers out of the parking spot as if it were absolutely nothing new to him that their captain might not only be into guys as well but into one guy in particular.

“Connors, why aren’t you freaking out as well?” Cliff asks and he feels torn between wanting to laugh and regretting not having been a better friend for Ilya to feel comfortable telling him that he is seeing Shane Hollander.

Okay, that sounds crazy and Cliff gets why Ilya wouldn’t have done that. If he is seeing that guy for real, though everything points to that being the case.

“I’m bi, by the way.” Connors says nonchalantly, as if he were talking about the weather, “and before you freak out even more Marlow: No, you’re not my type.”

That is not surprising at all, at least one part of that statement isn’t. The other one is an insult, at least to Cliff’s ears.

“Why not?” Cliff asks, nearly on autopilot because that’s their thing, that’s how they talk.

Connors talks back, just like he always does, there’s no actual bite in his voice though, there rarely is these days, “Our preferences wouldn’t align.”

Cliff thinks about it and he doesn’t get it for a moment but then he just shuts his mouth right when he wants to answer something snarky about how he wouldn’t bottom for anyone. He is open-minded enough to know what pegging is, yet he hasn’t wanted to try it out with any of his lovers quite yet. He never imagined himself being with a guy either. However, that is not something Cliff wants to focus on right now.

Connor doesn’t look away from the street, he’s the driver after all, yet Cliff can still see his smirk from the side.

“What, that finally got the tough, sharp-tongued Cliff Marlow speechless, actual, real and authentic gay talk?”

“I don’t mind it, it’s just a lot to take in.” Cliff replies, he desperately tries to remember how Connor himself had taught him how to react to someone coming out - which is quite funny in retrospect because a part of Cliff might have already guessed it back then that Connor is a safe person to talk to within their team when it comes to queer stuff.

Connors is someone who wraps his stick in rainbow tape after all and he doesn’t shy away from very nearly tackling dudes who say homophobic stuff that goes too far, even when it’s meant as chirping. Cliff himself had punched someone in the face who had misheard Connor being addressed by his nickname CC and probably thought he had been called a sissy. The other guy probably thought he was free to add some slur of his own and it had earned him a bruised cheek and a split lip, caused by an angry Cliff Marlow. No one gets to trashtalk Cliff’s friends, other than Cliff himself.

“Don’t.” Cliff warns when he notices what he just said.

“I didn’t even say anything, Cliff.”

“You were thinking it though!”

“About what? About taking-” Connor’s grin is outright devious.

“Okay, enough gay talk for the day.” Cliff has reached his limit, he’s fine with queer folks and he even knows quite a few queer folks but that’s three possible and one confirmed fellow hockey player who is queer and wow, that’s so much to think about in terms of whether there could be more and there certainly are more and-

“Don’t overthink it, bro.” Connors says, gently this time, “Nothing has changed. I’m still who I was when we got in the car. Our captain’s still our captain, even if he has horrendous taste in men.”

“Horrible taste? Says the one who owns a twingo!”

“It’s a perfectly fine car to have!”

“Says the twink- wait, can I still call you that or is that offensive?”

“Can I still call you an asshole or would that insult my favourite part of a guy?” Connors deadpans and Cliff makes a face at that.

“Dude! Too much information!”

“What, you asked first!”

“I didn’t!”

“Sure did!”

“Kiss my ass, Con!”

“I mean, I wouldn't want to compromise our work relationship like that,” Connors answers, glancing sideways at Cliff and Cliff only sees it because he was already looking at him and kind of holding his breath after that, it wasn't an invitation, not really. ”But I could point you towards clubs where you might find guys to experiment-”

“Holy shit, Connors, just shut up already!”

“Make me!”

Cliff keeps his thoughts to himself, about how he could make Connors keep his mouth occupied with other things other than with lewd words. That isn't something bros should be thinking about each other even if it's by far not the first time. It's just teasing, Cliff isn't really attracted to Connors. They just click really well and know how the other ticks.

They keep bickering like that for the rest of the drive. To Cliff's embarrassment and genuine curiosity, they do end up having a talk later about attraction towards more than one gender or to one's own and Cliff might actually have to think about some things after that, all because his captain might genuinely be in love with Shane Hollander of all people.

Thanks Roz, Cliff thinks to himself, as he later gets drinks with Connor and the rest of the team and finds himself wondering whether he really isn't Connor's type at all. Not that it would matter.

Truly, thanks Roz, Cliff really didn't need his maybe queer awakening to be none other than a fellow hockey player and why does it have to be CC, or Connor Connors, out of all people?

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

so, this happened. I didn't think I'd end up writing more for this ship but I've been thinking way too much about them not to write more about them (the rating will, most likely, go up once I post the next chapter). thank you so much for reading/liking this fic. :)

It has been quite a few weeks since the Montreal-Jane-might-be-Shane-Hollander incident. Cliff still has absolutely no idea how to break the ice, not that that's actually ever a good thing.

Still, Cliff knows there's some unspoken thing hanging in the air between his captain and himself. If Cliff cannot stand one thing, it's leaving things unspoken. Things seem to be going well, after all Ilya is back to constantly checking his phone to eagerly reply to texts from his apparently not-lady-ladylove.

He has been texting with Jane-aka-probably-Shane for most of the game without even really trying to hide that's precisely whom he is texting. Even Svetlana is ignoring him by now. She is much more focused on making comments about an ancient relic like Scott Hunter finally being rather close to winning the Cup.

Cliff looks down at his own phone just as it pings to let him know he's got a message. It's merely his own last name and an exclamation mark behind it. The person whom he is playing a drinking game with isn't currently even in the room with him but Cliff dutifully chugs his drink anyway the moment he hears his own last name being mentioned. What can he say, in Cliff's case hockey has been a family sport for ages.

Besides, Cliff is by far not the only player who has a family member who plays for another team. Speaking of, Cliff isn't sure what he is currently looking at. There's a fan making his way down towards the ice, down towards Hunter. It wouldn't be weird if that's his best friend and Hunter wants to celebrate with him after finally being able to hold the Cup in his hands.

Even Cliff is rooting for the guy. They might be rivals but he gets it. He gets the fear of knowing one's golden days might start to fade. Cliff knows what it's like to feel a bit as if time were running out.

Fuck it, Cliff thinks and gets up from the couch. Victory laps and celebrations of other people be damned. Cliff wants to hear one voice and one voice only right now.

Cliff nods towards the patio, takes out his lighter and gets outside. He quit smoking a while ago but no one needs to know that quite yet. No one other than the person whom Cliff is

trying to quit smoking for (and who is trying to quit for him in return).

Two rings of his phone is all it takes for Connor to pick up, obviously with, “Hello there, loverboy.”

He sounds so soft and also so excited to talk to Cliff all at once - and Cliff is absolutely not melting inside. He is Cliff Marlow after all, he doesn't melt or swoon because a handsome and pretty and beautiful guy called him by a pet name he has been using for Cliff for years without it ever really having meant anything more than just gentle teasing between friends.

Cliff cringes but he cannot help but smile as he steps further into the darkness that separates him from the illuminated room some of his teammates and his captain's childhood best friend are currently sitting in (or walking around in, in Ilya's case, since he, like he always does, once again procrastinated and only started packing before going back home to Russia a few days before he's meant to leave).

Cliff knows he didn't put Connor on loudspeaker but he still turns around to make sure no one heard it. What he sees then is none other than Scott Hunter being shown on the big screen while he is kissing and hugging that guy whom he asked to join him on the ice.

Cliff very nearly drops his phone at the sight just as his own team's captain puts his own phone up to his ear and marshes right out of the living room and into his bedroom.

“Holy shit.” Cliff whispers more to himself than to Connor and then, almost under his breath, he cannot help but repeat himself, “Holy shit?!”

“Wanna do that again, too?” Connor asks right back and if Cliff didn't know that Connor was currently watching the same scene he is, he wouldn't know what Connor was referring to.

Cliff turns around, looks at all the empty seats that have been occupied by their entire team more than once in the last couple of days. He misses Connor despite having just seen him a few days ago. He misses insisting on the importance of grilling Connor's favourite vegetarian snacks first before any other food even touches the grill and getting mercilessly teased for it by the rest of the team. Connor isn't even vegetarian or vegan, he simply doesn't like the taste of most meats.

Cliff remembers then that he promised Connor to take him to that new sushi restaurant his mother had recommended to him well over a month ago. She had been dropping hints that she expected Cliff to take a special someone with him. Connor Connors is special.

“Nah, you never brush your teeth, dude.” Cliff answers easily despite his heartbeat having picked up just a little bit.

In fact, Cliff wouldn't really mind at all kissing Connor or getting kissed by him. Whatever.

“It wouldn't matter if I kissed your ass, hubby.”

Is that flirting or not? Cliff isn't sure what he wants it to be.

Even so, as it is, Cliff makes the, probably, most undignified sound he is capable of and tries to play it cool by fake-coughing so hard he actually starts coughing for real. Oh gosh, he is so lame, Cliff thinks right then and there as he stifles the urge to groan at his own antics. That's why Connors is so much better at hooking up at clubs, though a lot of women dig the tough-guy-with-a-dorky-side thing.

Apparently, so does Connors.

"You good there, big guy?" Connor asks, adding yet another one of the many things he usually calls Cliff.

Cliff does not know how to function. After all, that is way too many pet names for just one singular phone call, even when it's one taking place between the two of them. Even worse, or better or whatever else it could be, Cliff cannot, absolutely not at all, deal with how much he wants to grin at the softness in Connor's tone and in the way he speaks.

It's probably not all that serious or at least not more than it ever was. Cliff is Connor's work husband and he wears that name with pride.

However, speaking of pride, Cliff really has no idea anymore just what made him finally start to look into why he loves this nickname so much.

Cliff had played it off as a joke. Like he always does whenever something happens between Connor and himself that cannot possibly be explained with typical straight-guy-friend behavior, at least not to most other people. Still, Cliff knows for a fact that it happened because of how he had leaned in for a hug and because of how Connor had immediately fallen into his arms like he always does whenever they know they will be parted for more than a few days.

Initially, after the big scare on the ice, caused by Hollander's accident and by Ilya being entirely out of it afterwards, Cliff had followed a spur of the moment idea and kissed Connor's cheek to say goodbye.

What Cliff hadn't counted on was Connor turning his head in just the right or wrong (depending on how one interpreted it) moment, so that Cliff's lips had brushed against Connor's own.

Cliff had, very much, not fled the scene right after that. He had not run out of the parking lot to get back to his own hotel room which he had shared with another teammate back then.

Like the good friend he is, Cliff had let Connor know that he had made it to his room. Running into Connor as well as into Ilya at the hotel's breakfast buffet hours later had been more than just a little awkward.

Ilya had looked exhausted but also much more relaxed than the evening before. Connors on the other hand had looked as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened whatsoever. They had all greeted each other like they always do, without anyone bringing up what had happened the day before.

There is no denial however. Not on Cliff's part. Not when it comes to the whole thing about him having kissed his buddy on the lips without even meaning to do that.

Maybe Connors was already entirely fine with accidentally getting kissed by another guy and with that guy being a member of his own team. Speaking of being in or on the same team, Cliff is now more than a little certain that he might actually be playing for both teams so to speak.

Cliff even said it out loud to himself, back in the bathroom, when he knew Varkov was out like a light. He had felt stupid for talking to himself like that roughly within five seconds yet whispered it for a second time just to hear it again and to see how it would make him feel.

Not bad. That's all Cliff knows in terms of how to describe how he feels about liking men and women. Ever since he let himself entertain that thought, Cliff has had to give himself the occasional moment to reflect and to think about why he is usually quite chill with anything some other cishet guy wouldn't be quite as chill with.

Cuddling one's buddies shouldn't be regarded as a gay thing. Cliff is still entirely sure of men just needing to be more affectionate in general. However, he isn't quite open and transparent with his own feelings either.

It's not as if Cliff is madly in love with Connor. At most, it's a bit of a crush that has been going on for ages.

Now that Cliff lets himself genuinely think about it, he realizes how many people used to comment on it without ever actually calling it a crush. He has no idea why but Price's words from a few years ago actually stuck with Cliff: even so, Cliff remembers having hauled a tipsy Connor back to the hotel room he used to share with their captain, while said captain has been whoever knows he could have been that day, only a few hours after a game.

Cliff remembers Price having asked whether he could help him. Coming from someone as shy as Price, that offer had actually been quite sweet. Or maybe Price had just felt obligated to help when he had heard noise outside his own hotel room and concluded it must have been caused by some members of his now former team.

By now, Cliff doesn't really remember whatever kind of things Connor might have been rambling about at that time. But he does remember Price having smiled down at him when Cliff and him had dropped Connor right onto his bed once they had made it to his hotel room. Perhaps Price had sensed something that evening. Who knows, Cliff for one doesn't know for sure. It wouldn't surprise him however if a guy like Price, who, despite having been quite shy when it comes to most conversation topics, could talk passionately about how hockey needs to become way more inclusive and open for all kinds of people and topics.

Cliff remembers that evening as one of the first ones where he spent the night in Connor's hotel room. Cuddling. Platonically. Of course.

There's a faint voice in the back of Cliff's mind that keeps asking whether he really isn't Connor's type. After all, those are precisely Connor's own words regarding the matter of whether he's attracted to Cliff or not.

“You want to kiss me so bad, it makes you look stupid.” Connor says then, not at all for the first time. Cliff has heard these words so often he’s somewhat become immune to them yet, now, he kind of knows there’s some truth to them.

“You wish,” Cliff replies back and adds something else because two can play at this game after all, “mon cœur.”

Connors outright shrieks with laughter.

It is then that someone opens the door behind Cliff to call out to him, “Marlow, get your ass back inside!”

No one ever says no to Svetlana Vetrova so Cliff tells Connor, “You probably heard the lady! Goodnight, my love, see you tomorrow.”

A knowing grin appears on Svetlana’s face and Cliff turns his back to her just as she says, or rather demands, “Tell Connors hi from me.”

“You heard the lady, once again,” Cliff dutifully tells Connors once again.

“That I did, Cliff, that I very much did. See you and love you, too.”

Minutes later, when Cliff and Ilya are in the middle of reluctantly admittig how fucking brave Scott Hunter, out of all people, is for just having come out on live TV by kissing his apparent boyfriend, Cliff’s phone lets him know that he just received a text message.

It’s from Connors because apparently he isn’t done talking to Cliff quite yet. It absolutely does not make Cliff feel a bit giddy inside. It’s a bit of a crush, he can admit that much. But holy smokes, he needs to calm down.

When Cliff looks around, no one else even bats an eye. They are way too busy chatting about how they might voice their support regarding Hunter’s decision to come out without actually supporting his team. They are still very much rivals. But they are also people and good sportsmanship means acknowledging personal struggles and things that have not much to do with the sport they compete in on opposing sides.

CC

With all due love and respect, your pronunciation sucks ass.

Cliff
Does it now?

CC

I didn’t say I’m opposed to it.

Cliff

My pronunciation or ass-sucking?

There's a bit of a pause and then, after reading the reply, Cliff sends his phone into stand-by. Because bye truly is what he needs to be saying. There is no freaking out, no denial of what Cliff is feeling at all. It's just that he is, maybe, feeling a bit too much all at once.

Some time later, back in his own car, Cliff eventually dares to glance at his chat history with Connor once more. The one word Connors replied with, reading "Both." stares back at Cliff and so he simply does what he always does, he types out a cheeky reply.

Cliff

I wouldn't mind, though a true gentleman would at least take me out to dinner first, don't you think?

CC

What makes you think I'd be gentle.

Cliff

It'd be my first time.

Is this still flirting or teasing between two friends without any second thoughts and hidden meaning whatsoever?

Cliff just sits there, inside his car as he waits for a reply for a good minute or two. Every second feels like small eternities. Maybe that was too much. Maybe the constant tethering and testing the line game they've got going on for all this time finally reached the point of no return.

CC

If it's you, I'd be gentle ;)

Cliff

Dinner first, remember?

CC

Tomorrow?

Cliff

Tomorrow.

Chapter 3

Cliff rings his captain's doorbell and immediately feels a bit as if he were returning back to one of his oldest friends after a walk of shame. However, Cliff is not ashamed, at least not of what he wants to talk about. It's maybe not the greatest moment in time, yet Cliff refuses to let go of this chance to talk to Ilya about something as tedious as feelings. They usually go have a drink together and vaguely mention what's bothering them or hit the gym together and use their energy in different ways other than to talk.

By now, Cliff is certain that's how Ilya ended up in the whirlwind romance with Montreal Jane, as their entire team calls their captain's on-again-off-again lover. Montreal Jane might be Montreal Shane, of that at least Connors is absolutely certain and who is Cliff to question the man when he is so sure of Ilya being head over heels in love with his biggest rival.

"Did you forget something?" Ilya asks, yet he swings the door wide open anyway to wordlessly indicate Cliff is free to get step right back into his home.

That's the thing with Boston's captain. He is always there for any of his team's members if they need him, if they need someone to lean on and talk to and yet he tends to shove them away even at times when it seems like he might need someone's help as well.

"I guess I need to talk to you before you leave for Russia." Cliff tells his captain right when he walks past him.

Ilya raises a brow when gestures towards his couch. It's empty. After all, despite Cliff having left first, it's only in theory that he actually left the premises. Cliff had entered his car, texted Connors and then ended up staring at his steering wheel for who knows how long before he unbuckled his seatbelt, opened his door and marched back towards the house of his captain.

Everyone else must have seen Cliff's car when they left, still it's not uncommon for Cliff to lose his sense of time whenever he texts with Connors. It's one of the many habits of theirs everyone else has just gotten used to.

"I'd ask if you want a beer, but you've been drinking mocktails all evening." Ilya shrugs and gets a bottle of water from the fridge anyway. Cliff catches it when his captain throws it at him but ends up putting it on the coffee table instead of taking a sip.

There is no mocking tone in Ilya's voice at all. It's just a casual observation.

Just as casually, Cliff had been looking for something in the fridge a few hours ago and noticed the seemingly leftover bottles of ginger ale. Cliff had not even been aware of Ilya even liking that stuff in the first place so he had been even more confused when Ilya promptly told everyone those drinks were off limits and reserved for one person and one person only.

Svetlana had muttered something in Russian, causing Ilya to playfully shove her a little. It's a bit weird seeing them giggle together. But then who is Cliff to say anything about the matter.

Connors would surely have him by the balls for having the flickering impression of it being a bit weird seeing their usually quite stoic captain act like a happy little kid around his childhood best friend.

The thing is Cliff, probably, most likely, maybe, wouldn't mind if Connors would have him by the balls. The thought in itself almost makes him blush and Cliff doesn't blush.

Cliff runs a hand through his hair, looks to the side and tries to come up with what to say. Making the first move, taking the first step, Cliff isn't good at this. Here, he's just trying to talk to Ilya and not to Connors directly and yet still, it feels like an impossible task.

"Lion got your tongue?"

"Cat." Cliff corrects out of habit, even while he is well aware that his captain knows idioms way better than some of the native English speakers in their team. Ilya simply likes to come up with ones of his own and then uses the foreigner card if anyone tries to call him out for mangling English sayings.

"Nah, the way you look all sad, it's got to be a bigger feline."

Ilya sits down on his preferred spot on the couch and folds his legs under his body in a way that looks entirely uncomfortable to Cliff. But it's been a habit of his ever since Ilya had that short but intense phase during which he got into yoga for whatever reason a few years ago.

So by now, knowing their captain's little quirks, to Cliff and the rest of their team, it's nearly perfectly normal seeing their captain bend his legs into weird shapes just to sit down. That guy clearly cannot sit like a normal person at all. But it's basically the same with Connors, so Cliff doesn't question it.

"So," Ilya prompts Cliff to actually tell him what's going on, "do I need to be your captain or your friend for this, or both?"

Despite the chaos inside his mind, this is a question Cliff does know how to answer.

"My friend. I need to talk to you as my friend right now, not as my captain."

"So it does affect the team somehow?" Ilya asks right back, hitting the nail right on the head in that way he usually does when he's managing to look right through people.

Cliff nods, vaguely but it's still a nod nonetheless.

Ilya hums, as if he were acknowledging Cliff's confirmation. Maybe it's the quick glance towards the TV but Ilya raises a brow when he seems to notice where Cliff had just been looking.

"Scott-Hunter-level news?"

Cliff feels the weird urge to hide his hands in his lap, as if he were sitting in front of a parent after having done something bad and were now awaiting getting scolded for his misbehavior.

He is a grown man though, talking to a fellow grown man and they have been friends for years.

Ilya had been present when Cliff got wasted for the very first time in his life - after having shocked Cliff slightly by telling him he had basically started drinking a decade before either one of them was legally allowed to drink in their respective home countries. Back then, still easily impressed by such things, Cliff had thought Ilya was the toughest guy around.

Now, Cliff knows that Ilya may like to party but that he tends to constantly look for something or someone without ever telling anyone about just what or whom he is looking for.

Cliff is not getting defensive but in a way he is somewhat feeling sad on Ilya's behalf. If it's true that Ilya is actually queer in one way or another and in love with another man, then going back to a bigoted asshole like his brother might already suck in itself.

Svetlana might have dropped a comment or two in the last couple of years about racist slurs Ilya's brother used to call her back when all of them had still been kids, all in the name of questionable childhood nicknames.

Cliff doubts it was all fun and games. That's why he is highly suspicious of the man whom Cliff knows Ilya used to have saved in his phone as Asshole, then as Brother and then by his first name, rinse and repeat, in all kinds of orders. Those words are seemingly interchangeable, at least between those two siblings. Cliff is aware of how much Ilya respects but also detests his brother.

It's an unspoken secret that, by now, Ilya only goes back to Russia to see his beloved niece. She seems to be the only family member of his who genuinely looks forward to his visits. Perhaps it's partially caused by how much he likes to spoil the kid.

Why is Cliff even thinking of all this? Oh yeah, right. Internal queer crisis, that isn't really a crisis but more a quiet acknowledgment of yearslong feelings and thoughts. Cliff isn't sure if he ever wanted to have a family of his own, he's the semi-famous uncle in his friend group and yet tries not to buy the most expensive gifts for his friends' and relatives' kids so as not to embarrass parents who might not afford the same gifts. Besides, Cliff has learnt that it's important to ask legal guardians before he gives any kinds of gifts to their children - after all, he is pretty sure Connor's oldest sister still hates him for having given her toddler a talking teddy bear with a battery life surpassing that of most other toys.

"And now you're smiling like an idiot." Ilya comments dryly, "do you want me to break the news to Connors that someone has stolen his work husband?"

"There's no work divorce happening any time soon." Cliff answers, after maybe a moment too long, yet Ilya doesn't say anything about how it took Cliff a bit too long to say anything at all.

"The offer still stands, if you need me to come pack and carry your things with you because you finally decided to move in with one of the guys-"

“Oh get off my dick, Rozy!”

Ilya grins, yet he tugs his ear in a way that everyone within their team knows to recognize as a nervous habit.

“I only moved into my grandpa’s old house to help clean it up, I’m not planning on actually settling down there.”

“Keep telling yourself that, man.”

“I’m not moving to Toronto!” Cliff has no idea why he feels a bit defensive, even so he has to make sure not to raise his voice, “Not permanently at least.”

“Sure.” Ilya shrugs and then, dropping his grin and getting more serious, he adds, “So you’ll be staying in Boston and with our team for the unforeseeable future, that’s good.”

“That’s good? Years of us being in the same team and that’s all you’ve got to say? Man, come on, I thought you could do better than that.” Cliff says it in a way that makes it relatively clear he is only kidding, yet it does sting a little.

Cliff makes himself look past it. After all, Cliff has known Ilya for years. He knows that, for his captain, humour is a defense mechanism and a way to make people ignore what he is really feeling and saying.

“I saw you pack your things hours ago, however the presents for your niece were all on the kitchen counter when I came in just now.”

Ilya looks as if he had been caught doing something bad. He looks just like Cliff thinks he had looked as well a while ago.

“It’s okay,” Cliff immediately tries to reassure his captain, “you don’t have to explain yourself to me. Just tell me you’re not going on a hiking trip all on your own without telling anyone where you’re going. I wouldn’t want to have to arrange a rescue mission and then not be able to tell them where to look for you-”

“I’ll be flying to Canada.”

“Montreal?” Cliff asks.

Ilya gives him a look as if to ask him where else Cliff thinks he would be going.

Cliff decides then and there to throw all caution to the wind and to test his theory once and for all, “Tell your lover I’m still sorry for what happened.”

“You had nothing to do with Jane’s accident.” Ilya answers, not even batting an eye.

“Pike still insults me whenever we cross paths. Fucking Pike and I cannot even be mean to him back because I know it’d make you sad.”

Cliff says the guy's name like a curse word and he very much means that name to be a curse word. It's not as if Cliff had been focused on actively harming Montreal's captain. It is fair though, to react with flying fists and harsh words once someone sees their friend and captain go down the way Pike has had to witness Hollander crash onto the ice.

Ilya snorts. "Why would it make me sad if you'd insulted Pike? You know I'd join in."

"Does he know?" Cliff asks back, instead of reacting to Ilya's rather blatant attempt to change the topic.

"What should he know?", Ilya replies, as deadpan as ever, "I'm not sure that guy knows anything else other than the bare logistics behind hockey and babymaking and I'm not so sure about the first one."

Cliff very much does not want to know anything about Hayden Pike's love life. He does not know whatever Pike's wife sees in the man. He must be a somewhat great husband to have as many kids as he does but that's not really saying much in the long run. Pike has lots and lots of kids. That's about everything Cliff knows about that guy and well, there's another thing. It's pretty common knowledge that Hayden Pike is Shane Hollander's best friend so Cliff cannot just break that guy's nose for insulting him or anyone within Cliff's team, even if he would really love to do that one of these days.

"I mean I cannot be mean to the best friend of my best friend's lover, right?"

"What the hell Marlow?" Ilya hisses and Cliff can basically see the walls coming down all around Ilya as he gets ready to absolutely not address the metaphorical elephant in the room.

Cliff holds up his hands, open palms up and all, just to show he isn't meaning any harm. It's quite the opposite actually. However, there is no sugarcoating this whole arch-rivals-in-a-forbidden-romance debacle, if that's actually what's happening for real.

Judging by how hard Ilya is shutting down right now, by how he is crossing his arms and by how his eyes narrow as if he were thinking about how to deny Cliff's claim, Cliff just spoke about the actual truth and not just something that might or might not be going on.

"Dude, Roz, listen, I'm not here to judge." Cliff tells his captain softly. He uses the same voice he used years ago when he was the one who came across Connors being in the middle of injecting himself with hormones. Being an athlete himself, Cliff had immediately heard warning bells going off inside his head and thought he had stumbled across the worst possible thing he could encounter.

"It's testosterone, you dickhead." Connors had told Cliff (before Cliff had so much as a chance to run to their manager regarding something like a suspected case of drug abuse). The thing is that Cliff had actually known Connors is trans ever since their very first meeting, yet it's something else altogether to actually see proof of it out in the wild. Cliff had simply forgotten about Connor not always having gone by that first name.

As a straight dude, or an allegedly somewhat straight-ish guy, Cliff had never bothered to look at the other players all too much while they changed out of or into their respective gear

or took showers. As long as other people mind their own business, so does Cliff. He doesn't need to look at other guys' junk. Besides, everyone is built differently. Some dudes have scars and some don't and there's also all kinds of body types and Cliff simply never bothered to make any comparisons.

Regarding Connors being trans, everyone in their team knows, their doctors know and other than that it's probably an unspoken open secret amongst all kinds of teams by now. No one says a word though. No one leaks anything to the press. Cliff has no idea how nothing about Connor's identity has gotten out to the general public quite yet but he doesn't care, as long as it means Connor is comfortable and safe. That's the most important thing regarding that matter, meaning that Connor himself is alright with whatever is happening.

"What are you here for then?" Ilya doesn't snap those words at Cliff and that's even more alarming. He sounds resigned, ready to just take how their yearslong friendship might fall apart over this. Over what exactly, Cliff thinks, Ilya possibly being Russia's second-greatest love machine? That doesn't bother Cliff at all, as long as Ilya doesn't try to go after a certain someone.

With that Cliff is right back to square one and he decides then and there to make himself vulnerable, to match the guarded expression in his friend's eyes.

"What is it like?" Cliff asks, carefully.

Ilya sighs, still the tension doesn't yet leave his body. It seems as if he is going entirely into captain mode when he replies with a question of his own, "What is what like?"

"What is it like being with a man?"

"What?" Ilya answers only then to pause, obviously needing a moment or two to comprehend what Cliff just asked him, "I mean, what makes you think I'd be with Hollander out of all guys?"

Cliff notices how Ilya isn't denying a single thing about being with a guy or at least having experience being with a guy or even with several guys.

"I never mentioned Hollander by name though."

"Who else could you mean?" Ilya counters and even while he so obviously tries to seem chill, he still looks on edge, even more so than before.

"Montreal Shane?" Cliff asks, with the softest voice he can muster and he half-expects Ilya to recoil or to start laughing or to tell him to stop cracking weird jokes like that. "I mean, you do run off every single time we're in Montreal or whenever we're playing against that guy's team."

Ilya doesn't answer. He just looks at Cliff as if he were daring him to prove his claims.

It's a good thing Cliff more or less brought all the receipts he thought he might need. His main goal however is not to actually prove what he has been suspecting for a while but to

make sure that Ilya knows that Cliff doesn't care, in the most loving way, about Ilya being into men (even if one of those men might be none other than Shane Hollander).

"I always assumed it's because you two met as rookies and were drafted at roughly the same time that caused you to be so focused on each other. Wherever one of you goes, the other surely follows, it's always been like that. I only really noticed there was something going on when Connors and I pointed out the whole Rose Landry dating Hollander thing and you basically threw a dramatic fit and nearly broke your damn toe over it."

Ilya does an incredible job at pretending he doesn't flinch the moment he hears that name. Still, Cliff does him the favour of pretending he didn't notice anything and just continues talking.

"I'm Russian, I don't do drama."

"Please, Ilya, you basically are the drama. Anyway, moving on, for a moment, I seriously thought you were dating Landry and that Hollander had gone and stolen your girl and gone public with her before you had a chance to. But it was the other way around, wasn't it?"

Roz seems to be screaming internally at that. His eyes are dark. He looks scared and it hurt Cliff to see that. There is no reason for Ilya to feel as if he had to defend himself or even his feelings. He isn't the bad guy. Neither is Cliff trying to be the bad guy. There really is no bad guy at all. Even if it's still really freaking strange to think about Hollander as the one person whom Roz might actually have feelings for.

"Shit, Cliff," Ilya answers, followed by a brief and pained sounding little laugh, "since when are you into touchy-feely-talks?"

"I mean, it probably started when you forced the entire team to eat your selfmade healthy snacks for weeks and then just as suddenly simply never cooked anything for us again. We genuinely had just gotten used to it and then, you just snapped at poor Kayden one day, for bringing his onigiri to the gym just because you said you couldn't stand the stench of tuna? What was that about, did you have sudden mood swings or what?"

Ilya glares but it does look as if Cliff just proved his claims. There's somewhat of a blush all over Roz's cheeks and neck. He takes a deep breath and Cliff somewhat expects Ilya to just say that he is indeed in love with Hollander but, of course, Roz says something else:

"We had sex on this couch."

"Blunt as always." Cliff replies and then the words he just heard actually sink in. "Oh, gross! I didn't need to know that! Too much information!"

However, Cliff doesn't jump up. The couch has been cleaned since then, surely. Hopefully.

Still, Cliff reaches to the side, grabs one of Ilya's fancy black or golden throw pillows and literally uses the first one he manages to get a hold for what its name suggests. It hits Ilya square in the chest but then, it is not as if he even attempted to dodge it.

Ilya looks at Cliff with that stare that says way too much all at once and yet nothing at all.

“Then he said he cannot do this, bolted and made his relationship with Landry a public thing.”

Cliff realizes something then, despite it being something he was pretty sure was actually happening back then. “You were jealous.”

The thing is, Cliff had thought Roz had been jealous of his arch-rival, not of the woman who had been dating said arch-rival no matter how briefly that dating period may have been.

“Fuck, Roz, I’m sorry on Connor’s behalf as well. I ran into one of Landry’s colleagues at the club back in Montreal, so I figured Landry and Hollander were there as well. We, I mean Connors and I, didn’t mean to drag you to a club for you to run into your ex boyfriend and his new girlfriend.”

That comment is the first one that genuinely seems to catch Ilya entirely off guard. His eyes widen a bit, if only for a moment.

“It’s been going on for years, that’s true but we never dated.”

“What were you then?” Cliff really doesn’t get it, after all from how affected Ilya seems by all this, Hollander must mean a great deal to him.

“Fucking? Hooking up? Screwing? Fooling around? We never stayed, spent the night or something and when he started, everything ended.”

That sounds as if it really has been going on since the very beginning.

“You cannot tell me you have been doing that since your Rookie season?”

Ilya is quick to reply, as if he were saying it on autopilot, “Before that, technically.”

“What’s it like?” Cliff repeats his question from earlier.

“Being with a man?” Ilya squeezes the throw pillow between his hands, seemingly needing to hold onto something and to simultaneously fall back into his self-soothing habits. Cliff knows way too much about stuff like that, all thanks to a certain hobby-therapist in their team.

“No, what’s it like being with Hollander?” Cliff gently corrects, “Please, no more intimate details.”

Ilya grins but his grin soon enough turns into the hint of a soft smile. He suddenly looks a bit younger, reminding Cliff of the young man whom he had first started playing with, for the same team, for Boston.

Perhaps at such a young age, Ilya had started to grow fond of Hollander without yet even having realized the depth of his own feelings. Cliff kind of wants to believe it’s the truth, he would want this for his friend, to have loved someone for so long with all his heart, even if it happened behind closed doors and as such entirely in secret.

In a way, Cliff is kind of sorry. He regrets that it seemingly must have taken close to a decade for Ilya to dare to address the true identity of the person he has been texting and seeing for literal years by now.

“He’s surprisingly funny and witty and snarky and yet he lets me see the softer sides of him. He’s got this public persona but he isn’t like that in private, not completely. He’s just Shane.”

It sounds so weird hearing Ilya call Hollander by his first name. However, at the same time, it’s not weird at all. The softness in Ilya’s voice matches that shining tenderness in his eyes after all.

“You’re in love with him.” Cliff realises.

It’s by no means a question. It’s a fact.

Ilya doesn’t say anything.

“You’re going to tell him, aren’t you?”

Ilya sports yet another one of his infamous half smirks half grins and then it breaks. He seems to remember that he doesn’t need to put on his usual mask, not when he’s facing Cliff.

“I hope I’ll get the chance to tell him.” Ilya says, then puts the throw pillow in his lap, straightens up a bit and just gives Cliff one of his really specific kinds of looks that prompts him to speak, “and now it’s your turn, which guy has you asking me what it’s like to be with one?”

As fate would have it (or perhaps karma is trying to be a bitch after all), Cliff’s phone beeps right in that very moment to let him know he’s got a text from the very man who has been occupying his mind more than usual.

“Sorry, let me just text Connors real quick that I’ve not yet made it home.”

Ilya kneads the pillow into a ball and speaks just as Cliff types his reply or rather his reassuring words meant to calm down Connors who was expecting Cliff to tell him about having arrived home in one piece.

“You do realize Connors isn’t your actual spouse, da?”

Cliff very nearly drops his phone at that and he catches himself too late and knows it when Ilya furrows his brow.

“Huh.” Ilya says and then it takes maybe just the blink of an eye and the pillow hits Cliff in the arm and Ilya is being kind there, because it’s not the one that’s holding Cliff’s phone “For real, Marly?”

“Well,” Cliff says, biting the bullet or however else the saying goes, “we’re going on a date tomorrow.”

This is so out of character for him. Cliff knows it. Ilya knows it. However, in a way, it's somehow still part of the usual dynamic between Cliff and Connor.

Ilya whistles and leans forward to slap Cliff's thigh. It burns and yet it's absolutely nothing compared to how Cliff felt when he was texting with Connor and things seemed to get heated without actually going into a direction they haven't ever gone into. Raunchy texts, between Connor and Cliff, that might be sexual in nature but never really imply things they might be doing together are kind of normal for the two of them.

They have the same kind of dirty and at times quite dark humour after all.

"I don't even know if you're kidding." Ilya admits then.

Cliff hangs his head and stares down at his phone just as he sees the heart Connor added as a reaction to Cliff's promise to let him know for real once he's safely made it home.

"Neither do I."

"Then ask him."

Cliff lifts his head and fixes his captain with his eyes, basically ends up giving him the stinkeye, "What? Says the absolute master of communication?"

Ilya pats Cliff's thigh then, right where he had just slapped him.

"Connors is great guy. Better man than you for sure."

"He is." Cliff agrees and oh gosh, that's probably the point where they should get trashed and forget this entire conversation ever happened.

However, Cliff promised to make it home without a single drop of alcohol in his system. He's got a date to look forward to now after all.

"Urgh, keep your mushy feelings to yourself!" Ilya jokes but then he smiles once more, "Now get out of my house, you lovesick idiot."

"Rich, coming from you."

"I'm very rich!"

Just to be a little shit, once again, Clint gets up, takes a sip of the water and puts it down on the coffee table. Ilya looks at him as if he were silently asking Cliff whether he thinks that would actually stop Ilya from drinking the rest of the water.

"Goodbye Roz!" Cliff says as he turns around with the intention to let himself out of the house.

Right when Cliff is about to open the door, Ilya calls after him, "Go and get your man."

“Same to you! But don’t you dare leave us for Canada, Roz! Or else I’ll figure out how to get traded as well!”

Cliff barely hears his captain’s reply that entails something along the lines of “You’re keeping your hubby up and waiting!” and it doesn’t really matter. Cliff won’t be going anywhere, other than home and then, once Connor and he have decided where to go, he’ll pick Connor up at his place or vice versa.

Cliff isn’t picky. He never really is, not when it’s about Connor.

Chapter 4

Cliff

dear captain, my captain, just letting you know, I'm back home.

Ilya sends a thumbsup, like he always does. He never leaves such a message without acknowledging it, even if that means answering with a simple emoji.

Roz

sleep well and give Connors my love

Roz

no

Roz

greet him from me.

Cliff

got it boss, your love is reserved for someone else

Roz

it is.

Cliff

I can hear the chaos in your mind from here, don't worry, if he's invited you to his not-so-secret-secret-hideout I'm sure that means something.

Roz

yeah, that he'd be able to murder me in the woods and get rid of all evidence

Cliff

whoa, pessimistic much, aren't you?
just don't say stupid shit and be open and shit about your true and authentic feelings

Roz

stop quoting Connors' words at me.

Roz

you know what, good luck with him as well

Cliff
thanks bro. sleep tight, okay?

Roz
will do, you too

CC
you home already?

Cliff
just made it back. I'm not even out of my car yet.

CC
I mean, you never know.

Cliff
there were no mysterious white vans barrelling towards me

CC
btw, since you've mentioned it first, you owe me a rewatch

Cliff
says the one who cried during almost every single episode

As expected, Cliff's phone rings and, in the matter of just a few hours, he hears the first notes of his current favourite drama series playing for the second time. Connors set that one specific melody as his own ringtone for when he calls Cliff - it's yet another one of their many, many inside jokes.

"Goblin or Coffee Prince?" Cliff asks in lieu of an actual greeting, while he finally takes the last few steps to walk inside his own home. He types in his doorcode just as Connors makes a fondly-irritated noise that tells Cliff Connor is rolling his eyes at Cliff's question.

"Both, obviously." Connor replies, sounding amused and outraged and a bit ruffled (Cliff shouldn't think of it as cute yet here he is). "I mean what kind of question is that? How dare you try to make me choose between two of Gong Yoo's best dramas!"

Cliff can basically picture Connor sitting on his bed, his back leaning against the headboard and one leg folded under his butt. That's usually how Connors likes to chill while he is reading a book or doing something on his phone.

Okay, the thing is that Cliff doesn't have to picture Connors doing anything. He knows Connor quite well and that is why he doesn't just imagine how Connor sits because he knows

how his friend usually sits when he is home alone or comfortable in the presence of another person.

Cliff has his own fair share of somewhat odd habits. Old habits are hard to get rid of, Cliff knows that probably better than anyone. After all, his own family members always tell him to not slouch and to stand straight. Maybe Cliff actually did start copying Connor's posture from back in the day.

Connor used to keep to himself back when he first got drafted. However, it had been Ilya who had dragged him out of his shell. Cliff had gotten closer and befriended Connor basically by osmosis. Once Ilya decides someone is friend-shaped, there is nearly nothing that can keep him from not befriending that person.

In a way, it didn't even come as much of a surprise that Connor is into men as well. He has always had a bit of a man crush on that one certain actor. For that, Cliff really cannot blame him, he might have been a bit too focused on Ma Dongseok - that dude is ripped after all and somewhat one of Cliff's workout inspirations.

However, Cliff kind of refuses to watch that one movie starring both of these actors. It had been Ilya's idea to watch a horror movie, Connors had asked if he could choose one he was certain both Ilya and Cliff would like and the rest had been history.

Cliff had pretended not to get emotional during quite a few of the movie's scenes, yet seeing one sole survivor of a sports team having to fight, yet standing frozen in place faced with his teammates after they had all turned into zombies had been rough. Even now, Cliff remembers how even Ilya had gulped a few times, almost as if he had been trying to hide how those scenes had gotten to him as well.

"Do you remember how you'd said you'd save me in a zombie apocalypse?" Cliff asks Connors. He knows it's a random question, yet Cliff has been thinking about this way too many times. Who would he try to get to safety first? Who would he sacrifice himself for?

"We've talked about this before, Marly, I'd obviously push you into an approaching zombie horde and get myself out and away asap." Connors clicks his tongue then. "Nah, I wouldn't, I'd grab my stick and start swinging. You know I'd have your back because I know you'll have mine."

Why is this making Cliff feel all warm inside? It's just Connors. He should really just stop thinking about whatever kind of insight he has gotten into his own feelings. Cliff had been fine with liking Connors maybe a little bit more than some of their other teammates. He had been fine with being aware of how Connor might be his favourite person to hang out with. For real, sometimes they can just coexist in the same space, scrolling through their phones and not really talk at all and yet Cliff still treasures these moments spent together.

"Hey, man," Cliff says, needing to distract both of them for reasons unknown (okay, Cliff knows what's going on but that doesn't mean he has to acknowledge how touched he is), "I'll have to shower real quick, can I call you back in a few?" Cliff asks and immediately forgets that he wanted to use this to segue from one topic to the next and to ask if they can videocall once he's done.

“Sure, don’t forget your beauty mask. You’ll need it.” Connor’s words sound mean yet Cliff can hear the smile in his voice.

Cliff actually makes sure to be quick, just like he said he would. Even so, he still takes a moment to shave so that he’s left with just a bit of scruff. He is certain whichever kind of dinner-date he will be having with Connors later surely won’t be an actual date.

Even so, some women Cliff has been with have complained about beard burn in the past and Cliff is just taking precautions or whatever. There won’t be any kisses, nor anything more than that. Cliff is certain of it.

After all, Cliff isn’t even sure if Connor is actually really into him or still leaning into the yearslong game they have been playing together for ages.

“Don’t forget to hang up before you get changed.”

Just for that comment, Cliff props the phone up against his dresser that’s facing his bathroom. He keeps the phone there as he undresses, fully aware Connors can hear the faint rustling of his clothes without actually being able to see Cliff getting naked.

To Cliff’s surprise the call is still on-going when he comes out of the bathroom, wearing a bathrobe and in the middle of drying his hair with one of the ugly towels Roz had gotten for Cliff as a housewarming gift. There’s embroidered little animals all over it - and honestly, Cliff mostly only uses that towel because while it might look hideous it’s still the softest towel he owns.

“Nice to hear you didn’t trip in the shower and broke your neck.” Connor’s warm voice travels all the way through the room just as Cliff takes off his bathrobe to change into a pair of boxers and his current sleepshirt.

Right when Cliff reaches for his phone, Connor ends the call only then to call Cliff seconds later. Cliff listens to his ringtone for a moment, throws his bathrobe across the room, or rather in the general direction of his laundry basket and eventually accepts the video call.

“You could have hung up sooner, you know that, don’t you?”

“Nah,” Connor says from where he is lying down on his side (judging by the angle, his phone is likely propped up against a pillow), “I was too busy scrolling through fanedits of you and random players.”

That in itself spells disaster. Cliff knows some vague aspects of shipping culture, or rather he knows what the terms ships and shipping mean and that it’s got nothing much to do with actual seafaring. But other than that Cliff has absolutely no idea why someone would find it entertaining to basically play dolls with fictionalized versions of other players and Cliff himself to then make these fictional versions of them kiss, among other things.

“Found something good at least?” Cliff cannot help but ask because curiosity always gets the cat or whatever, even if it’s morbid curiosity.

Connor's answering grin is outright devilish, "After the edits I moved onto fics. There's been some really spicy new ones recently. You want to hear the best parts?"

Cliff really does not want to know. But Connor looks excited about what he managed to find and so Cliff himself finds himself nodding, if only just once, very lightly while he is already questioning whether he shouldn't encourage Connor's strange hobby of reading some of the fictional stories that get written about them. It's all just fun and games or whatever.

Still, according to Connor, it's apparently quite gender-affirming if people write him as a cis guy. What is Cliff going to say against something that is making his friend happy?

Despite never really having looked for fanworks of that kind, Cliff is mildly intrigued if not a little curious whenever Connor mentions his latest deepdive into their fans' creative shenanigans.

Connor goes for his best attempt at an announcer voice when he tells Cliff, "Goalie ships are getting more popular, angsty Hollander/Rozanov fics skyrocketed after the incident we shall not mention. And speaking of Hollander, on a more fun note, there are apparently people who want you to be sandwiched between Montreal's captain and his right-hand man."

"Damn." Cliff answers, somewhat dumbfounded because what, like where does all this, especially the last part, even come from? Fucking Pike again, really?

"I mean," Connor answers without missing a beat, "depends on who is in the front and who is in the back, right?"

"I'd never bottom for either one of them!"

"Sure, honey."

Despite basically just having started talking about the topic first, Cliff just does not want to go into that. That's a conversation or rather a can of worms he won't open. Not yet at least. For real, how does one ask their friend of several years if the fake-flirting between them ceased to exist only to be replaced by actual flirting if nothing much changed at all? It's not as if Cliff can pull a Coffee Prince move and ask Connor outright, 'Hey, you want to be my lover?'

Would Connor want that? For Cliff to make the first move? Would he want Cliff to make any moves at all? Just because Connor is bi doesn't mean he will be into every person on the planet. Gross stereotypes and all that, Cliff has tried to learn more about what the queer community has to deal with to be a better ally himself.

Only now Cliff looks at his phone and sees the sleepy expression of one of his oldest friends and finds himself wanting to reach through the screen to pat said friend's head. Cliff knows from experience how soft Connor's curls feel under his fingertips, how his cheeks dimple whenever Cliff presses his thumb against those very cheeks.

Have they really always been this touchy, no real physical boundaries between them and all that? Cliff never really noticed.

“Any reason why you wanted to see me, big guy?” Connor asks and ruffles his hair and well, that certainly is one deadly combination. Cliff finds himself staring. Has his friend always been this handsome?

Cliff kind of ignores that question and instead states the obvious, “We’ve managed to talk about zombies, shipping and sex all in under ten minutes.”

Connor reaches for his phone and then Cliff sees a bit of a blur, unable to make out much before the phone stops moving around. Connor is sitting up in bed, holding the phone away from him so that his face and clavicle is visible - and wait, when did he take off his shirt?

“Any reason why you’ve decided to get naked, CC?”

“I get hot looking at hot people.” Connor says within the blink of an eye. He sounds serious, as if he means it but does he?

Flirty bisexuals - apparently Cliff knows more people like that than he was aware of, well, at least he can now add two people to that list, one that didn’t quite exist yet before this evening.

Though in case Cliff is really attracted to Connor, wouldn’t that make Cliff himself a flirty bisexual, too?

The only person whom Cliff would feel comfortable asking about it is none other than Connors himself. Asking Roz won’t be possible, not right now, after all that guy is busy packing for what might hopefully be a vacation with the person whom Cliff has been thinking of as Roz’s secret lover for many years. If Hollander actually is the source of Ilya’s happiness then so be it. Hopefully that guy knows how lucky he is.

Cliff is genuinely rooting for Roz. If one person deserves to be in a sappy and happy and sweet relationship it is Ilya Rozanov, if only because it would go absolutely against everything Cliff knows about his old friend and captain. Cliff has seen Ilya blush and how he’d gotten all giddy and excited like a little boy whenever he texted his longtime lover. Hopefully, they are or can be more than that. After all, just hearing how Roz had said Hollander’s first name had quietened the very thought Cliff had, if only he had it for a brief moment, about Ilya and Hollander being in a convenient yearslong hookup buddies arrangement.

Roz is in love. With the enemy. They are rivals at most, if Cliff is being honest. But that doesn’t matter.

Cliff can keep secrets. He really knows not to out anyone and yet-

“Roz is in love with Hollander!” Cliff blurts out.

“Yeah, no shit, Sherlock.” Connors replies, rolling his eyes and then he takes in what must be quite the bewildered expression on Cliff’s part, “Wait, you thought that wasn’t already obvious to me? When we already kind of figured out that Jane could actually be called Shane instead?”

“Huh, what?”

“Cliff,” Connor says and it irks Cliff a bit that Connor makes it sound as if he were talking to a small child who isn’t yet capable of understanding complicated sentences, “after we dropped Roz off at the hospital, he called me, told me he had driven to his lover’s place to spend the night there and gosh, I didn’t want to drag you into worrying about him as well, so I asked him to send me a selfie to prove he wasn’t out of it or doing something stupid.”

It takes one to know one, doesn’t it? Cliff really wants to hug Connors. Though he knows such a gesture wouldn’t necessarily be appreciated, not even from Cliff. The thing is, Cliff just wants both of his friends to know he will be there for them, no matter what they are going through. He hates feeling as if he weren’t allowed to share their burdens with them or to even know about what burdens them in the first place. Cliff will honestly fight everyone and everything for them, even if it’s their own damn mental health trying to make them feel small and weak and worthless. All Connor’s words about how he used to feel in the past.

“What’s having fucking depression good for if I don’t recognize similar symptoms in other people, right?” Connors tries to joke, in that familiar morbid way of his whenever his usually cheerful self actually mentions his own mental health struggles.

“Do you want to change the topic; Con?” Cliff asks softly, he isn’t quite sure whether he actually wants Connor to change the subject but he’d all too gladly talk about Connor’s favourite Korean drama series and movies, about his crushes on male and female actors and the restaurant they promised one another they will go to the following day.

Connor shakes his head, smiles lightly yet sweetly - and has his mustache always looked this pretty in the warm light of his bedside lamp, Cliff isn’t so sure about it, “I’m good. I’d just really like for you to lie on top of me right now, like my own personal weighted blanket.”

Is that what regular bros do? It’s not as if Cliff hasn’t slept in the same bed as Connor before. It’s not as if Cliff hasn’t literally fallen asleep on top of Connor. However, even if one of the other guys within their team had walked in on such a display of affectionate male friendship, they had never really said anything about it.

“Do you want me to stay on the phone until you fall asleep?” Cliff asks and well, it might mean he’s crossing some unspoken boundaries once more but, in all honesty, he doesn’t give a damn about it.

“Hmmm,” Connors hums in affirmation, “Tell me about the menu, about what you think I’d like.”

Cliff does, he tells Connor all about the different things he is absolutely certain Connor would love to try. They somehow return to their topic from before, or rather to one of them at one point. Cliff talks and talks and talks, about Connor’s favourite scenes in the series he loves so much and finds himself quoting his own favourite moments.

“Good night, Marly.” Connors eventually mumbles. Then, Connors smiles and his eyes drop more and more and eventually they just fall closed.

“Goodnight, Connor, I cannot wait to see you tomorrow.”

Cliff isn't even sure if Connor heard him but he just wants to say it out loud anyway. Because he means it and apparently it's important to tell people about one's feelings. Even if that means figuring out what those feelings even are in the first place.

Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

you may wonder how many tropes I'll be putting into this fic and the answer is yes, all the tropes. also, this story will most likely have eight (or at most ten) chapters because if it's escalating, I might as well see where this will lead and how this will eventually end. I had the plan to write the first chapter, everything else just happened, so thank you so much to everyone who is reading this fic and coming along for the ride (to to figure out where this will be going).

Roz had texted Cliff at roughly the time his captain knows Cliff gets up in the morning. Usually, it's Ilya himself, who makes sure his entire team is up and ready to go, even if it's still several hours or even a whole day before a game. Some of the younger guys tend to call Roz the Team Dad because of that, yet not a single one of them would ever dare to say that to Roz face to face.

It's a bit funny yet uncalled for that there's still fellow hockey players, even former ones from their own team, who would describe Ilya Rozanov as a stereotypical scary looking dude who tends to yell at anyone at the smallest provocation. Roz might have a rough accent sometimes but these days, it can only be heard if he's really tired and his second language doesn't come as easily to him as his first.

Cliff knows that much, especially after the events of the day before. Hearing Roz speak in Russian, to Cliff, is something good and it's even a source of comfort - after all, Roz speaks his first language without having to think about what he is saying, it comes natural and even if Cliff doesn't understand all that many words, it's good seeing his cap using his mother language. Maybe that's one of the many reasons why Cliff feels so protective of the guy - he remembers having been newly drafted to Boston, having asked whether he should speak slower for someone whose mother tongue isn't English. Ilya, who had most likely been distracted at the time and only listened to some keywords, had later told Cliff he was sorry for having punched him. After all, Roz had thought Cliff had just insulted his mother or something.

Family is a really, really touchy subject for Roz. Cliff knows that much. It became even more evident after Roz came back after having laid his father to rest. Now, knowing that Roz's first time back on the ice resulted with Cliff himself knocking out Roz's secret lover, makes Cliff feel even worse. That poor guy must have felt as if he were losing all his loved ones within the blink of an eye.

Cliff cannot fathom all the layers behind Connor's statement that Roz had slept at Hollander's place while the guy himself had been spending the night at the hospital. If Cliff looks too hard into it, he knows, it will break his heart even more because just from looking

at it vaguely it means Roz knows not only where Hollander lives in Montreal but also that he's been there, visited him in the past and that Hollander even gave him a spare key or trusted him with the passcode to his home.

It means Roz is basically welcome at Hollander's home anytime he wants to swing by.

Yeah, Cliff is not getting into that any more than he already has. The only people whom Cliff would ever trust with free access to his home are all ones who are related to him, then obviously Roz and Connors and maybe an old friend whom Cliff has known since elementary school.

Just because people play on the same team doesn't necessarily mean they are actually friends instead of colleagues. For that reason, Cliff is all the more glad that he managed to form quite a few lasting friendships with the other guys.

In a way, Cliff has even become the guest of honor at Ilya's place whenever their captain asks some of the other guys (and Sventlana) if they're in the area and want to watch a game with him. Most often than not it's the other Russians within their team, who mostly have wives and girlfriends back living in Russia or halfway across the country, who end up answering their captain's invitation. Cliff knows that Roz organizes these kinds of get-togethers so that no one feels as if they were on their own and without a support network.

Speaking of answering their captain, Cliff had wished Roz all the very best and a great time at Hollander's cottage. Seriously, that place is huge enough it could be described as something else. After all, Cliff himself inherited his grandfather's place and that is so much smaller and actually deserving of such a description. What Hollander owns might as well be called a lakeside mansion out in the woods, entirely made up of windows without actually being seen by anyone else. The perfect place to invite one's secret longtime lover to.

Good for Ilya, Cliff guesses and good for Hollander, too.

Even so, who in their right mind would voluntarily go to Eastern Quebec however? It's enough for Cliff having relatives living there. He has had to learn French for that very reason and even despite having done that for years, all Cliff knows to say are very basic phrases. It's a beautiful language yet Cliff has always been better doing maths than studying languages. Hence why he's glad to be able to watch series and movies with subtitles.

When he ends their conversation, Cliff texts Roz he loves him, toxic masculinity culture be damned after all. It doesn't take long for Ilya to text those very words right back. Besides, on the ice, it's usually Roz himself who tells every single man in his team, after every single game, no matter the outcome, that he loves them.

Other than that, Roz shows his affection more through actions than through words. Some of these actions can be quite aggressive in nature, like he did during his chaotic phase of wanting to feed his entire team with the weirdest food combinations. Now, knowing that Roz, most likely, wanted to impress Hollander, who is known as quite the health nut, Cliff is a bit endeared by his captain's eagerness to show off.

However, Roz isn't one to back off if someone close to him gets threatened by someone. On the ice, chirping is usually enough for rival players to keep their distance or to cross that distance and start swinging. It always depends on what had been said beforehand. No one ever gets to say anything to or even touch Oregan though. It's a set rule after all that no one gets anywhere near another team's goalie.

Cliff is getting ready, already fully dressed and brushing his teeth by the time Connor texts him that he just got up and will likely be a bit later than they agreed on. Seeing Connor is typing once again, Cliff just presses the call button.

"Morning, CC."

"I am so very sorry," Connor sounds cheepish and a little out of breath, "I forgot to set my alarm for the weekend. I'll be on my way in thirty, okay?"

"No rush, dude, put your pants on first."

To Cliff's surprise, there's actually a bit of a pause before Connor answers.

"Yeah." is what Connors says then, "Yeah, I think I should do that."

"CC?" Cliff asks, carefully, "Haven't you forgotten something?"

There's the clattering noise of a belt buckle and Connor hums to let Cliff know he heard him, even while he is seemingly still in the middle of hurriedly getting dressed.

Cliff remains gentle, intends to not let it sound like teasing when he reminds Connor, "We're meant to meet for lunch."

Cliff can basically hear the moment Connor stops moving.

"Oh. Oh no." Connor starts giggling then and his giggles are deep rumbling sounds, especially when he has just woken up and for a moment, Cliff wonders why he knows that as well as he does.

"Do you want to pick me up later or should I pick you up for lunch since we're having lunch together, not breakfast?" Cliff has a hard time keeping his own laugh out of his tone.

What a CC move to have mixed up their dinner dates. This time, meaning today, they will be going to eat at Cliff's pick and then, the next time, when they'll be eating out together it will be at the place Connor picked out. The menu at the little breakfast bar Connor chose for them to go to together actually sounds quite delicious.

"I cannot believe I've mixed up the dates." Connor says when they're eventually sitting at their table, right across from one another.

“Doesn’t matter, we’ve made it here on time and we’re free to eat as much as we want.” Cliff says just as he takes a sip from his coke - he never really liked that stuff but it’s basically all his captain ever has at his place so Cliff kind of got used to the taste of it and ended up ordering it without really thinking about it.

“By the way, no sportsbar this time, I’m impressed.”

“You said my taste is too heterosexual, whatever that means.” Cliff tries to defend himself, still he’s joking and he knows Connor knows that, too.

“So you pulled out the big guns and asked your mother for restaurant recommendations.”

Cliff nods because yeah, that’s precisely what he did. He has had dinner at a dragshow in the past and it had been Roz, not Connor, who had invited him to said show. Okay, to be more precise, it had been Svetlana who had invited both of them as well as some of her vaguely famous girl friends, probably because the friend she had introduced to Cliff had wanted to get to know him.

“I asked Isy.” Cliff answers honestly and Connor nods knowingly.

However, who even has a first date at a dragshow? Or maybe Svetlana had simply wanted to test whether Cliff would be fine with being confronted with something a lot of other cishet guys would call something far out of their comfort zone?

Jokes on her though, after all Cliff has lost bets in the past and done other things not because he was dared to but simply because he could.

Cliff had been put in drag himself, if only a few times. Most of the time, he didn’t even need to be asked and just did it. He remembers one time when he went out on the ice, in a complete female figure skater outfit and tried to perform the routine of one of his friends, Isabella or Isy for short, from high school. She had been laughing her ass off the whole time, yet Isy had promised Cliff never ever to publish the video recording from that questionable imitation of her skills on the ice.

A few years ago, Zadonsky and Dubek had the brilliant idea of dressing up as the two sisters from Frozen and talked Cliff into being their Olaf. There probably are still photographs of that after they had the glorious idea to skate in those outfits and Ilya had yelled at them for nearly breaking their legs caused by one laughing fit after the other.

They can be way more serious than that. However, it doesn’t help that, at all times, there’s at least one guy in their team who joins the chaos without so much as a second of hesitation. However, most of them have grown up quite a bit since their rookie days.

Time flies after all, and it’s been quite a while since Cliff got to meet up with some of his friends whom he used to go to school with. The thing is, some of them Cliff sees more than others. For example, Isy’s husband is now competing in figure skating, though in Cliff’s eyes that dude has always been on the annoying side of confident. Cliff is happy to not run into the guy or any of the members of his fanclub if he’s anywhere near Toronto - and Cliff knows he’ll be there, for several reasons.

Cliff is still trying to figure out how to break it to Isy that he probably won't be able to bring a date to her baby shower. What does one even bring as a gift to such a celebration? Cliff has no idea since Isy is literally the first person in his friend group who is becoming a parent. The other guys in Cliff's team do not count because their pregnant wives or partners basically made entire wishlists and handed them out to everyone.

Isy had told Cliff he could bring whatever he liked. She means well and Cliff appreciates her effort a lot yet it stresses him out immensely that he kind of told her he might be seeing someone. It's just that Isy and her husband grew up kind of conservative, so there's no way Cliff would be able to bring just a casual fling along and make it believable that he's genuinely in love with that person.

"How far along is she, by the way?" Connor asks and takes a sip of his own drink.

"Almost thirty weeks."

"Already? Wow, it feels as if you'd just shown me the pregnancy announcement. Her little munchkin must be so big by now."

Yeah, time really does fly. Cliff still has no idea how anyone could fall in love with Isy's husband yet he's apparently the love of her life and Cliff never said anything against that. Back in the day, people even thought he was jealous of the guy. That's weird though. Why should Cliff have been jealous of the guy whom his pseudo-adopted sister had fallen so deeply in love with? Of course, as her chosen older brother, Cliff had still threatened to kick that guy's ass and he knows, in case he ever introduces someone as his committed partner to Isy, she will absolutely do the same.

Some time later, Cliff gets out of his booth and sits down right next to Connor.

"What?" Connor mumbles, with his mouth filled with rice and tuna.

"I forgot to send Isy and my mom a picture of us actually being here." Cliff explains and then he puts one arm around Connor and pulls him into his side. "So get in here."

Connor makes a slightly displeased noise, chews a bit faster and eventually swallows his food. He takes a big sip of Cliff's coke and starts hiccuping right after. Cliff doesn't know why but he leans in and places a kiss on Connor's cheek and takes a picture right before Connor lightly punches him in the arm. He's grinning and very much not hiccuping anymore, so Cliff's plan to kind of surprise-scare him actually worked.

"At least show me how weird I look!" Connor demands while he is already pawing at Cliff's arm so that he hands over his phone. Connor then takes one good look at it, grins and gives the go-ahead for Cliff to send the picture.

"Do you want to come to Toronto with me, to Isy's baby shower?" Cliff asks on a whim and wow, he should have thought that through first. Now he cannot take it back.

Connor, who is still sitting very much right next to Cliff, just looks at Cliff as if he were doubting what he just heard loud and clear.

“You’re aware her husband will call you a promiscuous serial womanizer again, aren’t you?”

Cliff steals a bit of wasabi paste from the sushi roll Connor was just about to eat and puts it on the one on his own plate. He winks at Connor and eats his food as if nothing were amiss.

“I’m counting on it.” Cliff answers. If there’s one fun activity in Toronto, it’s getting on the nerves of a man who swears up and down he isn’t bigoted but who still calls any long-haired or androgynous looking guy a woman and who refers to fellow figure skaters who are openly queer and even engaged or married to their partners as people having and or living with a very close friend.

“How weirded out would he be if you showed up with me in tow?” Connors asks and yes, that is surely that devilish grin and tone that tells Cliff that Connor is already coming up with a plan.

“You’re reading too many fanfics, dude, for real.”

“Come on, I’d be a perfectly fine fake-boyfriend!”

Cliff spots one of the sushi rolls he knows Connor likes the most on the conveyor belt and gets it for him by somewhat awkwardly reaching around him. Without even really thinking about it, Cliff then dips the food into soy sauce and holds it up to Connor’s lips. Connor merely opens his mouth and accepts what Cliff offers to him and well, Cliff very much does not stare at the drop of soy sauce Connor then licks off of his upper lip before he starts to chew once more.

Connor would be a perfect fake-boyfriend and that’s a bit of a problem.

That is how, right after sending the picture, Cliff ends up in yet another phone call with one of the people who are most dear to him. When did he start accepting so many phone calls by the way?

“Like I just said, we’re in the middle of a restaurant.” Cliff explains and yet he cannot help but smile at the screen and at his overly excited longtime friend who is trying her utmost best not to squeal at the sight of Connor leaning into Cliff while Cliff holds his phone so that both of them are still, or again, in the frame.

Isy, with her pale skin, black hair and preferred red lipstick is still deserving of the nickname she had worn with pride as a figure skater. However, she followed her true passion and is now working full-time as a model. When she isn’t heavily pregnant, that is - however, Cliff wouldn’t put it past her to advertise for pregnant people with a fashion shoot or even a runway walk.

“Cliff, you owe me the full story of how you two finally got together!”

“About that-” Cliff hadn’t yet said anything about his relationship with Connor. He had merely sent the picture, accepted the incoming call and waited while Isy made happy noises (interspersed by her husband’s slightly worried input about how he thought she shouldn’t get overly excited like that in case it stressed her and her baby too much).

“Some time ago, it’s still pretty new.” Connor answers coolly, as if it were the actual truth. “I had to ask him first.”

Isy smiles so happily, Cliff doesn’t find it within himself to pinch Connor’s side to then ask him what he’s thinking, lying to a pregnant lady and getting her hopes up that her childhood friend has finally found a long-lasting love just like her.

Fake dating. Yeah, okay sure, Cliff can do that. Fake dating his friend whom he is developing genuine romantic feelings for, yeah okay, Cliff can and will do that if he has to. Not to deceive Isy but to annoy her husband. After all, Cliff can only chirp at and punch one dude named JJ on the ice and not the other one and so he might have to get creative in how to annoy the other as well.

Chapter 6

Cliff had not thought this through at all, as he soon enough realizes a few days later. In his defence, it had not been Cliff's idea to pretend he is seeing someone, let alone someone who might actually get mistaken as his committed partner as it is.

Things escalated right off the bat, after all Cliff has had to ask an auntie to pick him up from the airport. When she requested to know the reason why he needed such a last minute driver, as casually as possible, Cliff had mentioned Isy's baby shower and how he would be bringing a friend along.

Then, a few days after that call, while Cliff's aunt had eventually picked Connor and Cliff up, Cliff's auntie had just given her nephew that certain knowing look that only older relatives know how to use to its full potential and demanded Cliff introduce his dear boyfriend properly.

Connor smiled and introduced himself with his full name. It was quite weird hearing him say all three of his names when usually only one gets used to address or talk about him. Especially when it's around their team, for them Connor is mostly just CC after all.

There are certain other things that seem to be known now, at least according to most of Cliff's family members. Apparently most of Cliff's closest relatives at this point know about how he, according to some messages in the family group chat, finally started dating his longtime friend and teammate.

In all honesty, it hasn't even been that long since Cliff's auntie dropped him off at the house, which Cliff had inherited but still doesn't really know what to do with. It has been a few hours since they've arrived and yet Cliff has had to turn off his phone at one point because of all the incoming messages from his parents and some other relatives.

Cliff isn't all too ready yet to confront anyone other than himself with the possibility that he might be bisexual for real. Honestly, what was he thinking agreeing and going along with the whole fake dating thing? It was bound to escalate as soon as it started.

Still, in a way, it helped Cliff realize his family might genuinely support him if he were truly bisexual and dating a guy for real. Okay, scratch that, Cliff can admit to himself that what he feels for Connor isn't anywhere near close to what he feels for any of his other friends, no matter whether they identify as male, female, neither or something else altogether.

At least Cliff's aunt had the decency not to tell everyone within the family that he has brought his partner with him. That much for the topic of not outing anyone without their consent. Cliff assumes the older generations simply do not care about such things. He refuses to actually worry about it though. His family, hopefully, knows better than to tell anyone about how Cliff might be dating another man, who happens to be a fellow hockey player, now.

Speaking of said fellow hockey player, once again that is, Connor calls them staying at Cliff's grandfather's place a stopover. After all, they're only going to spend one night here and will take a car to see Isy and her husband the following day. Being the absolute sweetheart she always has been, Isy even booked a hotel room for Connor and Cliff and refused Cliff's attempts to actually pay for it himself. He doesn't see why he shouldn't spend his own money, he is a professional athlete, earns enough himself and doesn't need any of his friends to help him out in such a way.

That is why Cliff went a bit overboard with the presents he had prepared for Isy, the baby and of course, also for Isy's husband. Because even JJ gets some nice things - and Cliff will take it to the grave that he asked Isy about things her husband likes. Even so, Cliff doesn't want to make a good impression on the guy whom he threatened to beat up with a hockey stick back when they had all been teenagers. However, Leroy is the love of Isy's life and Cliff knows how happy he makes her.

Back as a teenager, chasing Leroy across the rink had been quite funny, even if Isy had tried to suppress her evident amusement at Cliff playing the protective brother figure a little too well.

Now, being in his grandpa's tiny cottage, it feels slightly weird to Cliff. The place has always been filled with laughter and the scent of freshly cooked meals. There had always been nieces and nephews running around the place, all kids of distant and not so distant cousins.

Now, the place is being looked after by older relatives and some family friends who live in the area. It's so awfully quiet.

"Do you want me to come along when you're going to visit him?" Connor asks after their little tour around the house. He has been mostly silent while Cliff showed him every room, retelling old stories from his childhood. If they really were boyfriends, Cliff would maybe have dared to take Connor's hand while he took him from one room to the next.

As it is, they are friends who know each other pretty well and Cliff is thankful that Connor doesn't mention the cemetery. He doesn't want to be reminded that he won't actually be seeing his grandpa but instead a headstone with his name on it.

It still doesn't feel real yet that he is actually gone. Cliff could swear he had just seen his grandpa, had just talked to him and yet he can barely even remember his voice anymore.

Cliff promised his family he would make the trip to his grandfather's grave. He hadn't been able to see him in his final moments but coming here, it still makes Cliff think he somehow failed to do the right thing.

In the end, Connor stays at a place that's filled with memories that aren't his own as Cliff takes the borrowed car, it belongs to a relative, buys some flowers and eventually makes his trip to the cemetery.

"Hey gramps," Cliff eventually greets his grandpa, "I know it's been a while. Sorry for not getting here to visit you sooner."

Even after all these years, Cliff still half expects to get an earful. He honestly kind of misses his grandfather's stern yet loving rebuke whenever Cliff used to do something he shouldn't have done. It's weird, isn't it, how one starts to miss even the not so pleasant moments one shared with another person once that person is no longer with them?

No, absolutely not. Cliff cannot get emotional today. Not because of the past. This is meant to be a happy weekend. He will spend it with a few of his most favourite people in the world. They will have a great time together and Isy will get to see Connor again and she will love him. It would mean a lot to Cliff to see his two best friends getting along well even if it has been ages since they saw each other.

"Do you remember Isy?" Cliff crouches down in front of the grave and gently places the flowers down so that they lean against the headstone. "She's having a baby with JJ of all people. But he treats her right, thinks of her as the goddess she is and honestly, that's the bare minimum."

It's still so early in the day, there's barely anyone else around despite it being the weekend so Cliff doesn't feel all too self-conscious about talking to his grandfather.

"I don't think you remember that guy I introduced to you a couple years ago. He still goes by CC. I remember you making a joke about me being around so many people who go by their initials. He chose that name himself, have I ever told you that? I don't think I ever told you that but Connor said there's no way someone would think he's trans if he basically got the same name twice. It's so strange, according to him, that it will get most people to think he's a cis guy who got that name at birth." Cliff scratches his head then, as he realizes something,

"Gramps, that would be you or me; cis, I mean. Connor wasn't born with the same parts as we were and yet, sometimes I think he's more of a man than I'll ever be. Body parts don't define us and I know, he'd kick my ass for mentioning that though. Sorry for swearing in front of you. He's a great guy is what I'm saying. We've made it so far. Sometimes it's actually scary how far but why am I even telling you that, you'd only shake your head and tell me to straighten up and go on, like you always did."

Why is Cliff even talking to his grandpa about his best friend like that? It feels comforting to be able to just get all of this off of his chest for once, when there's no chance that his conversation partner will react poorly.

"Connor is hard not to get attached to. He's one of the fastest guys in the rink. For real, gramps, I'm so lucky we're on the same team. I'd hate having to play against CC because I just know he'd destroy me. Besides, I'd hate not having him around. But there's something else. Something I never really let myself think about. I guess I always kind of knew. I love him, as a friend. Why is it so hard to put this into words? I love him but as more than a friend I guess. I think I'm also falling in love with him, gramps."

Cliff reaches out and touches the stone and he runs his thumb over the deathdate. Even at this time of year, the stone feels almost cold under his touch. Or maybe it's just that Cliff is way too used to the cold and to be surrounded by ice.

Cliff knows his grandfather would encourage him to speak his mind and even more so to tell Connor about all these things Cliff is thinking about. But will it actually be just that easy? Cliff has dated quite a few women but he's never really been with anyone long-term.

There are guys on the team, who are a few years younger than Cliff is and they are married, have wives and kids back at home and Cliff barely manages to clean up after himself if he's not relying on a cleaning service in case he isn't even home for several months at a time. What could he bring to the table, especially when it's linked to Connor, who apparently has been with guys already and who has more experience in that regard?

Besides, how do other people navigate through life? Why do other people make it look so easy to accept oneself no matter how one might not fit into society's figurative boxes?

Fucking Scott Hunter and his daring as fuck spur of the moment idea to be open about who he is and about whom he loves. It made Cliff think about so many things he hadn't even thought would be things he'd ever think about. Ilya would be laughing his ass off if he knew that it was that ancient relic of a man who kickstarted Cliff's own realization about how he truly feels himself.

But then Roz himself had left the room and made a change of plans.

Cliff will not get Hunter a bouquet of flowers or a freaking thank-you-note or anything at all.

"Good morning." Someone greets Cliff and he blinks against the light in his eyes when he turns around to look up at the person who is getting closer.

It's a young woman in her early twenties, with the same black hair and greyish blue eyes as her brother.

"I drove past your grandpa's house but your car wasn't there and I didn't want to drop by and make it awkward for your companion."

Jeannine puts special emphasis on the last word. She is trying at least. The cross she wears around her neck glistens in the sunlight. Unlike her brother, Jeannine has been trying for years to genuinely learn more about people who do not fit in society's neat little boxes.

"Morning Little Jay." Cliff greets her back, as if she hadn't just talked a mile a minute in her attempt to explain herself.

Jeannine huffs and puts her hands on her hips. Her stern voice is playful as she tells Cliff, "Excuse me, I'm Middle Jay, at most. Jeremiah is the littlest Jay."

"Not for long." Cliff says and grins and only then he finally gets up from the ground, goes over to his long-time friend, yet another pseudo-adopted little sister he never asked for and holds his arms out for a hug. She steps right up to him and puts her arms around him.

Some things never change. It's somewhat funny though that through having lived with Isy's relatives, as part of them having been Cliff's billet family for over a year, Cliff randomly got to make so many more connections which have been going strong for many, many years now.

“Thank you for looking after his place.” Cliff tells Jeannine while she sways them a little from one side to the other and it’s only working because Cliff lets her.

Neither one of them mentions how Cliff is obviously meaning both his grandfather’s erstwhile home as well as his eternal resting place.

“My family promised him we’d look after you, both of you if times got rough and we did, didn’t we?”

In a way, Cliff gets the whole found family part Connor had mentioned a few times when he had talked about the queer community. Being with people one feels comfortable with is so much better than being with people and to surround oneself with people one feels on edge with. It goes both for people one is related to and whom one isn’t related to.

“Do you want to keep talking to him for a bit?”

Cliff shakes his head and breaks the hug. Still, he doesn’t let go of Jeannine and smiles at her when he offers her to link their arms together.

“How’d you get here by the way?” Cliff asks belatedly, despite Jeannine having implied that she was driving. She has had her driver’s licence for years and that’s still such a wild concept to Cliff. When did even JJ’s younger siblings grow up to become adults?

“Jem picked me up and no, I do not want to talk about how your old car absolutely hates me.”

Ah, fond memories. Cliff had basically taught her how to drive - without JJ or anyone else in Jeannine’s family ever knowing about it. In the end, right before he had left for Boston, Cliff had instructed his grandfather to sell the car to Jeannine as soon as she was old enough to legally get her license.

Still, the most rebellious one amongst the three siblings is perhaps Jem or Jeremiah. He had followed in his older brother’s footsteps and gotten his first tattoo at eighteen years old. Now, in his mid-twenties, he’s got full sleeves on both arms and Cliff never stops teasing the kid about how he might one day run out of space for more tattoos.

The thing is, even the younger two Leroy siblings have made it quite far in terms of their professional careers as figure skaters. In a way, it is even quite funny that the oldest among the three siblings fell in love with a girl whose entire family plays ice hockey.

Before Cliff leaves the cemetery, with Jeannine by his side, he waves goodbye to his grandfather’s grave. The two old friends speak a prayer together and walk towards the parking lot. Once again, Cliff finds himself thinking about how he didn’t even really grew up religious. However, to him, praying with other people has always merely been a group activity rather than something that’s meant to create or strengthen one’s relationship with a greater power.

Jem gets out of his car to walk towards them once he sees them coming closer. When did that kid grow that big? He’s gotten quite bulky, especially for a figure skater, Cliff finds himself

thinking.

“Morning Clifford!” Jem greets Cliff and him using that loathed old nickname is all the reason why Cliff then walks up to the overgrown kid to then put him in a headlock.

Jem screeches and struggles a bit and then he simply hugs Cliff’s side.

“Good to see you, too, buddy.” Cliff greets back before he shoves Jem off of him to then ruffle his hair a bit.

“Boys, can you act your age for once?”

“Just because you’re literally coaching a bunch of kids doesn’t make you the wisest person around, sis.”

“I’m still older than you, you brat!”

Sibling fights. Between these two, Cliff knows things can escalate quite quickly. At least they won’t literally pull each other’s hair out anymore. They are all meant to be grown adults, at least judging by their respective ages and yet that doesn’t really mean all that much.

Cliff doesn’t have any personal experience in that regard, meaning with sibling fights of his own, yet he knows how to stop them within moments. Just distract everyone enough that they’ll forget what they were fighting about.

“So,” Cliff says, “would you like to meet Connor today or tomorrow? He said he’d be fine being introduced to whoever might be around today.”

Cliff’s diversionary tactic works a little too well because soon after, he finds himself parking right in front of his grandfather’s cottage with another car pulling into the driveway right after him. He was counting on the siblings being curious about Connor but he hadn’t expected they would kind of confirm his suspicion that they hadn’t just been in the area to visit Cliff’s later grandfather’s last resting place. He now knows the two siblings will not even be spending the night in the area but that they will instead actually be heading towards Isy’s and JJ’s place or rather to their respective hotel rooms close to the expecting parents’ home.

At first, when Cliff lets himself back into the house with two unexpected visitors in tow, things are a bit awkward yet Connor soon enough does an incredible job at telling the imaginary tale of how they, Cliff and he, realized their feelings for each other and how they eventually started dating.

Jem is in the middle of demolishing the bag of snacks Cliff promised he would get for him when he suddenly looks as if he were contemplating asking something or whether he should keep his mouth shut.

“Out with it, kiddo, what do you want to ask?” Cliff immediately prompts.

They’re all seated in the living room where they spend quite a few afternoons watching all kinds of anime series back when they were all still kids. Everyone except for Connor. Even

so, despite not knowing this place as intimately as the other three do, Connor fits right in anyway.

Jem looks at Connor then, as if he were expecting that Connor could give a more adequate answer than Cliff would be able to give, “So your team is fine with you two seeing each other?”

“Only Rozanov knows.” Cliff answers because they hadn’t really agreed on how they’d explain this part in case anyone would be brazen enough to ask about it.

Connor nods, going along with that answer, “I’ve been talking to him for ages about how I’d like to ask Cliff out. But I thought he’d reject me just because I’m a guy, you know.”

Cliff takes Connors hand then and pulls him down from where he’s sitting on the armrest of the armchair. It’s maybe a bit too much to pull his best friend into his lap to sell the idea of them actually being boyfriends.

“Cliff, not in front of other people.” Connor chides and it’s sweet that he is blushing for real. Connor prefers to be called handsome, even so Cliff still thinks he’s cute when he gets a bit shy like that.

“We’ve always acted like this,” Cliff nods to how he is holding onto his not-boyfriend, “so maybe that’s why it was so hard for both of us to realize how we really feel about each other.”

The lie comes way too easy because, to Cliff, it isn't a lie at all.

“Here we are, though.” Connor says with a shrug that is meant to portray nonchalance yet Cliff can feel how tense he is.

They act like they always do but something is different nonetheless.

Chapter 7

Cliff let Connor decide where he wants to sleep and then immediately told him he wouldn't accept it if Connor opted for sleeping on the couch. There are two guest rooms now. One of them used to be the room where Cliff's grandfather used to have his old writing desk with drawers, where he used to write letters by hand until he couldn't really hold a pen anymore.

That room was sacred to Cliff. After all, as one of the oldest grandchildren, it became his job to write his grandfather's letters in his stead when the old man ceased to be able to write himself. Back then, Cliff learnt that his grandfather had been writing letters like someone else would write diaries. All of these letters were meant for members of the entire family, only to be given to everyone after his grandfather's passing.

Cliff got to write word for word what his grandfather told him to write down. Most of these letters were meant for the youngest members of the family. Over time, when Cliff visited less and less due to his work schedule, Cliff's grandfather's little makeshift office remained untouched for years even after he was long gone. Once he actually made it back home to this very place in person, Cliff just couldn't bring himself to change anything, other than to ask his relatives who live far closer to the cottage than he does, to make sure it doesn't vanish under layers upon layers of dust.

There's a letter Cliff has not opened yet, he vowed to respect his grandfather's wishes and to actually only give it to his future spouse once they are married. Now however, Cliff knows he won't be able to give this to the person he loves. Marriage is not really an option, not when he might be falling in love with a fellow hockey player. Still, Cliff also doesn't know yet if Connor is actually the one for him. Besides, even if there is the tiniest chance they might actually end up together, giving Connor a letter, written by a man who probably assumed his grandson would end up with a woman, won't go well at all.

Cliff won't have anyone misgender Connor, not even when it's accidentally done by someone he loves. Why is Cliff even so focused on the thought of giving Connor this letter? He doesn't know why he keeps thinking about Connor in these terms, or rather in ways he had only ever thought about one person who then had broken up with Cliff because he, in her words, had loved hockey more than her.

The past doesn't really matter anymore. It cannot be changed no matter what, as Cliff keeps reminding himself again and again.

Even so, Cliff still feels bad for having spent two weeks cleaning and eventually clearing out the entire room he chose as his current bedroom. Back then, during his cleaning endeavors, he had gotten rid of nearly all old furniture except for the *escritoire*. The walls had been repainted, the carpets had been changed. Now, there's a brand new bed in the room and yet, Cliff finds that he cannot sleep either way.

He feels so bad for not having been here more often.

The stack of letters Cliff held onto for quite some time after he inherited the place has been distributed among the family. However, he has had a talk with his mother about how she thought it wouldn't do Cliff any good if he kept the place entirely the way it used to be during Cliff's childhood.

Holding onto too many reminders of what Cliff blames himself for, she had said, would only hurt him more than to not allow for changes to be made.

Being away from his family, who mostly lives in Canada, Cliff cannot help but to feel as if there was so much he was missing simply caused by the distance between them.

He hates being coddled and when his loved ones don't tell him things, all because they think he'd be better off not knowing if they are going through something.

There had been a moment of solemn silence when Cliff had asked Jeannine how she's doing these days and whether she still had the same couch as the one she had roughly half a year ago. She never really answers his texts after all, so Cliff had taken that opportunity to ask her in person. Of course, he could always look her name up online but his entire friend group has an unspoken rule of simply not looking each other up on the internet.

Even Jem had seemed tense all of a sudden and he had scooted closer towards his older sister on the couch, as if she might need someone to provide emotional support at that moment.

"I quit skating professionally," Jeannine had admitted then, "It wasn't due to injury. I was just so sick of all the nasty comments and about people trying to tear me apart over something I cannot change and of them to then smile into the cameras as if nothing were wrong at all. Tomorrow, I'll introduce my partner to JJ and Isabella."

Connor had seemed to understand what Isy had been talking about sooner than Cliff had done, "We may have only met a couple of times but I must say I'm so proud of you for making such a difficult decision."

Jeannine had smiled at CC then and even while tears had been filling her eyes, she had sounded absolutely certain of having made the right choice, "That's why there's two baby showers by the way. JJ said he wouldn't tell our parents the first date because of how they initially reacted to my coming out."

Now, hours later, Cliff lies awake and stares at the ceiling, wondering what happened for Jean-Jacques Leroy to basically prioritize his younger siblings and his wife's closest friend over his own parents. He remembers JJ as a notorious know-it-all, who kept telling Cliff his movements on the ice had no finesse or elegance. Still, he grew up to become a quite decent man, otherwise Isy would not have agreed to marry him, let alone choose him as the father of her child.

Connors is currently deep asleep in the room next door, meaning the second guest bedroom. So, left alone with only his own thoughts for company, Cliff is basically doom-scrolling through reddit. He has been trying to learn more about what one must keep in mind as a cis person if one is dating someone who is trans and yet all Cliff found is a bunch of

disheartening comments about how cis guys are said to only regard trans guys as fetish content and not as actual men.

He doesn't dare post anything or to answer any of these claims. After all, it's apparently mostly trans guys themselves who are trashtalking the original poster of the post Cliff just found. That guy describes himself as trans and was just asking about whether he would need to use birth control if he slept with his cis boyfriend in case there was a risk of pregnancy.

In the end, Cliff still writes an encouraging message to the original poster. He makes sure to state that he knows that taking testosterone doesn't work as a contraception. It's what Connor told him, back when they chatted a bit about the side effects of taking hormones as a professional athlete and about how Connor even manages that without anyone trying to call some kind of doping offence.

However, Cliff knows that Connor himself won't have to think about any possible unplanned pregnancies. He doesn't have the required body parts anymore to even have kids in the first place. Besides, as Cliff learnt recently, Connor prefers to be the one on top or rather to be the top.

There is no way Cliff will be thinking about Connor in any sexual context right now. It is already weird enough being in his grandfather's cottage and to mix childhood memories with the difficulties of being an adult. It's as if his past and present were intertwining in a way he doesn't know how to deal with.

So, in the end, fully aware of how he probably won't be able to sleep, Cliff turns on the lamp on the little bedside table, sits up and gets out of bed.

Cliff heads straight for the old escritoire. It's as beautiful as Cliff remembers it to be. Back when he had to carefully transport it from one side of the room to the other, with the help of a few cousins, Cliff had taken out all the paper, envelopes and pens of his grandfather. In a way, it had felt as if he had done something forbidden because all those materials, in Cliff's eyes, have more or less become part of how he remembers most vividly of his grandfather.

He was a man who didn't say much, especially not when he thought it wasn't necessary to say what he thought was already plain to see and obvious in itself. For that reason, Cliff wasn't really used to emotional talks with the old man who had made sure Cliff learnt for school and did his homework instead of spending every second after class in skates and such on the ice.

The thing is, back in the day, Cliff had been certain his grandfather didn't believe in him actually making it as a professional hockey player. He had always thought his grandfather had wanted to make sure Cliff would have a second option readily available in case his dream of being drafted wouldn't lead to anything at all.

Now, everything within the beautiful old desk is where it belongs once again. Cliff doesn't really know what prompts him to do it but he pulls out everything he needs, gently closes wooden doors again and then sits down to start to write. In a way, Cliff thinks, he himself is also right back to where he was always meant to be - it still doesn't really feel like having made it back home quite yet.

Home, for Cliff, that's all kinds of places. He feels comfortable at his captain's place in Boston, he loves to visit his mother and some other relatives. However, Cliff feels most comfortable on the ice and at the gym, surrounded by guys who share the same goals as well as most of the same dreams as Cliff himself.

Even so, Cliff knows his dreams and ambitions kind of changed and shifted in the last couple of years. He is still quite content with, slowly but surely, becoming the hockey playing uncle to the kids of his friends but he isn't planning on starting a family of his own anytime soon or at all.

Speaking of, Cliff wasn't sure what to get Isabella and Jean-Jacques, so he bought all kinds of things his teammates, who are all fathers already, said they would have loved to get when they became parents.

Connor had looked at the small pile of presents and asked if Cliff was aware that diapers would have already been a lifesaver for new parents. Back then, Cliff must have had the question of how Connor knew that written all over his face. Connor had simply shrugged before he told Cliff that he is an uncle himself by now, more than once and he's got quite the experience not just buying but also changing diapers.

For some reason, Cliff can't get the mental image of Connor holding a tiny, curly haired baby in his arms. However, it is unlikely CC will ever actually have kids of his own and there is also no way that he had a kid before he became part of the team. That perhaps is the final nail in the coffin. Here, Cliff absolutely curses himself for thinking of such an image merely hours after he visited his grandfather's grave. But he's absolutely certain now how he feels about Connor.

Who else would think of someone who is just a friend as a new parent, holding a baby that looks suspiciously like a combination of both of them? Family talks have been a bit too much lately, Cliff thinks or maybe a subconscious part of his mind has long since accepted Connor as an important part within his social circle. Perhaps Cliff has been in love with Connor for longer than he realized he was thinking about him as more than a friend.

In the end, Cliff just writes whatever comes to mind and still, even while Cliff has no kids of his own whom he could write letters to, in the way his grandfather used to do, he ends up writing a letter for the newest littlest Jay. Already in the flow of things and of pouring his heart out, Cliff then writes a letter for the expecting parents as well.

"What are you doing there?" Cliff startles at those softly spoken words, he hadn't even heard Connor open the door, let alone how he just let himself inside the room.

In his haste, Cliff sweeps the third letter he had just started writing right off the desk.

"Oh, sorry! Let me get this for you!" Connor calls out, sounding just as alarmed as Cliff feels.

Connor, who by then is kneeling on the ground, reads who the letter is addressed to and keeps reading and Cliff, in all honesty, just wants to vanish into thin air.

“CC, it’s not-”

Connor looks up, an unreadable expression in his eyes, “If you end that sentence with ‘it’s not what it looks like’ I’ll get up from here, climb into your lap and kiss you until your breath hitches just like you wrote here!”

“Connors, if you’re fucking with me like you always do, it’s not funny!”

“Cliff, by all means,” Connor says and he doesn’t sound angry but actually more resigned, “You cannot write me a letter and tell me that I take your breath away and that you want to know what it would be like to kiss me.”

Even then, while he says all that, Connor still doesn’t raise his voice. Cliff just sighs, tries to look to the side and to find the words that could make this right again.

“Oh no, Marlow, you don’t get to do this!” Connor tells Cliff firmly then and in the next moment, he’s up on his feet, pulling Cliff’s chair slightly away from the desk and then he is straddling Cliff’s lap just like he just said (promised? threatened?) he would.

Connor puts his arms around Cliff just when Cliff, without really thinking about it, reflexively puts his hands on Connor’s hips to keep him from sliding backwards and onto the ground.

“Don’t hide from me, okay?” Connor asks much, much gentler. He puts two fingers under Cliff’s chin and makes him look up at him.

“This is so lame,” Cliff mumbles and still tries to avoid having to meet Connor’s eyes but Connor doesn’t let him and he smiles so he cannot actually be mad for real, “CC, I didn’t mean to tell you like this.”

Connor brushes his nose against Cliff’s and Cliff immediately stops talking.

“Neat”, Connor notes, “I didn’t think that’d actually shut you up. The thing is, I wasn’t kidding. Roz must be sick of me beating his ears with how I’m an idiot for being in love with my straight best friend and how I might never be able to tell him about it without not only risking our friendship but maybe even our work relationship as well.”

Cliff’s mind and thoughts and especially his heart zeroes in on merely one information Connor just shared with him.

“You’re in love with me?” Cliff asks just as he lets his hands slide lower and he gets two raised eyebrows for that but no reprimand. So Cliff actually gets up while he is still holding onto Connor. The guy is heavier than he looks, despite his small frame, though Cliff wants to see another day so he doesn’t comment on it.

Connor lets his head drop onto Cliff’s shoulder. Silent laughter makes his body shake a little and then he just presses a kiss to the side of Cliff’s neck. That, too, isn’t uncommon.

“I’m not fucking with you even if I’d love to fuck you, is that clear enough for you, Marlow? I actually came in here to ask if you’d want to sleep with me. Not like that though. But I

know how you tend to overthink stuff, you're worse than me, you know?"

Despite being unable to see Connor's face, Cliff knows his friend is saying nothing but the truth.

"Can I take you to bed then, Connor?"

There's a light chuckle and then Connor cranes his neck a little and his lips speak right against Cliff's ear, his breath tickles but it also makes Cliff tighten his grip on Connor just a little bit more, "That's mighty forward of you, Mr Marlow, don't you think? I'd say you'd have to treat me to a couple of dates first but we've been on plenty of those. So, mine or yours, where do you want to take me?"

Trying to process all of what he had just been told and asked, Cliff licks his lip then turns his face sideways. He feels the fine strands of Connor's hair tickle his chin and lips and takes a deep breath of Connor's natural scent.

There is no way Cliff is going to stay in this room, not when Connor holds onto him as if he doesn't want Cliff to ever let him go again. Cliff is used to this amount of physical contact with Connor, however, now the context is an entirely new one. Cliff can basically hear his own heartbeat pulsing through his veins at this point.

Luckily, the door is still open so it's easier to carry Connor out of the room and into the other guestroom. Cliff has no idea how he manages to turn the respective lightswitches off and on without dropping Connor. But Connor seems too distracted by nuzzling against Cliff's throat, as if he were fully indulging in getting to breathe him in when he doesn't stink of sweat like he does after a game.

How did Cliff not notice sooner how much he actually likes Connor's natural scent? There really is no straight explanation for that at all.

It's a good thing Connor cannot read minds because it would be quite amusing to him to know just where Cliff's thoughts are currently drifting once again.

As it is, Connor nearly laughs his ass off anyway when Cliff drops him on the bed once they have made it to the second guestroom.

Unable to not react much in the same way, giddy with excitement and stupidly in love, Cliff grins back at Connor and lets himself fall forward, trusting Connor's quick reflexes to save him from having Cliff actually fall right on top of him. Once Cliff reaches out one hand towards him, Connor rolls right back, snuggles into Cliff's side and hooks a leg over Cliff's own.

"I didn't just dream that you told me you love me and want to kiss me?" Cliff asks just as he pulls Connor flush against his chest.

Connor's only answer is him softly kissing Cliff's cheek, his lips trail lower and end up leaving a kiss right on the corner of his mouth.

"Is this okay?" Connor whispers against Cliff's mouth and Cliff hugs him closer and initiates their first kiss himself, it's one of many and yet it's enough, for now at least.

They don't really say goodnight and even if they do, Cliff doesn't really remember it the next morning. What he does remember is the whirlwind of emotions of the night before and how he eventually fell asleep holding Connor in his arms and being held by him in return.

"Good morning, Connor." Cliff greets Connor sleepily when he feels him move right next to him. Cliff opens his eyes, groans when the sunlight hits him right in the face, closes his eyes and tries to blink himself more awake instead of just opening his eyes all at once.

"Morning, lover."

"Urgh, no, not that! We're boyfriends now!"

Connor mumbles something about how he thinks that word is still quite romantic despite it being linked to illicit affairs and such. However, Cliff doesn't intend to have an affair with Connor when instead he can love him as his committed partner.

Cliff feels Connor's lips slightly brush against his own then and before he can kiss him back or even deepen the kiss, Connor pulls back.

Cliff blinks and finds Connor already looking at him. Then, as if to keep Cliff from chasing his lips once more, Connor puts his pointer finger against Cliff's mouth. Fueled by their usual unwillingness to back off when they're teasing each other, Cliff licks Connor's finger and Connor, to Cliff's surprise, increases the pressure against Cliff's lip and moans.

"No," Connor says then, softly and with a different kind of heat underneath it than he probably means to be there, "We can't. We've got places to be."

Cliff tries to lick Connor's finger again, just to hear him make that beautiful sound from before again. But Connor is already scooting backwards and kicks the blanket that had covered both of them off of his body.

"Raincheck on the early morning makeout session, okay?"

Cliff can only nod when Connor gets up and out of bed and just rids himself of his clothes as if they had really been dating for ages for real. Nakedness has never really bothered Connor, not when they've been playing on the same team for quite a few years by now.

Being allowed to watch as Connor, only clad in boxers at that point, walks right towards the bathroom across the bedroom is something else altogether. He is not even putting on a show and yet Cliff can feel his already heated body react to the clear and unmistakable promise Connor just gave him.

Cliff snickers at himself and at how much time he spent and wasted trying to convince himself that what he feels for Connor is merely a different kind of deep affection and friendship when, in fact, Cliff cannot wait for them to be back in Boston, to talk about personal boundaries and about where their new relationship might be headed in the long run.

End Notes

Kudos and comments are always appreciated.

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