The Crow's Nest

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at https://archiveofourown.org/works/84393906.

Rating:	Mature
Archive Warning:	No Archive Warnings Apply
Category:	M/M
Fandoms:	Heated Rivalry (TV), Game Changers Series - Rachel Reid
Relationships:	Cliff Marlow | Cliff Marleau & Ilya Rozanov, Shane Hollander/Ilya Rozanov
Characters:	Cliff Marlow | Cliff Marleau, Ilya Rozanov, Shane Hollander, Boston Bears | Boston Raiders Team Ensemble (Game Changers)
Additional Tags:	2017-2018 NHL Season, POV Cliff Marlow | Cliff Marleau, Cliff Marlow | Cliff Marleau Finds Out About Shane Hollander/Ilya Rozanov, Supportive Boston Bears | Boston Raiders (Game Changers), Ilya Rozanov's Montreal Jane, mix of prose and texting, Crack Treated Seriously, Canon Compliant, Spoilers for Book 6: The Long Game (Game Changers), LGBTQ Ally Cliff Marlow | Cliff Marleau, Original Character(s), Texting, Group Chats
Language:	English
Stats:	Published: 2026-05-06 Completed: 2026-06-23 Words: 53,271 Chapters: 6/6

The Crow's Nest

by robbinscinquefoil

Summary

Cliff would probably remember if he was there when Ilya met a woman so earth-shattering that he would chase after her for nearly a decade. Probably. Cliff thinks he would probably notice something as life-altering as a meeting like that. Who on earth is this woman and how did they find each other? Did Cliff watch Ilya's life change before his eyes and not even realize what was happening?

In the fall of 2017, Cliff Marlow notices evidence of Jane all over Ilya's apartment. He decides to investigate.

Notes

you can imagine the context of this fic as what if cliff marlow got hit in the head so hard that he became the #noticer

See the end of the work for more notes

Chapter 1: Never have I ever purchased two toothbrushes

The Boston Bears talk about the transformation of Ilya Rozanov like it's something that happened abruptly. Like a neatly-divided history textbook that cleaves apart the passage of time from something constantly flowing together and into something that can be segmented into distinct chapters, to them, there are two eras of Ilya Rozanov: whore and…whatever is going on now. Cliff Marlow, despite popular belief that his brain is more closely-related to a couple of rocks smacking against each other in a tumbler than a fleshy, fully-developed human brain, knows better. He knows that the transformation of Ilya Rozanov is something that came in sections and is still happening before their eyes. The Ilya Rozanov they knew before is no longer the Ilya Rozanov before them. The great paradigm shift they think they saw is actually comprised of a series of small, mostly unnoticeable shifts cobbled together throughout the years and crammed into an Adidas tracksuit.

For a while, Cliff himself did not notice, or rather, did not care enough to notice. He took stock of some of the small changes: a steep decline in the number of hookups Ilya had, at least that the team was aware of, beginning in 2012. Then, a small increase in them in 2014, somehow more reckless than before, and then the numbers plummeted again. Ilya's libertine tendencies ebb and flow, like his dick is operating on a calendar that only it understands.

Something no one has been able to piece together happened in late 2016. The team does not bring it up around Ilya. Someone tried, once, to ask him if he was okay, and the way Ilya's teeth clenched with unbridled fury still haunts them all to this day…that, of course, and the bag skates he ordered them to do afterwards. Ilya was weird for those few weeks, demanding in a way that veered out of his normal threshold and into something almost unhealthy. Cliff knew something was going on when Ilya demanded a clubbing night in Montreal of all places, when normally he'd be…*wherever* he goes, when they're in Montreal, presumably in Jane's arms (or, Cliff supposes, balls deep in her vagina). That night, there was no Jane. Ilya went clubbing. He refused to be a wingman for anyone, preferring to sulk alone amongst the pulsating pink and blue lights, shitty liquor, and the dulcet tones of Rihanna. He made out with one woman (typical for Ilya) before he left early (common for him) and alone (atypical for him).

Granted, that whole night was weird. Shane fucking Hollander and Rose fucking Landry were there, for starters, which made a good chunk of the team feel too star-struck to properly dance, or even breathe, in the same vicinity as *The Rose Landry* and some of her costars (and, he guesses, Shane Hollander, but the star power of Shane Hollander isn't *that* magnetic once you've been thrown into the boards by him a few times). Connors tried to hit on a woman way out of his league and puked on her too-tall heels at some point, and Cliff got kicked out of the club for trying to start a fight with a guy who was swearing up a storm in highly-accented French he could not understand.

It wasn't their best clubbing night, but it wasn't their worst. The Bears have gone through it. Sebbin's objectively awful-looking mugshot from January of 2011 occasionally finds its way to Cliff's phone via hockey meme pages (also, sometimes it becomes the official group photo of the Boston Bears group chat when someone is mad at Sebbin, but it never stays long and is usually replaced by their official logo within an hour or two), which is probably why that evening stands at the forefront of his mind as an example of an evening where the Bears went through it.

Since that evening in Montreal in 2016, Cliff has not seen Ilya even attempt to hit on anyone in any serious capacity. It's like 2017 began and Ilya Rozanov was reborn. He is like a phoenix reborn in

the flames and ashes, except Ilya is a phoenix reborn with his dick significantly less wet than usual. He began to spend way more time wistfully looking at his phone. He came back from Russia, just a week after his father's passing, holding himself in a new, somehow more defiant way. Cliff swung by Ilya's apartment when he came back to Boston to drop off some food and a hearty condolence. In the process, Cliff managed to stumble and nearly drop the bag of takeout on the pile of boxes coated in cyrillic that was partially blocking the entryway. They're full of boring old things from Russia, Ilya had told him. He settled some affairs over there and had the last of his things shipped over, which struck Cliff as strangely final for a guy who previously made no claims of wanting to immigrate permanently. Then the Bears fell out of the playoffs and Ilya dropped off the face of the planet for several weeks.

He came back to Boston from wherever he had disappeared to a bit tanner and looking like some weight had been lifted from his shoulders. There was a pep in his step that Cliff knows he would vehemently deny if it was pointed out. *Russians do not do this*, he would say. *We walk normally. Read any Dovstoyevsky book, Cliff, and you will see that there is no 'pep' in mother Russia.* Cliff would tell him that there is no way in hell that he'd ever read one of Ilya's weird and depressing novels he brings on roadies sometimes, and Ilya would tell him that maybe reading a book for once would do him some good. Behind all of the denial and rerouting, Cliff would see Ilya fight off a small smile, secretly pleased that someone noticed that he's different now, finally a little bit more secure in a good way.

It's probably because of Jane, Cliff thinks. It's because of Jane and the way she is smearing evidence of her life all over Ilya's home.

It all begins when Cadyn, a recent trade from the San Jose Sharks, asks if the Bears do any "pre-season team-building kickbacks," which, upon seeing everyone's confusion, he clarifies: "Does anyone want to hang out after this, like, as a team?"

"Oooh, team-building," Johansson says with an audibly twinge of glee. Johansson is also new to the team and has been having a very hard time hiding the sheer amount of excitement leaking out of his pores at the idea that he has finally made it to the MLH and somehow landed a spot amongst the Boston Bears. The sight of the over-eager new guy about to vibrate out of his skin at the idea of hanging out with his own team makes Cliff chuckle a little.

"Roz has the biggest place out of all of us," Feller calls out as he unclips his shoulder pads, letting them fall to the ground with an audible thunk. "Nice as hell, too."

"No wife or kids," Varkov adds.

"He's also our captain, so this is totally his responsibility," Hammersmith says, elbowing Ilya in the process.

Ilya scoffs loudly, throwing his head back in dramatic disdain. "No," he says. "You people are like animals. You will drink all of my beer and nice vodka and puke on my expensive couch." The last time Ilya had the team over at his place, Kovalev's social media accounts had to be put under mandatory restrictions by the Boston Bears PR team after Kovalev posted a series of blurry photos on Instagram that featured Kohn flashing his bare ass at the camera. On his ass was, written in

large, sharpied-on letters, the phrase #BOSTONSTRONG. The team received a strongly-worded email the next day outlining the origins of the hashtag, appropriate uses and contexts for it, and strict orders to not write it on their asses. The post generated a concerning amount of discourse online. Kovalev did not get the go-ahead from the PR team to post on Instagram again for another 3 months, not that the PR team was ever able to really stop him. He reposted a few reels about squirrels which somehow added fuel to the discourse.

“You used to be fun, man,” Carmichael complains.

“I am fun,” Ilya shoots back. “I am so much fun. I am a joy to be around.” The accompanying glare he swings around the room does absolutely nothing to help him. “This is something I am famous for. Ilya Rozanov: best player in the league, extremely fun guy, and joy to be around.”

“You know a great way to prove that you are fun?” Feller asks, grinning like a cat that got the cream. Ilya hums, awaiting a response. Hook, line, and sinker. The fucker’s easy to manipulate once you know his tells. He puts up an intimidating front that crumbles to bits and pieces once you get to know the guy and how easy he is to play like a fiddle, or, Cliff guesses, like a balalaika, depending on the cultural context.

“Party at Cap’s place!” Cliff yells out. The entire locker room bursts out into a massive, bellowing cheer. Cliff sneaks a glance towards Ilya and is pleased to see a very, very small smile tugging at the corners of his mouth, despite his visible and likely herculean effort to maintain an intimidating glower. Beneath that hard exterior, Ilya Rozanov’s insides are a soft, sickeningly sweet, gloopy jelly filling. He is like a very stale, hardened Dunkin Donuts jelly-filled that requires a chainsaw to crack into two.

The Boston Bears pour into Ilya’s apartment, practically tripping over themselves as they all cram in through the entryway. Some of the guys try to make their way into the main room with their shoes still on, which makes Ilya frown and point at their feet before pointing at the door, silently ordering them to leave their shoes there and not trail the outside dirt into his clean home. That’s a relatively new habit Cliff has noticed; Ilya used to not care that much about shoes inside of his apartment. Cliff remembers the days when Ilya could barely be convinced to take his shoes off before flopping onto a hotel room bed, and now here he is, wearing his probable approximation of a pair of house slippers (adidas slides that were placed very specifically near the door).

The apartment really is clean. Cliff has always been a little weirded out by how minimalist Ilya could be with his decor, not to mention the weird ass modern art he’s drawn to. Feller pointed it out two years ago and Ilya snarked that the whole team needed to go on a field trip to an art museum to experience some culture for once. They never managed to get their shit together and make the trip happen. Maybe this year is the year.

The only flaws Cliff can see in the overall spotlessness of the apartment are an empty can of coke on the coffee table (on a coaster, which is also new) and a hoodie flung haphazardly on the couch like a throw blanket. It’s a vaguely familiar hoodie, but not one he’s ever seen Ilya wear that he can remember, not that Cliff is in the business of remembering Ilya Rozanov’s wardrobe. It’s just that Ilya tends to wear nothing but black athleisure or weird “going out” clothes that look objectively ridiculous on him, but seem to work wonders in clubs based on how many people are drawn to Ilya when he’s wearing his weird, mostly-unbuttoned patterned button ups that are as thin as tissue paper. This hoodie is blue and–

“Dude,” Sebbin calls out. “Is that a fucking Voyageurs hoodie?” he points at the offending article of clothing like he has noticed a cockroach.

Ilya practically materializes in front of the hoodie, somehow managing to stalk from the crowded doorway and into the apartment with a speed so intense that he creates gusts of wind that blows bits and pieces of junk mail off of an entryway table and onto the floor. Ilya Rozanov’s junk mail pile is always consistent and impressively large, containing some of the usual haunts: advertisement packages for McDonalds and Subway and a smattering of other chain restaurants desperate enough for customers that they dole out coupons to every soul within a 3-mile radius, random postcard notices from new dentist offices and other ventures cropping up in the neighbourhood, and the occasional bill. His pile also contains some real Rozanov specials, namely, a whole lot of random crap from just about every humane society, dog sanctuary, and pet store in the greater Boston region. Ilya doesn’t even have a fucking dog, so Cliff has no fucking clue why the man insists on putting his address and email down for every dog-related thing that crosses his path.

“This is not Voyageurs hoodie,” Ilya states, ripping the extremely obvious Montreal Voyageurs hoodie from the couch and crumpling it into his arms.

“Yes it is,” Dubek says, because he does not value his life. Ilya’s fingers visibly clench harder around the offending article of clothing. “What is this traitor behaviour?” Dubek continues, laughing. He really, REALLY does not value his own life. Cliff sees bag skates in his future. Some may say that Cliff Marlow is a prophet.

“No, no, is not mine,” Ilya says, eyes narrowing at everyone in the room who is laughing, which is *most* of the veteran players, save for Cliff, while the newer guys hover in the back sporting facial expressions that range from just confused to looking like they’ve walked in on their own parents having sex. A sleeve from the hoodie slips from Ilya’s grasp and falls limply against him, revealing to the wider room a tiny number 24 embroidered near the cuff.

Hammersmith, because he also does not value the sanctity of his own life, points it out as his laugh veers sharply from a simple giggle to a full-body wheezing attack. Ilya’s facial expression turns from grave to murderous, and Cliff watches with vague fascination as his grip on the hoodie becomes even tighter.

“Holy shit,” Connors says through a laugh so intense that there are tears forming in his eyes. “Is that from a hookup or something? Trying to steal Hollander’s fans or does the rivalry thing really get you going?”

“Something like that,” Ilya says, almost warningly. Behind them, the younger players still look so, so confused. Johansson looks like he is actively giving himself a migraine out of sheer overworking of his brain, and Zadonsky’s face is rapidly becoming fire engine red and steaming hot.

Cliff steps backwards and closer to the poor young guys. “Cap has a girl in Montreal named Jane who he has been hooking up with for a while,” he explains. Zadonsky’s face flashes a shade redder, somehow.

“Yes,” Ilya cuts in. “Jane. From Montreal,” he adds, stilted.

“Cap’s trying to convert Voyageurs fans one dicking down at a time,” Connors adds in. “Jane’s stubborn, so it’s taking longer than usual.”

A weird look crosses Ilya's face for a moment. "My Jane thinks it is funny joke to leave these things here," he says.

Beside Cliff, Hammersmith visibly mouths the words "my Jane," while lifting an eyebrow in surprise.

"I gotta meet this chick," Connors wheezes. "She sounds hilarious."

"She's been here?" Carmichael asks. "I thought you only see her in Montreal."

Ilya shrugs. "She travels for work sometimes," he says casually, flicking his wrist in a dismissive gesture, before lifting the hoodie up slightly in their direction. "I will take this away before one of you uses it to start a bonfire." Before anyone says anything else, Ilya turns on his heel and marches quickly into his bedroom like a man going to battle. He pops his head out of the doorway a moment later to yell "Marly! Give the kids some beer! And make them sit on the couch instead of being weird in the entrance!"

"Why me?" Cliff whines.

"You are good mother to our children," Ilya, the fucking dickhead, says. Sometimes Cliff regrets becoming Alternate Captain. Sometimes he digs a little deeper and regrets being nice to the new foreign guy on the team back in 2010.

"We discussed this already," Connors jumps in. "Cliff is dad. You're mom, Roz."

"You're right, sorry," Ilya continues to yell from somewhere inside of his bedroom, voice booming over the sound of crashing and furniture moving in the room. Cliff can't help but wonder what the hell Ilya is doing in there to cause so much ruckus. "I gave birth to all of you. It was hell on my hips. I've never been the same. Remember that I brought you all into this world and I can take you all out of it," Ilya continues.

"You heard mom," Carmichael jumps in, looking at the gaggle of confused and scared young guys. "Sit down while dad gets you beer."

That's Cliff's cue. Dad mode is on.

As expected, Ilya's fridge is stocked with several types of shitty beer (the type that Cliff knows Ilya would never let pass his own lips, because Ilya has told him over and over again to stop bringing it into his home, and Cliff will never stop doing it because it's cheap and gets the job done) because despite the man's protests at the idea of the team invading his house, Cliff knows that Ilya absolutely relishes the opportunity and was already prepared for it. This exact song-and-dance of the team inviting themselves over to his home has happened again and again like clockwork since the year Ilya first got an A stitched onto his jersey, and only increased in frequency when the A was replaced with a C.

There's a lot more food crammed into the fridge that Cliff is used to seeing, portioned out into neat containers and stacked on top of each other. Ilya Rozanov's refrigerator is usually a shrine dedicated to tubs of sour cream and jars of pickled vegetables Cliff had never previously seen pickled before, interspersed with familiar favourites like piles of chicken breast and containers of congealed pad thai. Now, crammed into crevices in-between the massive quantity of beer and the

unsettling jar of pickled watermelon that Ilya has offered Cliff many, many times (he keeps telling Ilya that he's allergic to watermelon, but Ilya doesn't believe him. "Allergies are American inventions," he told him. "Try the goddamn melon." Cliff has explained, repeatedly, that allergies exist everywhere, but Ilya always brushes him off with a quick *pfffthhh* noise from the tongue) are packages of food he doesn't recognize, covered in a language he doesn't recognize but knows for a fact is not Russian. Maybe it's another type of Russian, who knows. Cliff doesn't.

Cliff hauls another load of Pabst Blue Ribbon out of the fridge (fucking PBR. It's like he's trying to fucking kill them all. The least he could do is buy some Sam Addams) and slams the fridge door closed.

A piece of paper, affixed to the refrigerator with a magnet catches Cliff's attention. The magnet looks like a license plate. It says JE T'AIME in huge, navy blue block letters, with the phrase "je me souviens" underneath, accompanied by "Montreal." It must be from Ilya's infamous Montreal Jane, just like that hoodie Ilya got weirdly defensive about. It's a cute magnet and very fitting for a sportscar fanatic, Cliff thinks.

The piece of paper being guarded by the magnet is a grocery shopping list written out in handwriting Cliff knows for a fact does not belong to Ilya Rozanov. Ilya's handwriting is haphazard and blocky, scrawled out like he wants the reader to feel challenged by it. This handwriting, in contrast, is neat and precise to the point that it's almost unsettling to look at. Cliff whips his head around to catch the way the light hits the pen ink just to make sure it's actually hand-written and not a handwriting-like font printed directly onto the paper.

It reads:

- Ginger ale (CANADA DRY ONLY)
- Miso paste (Marukome, but other brands OK if you can't find it)
- Brown rice
- Salmon (do not buy pre-marinated)
- Chicken breast (do not buy pre-marinated)
- Kale
- Broccoli
- Spirulina
- Wheatgrass
- Chia seeds

Weird. The only thing on the list he can see Ilya eating is the chicken breast, but even then, he knows Ilya has a slight preference for pre-marinated. He showed Ilya a local butcher who mixes up a mean marinade and sells by the pound back when Ilya first was drafted by the Boston Bears. Cliff was drafted just a year earlier, but still took it upon himself to corral and monitor Ilya like he had just adopted a small baby chick purely on the fact that Cliff had already spent a huge chunk of his teenage life living in Massachusetts. The transition for him, a kid who spent summers with his freshly-divorced dad in Worcester (and just so happened to end up on a team so close by), would be far easier than it would be for a kid who just uprooted his entire life, translated it, and hauled it over to another continent. The least he could do was show the new guy where to buy some cheap-but-quality protein. Cliff shakes his head, snapping himself out of it, and hauls a few 6-packs of beer under his arms to bring out to the living room. Before he leaves the kitchen, he snags a few bags of potato chips Ilya has hanging out on the counter in between his free fingertips, clutching them with as much force as he can manage (the last thing he wants is to have to make multiple trips into the

kitchen, so he tries very hard to load everything up in one go), and makes his way back out to the room of already raucous hockey players.

Ilya has rejoined the group while Cliff was busy being weird and invasive in the kitchen, sprawling his massive body on an armchair. Cliff dumps the pile of beer and potato chips onto the table and watches as his team jump on it like a hoard of stray dogs pouncing on a pile of restaurant scraps.

As the room descends into the chaos of beer-and-chip-opening, Cliff makes his way to Ilya's armchair and plops himself onto the armrest, elbowing Ilya in an effort to get some more space. Ilya makes a big show out of being abused by the father of his children all while scooting over so Cliff's ass can rest comfortably.

"Since when do you buy fuckin' spirulina and wheatgrass?" Cliff asks, once Ilya has stopped his whining about being kicked out of his own chair that he spent his own hard-earned money on (Ilya, for what it's worth, is not kicked out of the chair. He's still fully spread out on it, just slightly more contained to account for Cliff's equally massive body).

"It is healthy," Ilya says, shockingly defensive. "We are athletes."

"I saw you house two McGriddles and a milkshake this morning, man," Cliff quips back.

"Life is about balance, Marly," Ilya says.

"What's this about balance?" Feller interrupts through a mouthful of chips. A few moist crumbs fly out of his mouth.

Zadonsky grabs the bag of chips out of Feller's hands. "Dude, where the fuck did you find ketchup chips in Boston?" he asks, grabbing a fistful for himself.

"Normal grocery store," Ilya quips quickly. "What is going on today? Are we playing 20 questions?" he complains.

"We are bonding," Kane says.

"You are in my house drinking all of my beer and eating all of my chips and asking me a million questions," Ilya says. "This is not bonding." he makes a dramatic, sweeping motion with his arms and swings his gaze across the room, building tension. "We will bond by playing a game," he announces, once satisfied by the undivided attention he receives from his team.

A chorus of cheers breaks out.

"What game, Cap?" St-Simon asks.

"You know it's going to be Never Have I Ever. We always play that one," Carmichael snorts.

"Captain, do you have Uno?" Oregan asks.

"Uno is banned in my home," he says. "For reasons I will not explain."

The team breaks out into a series of loud arguments over what game they will choose for their team bonding exercise. They throw out demands for various card games, charades, DIY-ing a ouija board (suggested by Varkov and vehemently rejected by Kane), 7 minutes in heaven (Kohn, who suggested that one, is silenced by several of Ilya's overstuffed pillows being thrown directly into

his face), and hide and seek ("What are we? 6 years old?" Carmichael asked), until finally, they landed on the inevitable:

Never Have I Ever.

Like all iterations of a Boston Bears Never Have I Ever game, they get wasted because everyone plays like they have a personal vendetta against every guy on the team. Ilya, as per usual, knows too fucking much about Cliff's (spectacularly bad) love life and makes a point of announcing he has never done *insert-hyperspecific-thing-that-Cliff-told-him-in-confidence*-here and watching with a greasy smirk as Cliff takes another sip of beer. He plays with the intention to kill. As per usual, the rookies look on in a very particular mix of worship and horror and jealousy as guys announce they have never done insert-sex-thing-here and Ilya Rozanov takes a dramatic sip, theatrically pretending like he's being tortured all because he dared to have a threesome in an airplane or control someone's vibrator in public.

Cliff and Hammersmith have, in the past, agreed that they believe Ilya lies during these games. Cliff thinks Ilya is full of shit and takes sips for sex acts he totally has not done but wants everyone to think he has, just to keep the mystique alive. Hammersmith has fired back by saying that he thinks Ilya sometimes doesn't drink when he should out of fear of the reaction. He said something about the way Ilya sometimes freezes, just briefly, when a guy announces that he has never sucked a dick or touched his own asshole, said when the team is mostly drunk and laughing their asses off because the concept of one of them doing something like *that* is just *so* funny. Ilya freezes, staring down at his beer, considering his move for a moment, and does not drink. Cliff said that Roz is probably just processing the statement, translating it from English to Russian in his head, but Hammersmith just shrugged and said "I dunno, man. It happens a lot, and you know Rozzy is pretty fast at processing all of the shit we say."

Anyways, like always, the game is rapidly devolving into something dangerously close to *'hey should we take ass photos and post them on instagram?'* territory. Several guys have tapped out, moving on to either sleep on the hardwood floor or attempt to drunkenly play video games (that stupid MLH game, and yep, they're all fighting over who gets to be Shane Hollander, which keeps making Ilya's eyebrow twitch. That rivalry of theirs really gets to him) on Ilya's PS4. A very small group of dedicated players are still trucking on with Never Have I Ever, dredging up increasingly strange things they have never done that they think will be a good gotcha moment for someone on the team. Hammersmith raised his eyebrows in Cliff's direction before flicking his eyes towards Ilya after Sebbin announced that he had never jerked off in front of another guy, but Cliff doesn't know why he did that. Ilya seemed perfectly impassive when Cliff looked over at him. Cliff is seven beers in now, mostly because now more of the guys who have known him for several years have pieced together pieces of Fables of A Love Life Failed by Cliff Marlow as Narrated by Ilya Rozanov and have begun to repeat mocking Never-Have-I-Evers meant to torture Cliff specifically, and he really needs to piss. He announces his departure just as Kovalev states that never has he ever been arrested for attempting to break into a church while drunk so he can get into the "blood of christ wine supply in the basement," specifically said just to watch Sebbin complain and take a drink.

Kohn is currently puking his guts out in the main bathroom and Cliff really doesn't want to piss in the sink (Ilya would probably murder him) or some bushes or whatever, so he goes to Ilya's bedroom where he knows there is an attached bathroom. When he enters the bedroom, he is struck by how clean it is. Ilya has always kept a relatively tight ship, even making the bed before leaving

hotel rooms when they used to room together on roadies, stating that it's a habit from childhood, but this…is pristine.

Briefly, Cliff remembers the sheer amount of noise Ilya made in this room while "putting away" the "offensive" Voyageurs hoodie (which, he notices, isn't even put away. It's been folded with military precision and laid on the well-made bed). He pushes the memory to the back of his mind when his bladder practically yells at him to get his ass to the toilet so he can finally piss the multiple beers he just had to ingest.

Ilya Rozanov's bathroom is mostly unremarkable. When Ilya first joined the Bears, Cliff noticed the way some of the older players mocked the amount of care Ilya took in his appearance. *You're going to get a puck to the face and then you won't be so pretty,* they'd mock. *You've got more hair creams than my mother. What did you do, buy out the whole Sephora?*

Ilya would shrug and say something like "Maybe if you cared more, you'd have sex more often. Girls like it when a man smells good," or "You do not get curls like this with bar soap that smells like petting zoo." He's always been intense about scents, which is probably due in part to a desire to cover up the aggressive smell of sweat and cigarette smoke Ilya would emanate otherwise. Cliff squirts a bit of Ilya's aggressively-fancy (and way too expensive; Cliff's googled it) scented Aesop hand soap he always buys, bringing his hands to his nose to take in the smell of mandarin and rosemary. Cliff didn't used to wash his hands that often after pissing, but kind of began to make a habit of it after a young Ilya watched him piss in a urinal and walk straight out of a public bathroom. The verbal dressing-down Ilya gave him was so intense and lengthy that Cliff still has nightmares of it to this day. Sometimes, when he leaves a bathroom without washing his hands, he hears the voice of a 19-year-old Ilya Rozanov yelling at him, and he marches back into the room to scrub under his fingernails with soap. He always washes his hands in Ilya's home for that reason, but also because he knows that Ilya buys the good shit.

The whole using-a-ton-of-products-that-aren't-13-in-1 thing became less of a problem when Ilya and Cliff started rooming together more frequently during roadies, and then the problem became nonexistent when they finally graduated to having single-room privileges and Ilya could have his little personal care routine without being observed like an aquarium fish. That being said, Cliff thinks that maybe it's starting to get ridiculous. Like, the dude has *way* more than Cliff remembers. Ilya of the past was concerned about his colognes and different creams and conditioners for his curly hair, sure, but he was never too fussed about his skincare beyond a simple facial soap and some lotion. Now, there is a whole pile of products lining the sink, including 3 separate kinds of sunscreen. Cliff shakes his head and wonders how the world would react if they learned that Ilya Rozanov, brutal hockey player, was *this* neurotic about his personal care.

As Cliff wipes his hands on the front of his jeans to dry them, his eyes land on the two matching electric toothbrushes propped up next to each other.

Huh.

Cliff has been thinking about Jane a little too much in the past 3 weeks. Or, rather, Cliff has been thinking about the *concept* of Jane a little too much, now that there is physical, real world evidence of her that he has stumbled upon.

In past years, Jane was just a nebulous entity who lived inside of Ilya's cellphone. Sure, Cliff knew that there must be someone, a real flesh-and-blood person, on the other side of that text message conversation. He knows that Ilya would go see her, get defensive when she was brought up, and sometimes come back smug, sated, and covered in scratch marks after an evening with her. Then Cliff saw those two goddamn matching toothbrushes sitting innocently next to each other amongst a sea of skincare products, and was hit with the realization that Jane is more than just a text message-machine for Ilya. He thinks about that hoodie Ilya denied ownership of but handled with such care. He thinks about the shopping list written in unrecognizable handwriting and the little Je t'aime magnet. Those small signs of life are instances of Jane, the physical, real person, having a presence and impact in Ilya's life.

Jane is a real person and Cliff knows nothing about her.

Cliff has shared with Ilya, over the course of several years, almost everything there is to know about his love and sex life in excruciating detail. Ilya knows the names of all of Cliff's ex girlfriends, including ex girlfriends who were never really girlfriends but still broke up with him anyways. Ilya knows about the time he had to hide under a girl's bed because she didn't tell him she had a long-distance boyfriend and said boyfriend decided to surprise her that evening with a visit, and Ilya knows that Cliff was a little too invested in the way he was forced to listen to them have sex while he was still hiding under the bed.

(The girl apologized and asked for Cliff's number, which he gave eagerly, but then she ghosted him. Cliff was really fucked up about it for 2 weeks)

Ilya knows that Cliff took years to completely get over Emily, a girl from his high school who he went to prom with and never truly dated or even kept in touch with, but thought of a little too much. Ilya monitored Cliff with eagle-like precision for 48 hours after Emily announced via Facebook that she was engaged (to another guy from high school) and expecting a kid.

Ilya knows that Cliff does way better on Tinder than he does in-person at clubs, but that Cliff tries the old-fashioned way anyways, and desperately needs the handholding of wingmen as a result. Probably worst of all, Ilya knows (and has told Cliff, repeatedly, that he is really obvious and needs to try to follow his dreams instead of striking out repeatedly with girls who he isn't compatible with– that's a new one for Ilya, *compatible*, a word he suddenly uses often and seems to weigh the sound of in his mouth like he relishes the feeling of the syllables) that Cliff dreams of the day that a tall, older woman sweeps *him* off of *his* feet, which is a fantasy he does not allow himself to explore because he is a tough, manly hockey player who should be romancing the hell out of a cute little thing his age or younger. Ilya says that that's stupid, but Cliff doesn't really care for advice from the guy who's hung up on a woman he won't even bring around his closest friends.

Speaking of that woman, the fact that Ilya knows so much about Cliff's love life and Cliff knows so little about Ilya's is starting to feel like a barb stuck directly into Cliff's heart. Cliff knows, admittedly, too much about Ilya's sex life, but he knows basically nothing about his love life. He has never had any serious girlfriends that Cliff knows of, not even as a teenager. "I'm a slut," Ilya announced proudly at the big age of 20. "I do not date." Cliff, briefly, thought that Ilya was dating, or had previously dated, Svetlana, an absolutely drop-dead gorgeous girl that made the eyeballs of the entire fucking team pop out of their skulls, but both Ilya and Svetlana guffawed massive, ugly belly laughs at the concept, like the idea of their relationship being something *more* was an impossibility and that everyone else was stupid for imagining it.

Ilya's longtime denial that Jane is his girlfriend has weakened over time (growing from a vehement denial to sounding like not even Ilya believes his own words) and was never treated like a funny joke like the idea of him dating Svetlana. Cliff's almost certain that Jane is the closest Ilya has ever been to dating someone. Cliff, for that matter, is certain that they *are* dating, like, in the traditional sense, with romance and promises and everything.

Ilya refuses to tell him about this. What is it about Jane that makes Ilya so incapable of talking about her?

What is it about Cliff that makes Ilya feel like he can't talk about his life with him?

[Author's note: if you have the Creator's Skin on, these WhatsApp chats scroll! Please do not pass by them without scrolling!]

BEARS

Several people are typing…

Today

Dubek

Alicia broke up with me. Need to go out tonight

4:26

Dubek

Who wants in?

4:26

Dubek

@Rozanov @Rozanov @Rozanov

4:26

Carmichael

I’m in

4:27

Connors

Yeah let’s do it!!

4:27

Kohn

oh hell yeah

4:27

Marlow

@Rozanov @Rozanov @Rozanov @Rozanov @Rozanov @Rozanov

4:28

Rozanov

no im busy tonight

4:28

Marlow

Too busy to get laid?

4:28

Rozanov

who said im not getting laid

4:28

Marlow

Is Jane in town?!

4:29

Rozanov

maybe

4:29

Rozanov

bye losers

4:29

Dubek

Okay whatever anyone else want in?

4:29

Kane

Sure!

4:30

Zadonsky

Busy tonight, mom’s in town

4:30

Marlow

I’m still in

roz hate club

Several people are typing…

Today

Carmichael

We need to get to the bottom of this shit

6:34

Carmichael

Roz is being weird

6:34

Connors

Is this about the Jane thing?

6:34

Marlow

I agree. I think Jane might be his actual girlfriend now

6:35

Marlow

He’s always been weird about Jane but this is a new level

6:35

Sebbin

I hope they are. We can’t have another repeat of December 2016

6:35

St-Simon

Maybe we are jumping to conclusions here

6:36

St-Simon

All he said was that he is with her tonight

6:36

Marlow

It’s not just that

6:36

Marlow

You remember when we went to his apartment a few weeks ago?

6:36

Feller

ooohhh shit yeah that hoodie thing

6:37

Marlow

There’s more

6:37

Marlow

He had two toothbrushes in his master bathroom

6:37

Marlow

Matching ones

6:37

Marlow

And there was some weird shit in the kitchen

6:37

Hammersmith

Details Marly give us details

6:38

Marlow

There was a grocery list on his fridge in someone else's handwriting asking him to buy shit he'd never eat

6:38

Marlow

Chia seeds and miso paste and shit

6:38

Marlow

Hung out on the fridge with a montreal license plate magnet

6:38

Connors

okay the evidence may be damning

6:38

Feller

Roz having an actual girlfriend is kind of blowing my mind

6:39

Feller

Like what could this woman possibly be like

6:39

Marlow

That’s what ive been wondering

6:39

Marlow

They’ve been texting since like 2011

6:39

Marlow

And well all know how roz doesnt even look at the same woman more than like 3 times

6:39

Connors

Jane’s gotta be fucking terrifying

6:40

Carmichael

Should we just ask him?

6:40

Connors

No

6:40

Marlow

No

6:40

Feller

No

6:40

Sebbin

No.

6:40

St-Simon

Yes

6:40

Carmichael

I’m going to ask him

6:40

Marlow

DONT DO IT

BEARS

Several people are typing…

Today

Carmichael

@Rozanov is Jane your girlfriend?

6:41

Dubek

Dude

6:41

Varkov

Holy shit lol

6:41

Kane

@Rozanov

6:41

Zadonsky

@Rozanov

6:42

Kohn

@Rozanov @Rozanov @Rozanov

6:42

Connors

@Rozanov

6:43

Hammersmith

Rozzyyyyyyyyy

6:44

Rozanov

Hi, this is Jane.

6:45

Rozanov

Ilya can’t text right now. He’s busy.

6:45

Rozanov

He says you all should shut the fuck up.

6:45

Hammersmith

HI JANE

6:45

Marlow

JANE?!

6:45

Varkov

no fucking way

6:45

Carmichael

OH MY GOD ITS JANE

6:46

Dubek

AINT NO WAY

6:46

Hammersmith

JANE

6:46

Hammersmith

JANE

6:46

Hammersmith

ARE YOU HIS GIRLFRIEND

6:46

Rozanov

I’m not his girlfriend.

6:47

Rozanov

Bye.

6:47

Carmichael

BRUTAL

6:47

Marlow

JANE COME BACK

6:47

Feller

Janey please

6:49

Marlow

Fuck she isn’t coming back

6:53

Marlow

PLEASE JANE

roz hate club

Several people are typing…

Today

Marlow

Okay what the fuck

6:53

Hammersmith

I dont believe her

6:54

Feller

now i REALLY gotta meet this girl

6:54

Feller

she seems fiery

6:54

Marlow

Can't believe we FINALLY made contact with Jane and she told us to fuck off

6:55

Hammersmith

Technically Roz told Jane to tell us to fuck off

6:55

Feller

is taking control of his phone girlfriend behaviour? or no?

6:55

Hammersmith

Need more data

6:55

Carmichael

We'll see what happens next time someone wants to go clubbing when jane isn't in town

6:55

Marlow

Good idea

BEARS

Several people are typing…

Today

Cadyn

Club tonight? My friend on the detroit team gave me some suggestions!!

3:07

St-Simon

I’m in

3:09

Marlow

Hell yeah

3:09

Marlow

@Rozanov

3:09

-0

Connors

@Rozanov

3:10

Rozanov

no im good

3:11

Hammersmith

Oh, is it because of Jane?

3:11

Rozanov

some of us have better things to do that get wasted and fuck stranger

3:12

Connors

Never thought id see the day…

3:12

Connors

Ilya Rozanov is dead…

3:12

Connors

Sometimes I can still hear his voice…

3:12

Rozanov

fuck off conny

3:12

Marlow

I didnt hear a no re: Jane

3:12

Carmichael

Oh my god he is ignoring us

3:17

Marlow

Roz if you dont respond im coming over to your apartment and dragging you out of it

3:17

Rozanov

i am very busy man

3:17

Rozanov

do not interrupt me

3:17

Marlow

Is Jane with you?

3:17

Rozanov

no

3:18

Marlow

Then what are you doing?

3:18

Marlow

DUDE COME ON

3:28

Marlow

Let’s go Cadyn

Cliff is at a club babysitting Cadyn after both of them struck out with every woman they attempted to chat up. He’s never been good at this alone and Cadyn kind of sucks as a wingman. Now despondent, Cliff nurses a Sam Addams and Cadyn is going to fucking town on a vodka redbull despite Cliff’s best efforts to turn the kid towards a more acceptable drink that won’t make his heart explode by the time he hits 27. Cadyn’s only 21, just barely drinking age in the US (but came to the Bears prepackaged with underage drinking experience enough to be able to stomach some bullshit like vodka redbull, which now that he’s thinking about it, makes sense. Cliff was drinking everclear jungle juice out of rubbermaid containers when he was 21, so he shouldn’t be one to judge) and already struggling to talk to women (Cliff also shouldn’t be one to judge here). If Ilya was here right now, he’d lovingly tell Cadyn that he’s fucking doomed and then try his absolute best to give

Cadyn hints-in-the-form-of-chirps until Cadyn knew what to do to hold a legitimate conversation with a beautiful stranger.

The Ilya Rozanov of a few years ago would just leave Cadyn to die and go make out with a stranger in a bathroom stall.

Ilya, Cliff has noticed over the years, does not like to pick up women without the emotional support of a team. He prefers to go to clubs in a pack, true to his Boston Bear nature, like a family unit of animals who all happen to be in heat. When he was younger, Ilya did not care if anyone else had success; his focus was entirely on himself. As time wore on, he began to focus a little more on developing his skills as a wingman himself. This is something Cliff has been on the lucky receiving end of on several occasions, more than happy to be coupled up with an extremely hot and eager woman thrust in his direction by Ilya before Ilya stalks off to find himself a suitable partner. Cliff, nor the rest of the Bears, have ever known Ilya Rozanov to go to clubs by himself, which is why the entire Jane situation sticks to the front of Cliff's mind. Cliff would probably remember if he was there when Ilya met a woman so earth-shattering that he would chase after her for nearly a decade. Probably. Cliff thinks he would probably notice something as life-altering as a meeting like that. Fuck, he probably wouldn't. Who on earth is this woman and how did they find each other? Did Cliff watch Ilya's life change before his eyes and fucking forget? He wishes he was more observant over the years.

Besides them, a tall, older woman touches Cadyn lightly on the shoulder. Cliff burns with jealousy; Cadyn's too drunk to realize how lucky he is. Cliff can practically hear Ilya's rumbling drawl in his ear, despite the fact that the man is nowhere near this club. *You need to go for what you want, Marly,* the Ilya Rozanov Cliff has invented and kept inside of his own mind tells him. He's fairly certain his brain got the accent right and everything.

Cliff plasters on a smile that he thinks Ilya would be proud of and says hello to the woman.

---

roz hate club

Several people are typing…

Today

Marlow

We need a team meeting

11:53

Marlow

We need to find out who Jane is

11:53

Feller

should we loop some of the other guys in

11:54

Carmichael

Oh hell yeah

11:54

St-Simon

I jusrt got hit by a guy on a moped

11:55

Feller

where the fuck are you

11:55

St-Simon

nashua new haampshire i think

11:56

Carmichael

Vic why the FUCK are you in New Hampshire

11:54

Carmichael

Get out of that godforsaken place

11:56

St-Simon

cant buy fireworks in mass

11:56

Feller

true

11:56

Marlow

What

“Shouldn’t we wait for Roz?” Kovalev asks.

“This is a strictly captain-less meeting,” Cliff says. “I’m captain right now.” He slams a fist on the smartboard screen, where a word document is currently being projected. Beside him, Hammersmith is set up on his laptop and preparing to type. At the top of the document, he writes *WHAT WE KNOW ABOUT JANE* in size 64 font.

The Bears, sans Ilya, have gathered on a rare off day specifically to discuss the issue. They even managed to convince someone over the administrative staff to let them use a meeting room equipped with a smartboard, HDMI hookup, a Keurig, and enough space for (almost) the entire team. To avoid having any admin mention anything to Ilya, they claimed that they were meeting to plan Ilya’s super secret surprise birthday party, a plan smartly devised on the spot by Carmichael. Kohn reminded them all, loudly, that Ilya’s birthday isn’t happening for another nine months. Hammersmith, a quick thinker, jumped in to save their asses by “reminding” Kohn that the team wanted to plan something really, really big that would involve multiple months of planning, which is why they all need to meet right now.

Cliff hopes that does not mean they’re now all on the hook to plan something really, really big that will involve multiple months of planning. Cliff will probably cobble together some kind of surprise party for Ilya both to save face and also because, now that he thinks about it, Ilya would probably fucking love a surprise birthday party. He hopes that by June, they know enough about Jane to be able to invite her to it. That would be nice, right?

“We are here to discuss what we know about Jane, Captain’s mystery girlfriend,” Cliff announces.

“I don’t really see a point to this,” St-Simon says.

“Don’t lie, Vic,” Carmichael groans. “You’re the biggest gossiphound out of all of us.”

“We care because of December 2016,” Hammersmith announces with ominous gravity. Several guys startle and nod their heads.

“Ah, right,” St-Simon nods in agreement. “The bad times.”

“What happened in December 2016?” Cadyn asks.

“We do not know,” Cliff explains. “But we are pretty sure it was related to Jane.” He pauses, looking around the room for dramatic effect. “Worst fucking few weeks of our lives. Roz was a monster.”

“He punched me square in the face during practice and told me it was my fault for having a ‘punchable nose,’” Connors says.

“He told me I should be strung up and hung by my balls because I didn’t get him a gatorade from the vending machine,” Kohn adds.

“What does Jane have to do with that?” Oregan asks.

“After careful observation, data collection, and discussion,” Hammersmith muses. “We have concluded that Cap and Jane probably broke up.”

“If they were even together in the first place,” St-Simon adds in.

“And we think, after careful observation, data collection, and discussion,” Carmichael continues. “That they made up earlier this year and may be dating.”

“Okay?” Cadyn says, confused. “That’s good right?”

“Right, for now,” Cliff says. “But imagine if they break up again.”

Several guys groan.

“We must figure out who this Jane is and make sure nothing happens to them for our own personal safety,” Hammersmith concludes.

St-Simon raises his hand. “A few months ago, I asked Marianne to ask the WAGs if they knew a Jane and they said no,” he announces. St-Simon really is a gossip hound.

Hammersmith nods. “Thank you for snooping before we even asked, dude.” Then, he carefully and too slowly types *does not talk to other wags* into the word document.

“Good,” Cliff says. “Let’s also get the obvious out of the way: she’s from Montreal.”

Hammersmith begins to type:

Lives in Montreal

Voyageurs fan

He takes several tries to type “Voyageurs,” stumbling over the vowels a few times. Everyone watches in silence as he types in letters, backspaces, and tries again.

“Great, what else?” Hammersmith finally asks after successfully typing in the word.

“That hoodie,” Dubek begins. “It was, uhm, pretty big looking.”

“Are we thinking that she has an oversized hoodie, or that Jane’s on the large side?” Carmichael asks.

“That thing looked big enough that it could fit Captain and he’s built like a monster truck,” Sebbin says. *Fuck,* Cliff’s jealous. Jane must be hot as hell.

After a moment of careful consideration, Carmichael leans over Hammersmith’s computer and types in *Statuesque?*

“It was a Hollander hoodie, so she’s probably a Hollander fan,” Dubek adds.

“Or she’s funny and bought a Hollander hoodie on purpose to mess with him,” Kane theorizes.

Hammersmith adds *Hollander fan (criminal), MAYBE ironic*

“What has Roz said about her when we’ve gotten him drunk enough to spill?” Carmichael asks the group.

Cliff takes in a deep, considering breath. Ilya has revealed a small bit of information about his Jane over the years, mostly by accident.

“She’s freaky as hell,” Cliff says. “I’ve seen some of their texts. Raunchy shit.” Cliff has accidentally looked at Ilya’s phone on several occasions just to be greeted by whatever nasty thing Ilya is sending to his texting victim of choice. He’s had a number of those throughout the years, but Jane has always been the only consistent one on his roster, and Cliff hates to reminisce about it, but she’s also the freakiest one. The girls Ilya texted in the past would respond eagerly but in a kind of perfunctory way, more interested in getting down to the actual physical act of fucking and less interested in pre gaming it via text, while Jane and Ilya seem to *actually* sext. Consistently. Often. Constantly. Cliff has, of course, also seen some texts between the two of them that *aren't* sexts, but he is more often unlucky enough to stumble into the conversation mid *I bet you're already soaking wet just thinking about my cock* than he is to stumble in mid *I’ll get a hat trick tonight and dedicate it to you* or, once recently, *yes sweetheart my knee is fine and I promise I iced it earlier* 🙄🙄🙄.

“I’ve seen her texting him about coming multiple times and choking on his dick,” Cliff tacks on.

Horny is added to the list.

“What does this woman look like?” Feller asks. “That could help us figure it out if we ever see them together.”

The room remains silent.

“That should be easy, right?” Zadonsky asks innocently. “What’s his type?”

The room continues to remain silent.

“He doesn’t have one, I think,” St-Simon says eventually.

MLH hockey players, as a whole, have a very specific type: young, white, blonde, skinny, athletic, conventionally pretty, and peppy. Even guys who claim to not have a type have this type. The average WAG meetup looks like a Carrie Underwood impersonator convention, and having a brunette woman join the fray is practically like having a diversity hire. Ilya has taken home his fair share young, white, blonde, athletic, skinny, conventionally pretty, peppy women, but he has also hit on and taken home women of a wide variety of appearances, backgrounds, body types: Ilya Rozanov is an equal-opportunity whore with his only discernible type, if one wants to call it that, being: *pretty* and *kind of the same age* as him (though, in his younger years, Ilya was been known to get with some women who looked a hell of a lot older than him, *not that Cliff is jealous or anything*).

Cliff once joked that Ilya’s roster looked like a University advertisement photo and Ilya told him to shut up and try talking to more women.

Except. Wait. Ilya *used to* not have a type. He definitely has developed one over time, one that Cliff can definitely pinpoint to a few, distinct features that he has seen over and over again on the women Ilya has hit on with increased frequency over the years, which ramped up to a fever pitch in 2016, and that’s–

“Freckles,” Carmichael says into the silence.

“Freckles?” Johannson asks, scrunching his eyebrows in confusion.

“Freckles, brown eyes, black hair,” Cliff says with a serious nod.

This has come up several times in Cliff’s recent memory; as Ilya became less inclined to sniff out potential hookups like a bloodhound, he became more inclined to spend his clubbing time becoming a drunk, emotional wreck. Cliff would need more than two hands if he wanted to count on his fingers the number of times Ilya has gotten weepily intoxicated over the past two years, loudly and whinily describing *those goddamn freckles* and *those shiny brown eyes* with deteriorating English. Cliff, slightly more interested in enjoying his night than listening to the Ilya talk about freckles like a broken record, pirated and etched onto old x-rays and smuggled throughout the Soviet Union, gave only about a quarter of his attention to those drunken rants. Fuck, he kind of wishes he paid a little more attention to Ilya weeping over this unknown’s womans aesthetic charms instead of trying to catch a random woman’s attention over the sounds of Justin Bieber house remixes. Dunken Ilya is the only version of Ilya that could be caught doing this. A sober, happy Ilya would deny having functional tear ducts. *I am never a sad drunk, Marly. I am a fucking delight to be around all the time. If you see tears in my eyes, this is a trick of the light. The only time you will see tears in my eyes will be the tears of joy I shed when Scott Hunter finally retires to the nursing home.*

“Oh my god,” Dubek looks haunted. “You’re right, fuck, we went clubbing, like, last September? And Cap rejected every girl who approached him until he found someone exactly like that.”

“Girls approach him? Fuck, what am I doing wrong?” Kane whines.

“That’s specific as hell,” Cadyn says with a low whistle. “He definitely has a type. I bet Jane looks like that.”

“No, wait,” Sebbin says. “There’s more. I think he’s into Asian women.”

Dubek whips his head towards Sebbin. “The girl, back in September with the freckles, she was Asian.”

The room is silent, and then:

“Oh my god,” Kohn says with a solemnity that does not fit him. “He has yellow fever.”

After a brief moment (and with some reluctance) Carmichael adds

Freckles?

Brown eyes?

Dark hair?

Asian?

to the document.

“We need more data,” Hammersmith announces once the typing is finished. Around the room, several guys murmur in agreement.

“How?” Sebbin asks. “He won’t go out with us anymore.”

“We’ll keep inviting him out anyways,” Connors answers. “Maybe he’ll go out with us on a night that Jane’s busy.”

Cliff has an idea.

“If he won’t go out with us, we’ll go to him,” he says. “We invade his apartment and snoop around a bit. He denies it, but he fucking loves having us over.”

“You sure?” Carmichael asks.

“Absolutely,” Cliff says, thinking about how Ilya always keeps his refrigerator stocked with beer he will never drink just in case a teammate drops by. “But we probably need one of the rookies to ask him.”

The rookies look at Cliff like he just asked them to pirouette into a volcano.

“It’s true,” Kovalev says. “He’s a softie for new kids.”

Hammersmith takes his eyes off of his computer and throws his gaze out into the room, eventually landing on Johansson. “It’s gotta be you, Sensy,’ he says.

“Sure,” Johansson shrugs. “But why me?”

“New, young, European, ESL,” Hammsmith lists. “All the things that make Cap enter dad mode.”

“Mom mode,” Connors corrects. “Cliff is dad. Roz is mom.”

Chapter 2: Lilies for my Lily

Chapter Notes

> check out the end notes for a list of headcanons/background bits I incorporated into here but didn't outright state

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Ilya Rozanov holds his cards as close to his chest as he possibly can without alerting everyone around him that he has secrets to hold. He isn't particularly great at this. Sometimes, the way he grips the cards is just slightly too tight, just enough to make it obvious that there is something amiss. Maybe if he didn't do that, no one on the team would have cared about the whole Jane thing. It's not exactly earth-shattering news when a hockey player decides to date someone, and while Ilya Rozanov has claimed several times over that he is a whore down to his bone marrow, everyone knows that's some bullshit. Ilya Rozanov has a hell of a lot of love to give. Cliff suspects that that secret Ilya protects so fiercely has to do with how deeply he can love.

By trying to protect his secrets, Ilya has dug himself into a hole. His open-book, loud, out-there persona mixed with his athletic prowess means that there are always eyes trained on his every move. He's a sleazy reporter's dream and a PR staffer's sleep paralysis demon. He tries, usually successfully, to distract the watching eyes all with bigger moves, crazier statements, and other moments that make them think *now THAT'S Ilya Rozanov, the guy we all know and love or love to hate*. He uses his public persona like an obnoxiously-patterned duvet on top of the bed that he wants everyone to believe he fucks nasty on. If you know where to look, sometimes you can notice that the corners of the duvet are not tucked in properly and that the blanket has gone slightly askew enough to reveal a hint of what he was trying to hide underneath.

Cliff has seen the duvet askew many times, and on occasion, has caught glimpses of what lies underneath. Sometimes it is a stiffness that settles over Ilya whenever parents are the topic of conversation. Sometimes it is a small grimace when someone implies that maybe he can't understand what is going on around him or speaks to him slowly and carefully like they're trying to communicate with a caveman. Sometimes it's a flash of rage or indescribable sadness in his eyes when someone talks about love.

There is something new, far bigger than usual, and probably Jane-shaped that Ilya is trying to hide under that old duvet, which is starting to grow threadbare with age and overuse. Cliff can tell that Ilya is trying very hard to tuck the corners in precisely and smooth out the wrinkles on top, and he suspects that it's getting harder and harder for Ilya to do. Whatever lies underneath is too big for Ilya to smush down into complete secrecy. Cliff thinks, as Alternate Captain, that it's his job to maybe coax his friend into letting that worn-out duvet go.

Hammersmith and Carmichael have seen it too, and now the rest of the team is on the lookout alongside them. Cliff feels just a little bit bad about the way he has conscripted the team into helping him dig the secrets out from his friend's chest, but he is telling himself it's for Ilya's own good (as well as the team's own good).

If Ilya is happy, the team is happy. If the team is happy, maybe they'll have a shot at the cup again. Maybe Ilya will finally loosen his grip on those cards he has vice-gripped against his chest. Faintly, Cliff thinks back to 2014 and the way Ilya, fresh off of an Olympic-sized disappointment, worked his fingers and toes into bloody nubs with the force of his desire to prove himself. Ilya has always worked best under pressure. His track record playing against the Montreal Voyageurs (specifically, Shane Hollander) is proof of that, but then again, Cliff does not think he has ever seen Ilya Rozanov perform without his hidden little secrets encircling his lungs and squeezing hard. Jane *could* be the ticket to see an Ilya Rozanov at his full potential, unencumbered by the weight of his own secrecy, if only Ilya would let that goddamn duvet go.

In a few weeks time, Johansson finally works up the courage to take out the big guns after careful coaching and encouragement from the veterans amongst the team. Feller, Varkov, and Hammersmith have come together to create what they believe to be the most lethal weapon they've ever forged against Ilya Rozanov's heartstrings (although they know it's only an approximation to the real nuclear weapon, which is whatever the hell Jane has going on. They, meanwhile, must satisfy themselves with building a hydrogen bomb wrapped up in Johansson's skin). Johansson, on a dreary and cold Boston morning, pulls Ilya aside, thickens his accent, forces his tear ducts to apply just enough moisture to his eyelashes that there is a twinkle when he bats them, and tells him in a wobbling tenor that he is homesick and thinks he needs some family bonding time.

Ilya, as they expected, folds immediately under the assault. The power of the rookie's trembling lip and stumbling voice is too much for him to resist. His hand reaches his phone in record time, attention pulled so forcibly to the act of solving the homesickness issue that he does not even notice that Johansson's eyes dry with a suspicious speed. Within moments, every member of the Boston Bears receives a text message announcing that they are having a mandatory bonding night in Ilya's apartment. Bring alcohol and food, if you want, and Ilya will buy several pizzas. Anyone who does not join will be punished severely and promptly.

The pizza requests flood the chat, which Ilya only partially pays attention to. Pineapple on pizza is a longstanding argument amongst the Bears; Hammersmith and Feller always sing its praises, while Ilya claims he would rather die than try it. Kohn's request for a vegetarian pizza is shockingly honoured, but Kovalev's request for mushrooms is denied. Johansson gets a full pizza to himself. It's piled high with meat, and when it arrives, Ilya takes it into his kitchen and loads it up with some kind of cabbage slaw he apparently made himself. Ilya strictly bans anyone else on the team from even touching the special pizza, not that any of them would want to get *near* a pizza with fucking slaw on it. Johansson, for whatever reason, gets really choked up when he sees it, so Cliff guesses Ilya knows what he is doing. Fucking Europeans, man.

The Boston Bears are everywhere in Ilya's living room, flopped together in heaps like hamsters in a cage smothering each other. The smartest of the bunch grabbed seats on Ilya's oversized couch and the few chairs he has, while the rest make do with spots on the floor. Kovalev made the executive decision to drag a barstool from Ilya's kitchen but no one else was willing to follow his lead. There's a lot of lap-sitting happening, or in Cadyn's case, a lot of sprawling one's entire body across the laps of three grown men. As always, Ilya lays partial claim to a chair. It's another one of their unspoken rules: no matter how dire the chair situation in Ilya's home, the big, fluffy armchair is reserved for Ilya and Cliff, who will always find a way to cram both of their massive asses into its hold.

Having so many of them in the space means Ilya is too distracted with hosting to notice if one of his older teammates slips away for a moment. He trusts that they won't get lost or die in a corner; They're adults who can handle themselves and do not need to have their hands held while walking to a bathroom. Ilya, of course, still offers on occasion, mostly in a dry, mocking tone when he wants to poke fun at one of them for drinking a little too much. There's always an undercurrent of a legitimate offer laced into the mockery, like what Ilya really wants to say is "if you need help, I am here. I will even hold your hand or carry you to the toilet," but can't bring himself to say with the raw sincerity the thought holds.

Today, when Cliff slips out of their shared armchair with a murmured "I'm gonna go piss," Ilya just nods, not even bothering to tear his eyes away from the way Johansson sniffles as he stuffs another mouthful of meat and cabbage slaw into his mouth.

Cliff intends to use the moment of distraction and relative free-reign in his team captain's home to his advantage. Of course, he will go to the bathroom, but if he happens to slip into another room and, maybe, accidentally, by total coincidence, slip and fall and open every single drawer along the way, well, who can blame him? Accidents happen. Who amongst us has not accidentally opened up every book on a bookshelf in the process of looking for some extra soap? Or accidentally rummaged under a bed while in search of a dropped wallet? Oh, clumsy me. I've lost the contents of my pockets, uhm, everywhere. That's why I'm lifting up lamps and checking under pillows, you know, for the lost contents of my pockets.

Once he is in the bathroom, Cliff's eyes land on those two matching electric toothbrushes that are propped up on their chargers. Only one of them, the one with the yellow colour strip on it to differentiate it from its blue counterpart, is plugged in. It must be Ilya's. The sink is still an organized riot of products, including the familiar tubes and tubs Cliff has seen Ilya take out of his travel bag in past years when they roomed together. The rest are still perfect strangers. Oddly, only two of the other things seem to see some serious use: an unscented foaming face cleanser and an unscented lotion. Some of the shit on the sink hasn't even been opened yet, plastic anti-tampering packaging serves as proof of it.

Enough on the stuff lining the sink– Cliff's eyes catch on something much, much more interesting: a series of post-it notes stuck onto the mirror, edges curling upwards likely due to the humidity of the room. They've got that same perfect, almost unsettlingly precise handwriting Cliff remembers staring at on a grocery list on Ilya's fridge. Gotcha, Janey.

They're arranged in a haphazard line on the right hand side of Ilya's aggressively large mirror. Cliff's eyes rove over them as he takes in what is written: an *I love you* here, a *je t'aime* there, a *I have to go and didn't want to wake you. You looked so peaceful. I'll see you in Montreal in two weeks. Love you, baby* next to the others. There are a few notes written in Russian, also neatly written but in a different way than the other notes, like Jane's preciseness is coming not from muscle memory but from very careful effort.

Jesus, it's a lot to look at all at once. There are a lot of L-bombs here. Cliff didn't know that Ilya and Jane were in "I love you" territory.

Cliff returns his eyes to the post-it notes to read the ones he missed. *You're such an asshole* makes him raise his eyebrows a little. At least he can agree with that one.

In the distance, Cliff can hear Zadonsky and Carmichael argue very loudly over which Dunkin Donuts beverage deserves the title of best drink (Zadonsky is team Dunkaccino, while Carmichael

has taken the arguably insane position that the iced tea with simple syrup is the true underdog of the menu). Kohn is loudly trying to interject with his opinions on Coolattas, which means that this discussion is about to become much, much more lengthy and potentially violent. Everyone in the apartment will be so distracted by the discussion that Cliff can probably snoop for a while longer before Ilya begins to get suspicious, if he gets suspicious at all. Ilya sometimes gets so absorbed in monitoring the newer members of the team that he completely forgets that the rest of them exist. Thankfully, if the Dunkin conversation loses steam before Cliff returns, Johansson has a little something in his back pocket to use in case that emergency Ilya distraction is needed. He has really whipped up a story about being absolutely beside himself with grief over how much he misses Malmö, so Ilya's got his work cut out for him.

Cliff slinks into Ilya's bedroom just as Kane asks everyone about their favourite Munchkin flavours. It is absolutely diabolical work– this should keep the room occupied and loud for a solid ten or fifteen minutes.

Ilya's bedside table is an absolute mess, which looks strange in comparison to the relatively spartan rest of the apartment. It's not unusual for him; even in hotels, Ilya keeps his stuff mostly contained with the exception of one piece of furniture he chooses as a victim, usually the nightstand or the obligatory chair shoved next to the obligatory desk every hotel room has. The victim is piled with whatever Ilya might need at a moment's notice. In hotels, this means a cell phone charger, bottle of water, a singular shitty-looking paperback book, and often condoms. In Ilya's personal bedroom, the concept is taken to its logical extreme. The paperback becomes an entire stack of books that spills over to the floor next to the table, where even more books are stacked together (would it kill the guy to move them to the bookshelf in his living room?). The mandatory water is there in the form of an empty glass cup. A phone charger is dutifully waiting. There's also an entire fucking tripod and ring light setup in the corner, which Cliff really, *really* does not want to dwell on. Is Ilya doing fucking Only Fans in his free time? Surely he doesn't need more money. Then again, sports cars are expensive beasts and Ilya is quite the collector. The MLH pays him really well, but maybe there is more to Ilya's finances than the general public, or even Cliff, know.

It's either that or Ilya is having absolutely fucking nasty phone sex with his Montreal Jane, the type that requires a hands-free option and special lighting for. Cliff stares at the ring light for a moment longer and concludes that it's probably the hands-free video call option. If Ilya Rozanov had a fucking Only Fans, surely a journalist or an eagle-eyed fan would have figured it out by now and spread the news far and wide, Paul Revere style. Instead of riding through the streets to announce that the British are coming, someone is running through social media to announce that Ilya Rozanov is coming. Not many would be shocked to hear that, probably. Ilya has a reputation for coming quite often.

Cliff is not at all surprised to see that stack of paperback books nor is Cliff surprised to see that a good chunk of them are the very same style of shitty mass market paperbacks covered in Cyrillic that he knows Ilya loves to bring along on road trips. Ilya has always been a bit more of a reader than the average hockey player, which is something that has always shocked those who do not know Ilya well. He always has a weird Russian paperback book crumpled in his duffel bag (and dog-eared, because Ilya is insane) for times when scrolling on his phone or listening to music while waiting at the airport isn't cutting it anymore. Cliff trails over the few English-language books in the stack, expecting Ilya's typical sad-sack fiction shit, and is surprised to find a smattering of nonfiction with no clear theme: a book about the 1972 Summit Series, an Ottawa travel guide, a book about autism, a crossword puzzle book, a few loose copies of The New Yorker, and…

Ha. Marley and Me.

Cliff's gonna give Ilya so much shit for that one once he figures out how to bring it up without revealing that he has been snooping in Ilya's bedroom.

Before Cliff leaves the bedside table alone, he takes a quick peek in the single drawer, which he immediately regrets. That's a huge bottle of lube, Jesus Christ, and it's half empty. Who needs that much fucking lube? Next to the bottle is a fucking dildo (girthy as hell, bright purple, with veins that stick out) and a pair of handcuffs. There's more underneath those three top things, but there is a zero percent chance that Cliff Marlow will allow his hands to come into contact with Ilya Rozanov's sex toy collection. Not in a million years. He slams the drawer closed and backs away.

He wonders if that's Jane's dildo she's left here or if Ilya maybe bought it to use on her when she visits. A thought crosses his mind, briefly, that maybe Ilya uses it himself, but Cliff banishes the thought. What on earth would Ilya do with that thing? He shakes his head as if to physically knock the thought loose enough to leak out from his ears.

Cliff doesn't see anything else of note in the room He moves on to the closet and quickly scans it for any, literally *any* women's clothing at all, in hopes of finding something that can clue him in on who this Jane woman is. After a quick scan of the hangers and shelves, he is disappointed to find nothing besides that one Voyageurs hoodie (neatly folded and placed on a shelf in the closet this time, instead of out in the open) that he already knew about. Besides that one glaring thing, everything else in Ilya's closet is perfectly expected: lots of athleisure, those tissue-paper thin shirts he passes off as clubwear, some suits for game days, a pile of jeans, and a few casual sweaters.

Ilya has a fuckton of clothes. Like, far more than one guy really needs. The sheer quantity of athleisure is dizzying, as is the stack of Reebok sneakers still in boxes piled on the floor. Cliff briefly feels the texture of an orange plaid shirt he has never seen Ilya wear (since when does Ilya wear plaid flannel shirts? He really needs to clean out his closet) and finds that it feels soft with age and consistent use. Then, Cliff is distracted by the I'M WITH STUPID t-shirt Ilya has hung up. For Sebbin's bachelor party back in 2015, the whole team wore them, each with an arrow pointing in a different direction. Ilya's t-shirt points to his dick. Cliff's t-shirt points slightly diagonally to the upper right, which worked great when he posed for photos and got to position himself next to Ilya so his arrow went straight to him. Cliff has no idea where his t-shirt is now, if it even exists still. It's kind of sweet that Ilya cares about this t-shirt enough to hang it up on its own hanger in the closet next to the Armani and Hugo Boss suit jackets.

"You took a while," Ilya says casually when Cliff finally makes his way back. Fuck. Cliff has been caught red-handed. The Dunkin conversation has fizzled out, but it seems that Johansson has not yet needed to whip out a second helping of his homesickness sob story. Instead, the team has moved on to discussing what the hell happened with Tampa's lineup over the summer. "Did you get lost?" Ilya snarks.

"Line for the bathroom," Cliff says quickly. "I waited a bit but then I decided to use the one in your room."

Ilya hums. "I did not see anyone else go to the bathroom," he responds.

Carmichael, who is currently sitting next to Ilya, is clearly listening. "St-Simon had the shits," he says interjects before Cliff can think of an excuse.

St-Simon, who is also sitting with them, startles. “Hey–” he begins, but then seems to catch the pleading looks Carmichael and Cliff are sending him. “Ugh. Yeah, I had the shits,” he acquiesces.

Sensing an opening, Cliff decides to ask a few pointed questions now that it is known that he used Ilya’s main bathroom. The dildo and the tripod are at the forefront of Cliff’s mind, but he would rather be traded to fucking Ottawa than announce to the room that he went snooping in their captain’s sex toy drawer. The hell that conversation would unleash would be constant and come back to haunt him for years to come, knowing these guys. He instead decides to play it a bit safer and stick to the bathroom’s relative innocence. “You been getting into skincare recently?” he asks. Ilya looks at him with vague confusion, scrunching his eyebrows together.

“Not more than usual,” Ilya responds carefully.

“You, uh,” Cliff begins. Beside Ilya, Carmichael tips his head back in silent disappointment. Cliff’s blowing this. “You just have a ton of new stuff in there.”

“New stuff,” St-Simon repeats slowly.

“Ah,” Ilya says, the word somehow sounding understanding and confused at the same time. “Yes, kind of.”

“Kind of,” Cliff repeats.

“Jane leaves them here,” Ilya says suddenly, like the words are escaping his throat before he can stuff them back down. St-Simon does a miniature, almost unnoticeable fist pump in celebration. Carmichael keeps his head tilted back but looks like he is really struggling to not react too strongly and scare Ilya off from admitting whatever it is he plans to admit to them. “She, ah, gets many things for free but does not want them.”

“Jane gets skincare and shit for free?” Cliff presses, latching on to the detail. It's not much, but it's a clue. Not many people get unwanted stuff like that heaped on them for free.

“Yes,” Ilya continues. “But she is stubborn and does not like to try many new things. She prefers to use the same stuff she always uses. She gives me some things to try. Other things she gives to a friend or her mother.”

“Is she an influencer?” Carmichael chimes in.

“Something like that,” Ilya says. “She is a model,” he continues, lips twitching upwards like he is telling a private joke that he won’t explain. “What, you want something? Maybe the creams will fix your ugly face.”

Cliff rolls his eyes.

“Actually,” Carmichael cuts in. “You got a cleanser you don’t want? I’ve been looking for one.”

Ilya barks out a laugh. “Finally. I thought you would never ask.” He claps a massive hand on Carmichael’s back. “I will give you moisturizer too. Maybe anti-acne serum. You need it badly.”

“Hey,” Carmichael protests weakly.

On the television screen, the video game approximation of Scott Hunter receives a penalty for an illegal hit made on the video game approximation of Ilya Rozanov. The fake Admirals are up 2 points over the fake Bears, which Feller playing as Ilya is taking personal offense to. They should probably make a rule against playing as the Bears on the MLH video games because beating the Bears as a rival team always, *always* devolves into a physical altercation. It's traitorous. It's also blasphemy to play as Scott Hunter and have the audacity to beat the Bears while sitting in Ilya Rozanov's own home. In his fit of rager, Cadyn accidentally spills an entire can of diet coke on one of the Playstation controllers, which cuts all of the conversations in the room short with the ensuing chaos.

Once the diet coke is cleaned, video game Scott Hunter is officially banned from Ilya's home, and the little groupings of the team have settled into more relaxed conversations, Ilya's cell phone vibrates a few times. He picks it out of his pocket to check it at the same time that Cliff and Carmichael both sneak glances at the screen, and–

Carmichael's hand reaches out at light speed to grab it and instead manages to knock it clean out of Ilya's loose, unsuspecting grasp.

"What the fuck, Carmy," Ilya chokes in surprise before reaching down to retrieve the phone that just clattered loudly onto the floor.

"Jane is calling," Carmichael says as an explanation. A mad dash for the phone immediately begins as multiple bodies and hands launch towards it, each person hellbent on getting the device and answering that call. This is now officially a team effort. It is a team bonding night, after all, and they've just been banned from beating the shit out of digital Scott Hunter, so they need something good to put their energy towards.

"You fucking animals," Ilya yells, beating Kohn away with the meat of his palm. As he pushes back Kohn, Dubek attempts to swoop in and pluck the phone from his other hand and is thwarted by Ilya's elbow making forceful contact with his ribcage. "What is this?" Ilya complains, whipping his arm towards his chest to cradle the phone against his sternum.

"I wanna talk to Janey," Kohn says. His nose starts to bleed as he says it, dribbling down his lip and chin.

"Real subtle, guys," Hammersmith groans before suddenly lunging towards Ilya to make a robbery attempt of his own, which fails almost immediately when he loses his footing and crashes directly into Kovalev (who is luckily sturdy enough to withstand the entire brunt of Hammersmith's weight and more).

Ilya hoists the phone up high with the intent on keeping it far away from the prying hands. "None of you will talk to Jane," he announces. "Clean up Kohn's fucking face while I take this," he says, pointing to the roll of paper towels left on the coffee table after the diet coke spill before walking towards his balcony.

Once their captain leaves the room, the guys split into two groups: the ones trying to clean up Kohn's nose as ordered, and the guys who huddle together to figure out their next steps towards learning anything at all about Jane.

“Someone needs to follow Roz and listen in,” Hammersmith announces (quietly, of course, to ensure Ilya does not overhear them and kill them all).

“Oregan,” Carmichael calls out. “You’re up, bud.”

Oregan blanches. “Why me?” he whines softly.

“You’re the smallest out of all of us,” Carmichael explains. “And quick.”

“Slippery on the ice,” Cliff adds. “Our little weasel.” The nickname was bestowed upon Oregan just a few weeks earlier by a commentator who seemingly made it his personal mission to think of the stupidest descriptions he could during their game against Philadelphia. Oregan had slipped impressively between several of the Philly players, weaving in and out at a high speed. The commentator, intent on finding a creative way to describe his body movements, landed on “weasel-like.” The name stuck almost immediately. Oregan seems to have mixed opinions on it, both excited to have received a nickname so early on into his career in the MLH, but disappointed that he’s being compared to a little rodent-like thing.

The same commentator described Cliff as “elephantine” and Ilya as “unsettling,” neither of which held the same charm as the weasel comparison.

“That doesn’t mean I’m good at it on land,” Oregan grumbles.

“Do it or I’ll put glitter in your jock,” Hammersmith threatens with a smile on his face.

St-Simon nods solemnly. “He will do it,” he says. “He’s done it before.”

“Vic had a purple sparkling dick for months,” Sebbin chimes in. Cliff squeezes his eyes shut and tries really hard not to think of the purple dildo just sitting there in the darkness of Ilya's bedside drawer. “Gnarly stuff. You don’t want to mess with that," Sebbin continues.

“Fine,” Oregan sighs. “I’ll go.”

Oregan looks slightly haunted when he returns well before Ilya finishes his phone call.

“I felt icky listening in on that,” Oregan explains to the wider group in a whisper. “It felt too personal.”

“You fucking moron,” Varkov whisper-yells. “We sent you out specifically to get personal info.”

“It’s fine, we can work with what we’ve got,” Carmichael says, lightly patting Oregan on the shoulder. “What happened?”

Oregan’s eyes glaze over, looking distant. “He kept calling her ‘Sweetheart.’”

“Pet names, good, that’s something,” Hammersmith nods. “Sweetheart’s a choice, though. I thought he’d be more of a ‘babe’ guy.”

“I think she was upset about something,” Oregan continues. “Captain seemed really worried about her…really upset too…” He considers his next words for a moment before pressing onwards. “I

think Jane and her friend got into a fight about something? And Captain doesn't seem like he likes the friend."

"Say more," Carmichael orders, leaning forward with anticipation.

"He said that her best friend is 'as stupid as a pile of rocks' but will come around eventually, and he said something about her friend being bad at his job. I don't know what the job is. Captain kept using hockey, uhm, metaphors?"

A small laugh startles out of Cliff. "Roz is so hockey-brained that he uses hockey terms when comforting his girl? Should have known he'd be like that."

Hammersmith's face does something weird, like it's twisting in on itself as he thinks. "Hockey metaphors like what?"

"He said something about her best friend needing to get some pucks to the head to fix his brain and help him process everything," Oregan says. "He offered to drop his gloves and punch him the next time he sees the best friend."

"Violent," Varkov says. "Typical Roz, I guess." Definitely *unsettling*, just like that commentator from that game a few weeks ago said.

"Anything else?" Carmichael asks.

"Uhm," Oregan stutters. "I couldn't hear much, but Captain mentioned another friend named Jackie and asked Jane if she'd heard from her? And then I left because Captain started talking about how he'd lick the tears off of her pretty face if he was there." Oregon grimaces even harder. "He sounded so gross when he said that, like, it was like he was cooing at a baby."

Everyone grimaces a little along with him. Varkov mimics a gag. "Okay, I don't blame you for leaving," Hammersmith says.

"Sorry," Oregan apologizes anyways.

"It's fine, we have new info," Carmichael announces. "Cap does not like Jane's best friend and thinks he is stupid, and Jane has another friend named Jackie."

"And Roz can't stop thinking about hockey long enough to come up with threats that aren't hockey related," Feller adds in. "'Drop gloves?' Has anyone ever told him that regular people don't say that?"

Hammersmith pulls up a note in his phone notes app full of new bullet points to add the new information to his *WHAT WE KNOW ABOUT JANE* document. When he is done, Cliff motions for Hammersmith to hand the phone over so Cliff can add a few points of his own:

They're saying "I love you"

Model

Picky about her beauty products

Roz has a tripod and ring light by his bed– for video call sex?

Roz is DISGUSTINGLY mushy with her

BEARS

Several people are typing…

Today

Rozanov

i have muscle balm and foot powder from fancy brand

4:28

Rozanov

the brand gave them to jane but she thinks the smell is terrible so i cannot use them either

4:28

Rozanov

does anyone want them?

4:28

Kane

I'll take them

4:29

Oregan

Why does your girlfriend have so much shit she doesnt want

4:31

Rozanov

jane is very popular

4:31

Rozanov

everyone who meets her wants to shower her with gits

4:31

Marlow

You said she’s a model, right?

4:31

Rozanov

yes

4:32

Marlow

roz hate club

Several people are typing…

Today

Feller

HE DID NOT DENY THE GIRLFRIEND ALLEGATIONS

4:32

St-Simon

Do not say anything! He will mute the chat if we press too much

4:33

St-Simon

And I want to see if he will give us more free shit

4:33

Hammersmith

Bro……..

4:33

St-Simon

Dont hate the player hate the game

4:33

Marlow

I wonder why a model is getting free stuff meant for athletes

4:33

Marlow

Muscle recovery and foot stuff for athletes? Okay…

4:33

Hammersmith

I wonder if Jane models for sport companies

4:34

Hammersmith

It would make sense for Roz. Dude lives in Adidas and Nike

4:34

Marlow

Okay yeah that makes sense, good thinking bro

4:33

Marlow

BEARS

Several people are typing…

Today

St-Simon

Cap, is there anything else jane does not want?

4:36

Rozanov

i can think of many things

4:36

Rozanov

jane does not want scott hunter to get another cup for example

4:36

Kane

Janey’s a homophobe?

4:36

Rozanov

what? no

4:36

Rozanov

she wants me to win obviously

4:36

St-Simon

i meant like creams and shit

4:37

Rozanov

ah. actually yes

4:37

Rozanov

i have this dry shampoo. it is too light for my jane’s hair and i do not like how it feels in mine

4:37

varkov

Jesus okay Princess

4:38

Marlow

What does too light for Jane’s hair mean?

4:38

Rozanov

it is good for light colour hair. my jane has black hair. It does not blend in well

4:38

Cadyn

idk what dry shampoo is…isnt shampoo supposed to be wet?

4:38

Rozanov

oh my god

4:39

Dubek

No seriously why are they taking perfectly good shampoo and drying it

4:39

Dubek

It is like bar soap for your hair??

4:39

Connors

Cap, I'll take it. I need a new dry shampoo anyways

4:40

Kane

Damn @Connors can I borrow it just to see if I like it?

4:40

Cadyn

Why won't anyone explain what dry shampoo is oh my god

4:40

Marlow

roz hate club

Several people are typing…

Today

Hammersmith

JANE HAS BLACK HAIR: CONFIRMED

4:42

Feller

@Connors what the fuck is dry shampoo

4:42

Marlow

Smithy do you have the document pulled up? Add black hair and maybe an athleticwear model to it

4:43

Sebbin

Why are we trusting Smithy with sole custody of the Jane doc? Let’s do a google doc or something

4:43

Hammersmith

You cannot be trusted with a Google Doc

4:43

Sebbin

Yes I fucking can

4:43

Sebbin

I literally have a son

4:43

Sebbin

I can be trusted with a goddamn google doc

4:44

Carmichael

I second the google doc idea

4:44

Marlow

Same

4:44

Hammersmith

Ugh fine

4:44

Hammersmith

I’ll make one, gimmie a few minutes

4:45

Marlow

Her name is Natalia.

Natalia is 43 years old, works as an administrator at Boston University, has two cats named Grapa and Cinta, an impressive seashell collection, a subscription to MoviePass which she uses frequently and with gusto, and a strong desire to take a few pottery classes in the near future.

Natalia super liked Cliff on Tinder, but not because she recognized him; Natalia knows next to nothing about hockey ("But I could learn for you," she said. "Watching you skate around for a few hours doesn't sound like a bad time at all") and had no idea that when she pressed like on his profile, that the hockey-playing dude in the profile was more than just a hobby player. Natalia super liked his profile because she thought he looked nice and liked that he admitted to watching rom-coms in his profile.

Cliff was almost certain that he was being catfished. He assumed that someone, somehow, had locked in on the very specific things Cliff wanted in a partner and cobbled them together into a singular profile featuring a few photos of the hottest woman Cliff has ever seen in his entire fucking life, holy shit, with the express intention of embarassing the everloving fuck out of Boston Bears player Cliff Marlow. He imagined that there might be blackmail involved. Maybe it's a Voyageurs fan hellbent on breaking the Boston Bears from the inside before they even hit the ice. Maybe it's a sleazy opportunist intent on getting some kind of greasy story to sell to TMZ for a quick buck. Maybe it's a scorned ex. Maybe it's Ilya playing a shitty prank.

Luckily, this was not the case. Cliff pumped his fist in the air like he just scored in OT when he saw her, the real flesh-and-blood Natalia, sitting primly at a 2-seater waiting for his arrival. He couldn't fucking believe it. Natalia isn't quite as tall as he is, maxing out at 5'11" but easily hits over 6' in heels, with broad shoulders and wide hips to match. A literal goddess asked him to go out for dinner and called him a little cutie when he sat down. Cliff has won. He probably saved a small country from complete obliteration in a past life. All that is left for him to do is to not completely fuck it up.

Somehow, Cliff has managed to go on three dates with her and maintain a text conversation with Natalia that is running on three weeks strong. That text thread has been helping Cliff keep his sanity during this round of roadies the team is on, hitting a brutal schedule of ping ponging across the entire eastern coast of the United States and Canada.

The text thread is also helping him keep his sanity as Ilya browses yet *another* tourist-trap stall masquerading as a gift shop for…something. In Pittsburgh, Ilya grabbed a postcard with a photo of a bridge on it with obnoxious WISH YOU WERE HERE text splashed on the front. In Washington DC, Ilya picks up a mug covered in cherry blossoms, which is weird because it is definitely not the time of year that they bloom and Ilya has never seen those blossoms. In Tampa, Ilya is actively browsing the ugliest t-shirts Cliff has seen in his entire life. He picks up a t-shirt that is a riot of blue florals with a massive cartoon alligator on the front, inspecting it with a huge smile on his face.

"This is it," he says to Cliff with a grin, holding up the heinous t-shirt like a prize fish.

“I know you’re hot, but I don't even think you can pull this one off, Roz,” Cliff teases. “That thing is hideous.”

“I could,” Ilya says. “But it is not for me.” Ilya then picks up the t-shirt’s brown twin and holds it up to himself. “This is mine.”

Cliff raises his phone up and takes a photo of Ilya holding his ugly-ass t-shirts. “Whatever you say, man.” Then, he sends the photo off to the Bears group chat, and after a few moments of consideration, he sends it off to Natalia too. *Bro thinks he can make these shirts work,* he writes to her.

You could make them work, Natalia writes back. *He can't, though.*

Cliff’s phone vibrates some more. *There are perfectly normal-looking shirts next to him. Maybe show him those instead.*

Cliff had previously attempted to steer Ilya towards those far more tasteful shirts. Ilya took one look at the normal heather grey shirts with the sleeves cut off stamped with the words TAMPA BAY in simple block letters, rolled his eyes, and told Cliff to find something more interesting. It was a bold statement for a dude wearing a plain black t-shirt and plain black shorts.

He keeps calling them “too boring.” Cliff writes.

He has terrible taste. That grey muscle shirt looks good. I'd pay good money to see you in one.

Cliff smiles and asks Ilya to pass him one of the boring grey muscle shirts.

BEARS

Several people are typing…

Today

Rozanov

montreal game today

10:32

Rozanov

rise and grind! it is time to eat today’s ass!

10:32

Kovalev

Die.

10:32

Dubek

10:33

Marlow

10:34

Connors

10:36

Cadyn

10:37

Rozanov

ENOUGH

10:37

Marlow

The guest locker room in the Montreal Bell Centre is buzzing with excitement.

It's always like this when they're playing Montreal; the rivalry between the two cities is electric. Cliff thinks that they could power the entire city of Worcester for a week with the energy they create trying to beat the Voyageurs into submission. Ilya alone could probably power the entire downtown with the energy levels he brings, especially today. Everyone tries to steer clear out of his path as the six foot, three inch, two hundred and something pound player practically bounces off of the walls, ping-ponging around the room with reckless abandon.

"Tonight, we will kill the Voyageurs," Ilya keeps saying, chanting it like a personal mantra. His phone pings a few times and the grin that takes over his face is almost disgustingly wolfish with glee. Cliff half thinks that Ilya might swallow the phone whole at this rate. Luckily for everyone, Ilya instead shoots off a quick message or two before setting the phone face-down. While someone may end up in the hospital tonight (this is, after all, an occupational hazard), it will likely not be because their stupid Captain decided to deep throat a cell phone.

"No one fights Hollander tonight," he announces. "He's mine." He says it like this is a special occasion, like it's a rule he has made for just this one game, but everyone knows that Hollander is *always* off limits to everyone except for Ilya. A few checks into the boards are fine, but the Boston Bears are under the unspoken and unwritten understanding that picking fights with Shane Hollander is strictly forbidden.

All new Bears figure this rule out very fast into their first game against the Voyageurs. Any aggressive movement made towards Hollander is rewarded with the most enraged look any of them have ever seen being shot in their direction by their own captain. The only person who can pick a fight with Shane Hollander is Ilya Rozanov. No exceptions. Oddly, Ilya never attempts to start one, and everyone across the MLH knows that the chances of Shane Hollander initiating a fight are close to 0%. *Close* is the operative word here; the chances are never zero. Scott Hunter could tell you that.

Hammersmith leans over to Cliff, pitching his voice into a low whisper. "Do you think Roz's interest in freckled Asians is because of Shane Hollander?" he asks with a vaguely haunted timber to his voice.

"What?" Cliff asks, stupidly. Ilya has always been weirdly intense about Shane Hollander, sure. He has all of his stats memorized, he brings up Hollander's plays and edges and recent accolades during practices as a way to get the team to improve, but this is done all while he insults Hollander. He just pays attention to his top competition like any good player should.

Ilya barely even blinks when they watch Montreal games together, eyelids practically stapled to his forehead every time Hollander is on the ice. His mouth falls agape on occasion, staying open long and wide enough that a fly could probably make its way to his throat and he wouldn't even notice. That's the level of dedication Ilya has to his craft. Cliff has heard rumours that Hollander is

similarly intense about his rivalry with Ilya, also memorizing his stats and plays and recent accolades with eerie accuracy and attention. He also, like Ilya, seems to zero-in on his rival when they play against each other, like they're the only two men on the ice. Sometimes, it really does feel like the game is just between them. They're a rival match made in hell and everyone else is just along for the ride.

"Roz's very obvious interest in partners with freckles, brown eyes, and black hair. Do you think it's because of his obsession with Shane Hollander?" Hammersmith presses.

"Jesus fucking Christ," Cliff wheezes. "Are you asking me if I think Roz wants to fuck Hollander?"

"No," Hammersmith says, but he doesn't look convinced by his own answer. "I am asking if you think that maybe he became so obsessed with his little rivalry that he subconsciously started going after people who look like Hollander."

Cliff thinks back to their last game against Montreal, the first of the season, and how absolutely ballistic Ilya went on the ice. He and Hollander were *everywhere,* moving so fast that barely anyone else could keep up with them. Cliff thinks about watching the two of them face off while he waited on the bench for his line's turn, and how fucking eager Ilya looked to smack the puck away from Hollander's stick. He thinks about how, when Montreal's puny-but-scrappy Pike decided to pick a fight with Carmichael and the ice erupted into chaos, Ilya had beelined to Hollander to say some kind of weird little quip while wearing a shit-eating grin. Whatever was said made Hollander bark out a sharp, loud laugh that echoed off of the walls of the Bell Centre and caught quite a lot of attention before the two captains split to collect their respective teams.

Cliff thinks about the way no one is allowed to fight Hollander. He thinks about the 2 weeks in the spring when Ilya wouldn't even talk to him after Cliff hit Hollander, knocking him out of the season with that brutal concussion and broken collarbone combination.

That Hollander Voyageurs hoodie folded in Ilya's closet flashes into his mind.

"He's always been weird about Hollander," Cliff acquiesces, finally. "Ugh, I hope that isn't the case. That'd be fuckin' weird, right?"

"Yeah. Imagine how weird it must be for Jane," Hammersmith muses. "I mean, fuck, even their names are similar."

Cliff blinks in surprise. "Their…" he begins, working his jaw a little. "Jane. Shane. Jesus Mary and Joseph." Cliff feels a little nauseous. Maybe there is something deeply wrong with his friend.

On one hand, Cliff is glad that Ilya has finally found someone that fits the hyperspecific criteria his mind has mutated into believing it wants. Ilya seems happy, really. Jane's stuck around for so long, at least 2011 or 2012 if Cliff remembers properly, so that must mean that there's something about Ilya that makes Jane happy too. There wouldn't be little *I love you*s stuck onto Ilya's bathroom mirror if that was not the case.

That being said, good lord, Cliff is definitely a little grossed out that the specter of Shane Hollander has haunted Ilya's career so much that he has seeped so far into Ilya's personal life. That level of bleeding into his subconscious must be unhealthy. Is there a support group for this kind of thing? Is this normal for athletes of Ilya's caliber? Was it inevitable that spending so much time staring at

Shane Hollander's face on the ice and on television screens would translate into an obsession with his features?

"That's fucking unsettling," Cliff says eventually.

"Cliff," Ilya says, approaching Cliff and Hammersmith with a predatory grin and effectively ending their hushed conversation. "My favourite bulldozer."

"I hate when you call me that, man," Cliff groans. He's been saying it since Cliff, well…bulldozed Hollander on the ice. More specially, he has been using it since he got over those two weeks where his feelings about the Hollander concussion situation were so big that he couldn't even put it into words. He only briefly put the nickname into use in the spring of 2017, using it sparingly in the days leading up to the Bears being firmly kicked out of playoffs. He has since brought it back for the fall 2017 season, much to Cliff's chagrin. It's an unpleasant reminder.

"But it is true," Ilya shrugs. "Tonight, please try to get Comeau good for me if you are on the ice at the same time."

"Why?"

Ilya shrugs. "Something tells me he deserves it, maybe."

Cliff blinks, then nods, then flashes his friend a thumbs up for added measure. "Fine. Aye aye, Cap," he says. While he hates the new nickname, he can't say he feels anything negative about potentially running Gilbert Comeau into next week. Cliff Marlow is a Boston Bear after all, and if his captain tells him he has blanket permission to beat the shit out of a Montreal Voyageur, well… who is he to say no to that opportunity?

Ilya shoots him another wild grin before turning to the rest of the team. "Boys!" Ilya calls out to the wider room, spinning in a slow circle and still grinning wildly. "We will send the Voyageurs home to their sad little families crying!" He opens his arms, spreading out his wingspan to its full extent. "I want no overtime. This game will be fast. The sooner they go home in tears, the better. The sooner we get to celebrate, even better." It's by no means Ilya's best work when it comes to his pre-game speeches. His speeches always suffer a little in quality when they're preparing to play against Montreal. Games against the Admirals are also often hosts to poor-quality speeches, but that's because Ilya can't get two sentences in without saying something about how the only competition Scott Hunter poses against them is at the nursing home's bingo hall or in the line to get to the prune juice first. Games against Montreal, meanwhile, are a messy combination of threats and giddy wishes to smash the opposing team's faces into the toilets or whatever other middle school-level insult comes to Ilya's mind, all while saying strangely kind things about Shane Hollander (which are disguised as insults). It's weird, but whatever works for him, Cliff guesses. Ilya's impressive track record is proof enough.

"You just want to finish the game fast so you can go smash Jane," Feller calls out.

"Yes, the sooner we send the Voyageurs home, the sooner I can have hot sex with my beautiful Jane. Try not to be too jealous," Ilya shoots back.

It's a tough fucking game that goes into fucking overtime. Above them, the scoreboard bearing the same 1-1 score it's held onto for the past god knows how long mocks them.

Ilya and Cliff both have played long shifts and are pulled off the ice, replaced by Carmichael and St-Simon, while the Voyageurs have held steadfast onto their golden goose Hollander. He's been working that ice for 6 minutes straight now, which probably should be criminal. He's a fucking beast. Watching him makes Cliff feel exhausted. It's stupid to keep him out there, but the Montreal Voyageurs aren't known for making amazing decisions with player health and safety in mind. It's also probably because they'll be screwed if they let Hollander off the ice given how exhausted the rest of his team is. Maybe Hollander is refusing to step off, hellbent on finishing what he's started.

The jumbotron flashes a shot of Hollander's face, glistening under his visor. The crowd, also growing exhausted, manages to eke out a hoarse roar. Beside Cliff on the bench, huffing and puffing with exertion, Ilya is watching the screen like a hawk.

"Hollander's kind of pretty, right?" Cliff asks after taking a deep swig of water.

Ilya narrows his eyes, flicking them briefly to Cliff's own face. "Maybe," he says, voice and face blank.

Before he can push further, the puck drops. Hollander slams it towards Pike before he shoots off towards poor Varkov, who looks dead on his feet between the goal posts. Cliff practically watches the play in slow motion as Pike whips the puck back to Hollander, who zips it straight between Varkov's wobbling legs.

The buzzer sounds, and the crowd erupts.

The jumbotron shows Hollander and Pike slamming their helmets against each other in celebration. Cliff glances towards the Montreal bench, interested in the way the team is mostly remaining still instead of celebrating their win. Maybe it's exhaustion keeping them rooted to the bench. Even stranger, Cliff can see Drapeau shake his head. That's a weird fucking reaction to winning.

Cliff turns to Ilya to ask if he's seeing the same thing that he is seeing. He realizes fairly fast that there is no need to ask him anything; Ilya's eyes are locked completely onto Hollander like a man under a spell. There's no way in hell Ilya is seeing anything else right now besides his rival celebrating a hard-earned win. Maybe there's some teeth to the theory that Ilya is just a *bit* too obsessed with Shane Hollander. Poor Jane. Or maybe not poor Jane, as Cliff knows that she's a Voyageurs fan. That Hollander Voyageurs hoodie in Ilya's closet flashes through Cliff's mind again like an unwelcome guest, and he wonders whose idea it was to get it. He isn't sure which is worse: if it was Ilya's idea, or if it was Jane's.

The day after the Montreal game, Ilya takes off his shirt in the locker room to reveal several dark, massive hickeys littering his adonis belt.

This would not normally be something notable, given Ilya's reputation, but it is the first time anyone has seen him with marks so dark and intense. He has never really been much of a hickeys guy.

Jane must have really missed him.

When it seems like no one is watching him, Ilya presses his fingers against some of those bruises and smiles. Cliff tries very hard to ignore that. Eugh.

Are you busy today? Cliff texts Ilya. They have a rare day off in Boston and Natalia is busy with some kind of big speaker event happening at her job. Cliff's already done his workout for the day and watched a few episodes of The Good Place, *okay,* he's bored, and he is trying to be very brave about the fact that he isn't pathetically texting his kind of girlfriend about how bored and lonely he is while she is busy at work.

No Ilya writes back almost immediately, probably also bored.

Can I come over? Cliff texts Ilya.

Ok

Cliff is outside of Ilya's door within 30 minutes.

"You have brought piss to drink," Ilya says upon opening the door, fixing his glare at the 6-pack of Sam Addams Cliff holds in his left hand. It's been nearly a decade living as a Bostonian and Ilya Rozanov still has not developed a taste for Sam Addams. Ilya will really need to learn to love the stuff if he plans to plant roots in Boston permanently.

"Yeah, yeah," Cliff says, pushing his way past his friend and into the apartment. "This is mostly for me."

Ilya rolls his eyes.

This time around, Cliff didn't even plan on snooping. He legitimately just wanted to talk to Ilya. The thing is that Cliff is not responsible for accidental snooping, you know, if the snoopable material is positioned directly in front of his face.

For example: a vase of flowers in the middle of the coffee table, fresh, colourful, and very aggressively in his face (and his nose). The riot of pink, white, and red flowers peek out of a simple glass vase with a gold ribbon bow tied around it is kind of hard to miss. What's also hard to miss is the simple square card slung on the gold bow that reads "Lilies for my Lily" in cursive printed script.

The issue with this material is that Cliff has no freaking clue what that could possibly mean. The only reasonable explanation is that Ilya bought them for a girl named Lily and hasn't handed them over quite yet.

Cliff whips his head around to look back at his friend. "Are you cheating on Jane?" he blurts out before he can stop himself.

Ilya looks at him like he just hit a deer with his car, backed up, and hit it again. "What the fuck are you talking about, Marly?"

"The flowers you got for some chick named Lily?" He gestures towards the offending bouquet.

Ilya looks at the flowers like he forgot that they would be there and visible to Cliff. Then, to Cliff's absolute shock, he blushes.

"No, they are…not for a girl," Ilya stutters out, and it's so unlike Ilya that Cliff almost laughs. "...named Lily." Ilya finishes his statement and does not clarify further, instead opting to flop onto the couch next to Cliff.

"You gotta give me more than that, dude," Cliff says. "Because what I see right here is a bunch of flowers for someone named Lily."

"I do not," Ilya says, defensive, before sighing. "Do not tell anyone else this," he begins. "But it is...ah, a personal joke...with Jane."

"Uh-huh," Cliff says, definitely not believing him. "You call her Lily?"

Ilya shakes his head. "She calls me Lily, in her phone, because, uh, her friends and coworkers do not know about me," he explains. "It is easier for her to be seen texting a friend named Lily than a guy named Ilya."

"Her friends don't even know about you?" Cliff frowns. He's always known that Ilya is cagey about Jane, but the idea of Jane being *this* cagey about Ilya feels…wrong. Ilya is a celebrity of sorts (C-list or D-list, depending on who you ask), and Cliff knows that Jane is a model, which means she probably is also a C-lister or D-lister. It just seems so extreme to hide to such an extent. A hockey player and a model dating wouldn't break the internet by any means, even if the hockey player in question is retired fuckboy Ilya Rozanov. There has to be more going on to the story that Ilya isn't letting on to.

Ilya's mouth twists downwards just a little. "One friend knows. Her parents know. Another friend knows I exist, but not who I am," he explains.

"You're her, what, her dirty little secret?" Cliff asks, offended for his friend. "And you're okay with that?"

Ilya chuckles a little. "I am kind of her dirty secret, yes, but it works for us," he says. "Her career is important to her. My career is important to me, too. Being public would make our careers more complicated." Ilya takes a deep breath and sighs it out audibly. "Neither of us are ready to make our lives even more complicated."

"Wait, circle back," Cliff says. "You met her parents?" Something about the idea of Ilya meeting someone's parents feels even crazier than the idea of said someone hiding him from almost all of her friends.

"Yes," Ilya nods. "They are nice people. They were surprised to find out about me," Ilya says this like there's a lot more to the story, but knowing him, he's going to hold that story inside. "But it is all okay. They like me now."

"It sounds like it is serious," Cliff trails off, trying to give Ilya the chance to outright confirm what Cliff already knows. After all, Cliff has been ribbing him for a while about Jane, but he's never confirmed that it's, well, a real, stable relationship. "Like...you've met the parents." Meeting the

parents and sending each other flowers is a far cry from the *she's just a girl I fuck* excuse from years prior. Meeting the parents is *we are deeply fucking serious* territory.

"It is," Ilya says after a moment, eyes locked on the vase of flowers. "It really is."

Cliff's eyes also drift back to the flowers. "Jane sends you flowers?" Cliff asks, incredulous. Holy shit, Ilya's living the dream; he's got a hot model wining and dining him, sending him flowers, and from what Cliff's seen on his phone, she's a real freak. It reminds him of Natalia. Holy shit, maybe he's living the dream too?

"Yes," Ilya says, smiling a little. "She is thoughtful."

"So," Cliff ventures. "Things are good with Jane?"

Ilya eyes him with suspicion. "Yes. Good," he says, tilting his head to the side slightly. "How are things with your mystery girl?" he asks pointedly.

Cliff pauses for a moment, beer inches from his lips. "What do you mean?" he asks, intending to keep his tone steady and emotionless, but his voice betrays him a little. He can't exactly fight off the small smile that is threatening to break through, and after a moment, he breaks character completely with a laugh. "Man," Cliff says, elbowing Ilya a little. Ilya smiles wider in response. "How'd you know?"

"You are not a very subtle person, Marly," Ilya says, taking a sip of Sam Addams despite his earlier protests about the drink.

Cliff rolls his eyes. "Fine," he says. "Things are, uh, good. I think."

Ilya just watches him. It's fucking unsettling. Ilya always finds a way to make Cliff feel like he's writhing under a microscope. This is the thing that no one warns you about Ilya Rozanov--everyone talks about how much of an annoying asshole he is, how much he parties, how absolutely unbearable he can be to play against on the ice, but no one warns you that one of his hobbies is reading everyone around him like they're the paperbacks he collects. The better he knows you, the worse time you will have squirming away from his prying gaze.

Ilya knows Cliff too well.

"It's all very new," Cliff says. "I keep freaking out thinking I'm gonna fuck it up. She's out of my league," he continues, whining a little.

Ilya smiles, clearly happy with the way Cliff's resolve has crumbled in the exact way he wanted it to. "Show me a photo," he demands.

A jolt of nervousness shoots through Cliff. Natalia is, in Cliff's opinion, probably the hottest woman he's ever had the pleasure to talk to. She also happens to be the polar opposite of The Type that prevails amongst the bedrooms and tinder profiles of the wider MLH player community. Ilya, Cliff thinks, is probably one of the few guys who won't immediately give him shit for having (what Cliff thinks is) good taste, given the vast diversity of his now-dead roster (which, on second thought, wasn't *that* diverse, but was more so than anyone else's on their team).

Cliff opens his camera roll and pulls up a selfie he took with Natalia on their second date. They went bowling at her request, and she totally hustled Cliff into oblivion, claiming she "is just okay"

at bowling and that she hasn't "bowled in ages, like seriously, it's been years." It had been just two months, actually, and it turns out Natalia is a fucking beast with a bowling ball. She knew it, too. She flashed Cliff a downright evil grin every time she hit a strike or a spare, which made Cliff embarrassingly horny. So horny, in fact, that he could barely manage anything besides a gutterball. It was a deeply embarrassing experience and he wouldn't trade it for the world.

In the photo, the two of them are pressed up against each other like they can't bear to leave a modicum of space between them, smiling and sweaty from the effort of their game. Cliff spares it a final glance between handing it over to Ilya. Cliff feels himself start to sweat as he sees Ilya's eyebrows raise just a milimeter. After a moment, Ilya looks Cliff dead in the eyes and says:

"She is too pretty for you."

Cliff huffs out a relieved laugh. "She is," he agrees. "I guess we are both going for girls out of our league?" He says this fully expecting Ilya to vehemently disagree and defend his position as certifiable heart throb and one of the top ten hottest men in the MLH according to Cosmopolitan, but to Cliff's shock, Ilya just nods and agrees with him. The Ilya Rozanov of a few years ago would have a heart attack and collapse onto the ground if he saw his future self.

Cliff lets out a low whistle. "Jane's that hot, huh?" he says. Ilya nods again and takes a sip of beer. "Tell me about her," Cliff requests, trying to swing the conversation back to Ilya's infinitely long situationship instead of Cliff's really embarrassing crush on a woman he'd only been on a few dates with.

"She is boring," Ilya says with a quickness and certainty that makes Cliff bark out a laugh so hard that he chokes a little on his drink.

"Dude, boring?" Cliff asks through a few weak coughs. "I doubt that, man."

"No, it is true," Ilya says. "She is boring." The way he says it is gushy and affectionate, like he is announcing to the world that she is the most wonderful creature to set foot on the soil over the past 4.5 billion years and not saying what, for most people, should be an insult.

"Can't say I ever imagined you'd like a boring person," Cliff says.

Ilya shrugs, still smiling. "Maybe boring is what I've always needed," he says quietly.

"Okay, so: she's boring. What else?" Cliff presses.

Ilya tosses his head to the side a little, considering. "You know that Jane is very private," he begins. "I think that I can't say much else right now." Ilya grimaces a little as he says this. "Maybe someday I will be able to say more. I think, everyone will be surprised when they find out who she is." Ilya pauses for a moment, frowning. "I do not know if the reaction will be good."

"We'll support you, man, you know that, right?" Cliff says. "We've got you even if some jackasses react badly, or whatever you think might happen."

"Thanks," Ilya says. "But still, I cannot say much right now. Jane would be upset."

Cliff makes a questioning noise.

“Jane is very concerned about my reputation and safety,” Ilya explains. “More than I am, I think. I should listen to her, probably.”

Ilya gets quiet and a faraway look fogs over his eyes.

“You okay, man?” Cliff asks.

Ilya smiles, but it doesn’t quite reach his eyes. Instead of answering Cliff’s question, he says: “This is it for me, Marly, Jane is it.” Then, because Ilya is fucking allergic to being vulnerable for longer than five minutes at a time, he grabs his remote control and pulls up YouTube on his massive, fancy smart TV, effectively signalling to Cliff that the conversation is over.

Cliff laughs lightly and shoves Ilya just a little. “Fine, have it your way, asshole. Message received. Let’s watch something stupid.” All things considered, and despite the fact that Cliff still doesn’t know anything about the infamous and mysterious Jane, Cliff is painfully aware that Ilya just opened up to him far more than he has in ages. Looking over at his friend, Cliff feels like he is holding something fragile in his clumsy, meaty hands. He doesn’t know the shape of what he is holding, just that it is something precious. His eyes briefly drift to the riot of flowers in the center of the coffee table and Ilya’s brief but intense plea to not tell anyone else about the Lily joke replays in his head.

Cliff will keep this moment to himself. He wraps that fragile thing up in cotton and places it gingerly in a box for safe-keeping (Mentally, of course. We aren’t talking about anything actually physical here beyond the flowers on the table and the remote control in Ilya’s hand. Cliff’s got a figurative filing cabinet in his brain labeled ILYA ROZANOV TOP SECRET DO NOT TOUCH that he can put that precious box in).

Cliff brings his attention to the television screen in front of him. Ilya’s YouTube recommendations are mostly unremarkable.

There are a smattering of sports car videos, which makes sense for Ilya and his whole luxury vehicle fetish. Cliff knows several guys who get videos like this recommended to them. Of course, as a professional hockey player, Ilya’s YouTube recommendations are also chock full of hockey content. Today, it seems that YouTube has decided to serve Ilya a heaping portion of Shane Hollander videos, like *Shane Hollander celly compilation part 14* and *Shane Hollander interview 20171019* and *Shane Hollander being a perfect cinnamon roll for 7 minutes straight.* Cliff is just as likely to get these videos on his feed, though he suspects that maybe someone over at YouTube HQ thinks they’re funny and is maybe purposefully trying to piss Ilya off by delivering him a whole lot of content about his rival all at once. The final genre of content in Ilya’s recommended videos algorithm, the only genre that takes Cliff by surprise, is the strangely large number of videos dedicated to learning basic Japanese.

“That’s a lot of stuff about learning Japanese,” Cliff remarks. Ilya does not respond and selects a commentary video on Montreal’s recent game against Detroit.

BEARS

Several people are typing…

Today

Kovalev

I’m kinda bored. Anyone want to hang out?

2:26

Varkov

I’m spending time with my kids today

2:26

Cadyn

I’m down!

2:26

Feller

I could meet up after 6 I think

2:29

Marlow

I’m having bro time with Roz today

2:33

Connors

Without us?🥺👉👈

2:33

Marlow

Yeah

2:33

Feller

Wow fuck us I guess

2:33

Kane

Does anyone want to go to the aquarium?

2:34

Marlow

roz hate club

Several people are typing…

Today

Feller

wait @Cliff are you at Roz's place?

2:37

Marlow

Yeah

2:37

Carmichael

MY MAN

2:37

Carmichael

WHAT ARE TODAY'S FINDINGS?

2:38

Marlow

I'm not here to snoop

2:38

St Simon

lame

2:38

Marlow

I've got nothing today except that Jane is hot and """"boring""""" but we knew that already

2:39

Marlow

Actually wait I've got something weird

2:40

Marlow

Roz put youtube on the tv and he has some weird recs

2:40

St Simon

👀👀👀

2:40

Marlow

There was a lot of stuff about learning Japanese

2:41

Hammersmith

Did you ask him about it?

2:41

Marlow

Yes but he didn’t answer

2:41

Carmichael

INTERESTING

2:42

Connors

two thoughts: either jane is japanese or cap is a weaboo

2:42

Varkov

What the fuck is a weaboo

2:42

Connors

Oh my god

2:42

Connors

Like… a fan of anime?

2:42

Varkov

What is anime

2:42

Connors

Hold on

2:43

Marlow

???

BEARS

Several people are typing…

Today

Connors

@Oregan can you explain anime to us really quick

2:44

Oregan

Uhm

2:44

Oregan

Japanese animation?

2:44

Varkov

Like movies?

2:45

Oregan

Yeah. Or tv shows too. It’s really popular. If you’re interested you should check out Death Note

2:45

Zadonsky

Oh hell yeah

2:45

Zadonsky

Hunter x Hunter is where its at

2:45

Kane

don’t forget my goat NGE

2:46

Connors

@Rozanov do you have any anime recommendations?

2:46

Rozanov

i do not watch cartoons for children

2:48

Zadonsky

Captain you gotta try it come on

2:48

Kane

Yeah, cap! You and Marly are watching tv right now, right? @Marlow put on Elfen Lied

2:49

Oregan

NO DO NOT DO THAT

2:49

Marlow

roz hate club

Several people are typing…

Today

Connors

Okay so he’s not a weaboo

2:51

Hammersmith

Adding Japanese? to the Jane google doc

2:51

Marlow

Roz is on his phone googling if watching Elfen Lied will help him learn Japanese

2:54

Marlow

Nevermind he just put his phone down

2:54

Marlow

We’re watching a game right now so he’s distracted

2:54

Hammersmith

Quick question. Is it a Montreal game?

2:55

Marlow

Yeah. Why?

2:55

Hammersmith

Just wondering

2:55

Carmichael

Detroit v Montreal?

2:56

Marlow

Yeah

2:56

Carmichael

I heard it was a shitshow

2:56

Feller

Pike got his shit ROCKED it was kind of hilarious

2:57

Feller

Enjoy dude

2:57

Carmichael

I've seen gifs of Pike getting his tooth knocked out on twitter this week more than I've seen my own family

2:58

Marlow

Chapter End Notes

The friend that "Jane" gives free products to is Jackie Pike

The "Jane arguing with her best friend" part is Hayden getting pissed after learning about Ilya, I can't remember what Rachel Reid's timeline for that was but currently idgaf. I think I put it too early into the story here but again: idgaf

Also Shane's come out to his team at this point, which idk I might have also jumped the timeline gun there but also it's not like Rachel gave us much on that besides that it happened

Re: the Japanese language learning videos, my headcanon is that Shane is not fluent in Japanese by any stretch of the imagination, but his mom is fluent and his grandparents prefer to speak in Japanese. IDK if there is a term like no sabo that works for non-Spanish speakers but like that's the family dynamic I'm thinking of. He mentions to Ilya in passing that he's got family who prefer to speak in Japanese and Ilya decides to learn a teeny tiny bit in hopes of impressing them someday

And for the anime section, I originally wanted Kane to try to get them to watch Boku no Pico, but then I remembered that if I put that in there that there would be a non-zero chance that at least one reader would go watch Boku no Pico and I could not ethically do that, so I replaced it with the more acceptable Elfen Lied. that being said if you do not know about the anime called boku DO NOT GOOGLE IT

Chapter 3: A completely normal collection of hockey cards

Chapter Summary

2018 arrives. The Boston Bears begin to get the sense that their time with Ilya is limited.

Chapter Notes

ppssstt there are both WhatsApp chats and iOS chats in this one, and all of them scroll! Please scroll if you have the creator's skin on!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The turn of the new year begins, according to the whispers that have begun ricocheting from the walls of the Warrior Ice Arena, with Coach LeClaire making reference to to team's plans for the 2018-2019 season and a shocking response from Ilya Rozanov: a casual dismissal and reminder that his contract has not been renewed yet.

While others make plans for the year's resolutions (Zadonsky wants to run a marathon, Feller plans to learn how to play the violin, Connors want to quit Zyns, Varkov wants to take his kids to Disney World, Hammersmith wants to finally get a girlfriend, and Cadyn, to everyone's shock, wants to start his bachelor's degree "on the side"), it becomes increasingly apparent that Ilya Rozanov has already been quietly making small changes over the past few weeks.

The staff whispers that travel into Cliff's ears let him know that Ilya's longtime agent is long gone. His new agent is based in Canada and also represents Shane Hollander. *Isn't that funny?* The staffer commented. *Imagine how tough it must be to represent two guys who want to rip each other's throats out. I hope she's well-paid.*

The whispers also tell him that management is starting to freak the fuck out over how wishy-washy Ilya and his new agent are about the contract renewal. Ilya, apparently, has outright refused to promise them anything, opting instead to make vague references to "exploring his options" and "talking things over with my agent."

He says his contract hasn't been renewed yet quickly turns into *He said his contract expires in a few months.* The small change in the phrasing turns simple curiosity into something more closely resembling panic.

There's no way Ilya Rozanov would leave Boston. This must be a joke, they say. *Or a manipulation tactic. Is he just messing with us? Does he want more from us? Will he play the market?*

As January wears on, the whispers turn into *Can we trust him? What do we need to give him to stay?*

Finally*: Shit. That roster's built around him.*

A misplaced whisper that breaches its containment, said too loud and too close to the locker room before practice, reaches the ears of several team members. It acts as a stone thrown into a pond, its aftereffects rippling out through the water. The casual gossip filtering through the walls kicks off a mass panic amongst the team, like the anxiety is airborne and highly contagious.

In the locker room, those ripples sound a lot like *oh shit oh fuck oh goddamnit oh my god.* It's a little less coherent than the staff's panic, which is at least in fully-formed sentences.

A plan almost immediately falls into place, whispered to each other like a frantic game of telephone: the Boston Bears have to remind their captain of how fun they are. They are a family, after all, and a good mother never abandons her children (depending on the teammate, it might be "a good father never abandons his children," kindly corrected by whichever teammate receives the message and remembers that Roz is mom, Marly is dad). It'll be easy enough to get Ilya to stay once he's soft and gooey with affection for his teammates.

They decide that the easiest and most effective way to put the plan into action is by collectively breaking into their captain's apartment.

"Break into" is a rather intense way to phrase it– they don't necessarily break and enter, they…let themselves in uninvited. "Breaking into" implies some level of property damage, and the only property damage that has happened here is a small dent in the wall outside of Ilya's apartment, freshly made by Kane's elbow making contact with the drywall while roughhousing with Oregan. No, they're *letting themselves in*. The distinction is important. In cases of absolute, earth-ending emergencies, Cliff has a spare key to the apartment. If something goes terribly, terribly wrong, like if a meteor strikes Ilya with sniper-like precision, or Ilya wraps himself and his 2015 Porsche 911 GT3RS around a tree trunk like a warm hug, or perhaps if Ilya is mugged at gunpoint and the attacker decides to take his house keys along with his wallet, well…someone else has a way to get into the apartment. Svetlana has a key as well, but her presence in Boston is just as sporadic as Cliff and Ilya's own. Between the two of them, Ilya's emergency bases are covered.

Cliff wasn't convinced that this is an emergency of the same calibre, but was worn down almost immediately by the incessant begging and doe-eyed looks flashed to him by Kane and Zadonsky. They're a horrifying duo to behold. Connors tried to participate, but seeing him flash doe-eyes just made Cliff feel like gagging a little. He looks like one of those gremlin things from that movie his dad made him watch as a kid that gave him nightmares for 2 months. Do NOT feed Connor Connors after midnight!

When the entire team manages to spill into Ilya's apartment, unannounced and uninvited, Ilya is sitting on his couch eating a sandwich and watching some bullshit on YouTube. He pauses it quickly and turns off the television, which is probably just a knee-jerk reaction to being startled instead of an attempt to hide whatever he was watching, because Cliff is pretty sure he saw a flash of a hockey game on the screen, and why on earth would professional hockey player and team captain Ilya Rozanov be embarrassed about watching hockey in his free time?

"What the fuck," their captain says instead of a normal greeting, throwing the remote next to him. They were hoping for something more along the lines of "Wow! What a surprise! I am so glad you are here!" but this is still something they can work with.

"Surprise!" Connors calls out. Then, before Ilya can protest, the guys pile in and disperse throughout the room, some of them spilling into the living room to join their captain, while others

split off into the kitchen to check for beer or whatever else Ilya might have stocked and ready for ransacking.

“Not this again,” Ilya grumbles. “Why the fuck are you in my home?” he asks, head craning around wildly on its axis as he watches his entire team wander around like they own the place. Finally, his gaze lands on Cliff.

“Marlow,” Ilya says in a warning tone.

“Roz, bro,” Cliff says, carefully calm.

“Did you use your key to break in,” Ilya says rather than asks.

“Oh, bud, you forgot we planned this, yeah?” Carmichael swoops in, throwing an arm around Cliff in an almost protective manner. “Damn, we should have texted you, sorry, man.”

“We did not plan a team gathering,” Ilya says.

“We did,” Cliff jumps in. “You weren’t, uh, answering the door, so I used the key,” Cliff lies through his teeth.

Ilya just stares at them, unimpressed, before heaving a huge sigh. “Fine,” he says. “We have a party.” Ilya then grabs his phone out of his sweatpants pocket and starts to text.

“Plans tonight?” Hammersmith asks, gesturing to the phone with his chin.

“I was going to call Jane,” Ilya answers. “I am texting her to change our plans.”

“You can still call her,” Carmichael says. “We’ll be good, we promise.”

Ilya shoots them a flat look. “Absolutely not.” Ilya pockets the phone again. It was a good try.

Again, like always, the Bears pile into Ilya’s living room like they own the place and begin to argue over whether or not they will play a game together or watch something on the TV. Ilya leans back on the couch, arms crossed, observing his team with a small smile on his lips and actively ignoring the buzzing vibrations from his phone that is trapped in his pocket. Despite his complaints, Cliff can tell Ilya is secretly quite pleased to have this sprung on him.

After a heated debate, Connors makes the unilateral decision to turn on the television and pulls up YouTube.

Continue watching where you left off? The television helpfully asks.

“No, choose something different,” Ilya says quickly as Connors hits *Yes.* It’s nothing too crazy nor anything all that interesting, given that it’s a Shane Hollander Ultimate Mic’d Up Compilation. Hollander's not exactly known for his mic'd up moments, at least, not in the same way other players (example A: Ilya Rozanov, example B: Carter Vaughan, example C: shockingly enough, Victor St-Simon) are. His mic'd up streams involve a hell of a lot idly talking to himself about what's happening on the ice in a tone so low that it can barely be picked up by the mic, mixed with (thankfully) clearly audible comments and orders delivered to his teammates. Sometimes, Hollander makes a strange *pssh pssh pssh* sound as he skates, like he's trying to emulate the sound of blades sluicing through ice under his breath. He sometimes follows the *pssh* noises with a resounding *PAH* when shooting the puck. Hollander, of course, also chirps on the ice. It's never

anything too crazy, just a pointed comment here and there, or a simple *fuck you* delivered to players he doesn't care enough about to learn personal details of.

Cliff knows this because Ilya has forced him to watch a Voyageurs game with a mic'd up Shane Hollander before. He's always assumed Ilya watches those for research purposes so that he can refine his anti-Hollander chirps with pinpoint precision based on the data he gleans from the streams. Now, Cliff...isn't so sure about that.

Cliff watches as Hammersmith's eyebrows shoot up so high that they practically launch off of his face and hit the ceiling.

"Boring," Johansson says, which makes Ilya bark out a sharp laugh. Johansson steals the remote and immediately pulls up a replay of something called the Four Continents Figure Skating Championship, which results in some immediate protests from the group as Johansson begs his team to check out what some guy named Elladj can do.

roz hate club

Several people are typing…

Today

St Simon

jane espionage today? 😉

6:21

Sebbin

IDK what that means

6:21

St Simon

it is like…gathering information

6:21

Sebbin

Oh okay hell yeah!

6:22

Feller

Aren't we here to just hang out with Cap?

6:22

Hammersmith

We can do more than one thing

6:22

Hammersmith

But we have to be careful because he's watching us pretty closely today

6:22

Sebbin

Sounds like we have to send Cliff out on a mission again lol

6:23

Marlow

Why is it always me?

6:23

Hammersmith

Roz trusts you the most out of all of us and doesn't get suspicious if you wander off

6:23

Marlow

I dunno, he's gotten suspicious before

6:23

Carmichael

I wanna join in this time

6:24

Carmichael

🥺I can be trusted on a top secret fact finding mission🥺

12:24

Hammersmith

Two sets of eyes could be better than one, good idea

6:24

Hammersmith

But we have to wait until Roz is really distracted

6:24

Marlow

Fine

The opportunity comes fast. Dubek's ex-girlfriend, Alicia, posts a photo on Instagram of herself and her new boyfriend kissing. Unfortunately, the new boyfriend in question is Etienne Brisebois from the fucking New York Admirals, which is…yikes. Ilya practically launches himself towards Dubek as the guy begins to tear up, hellbent on pouring him a stiff shot to help drown out the pain.

In the chaos, Cliff and Carmichael quietly slip out of the room and beeline towards Ilya's bedroom.

Again, the room is mostly unremarkable. Cliff told Carmichael, repeatedly, that there probably wasn't going to be anything interesting in here. He's searched before, after all! Granted, it's been a few weeks, so maybe there are some new things, but…wouldn't it make more sense to focus on an unexplored area? Search Ilya's mail, go through his kitchen trash, or perhaps take a look inside the large planters on his balcony?

"You weren't thorough enough in the bedroom," Carmichael insists. "I want to see for myself."

The nightstand is basically the same as the last time Cliff looked at it. Cliff takes a quick peek at the stack of books and finds nothing notable about it. The book at the very top is a Russian book he can't glean any information on, apparently about three-quarters of the way finished based on the bookmark Ilya is using.

The bookmark makes Cliff pause. Ilya usually dog-ears his books. The stack underneath that top one is full of books with ruined, creased page corners. He grabs the offending book to briefly inspect it and finds that the bookmark, which isn't really a bookmark but rather a postcard, looks well-worn, like Ilya has been thumbing at one of the corners as he reads his book. It's nothing too interesting, in his opinion. It's got a bird on it and says "Greetings from Canada." There's nothing written on it or anything, not even a stamp. Maybe Ilya bought it for himself during one of their numerous trips across the border. Cliff just shrugs, returns the postcard to its place, and positions the book carefully on the top of the pile.

Carmichael, meanwhile, has opened the nightstand drawer and is staring blankly at its contents. They do not talk about it, even after Carmichael closes the drawer with a solid *clunk*.

Silently, they poke their heads around the room, checking under the bed and behind the picture frames, only to find nothing besides a singular hole in the wall the approximate size of a fist being covered by a large piece of ugly ass abstract art.

"What about the closet?" Carmichael asks.

"I already looked," Cliff says. "Nothing besides all of the fucking clothes Roz owns."

Carmichael shrugs and walks towards the closet anyways. "Might as well, while we are here." Then as Carmichael takes in the sheer quantity of shit inside, he says "Jesus, how many shoes can a guy own?"

"I didn't think Roz was a sneakerhead," Cliff says. "But yeah, there's a ton."

Carmichael opens a few boxes of shoes. "These are, like, brand new," he says, wonderingly after opening the fifth box of practically untouched shoes. "Do you think he'd notice if I took a pair? They're in my size," he continues, inspecting the various makes and models of sneakers. Then, he freezes, hands completely frozen over a box as he holds the lid above it.

"What?" Cliff asks.

"Jackpot," Carmichael whispers. Cliff rushes over to look at the box.

It's full of, for lack of a better word, random shit. Cliff and Carmichael take the box into a spot in the room with better lighting and begin to flip through its contents. Carmichael, intent on being thorough, takes photos of some of the piles of things as they sort through them.

Objectively, it's a weird collection of things, in Cliff's opinion. There is a smattering of stuff that can't be sorted into clear categories: a singular Uno skip card, an empty snickers bar wrapper, a stray strip of hockey tape folded in on itself so that it doesn't stick to anything, a singular ripped-out page from the New Yorker that has a little illustration of some hockey players shaking hands after a game, and a handwritten recipe for pasta with a lemon cream sauce on creased lined paper.

Then, there's the stuff that can be sorted into little piles. In one pile, they load up the various postcards from a bunch of cities flung across the United States and Canada, none of which have

any writing on them besides the occasional “Miss you” or “This reminded me of you” message penned in careful blue ink. Another pile is dedicated to receipts Ilya is apparently hoarding from random coffee shops, always for two drinks and sometimes a ginger shot or a pastry, in Boston, Tampa, Montreal, and Ottawa. There are plane tickets for various trips, which doesn’t really surprise Cliff at all. They’re almost constantly flying, and sometimes Ilya organizes his own travel instead of joining the team for their chartered flights.

Now that Cliff thinks about it, Ilya’s begun organizing his own travel way more often than he used to. Sure, he used to do it on occasion if he needed to travel to Russia for whatever reason, promising to meet the team wherever they needed to play after his lengthy return flight from Moscow. These tickets, however, aren’t to Russia. Ilya has been ping-ponging around the East coast.

The question forming in Cliff’s mind is answered before it is even fully formed when he notices that the majority of the tickets are for Montreal-Trudeau and Montreal Metropolitan airports. These are Jane tickets, he realizes with sudden clarity. This must be a Jane-related box.

The last major category of stuff inside of the box is the hockey cards. Ilya’s got his cards in a tin with his own face on it, the narcissistic bastard. Carmichael and Cliff both huff out quiet, breathy laughs when they see it. Carmichael cracks it open, probably expecting to see a bunch of Ilya Rozanov cards like a miniature shrine to himself, and instead scrunches his eyebrows in confusion.

Cliff grabs the tin and finds Shane Hollander’s face staring back at him.

Well, not exactly. Shane Hollander isn’t looking at the camera in the photo. He’s got his eyes laser-focused on a puck that is partially cut-off in the cropped photograph, but, well, that’s a Shane Hollander hockey card in Ilya Rozanov’s house.

Cliff tips the tin upside down into his hand to free the other cards, as Carmichael shifts closer to silently watch as Cliff flips through the small collection.

Jesus, it’s a lot of Shane Hollander cards. There are a few Scott Hunter ones, too, which Cliff finds even more shocking than the Hollander cards, somehow. That being said, the ratio is like 97% Hollander to 3% Hunter. Ilya doesn’t even have any of his own fucking cards. Mind you, he doesn’t even have a singular Bears player. What the fuck? Cliff makes a mental note to give his friend a nice Cliff Marlow card, maybe for his birthday. Cliff’s got some nice cards on the market and some of them fetch a pretty penny.

Their phones begin buzzing as Cliff ponders his card options.

roz hate club

Several people are typing…

Today

Connors

Caught captain texting Jane

7:21

Connors

She’s a dry texter

7:21

Connors

What’s crazy is that it’s definitely doing it for Cap

7:21

Connors

He’s sending her flirty responses and doubling and tripling down even when she gives him like barely anything back

7:21

Kovalev

Oh my god, is that why his face is pink right now?

7:22

Feller

She’s gotta be the hottest woman on the fucking planet for him to be reacting like this

7:22

Connors

Deadass just watched him blush over a text that said “I’m watching a new documentary about Wayne Gretzky. I’ll give you my review on it later.”

7:22

Feller

🤢

7:22

St Simon

unbelievable levels of simping. this is pathetic

7:23

Kovalev

Should we ask him his thoughts on Gretzky and see what happens lol

7:23

Marlow

Keep me updated lol

Cliff laughs, low and quiet, settling the cards back into their place in the tin.

“So…” Carmichael begins. “What do you think this box…is?”

Cliff stares down at the neat piles. “Random shit,” he says. “Jane shit, I think.”

Carmichael tilts his head to the side and gestures to the piles. “I believe you, but can you explain anyways?”

“The plane tickets,” Cliff says. “Look at how many have Montreal as the destination.”

Carmichael squints his eyes and then lets out a low whistle. “Okay. Do you, uh, know what the rest of it…means?” Carmichael takes a few close-up photos of the plane tickets. “We need more opinions,” he explains as he does it.

“I don’t really know what most of this, like, means to Roz,” Cliff says. “I assume it’s all related to Jane, but I don’t know *why* Roz is keeping an old snickers wrapper. Maybe Jane ate the snickers and he got really horny about it, I dunno.”

Carmichael grunts out a small laugh. “It’s like Roz is collecting shit like a crow,” he says. “His little Jane collection.” His eyes land back on the tin of hockey cards, now back in order and sealed shut inside of their coffin emblazoned with Ilya’s smirking face. “You’d think he’d have a bunch of little Jane polaroids or some shit in here if it’s a Jane box, though, not hockey cards of his sworn enemies.” He rolls his eyes, laughing a little harder. “Here I was thinking we’d find some shit like Jane’s nudes, and it’s just Shane Hollander looking like he wants to kill someone with his stick.”

“We know Jane is maybe a Hollander fan. Maybe these are her cards?”

A voice in the back of Cliff’s mind reminds him of the brief, vague conversation he had with Hammersmith about Ilya’s deeply unsettling obsession with Shane Hollander. For some reason, it feels too personal for him to bring up with anyone else, like maybe he’ll finally cross the line from acceptable interest into unacceptable prying if he plants the thought in other people’s minds. It doesn’t help that somewhere along the way, Cliff has managed to get some wires crossed, and now a tiny, tiny voice in his brain is telling him “Ilya wants to fuck Shane Hollander” alongside the slightly louder voice saying “Ilya is dating a woman who looks a little like Shane Hollander because the human brain is a crazy place and he’s been hit in the head a few too many times and now his braincells are a little scrambled.”

For now, Cliff will stick with the facts Ilya has given to them on a silver platter: Jane is a Voyageurs fan, likely a Hollander fan.

“And the Hunter cards?” Carmichael asks.

“Maybe she thinks it’s funny to rile Roz up,” Cliff shrugs. Maybe Ilya likes a woman who can rage bait him a little. He seems like the type.

Carmichael hums. “Weird,” he says as he snaps a quick photo of the pasta recipe. “Well, I’m done taking pics. We can put this all back,” he says.

There’s nothing else notable in the remaining shoe boxes, just shoes. Carmichael takes some photos of pairs he wants to steal in the near future. While Carmichael busies himself with mooching off of Ilya, Cliff looks around the closet some more.

Of course, there’s another fucking Montreal Voyageurs sweatshirt in his closet. The simple embroidered MONTREAL VOYAGEURS on the chest stares back at Cliff mockingly. Cliff doesn’t comment on it or bring Carmichael’s attention to it for reasons he can’t figure out himself. Luckily, Carmichael doesn’t even notice it, instead too distracted by a pair of blue and red sneakers so ugly that they make Cliff’s eyes ache a little.

Carmichael dumps the photos into the group chat once they've finally left Ilya's apartment. It was an abrupt exit, spurned on by Ilya all but physically picking up each teammate and throwing them out the door. *Jane's wearing her glasses tonight*, is the only explanation they received. Not a single one of them could figure out what the fuck that could possibly mean. *All of you need to sleep well tonight. We cannot lose to fucking Buffalo*, Ilya warned, firmly reminding them all that they actually have to do their jobs tomorrow. It's not like Buffalo is a team that requires a whole lot of effort to beat, Cliff thinks. They could probably have drunk in Ilya's apartment all night and still been in good enough condition the next morning to destroy Buffalo. Maybe he's just trying to be a good captain. Maybe he just really wants to jerk off on a camera while Jane watches.

roz hate club

Several people are typing…

Today

St Simon

wait that pasta recipe looks good as fuck

10:32

Feller

There’s like 40 Hollander cards and you want to address the pasta?

7:22

Hammersmith

Jane’s a Voyageurs fan, right? That must be why haha

7:22

Marlow

Jane likes Hollander yeah

7:22

Feller

Right…

7:23

Connors

Roz banned Uno from his home and now I see an Uno reverse card in his special items box #OKAY 🙄🙄🙄

7:24

Carmichael

I wanna talk about those Airports

7:26

Carmichael

Like, yeah there’s a lot of Montreal, that makes sense

7:26

Carmichael

She’s Montreal Jane obviously

7:26

Carmichael

But why the fuck has he gone to Ottawa so many times?

7:26

Marlow

No fucking clue

7:27

Feller

Wait lemme google where Ottawa is

7:28

Sebbin

same

7:28

St Simon

you guys don’t know where ottawa is? we go there all the fucking time. they got the shit team with the ugly horse logo

7:29

Feller

Oh

7:30

Feller

That’s really close to Montreal

7:30

Connors

Maybe it’s cheaper to fly into Ottawa then drive to Montreal

7:31

Marlow

Roz makes more money than all of us except Hammers

7:32

Hammersmith

Haha nice 💪🤑

7:33

Hammersmith

Let’s table this discussion

7:33

Hammersmith

I wanna talk about those fucked up drink orders

7:34

St Simon

who the fuck orders black coffee

7:34

Marlow

That’s gotta be Jane. Roz is a cream and sugar warrior

7:34

Marlow

Bro who drinks ginger shots?

It's unclear who enjoys All Stars more: Ilya or the media. Ilya and Shane Hollander's rivalry is oftentimes center stage during All Stars weekend as the infamous duo duke it out over increasingly ridiculous things. If it was anyone else, a .5-second difference in a race would hardly matter, but it's Ilya Rozanov and Shane Hollander, so of course that .5 second difference matters. It’s going to rear its ugly head in mic’d up chirps for the next year. This year, they're on the same team. 2018 All Stars is divided into four teams based on division, and those two freaks of hockey nature both happen to be the terrors of the Atlantic Division.

Ilya is spending his weekend practically glowing with unadulterated glee if the photos Cliff is seeing on Instagram are to be believed. Also, Ilya is talking about All Stars with the media like this is his true passion instead of a strange blip in the annual game schedule. You'd think the guy was born to play on this temporary team as the left wing to Hollander’s center.

Ilya must annoy the everloving shit out of him, Cliff thinks. Hollander has always seemed like an intense, uptight kind of guy. Hockey is his job that he takes with a deathly seriousness, and he is damn good at it. Then there's Ilya, also damn good at his job, but he's got a wildly different attitude about it. Ilya seems to view it more as an actual *game* he is extremely good at than a career path as serious as a neuroscientist or university professor (or at least, he wants to make people believe that about him). It's fine when they're playing a single game against each other and only have to share the same air for a few hours, but a whole weekend? Woof. Cliff does not really envy whoever has

to deal with the two of them breathing in the same air. Hammersmith, the poor bastard, probably had no idea what he would be getting into when the fans voted for him to essentially be Ilya Rozanov's weekend babysitter. Sure, Ilya and Hollander play well together when they put their minds to it, as evidenced by the previous year's All Stars game, but that doesn't mean that they can get along once the hockey sticks are out of their hands. Cliff's gotten the vibe that Hollander's the type of dude who'd sooner bite Ilya's head off than engage in small talk with him.

He hopes Ilya makes it back to Boston in one piece. They kind of need him to have all of his body parts together if they want to make the playoffs this year. Losing Ilya would be a huge blow.

Cliff imagines what he'd do in Hammersmith's place as he scrolls idly through the photos slowly making their way onto Instagram from the various players. Maybe he'd watch Ilya pull on Hollander's metaphorical pigtails and finally bring up his concerns about Jane. It's been about two weeks since Cliff and Carmichael found the stack of Shane Hollander (and Scott Hunter) hockey cards shoved in a box in his closet, and neither Cliff nor Hammersmith have had the courage to stage an intervention for their captain and friend vis-a-vis his uncomfortable obsession with Hollander bleeding into his sex life. I mean, fuck, Cliff still hasn't seen what Jane looks like to really confirm that her likeness is similar to Hollander, but the signs are all there.

Filling up Cliff’s instagram feed are a few group shots that make for some funny sights, for example: every photo he sees coming out of the Atlantic Division team. Ilya, that ridiculous prick, is wearing that awful-looking brown floral t-shirt with the weird alligator illustration he got in Tampa a few weeks ago. Cliff can't help but laugh at a photo of Ilya hitting a cheeky grin with his arms slung around Hammersmith and Bernard from the Red Wings, who are both wearing comparatively boring outfits of plain t-shirts with shorts.

Cliff scrolls a bit more, passing by a few photos of guys he knows (or sort of knows) from the other divisions. It's all the expected fare of hockey players with arms slung around each other and grinning, playing pool, swimming in an actual pool, or clinking some bottles of beer together, and he doesn't bother spending more than 30 seconds on each photo.

That is, until he lands on a photo posted by Hammersmith of Shane Hollander, of all people.

Shane Hollander and Ilya Rozanov.

Shane Hollander is looking at Ilya with an expression Cliff can only describe as long-suffering fondness, while Ilya looks back at him with nothing short of absolute glee. He's fucking ecstatic to be standing shoulder to shoulder with his greatest enemy.

In the photo, Hollander's wearing a matching blue floral shirt to Ilya's brown one, just like the ugly blue one Ilya bought to go with his own while Cliff watched with disinterest.

...What?

Brad 'the hammer' Hammersmith

Sun, Jan 28 8:21 PM

Cliff: How's All Stars?

Cliff: That assist you did with Boiziau was wicked nasty

Cliff: Roz behaving himself?

BradAs best as he can around Hollander, I think

Cliff: I saw they're wearing…matching t-shirts?

Cliff: 🤨

BradYup. Everyone's getting a kick of them

Cliff: I watched Roz buy those shirts a little while back, I think

Cliff: What are the chances that Hollander also bought one?

BradYou watched Rozzy buy them?

Cliff: Yeah, he got the blue one for someone else and the brown one for himself

BradHmm

BradAnd he didn't tell you who he was buying the shirt for?

Cliff: No

Cliff: You think he bought it for Hollander?

BradWell…

Cliff: Do you think it's some sort of joke between them?

BradMaybe

BradNot sure

BradI'll get back to you on that

BradAnd we'll debrief later

BradDon't tell the other guys you saw Roz buy the shirts

Cliff: Wasn't planning on it until we got more info…don't want the guys to get the wrong idea

Cliff: What do you think is going on?

Cliff: Do you think they're friends now?

Seen

+ Message

When the team asks the two returning Bears about the weekend, they do not get any detailed responses. Ilya just smiles and launches into some ideas he has for their next few games, presumably developed from ideas he got over the weekend, while Hammersmith remains shockingly quiet.

"It was good," he says simply. "A little tiring. I'm glad to be back."

After practice, Varkov pulls up the photo of Ilya and Shane Hollander wearing their matching t-shirts and holds his phone up high for all in the room to see, meandering through the room slowly to ensure everyone's attention is on him.

"Roz!" Varkov calls out to the man of the hour. "You and Hollander friends now?" There is no malice in his tone, just thrilled curiosity, like the idea of Ilya Rozanov and Shane Hollander being buddies is the funniest thing he's ever had to consider in his life.

Ilya smiles while ruffling his hair with a towel. "No," he says simply.

"What's with the matching t-shirts?" Kovalev presses, booming voice traveling through the showers and into the locker room somehow. Gossip can truly triumph everything, even the warm spray of water from a shower head. Also, Kovalev's hearing is incredible.

"We both had the shirts," Ilya shrugs. "It was funny, yes? It made for a good Instagram photo."

Cliff forces himself to laugh at the exchange, eyes flicking over to Hammersmith's cubby only to find that Hammersmith is already staring at Cliff. Hammersmith, still maintaining eye contact, grabs his phone from his cubby. Cliff follows suit.

Remember our conversation about Roz being weird about Hollander? Cliff sends to Hammersmith.

Can we debrief? Alone. Secret debrief time, Hammersmith fires back.

The two of them head straight to Cliff's apartment, ignoring Cadyn's begging to go to a pub as a group and Sebbin asking if anyone wants to go see Paddington 2 with him. They bid their team farewell, making up fake plans that will keep them occupied for the rest of the evening (Cliff says he has a date, and Hammersmith claims he is going to go babysit his niece, which is a stupid excuse because his brother and niece live in Michigan), and take separate cars.

Hammersmith arrives first, somehow. Cliff lost sight of his car partway through the ride after Hammersmith took a weird turn Cliff wasn't expecting, going the wrong way down a one-way street. He does that a lot, claiming they are shortcuts. Cliff isn't sure how Hammersmith has kept his license for this long.

"I think they're fucking," Hammersmith says as soon as the two of them make it into Cliff's apartment and close the door. "Roz and Hollander."

"Jesus," Cliff wheezes, winded by the statement somehow. "What if they're just friends?" he asks.

Hammersmith shakes his head. "I think they're hell of a lot more than that," he says.

"What about Jane?" Cliff asks as he heads to his kitchen to get some water.

"That's the thing," Hammersmith says vaguely, then does not add to his thought.

"I shouldn't tell you this, but Roz told me that it's really serious with Jane," Cliff says. "He told me that this is it for him, and we know it must be intense if he's stuck with her for this long. You think he's cheating on her with Hollander?"

"Marly," Hammersmith says, taking a glass of water as Cliff offers it to him. "Let's list the facts."

Cliff snorts. "I know what our Google Doc says."

"Okay," Hammersmith says through a mouthful of water. "Think about those facts, and then think about how Roz refuses to let us meet Jane or even see a photo of her," he says, swallowing. "Then think about Roz maybe buying matching t-shirts for himself and Shane Hollander."

Cliff pauses. "I mean," he flounders. The tiny voice in his brain that once told him that Ilya and Shane are totally fucking is beginning to scream, voice growing louder as the seconds pass. *Yes! Yes! Think about it!* It screams. "I thought we agreed that Roz was so obsessed with Hollander that he found someone who looks like him, and he said Jane's shy and private," he reasons. "Maybe he and Hollander are friends and that's why they got matching shirts, or maybe Hollander just happened to have that shirt already."

"They practically have the same name," Hammersmith says. "Jane. Shane."

"Maybe it's a coincidence," Cliff murmurs.

"You think Roz coincidentally found a woman with a name similar to Shane, who probably looks a lot like Shane, lives in Montreal, likes the Voyageurs, owns Shane Hollander merch, watches documentaries about Wayne fucking Gretsky, models athletic shit, and has been around in Roz's

life since the dude was practically a teenager?" Hammersmith rambles, slamming his cup down on the countertop.

"Well, when you put it like that," Cliff says weakly. Then, Cliff remembers an extremely vital piece of the puzzle, something that cannot be ignored or forgotten. "Roz is straight."

"I don't think so," Hammersmith says. "I think he likes men and women."

Cliff rolls his eyes. "That sounds…what's that word he's called us before? Z-phobic?"

"Xenophobic."

"That one," Cliff says. "Like when we watched Legally Blonde all together and he said that when the gay or European thing happened and we all laughed."

"I don't think this is a gay-or-European thing, Cliff, I think it's a gay-and-European thing."

"Do you have any proof?" Cliff asks. "We can't accuse the guy of being bisexual without reason."

"Do not tell anyone this," Hammersmith says, leaning forward conspiratorially despite the fact that they're alone in Cliff's apartment. "But I saw him and Hollander making out."

Cliff blanches, staring at his friend in disbelieving silence. "Way to bury the fucking lede, dude. You could have started with that."

Hammersmith shrugs. "I kind of did," he says casually.

"No, you said that you think they're fucking," Cliff argues. This is the stupidest argument he's had in his life, and he once had to convince Dubek that the Earth isn't a video game simulation being played by an alien. Dubek's evidence contradicting Cliff's was devastating in a way that has made Cliff a little unsure about his position in the universe ever since. "You didn't say that you fucking watched it happen."

"I do think they're fucking," Hammersmith says. "My evidence is everything we know about Jane, and the fact that I saw Roz shove his tongue down Shane Hollander's throat in a fucking public bathroom."

"In public?" Cliff asks, shocked.

"I think they thought they were alone," Hammersmith says. "I walked in and they didn't notice me. I just walked straight out." Hammersmith grimaces. "Maybe I should have told them to move it somewhere else, I dunno. For their safety? I felt like I did the right thing in the moment, you know, while I was in shock."

"Fuckin' A," Cliff says. "What now?"

"We make a plan."

They have no fucking clue how to make a plan for this. Hammersmith and Cliff are often a good team: they can make some good fuckin' plays on the ice, plan a party, play a mean game of darts together, and figure out a way to prevent Connors from getting arrested after the infamous Duck

Tour Boat incident of 2015. What they cannot do is make a plan on what to do about Ilya Rozanov's longtime girlfriend potentially being Shane fucking Hollander.

"We need to make sure Roz knows we are allies," Hammersmith says. "But we can't be too obvious or else he'll know we know something we shouldn't and he'll freak out."

This is like handling a landmine, Cliff thinks. One wrong move and everything goes kabloom. They need to handle this entire situation with a level of care normally designated only for handling newborn babies or nursing sickly kittens back to health. If they go into this too fast and too aggressively, Ilya will panic and close himself off. If they move too slowly, Ilya may never feel comfortable telling them the truth.

Fuck, and maybe they're on a time limit. No one knows where Ilya will be in a few months if he chooses not to sign a new contract with Boston.

Cliff has no fucking clue how to handle a situation like this with care. He's the fucking Bulldozer. He is built for knocking shit down and slamming his problems into walls. Hammersmith is no better. He's built breaking shit with brute force; Hammer is literally in his name.

"I know someone I can ask," Cliff says after some thought.

Natalia

Tue, Jan 30 5:27 PM

Cliff: Hey babe can I ask a hypothetical question

BradSure, what's up?

Cliff: Let's say you have a friend who is really secretive, maybe about, let's say, a relationship

Cliff: And you want to find out what's going on with your friend because you care about him a lot and want what is best for him

Cliff: And maybe in the process you maybe find out some information about your friend that you think he has been trying to keep secret from everyone for a long time

Cliff: And you want your friend to know that you're cool with it and it's safe to tell you about these secrets because you're an ally, like love is love and all of that 💞

Cliff: Without telling your friend that you've been trying to figure out his secrets, maybe

Cliff: Hypothetically of course

Cliff: What would you do?

Natalia: Okay, cutie, first of all

Natalia: Let's drop the hypothetical here because this sounds pretty specific.

Natalia: You found out your friend is gay and you want him to know that you're an ally so he can feel safe around you, right? And willingly tell you about his relationship?

Cliff: Wow

Cliff: How are you so smart

Natalia: You just told me that you found out your friend's relationship secrets and used the word "ally."

Cliff: Have you ever considered being a detective?

Cliff: You would look really hot in a trenchcoat

Cliff: 🤤

Natalia: Focus, Cliffy.

Natalia: I think in this situation, you should just be yourself. You're a nice, understanding guy. I'm sure your friend knows that you'll be supportive of him. Maybe he just needs some time.

Natalia: If you want to nudge him a little, you can do some little things to show him that you're an ally. Nothing huge. Something subtle, just to show him that you'll support him whenever he is ready to talk to you.

Cliff: You're right

Cliff: Thanks, Nat

Cliff: Maybe I'll see if the whole team wants to go to a gay bar together 💪🏳️‍🌈

Natalia: Uhmmmm

Natalia: Maybe try something more subtle than that at first.

Cliff: Okay, good idea

Cliff: Our team is having our Hockey is for Everyone night on Thursday. I'll plan something subtle

Natalia: Do you have a spare ticket? I'd love to watch.

Cliff: Oohgjf

Cliff: Uh yeah

Cliff: That'd be great!! Having you there I mean

Cliff: I'll send you a ticket

Natalia: I look forward to it. See you there.

Natalia: I'll be the girl in the Marlow jersey. :)

Natalia: Oh, and good luck with your teammate!

Cliff: What

Cliff: You have a Marlow jersey???

Cliff: When did you buy my jersey Nat??

Seen

+ Message

Chapter End Notes

Possibly a short chapter (idk my own word count)? I thought it made sense to end this one here before Hockey is for Everyone night >:)

Chapter 4: Hockey is for everyone, even lab technicians and Hayden Pike

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

PRESS RELEASE: Hockey is for Everyone Month

[Image description: Hockey is for Everyone month article image. It shows a hockey stick wrapped in rainbow tape. Above the words "Hockey is for Everyone" is the Boston Bears [Raiders] logo]

The Boston Bears will host Hockey is for Everyone Night in support of You Can Play on Thursday, February 1 during their home game against the St. Louis Blues at 7:00 p.m. at TD Garden. Hockey is for Everyone is a larger initiative that uses the game of hockey - and the League's global influence - to drive positive social change and foster more inclusive communities regardless of

race, color, religion, national origin, gender, disability, sexual orientation, and socio-economic status.

As part of its ongoing effort to celebrate diversity and inclusion in hockey, the Major League Hockey Players' Association (MLHPA), Major League Hockey (MHL) and its 31 Member Clubs announced *Hockey Is For Everyone* month begins today. The annual campaign focuses on awareness and activities with organizations that celebrate all people who play or watch hockey, including fans of every race, color, religion, national origin, gender identity, age, sexual orientation, socio-economic status, and those with disabilities.

As part of the Hockey is for Everyone celebration, each team will host a *You Can Play* night, which will celebrate members of the local LGBTQ community. Players will use “pride tape” (a rainbow-colored tape) on their equipment during warmups, and the Boston Bears Foundation will be holding a silent auction and raffle for select autographed sticks. All proceeds raised will benefit You Can Play. The Boston Bears merchandise store will be selling rainbow baseball hats and hockey pucks.

Each MLH team is an official Hockey is for Everyone Ambassador. Below is a statement from Boston Bears Hockey is for Everyone Ambassador Connor Connors:

"When I was asked [to be the Bears' You Can Play Ambassador], I accepted right away, because I knew it would be a great time. It's good to get the word out there that hockey is truly for everyone who loves hockey, and we want to show that."

"The Bears are a big family. It doesn't matter what quirks each of the guys have, or where they come from, or whatever else. Guys would accept it without any question. Again, in the room we're a family. That's the way it is on a hockey team, and that's the way it will always be."

Connor x2

Connors is typing…

Today

Marlow

What are we doing for hockey is for everyone night? ❤️ 🧡 💛 💚 💙 💜 🖤

2:13

Connors

We got an email about it a week ago come on dude

2:26

Connors

We play hockey and let management handle the rest

2:26

Marlow

Dude

2:26

Marlow

We gotta do more! It’s such an important night!

2:26

Marlow

We need to make sure everyone on the team knows this is a safe space for everyone #ally 💪 🌈

2:26

Connors

Okay man 🤨

2:27

Connors

I mean, we're doing pride tape for warmups and they've got some new merch in the shop

2:27

Connors

I think we're wearing pride jerseys too. But besides that WE aren’t doing anything else different. Just a normal game

2:27

Marlow

Can I suggest some ideas?

2:28

Connors

I think it's too late to make huge changes dude…the game is TOMORROW

2:29

Marlow

Damn…I'll think of something

2:29

Connors

If you plan to do anything public can you please run it by me first so I can run it by PR

2:30

Connors

Please

2:32

Connors

Marly. Please.

2:35

Connors

Cliff I'm serious if you fuck this up I'm going to get in trouble as your fuckin ambassador and I only accepted the position so I could talk to Josephine from PR more DO NOT MESS THIS UP FOR ME

2:37

Marlow

I'll think about it

Hammersmith throws a roll of pride tape at Cliff. As he tosses it, he eyeballs the brand new-with-tags Boston Bears rainbow pride cap that Cliff has had surgically attached to his scalp since he

managed to convince one of the merchandise staff to let him buy one before the general public was let into the store. They're new additions to the store courtesy of Hockey is for Everyone month, and Cliff was intent on getting his hands on one of them come hell or high water.

Cliff tries to catch the tape with one hand, like a goaltender casually gripping a 95-mph puck within the cradle of their gloves, and fails. The tape bounces clean off of the meat of his palm and lands on the floor, rolling miserably towards Ilya.

"Well, shit," Cliff says, scrambling towards the tape roll. Ilya picks it up before Cliff can reach it and begins wrapping his stick up.

"You have no future as a goalie," Ilya says solemnly, holding up the roll of tape almost mockingly.

"Wasn't planning on it," Cliff grumbles. Ilya laughs, which is a win for Cliff. Ilya seems pretty fucking on edge tonight. He's quiet and practically brooding, so Cliff will take whatever wins he can get. Maybe wrapping your stick up with rainbows and paying lip-service to acceptance and tolerance is pretty fucking terrifying when you're carefully closeted. Like, the poor guy's love life is literally packed in a box in his actual closet.

While the guys wrap their sticks, Cliff decides to enact his big plan…well, it's not really a big plan at all. There was not much he could think of in a single day, and the Boston Bears kind of have the whole evening planned out well in advance. There are people working for them whose jobs it is to plan and properly execute nights like this, and Cliff is definitely not one of those people. Cliff's role tonight is just to wrap his stick in the special tape for warmups and play the game as usual. Despite this, he does still plan to take his allyship one little step further.

He readjusts his crisp, new rainbow Boston Raiders cap. "I know I am not your Hockey is for Everyone Ambassador, but I'd like to make a speech," Cliff announces to the room.

Connors' head snaps to him as he eyes him with open fear on his face.

"We are all brothers," Cliff begins. Fuck, he's already fucking this up. "Brother" isn't inclusive enough. He did so much research yesterday about what words he should use for optimal inclusivity. He practiced this speech in a mirror three times before this! "Siblings. Sorry. We are all siblings. And siblings support each other."

There is a vague murder of agreement in the room. Ilya is watching him with interest, body language on the relaxed side, which is another win. Good, Cliff's got his attention. Now he can go in for the kill.

"It's important that we are always there for each other, regardless of who we are, who we love, or what we believe," Cliff continues. He purposefully couches "who we love" in between other statements so it doesn't ring any alarm bells. He's smart as fuck. Natalia would be so proud of how subtle yet cool he is right now.

"The Bears are a big, accepting family. Our Bear cave is a safe space for everyone, and maybe there will come a day where one of us tells everyone else that the person we love isn't a person everyone else is expecting, and we need to make sure we are all open minded that day and ready to take our brot—sibling in arms and accept them fully," Cliff continues.

"Okay, man, thanks for the speech, but—" Hammersmith attempts to interject, which is rude because Cliff's just getting into it.

Cliff simply ignored Hammersmith's pleas and plows onwards, like a plow truck taking a badly-placed motorcycle along with the snow bank it is pushing down a street. "So let's wear our rainbows with pride and show everyone how inclusive and accepting and amazing the Bears are," Cliff continues, ignoring Hammersmith. "Even if the league is being a little reductive by only giving us rainbow tape, like, what if we had, I don't know, bisexual tape or something--"

"Are you trying to come out, Marly?" Cadyn yells out from his spot near the back of the locker room.

"No," Cliff says, wincing at the speed and forcefulness at which he announces it. Shit. Regroup! "I mean, it would be cool and normal if I was bisexual, but I am not, which is also cool and normal, and it would also be cool and normal if anyone on this team was, uhm, bisexual, or gay, or something else! I don't know. I learned about this thing called pansexuality yesterday online, and I think that's something different maybe," he rambles. Ilya is narrowing his eyes in suspicion, which is not what Cliff wanted to happen. He was hoping for undiluted happiness as he is struck with the realization that his team is so safe to be in, not this. Fuck, he needs to back off a little before Ilya fucking bolts. "I'm straight, which is just as, uhm, valid and normal as other sexuality, like, for example, bisexuality—" Hammersmith has begun to do some kind of interpretive dance involving making a lot of X marks with his arms and frantic throat-slashing motions while making strong eye contact with Cliff.

"Just an example. It's the same as, like, gender stuff, which I started learning about recently--" Shit, shit, shit, shit! He's fumbling this. Ilya looks *concerned*, not happy.

"Okay, that's enough," Connors says, mercifully ending Cliff's rapidly growing misery. "Thank you for the heartfelt speech, Marly. Uhm, as your actual Hockey is for Everyone Ambassador: Go team. Let's go be inclusive and stuff and tell everyone that hockey is for everyone!"

Everyone in the room lets out a cheer (or an approximation of one. Sometimes guys just hoot or make a weird growl that's meant to imitate a bear's roar. It's an ongoing thing for them as a team that hasn't completely caught on, mostly because a few of them are legitimately embarrassed to imitate animal sounds with their bros) and immediately return to what they were doing.

Ilya quietly shuffles closer to Cliff and hands him the pride tape, which Cliff takes in his sweaty palms.

"Marly," Ilya says quietly, like he is talking to a scared chihuahua being faced with a firing squad of vet technicians holding vaccines. "You are having a stroke?"

"What?" Cliff asks while fiddling with the start of the tape roll.

"What are you doing, Marly?" he continues, still quiet and soft. It sounds wrong in his voice, especially in this context. Ilya in the locker room always speaks with a booming timber, loud and brash and everything the media claims he is.

"Just want to, uh," Cliff mutters. "Foster inclusivity," he says.

Ilya scrunches his eyebrows in confusion for a moment, then releases them like an epiphany has struck like lightning in his brain. "Wait," he says. "Your girlfriend is coming tonight, yes? You are shitting bricks because she is here and you want to impress her."

Cliff pauses wrapping his stick in surprise. “What?” he squeaks. “Dude, how the fuck did you know that she’s coming?”

Ilya, the absolute fucking prick, just fucking winks. “You are nervous about her watching you play, or are you nervous that the team will fuck up, ah, fostering inclusivity?” He says this with a playfully mocking tone, which has the effect of snapping Cliff out of his weird little spiral and back into a more normal pre-game mood.

“I’m not,” he snaps, but there isn’t any heat behind it. “She isn’t even my girlfriend.”

Ilya hasn’t dropped that mocking little smirk. “Have you asked her to be, Marly?”

“No,” Cliff answered truthfully.

“Ask,” Ilya orders, before turning back to his own gear to finish getting himself ready.

Natalia

Thu, Feb 1 6:01 PM

Cliff: If I asked you to be my girlfriend what would you say

Natalia:I'd say yes.

Cliff: Oh.

Cliff: Do you want me to ask you? to be my girlfriend I mean?

Natalia: Cutie, you just asked me.

Cliff: Oh

Cliff: Okay

Cliff: Cool

Cliff: Uhm thank you

Natalia: Lol

Natalia: Are you nervous about tonight?

Natalia: Because I'm pretty sure we've been together for like three months. 🤣

+ Message

Ilya's hot, loud-ass breathing startles Cliff enough to make him break his laser-focus on his cell phone. He was fucking watching Cliff text Natalia. He looks like he was about 5 seconds away from hooking his chin on Cliff's shoulder to get a better look.

"You are blowing it, Marly. This is terrible to watch," Ilya says with way too much affection.

"Fuck off, dude," Cliff rolls his eyes. "I've seen you text Jane and you aren't much better."

"My texts with Jane are much more interesting than this," Ilya defends. "We are both very interesting people with very int– wait, you have seen me text Jane?" he asks suddenly.

"Uhm, yeah?" Cliff says.

Ilya furrows his brow. "You have read what we say?"

"Yeah?"

"Do not do this," he says seriously, clapping a hand against Cliff's shoulder hard enough to sting just a little.

"Dude, did you not just do the exact same thing to me?" Cliff whines.

Ilya doesn't respond.

He really wanted to do more during this game. He really did. It was the perfect opportunity to really hammer-home how amazingly accepting the team would be, or at least, how amazingly accepting Cliff would be if Ilya ever chose to disclose his relationship with Shane Hollander. Cliff's fairly certain Jane is Shane now. He did a lot of reflection after Hammersmith went home. Cliff spent a whole lot of time on Google learning about bisexuality, allyship, and some other terms he had never heard before. Then, he thought back to some of the "signs" of bisexuality Hammersmith

mentioned to him. Things really began to slot into place for Cliff, you know, like the weird looks he's seen Ilya give to guys at bars in the past, his entire, well, his entire demeanor (Cliff always chalked it up to Ilya being on the metrosexual side, but obviously there's more to it than that, and last night Cliff learned that "metrosexual" is apparently a really outdated and "cringe" term), and...the whole entire Shane Hollander thing. Like, the nearly decade-long obsession that has been encouraged by about every person around the guy since he was a fucking teenager, and apparently no one has noticed that the perfectly normal sports rivalry they were encouraging was actually having very serious psychosexual impacts.

This game was the perfect opportunity for Cliff to tell Ilya that finally someone in his life has noticed (without outright saying it, again, Cliff can't go scaring the guy off completely. One wrong move and the dude slams his clamshell closed and locked so tight that not even the jaws of life could get him out) and is perfectly okay (well, Cliff is still a little weirded out, he won't lie, but if Hollander makes Ilya this happy, Cliff's willing put his own feelings aside) with it. The thing is that Cliff can't fucking pay attention to anything else besides the fact that Natalia is sitting in his seats wearing his jersey like she belongs there, which, obviously, she does.

Cliff wanted to say some more stuff to Ilya during warmups, maybe point out some of the pride flags and jerseys in the audience, you know, really make the guy feel like everyone surrounding him, even Bears fans, are accepting and super fucking cool. Cliff even saw a teenager wearing an unironed bisexual flag slung across their shoulders like a cape *and* a Boston Bears jersey, which to Cliff looks like the universe handing him the perfect opportunity on a silver platter. He skates up to Ilya to enact part two of his plan. Ilya, before Cliff can say a single word, flings an arm around his shoulders and pushes him towards the area that Cliff knew was reserved for the players' seats. All of his thoughts fly out of his head via his ears as he makes eye contact with Natalia.

Next to him, Ilya is waving at her like a fucking lunatic, screaming her name repeatedly, and she's waving back. Cliff can faintly hear her yell out a hello to Ilya. She uses his first name and everything. Cliff's stuck in between them listening to an extremely loud volley of *HI NATALIAAAAAAAA! HI ILYAAAAAAA! HOW ARE YOU NATALIAAAAAAAAAA!*

Carmichael, summoned by the noise, slides over with such an intense speed that he nearly fails to stop in time. Luckily, he manages to catch himself right before bowling both Cliff and Ilya over. Cliff would fucking kill him if he embarrassed him in front of his brand new girlfriend during the first game she's ever attended. Their official relationship is barely twenty minutes old!

Carmichael begins to wave frantically at the crowd. "Who are we waving to?' he asks, stupid and excited.

"Marly's giiiiiiiirlfrieeeeend," Ilya sings like a fucking elementary schooler who is five seconds away from singing something like *Marly and Nat sitting in a tree, K-I-S-S-I-N-G*. Cliff smacks him on the back of the head in an attempt at weak, half-hearted revenge.

"My girlfriend," Cliff confirms anyways before finally waving to Natalia, who beams back at him.

"Holy fuck," Carmichael says, mouth dropping open a little. "No way."

"Way," Ilya says, audibly proud. Cliff feels like a teenage son experiencing approval from his strict father, which is a super messed up feeling for him considering Ilya is slightly younger than Cliff.

Suddenly, a realization hits Cliff. He briefly (and reluctantly) tears his eyes away from Natalia to face Ilya. "Wait," he says with a warning tone. "Why the fuck is Natalia acting like she knows

you?"

Ilya winks and skates off, spraying Cliff with shaved ice as he leaves. Cliff immediately sees red and begins to chase him across the rink. Ilya Rozanov is fucking dead. His condolences to Shane Hollander. It's a shame that their young love will be tragically cut short on Hockey is for Everyone night, of all nights. Hockey may be for everyone but life is not for Ilya Rozanov right now.

Thankfully, it turns out Cliff's immediate, knee-jerk assumption, which had little proof outside of a series of hypotheses and past experiences thrown together in his brain within ten seconds and spat out into the conclusion that Ilya and Natalia have fucked, is wrong.

"Baseless," Ilya cried when Cliff finally caught up to him and laid out his allegation. "Accusatory! Unsubstantiated! Defamatory!"

A reasonable assumption, Cliff thinks. Ilya's really working the hell out of his English vocabulary tonight, the absolute fucking show-off. Cliff doesn't think half of the guys on the team know what "unsubstantiated" or "defamatory" mean. Just last week, Cliff witnessed Oregan struggle to sound out the word "chocolate" while reading a picture book out loud to Varkov's youngest daughter.

The reality of the reason why Ilya and Natalia seemingly know each other is, somehow, slightly worse than if they fucked. Ilya, apparently intent on learning more about the woman who was putting such a "dopey, disgusting smile" on Cliff's face, stole his cell phone and nabbed the phone number. Natalia, *who is also a traitor by the way,* has been texting Ilya for weeks like they're buddies.

Ilya's known for crossing a few boundaries, but this is new.

Granted…Cliff can't really talk. He's gone through the man's closet and sex toy drawer and catalogued the different lotions on his bathroom counter. He's analyzed the meaning of a blue toothbrush and some weird bean thing called natto in his refrigerator (turns out the weird, maybe Russian non-Russian writing he was seeing in there was actually Japanese, which he only learned after Kovalev suggested he download the Google Translate app and wave his camera over the packaging until it detected a language). He's in a fucking group chat dedicated to rifling through Ilya's love life like it's a drawer full of candy.

If Ilya just crossed a boundary, well, Cliff 'the bulldozer' Marlow has bulldozed over it completely, demolishing every barrier in his path.

He sticks the thought to the back of his brain, promising to return to it when they aren't moments away from playing a violent game of hockey. There's a time and place for analyzing boundaries, after all, and mid hockey game is absolutely *not* the time nor the place. Thankfully, Natalia's presence in the rink is enough to distract Cliff completely. A quick turn of his head back to her seat– *his* seat, wearing *his* jersey– is enough to kick his heartbeat into overdrive and get a jetstream of adrenaline pumping through his veins.

He's going to play some really fucking good hockey tonight, he decides. Hell yeah, he'll show the world that hockey is for everyone (but especially for Cliff Marlow).

Cliff gets a bright idea: Hockey is for Everyone is technically a month-long campaign. Just because the Bears had their official night on the 1st does not mean they can't keep the good, inclusive vibes going during the subsequent days…so maybe, just maybe, he can try to salvage one of his initial plans he thought of a few days ago and failed to put into action. He's going to try to get the team to go to a gay bar after they play the Toronto Guardians on February 3rd. It's perfect, he thinks: it's a home game on a Saturday, the timing is right, and he's sure that most of the team will be keen on trying out a fun new bar while they're still flush with the game's adrenaline.

Listen, he knows Natalia told him that inviting the entire team to a gay bar was an unsubtle way of expressing allyship, but…he still thinks it's a solid idea. He purposefully omits the whole gay bar thing when he tells the guys about the new chill sports bar he wants to try out. He tells them that his cousin's best friend recommended it. Maybe no one will notice it's a gay bar and think it's a normal bar–wait, no. Cliff knows better now. "Normal" is not a good term to use for, uh, non-gay things. Maybe no one on the team will notice that it isn't a *heterosexual bar* and everyone will naturally acclimate to the vibe because it's *cool* and *fun* to be allies and go to inclusive places. Maybe that way, Cliff can get everyone in there, including Ilya, and they will all have a nice and supportive time together.

Most of the team declines, because they're fucking traitors who are complaining about "being tired" and "wanting to see [our] families" and other ridiculous reasons. Ilya, thank fucking god, agrees to go. Something complicated seems to go on behind his eyes when Cliff tells him the name of the bar he wants them all to go to, like Ilya maybe has heard of the place before but wants to pretend he hasn't for some reason. Cliff figures that there is a small chance that he has been there before, given that Ilya spent a good portion of the years 2010-2014 being a cockroach in the Boston bar and club scene. Wherever you went, there he was, crawling the walls and lapping up stray pools of spilled vodka. Nothing short of fumigation could get the man to stay away from a club on a Saturday night. Then again, Cliff would be a little surprised if Ilya has been to *this* one; He's never invited any of them to this place, and he's pretty sure he'd know by now if Ilya was crawling around the local Boston gay scene.

He also thought Jane was a woman for years…so maybe he's a little less perceptive than he thinks he is.

In the end, a ludicrously strange group of Boston Bears go to the relatively quaint sports bar together: Cliff, Ilya, Johansson, St-Simon, and Sebbin.

"Do you think Sebbin knows he is being hit on?" Ilya asks, leaning over into Cliff's personal space. When they entered the bar, Ilya beelined to a specific corner bar stool and greeted the bartender like he would greet an old friend. Cliff asked if Ilya has been here before, to which Ilya just shrugged in a non-committal way, clearly intent on giving Cliff absolutely fucking nothing to work with. The bartender then slid Ilya a glass without even asking for his order, and then proceeded to actually ask Cliff for his own. That small interaction alone answered Cliff's question.

Cliff was kind of zoning out just now, sipping idly on a whiskey sour that was a touch too heavy on the whiskey. The bartender here pours with a heavy hand. While he and Ilya got their drinks, Sebbin and St-Simon split off to socialize, and Johansson practically dematerialized as soon as they

walked through the doors. Ilya, despite agreeing to come out, doesn't seem to be feeling all that social tonight, preferring to instead keep his fingers and eyes glued to his phone.

Listen, Cliff tried very, very hard to stop himself from looking at Ilya's phone. He's trying to be better about the invasion-of-privacy thing, he promises…it's just that Ilya's phone is *right there,* and Ilya isn't talking to him, and the bartender is now busy very obviously hitting on a dude sitting at the other end of the bar who cannot stop fiddling with his own straw.

Also, Ilya has been texting Jane, which meant Cliff's monkey brain was extra interested in what was happening on that bright little glass screen.

maybe someday we can come here together when things are different, Cliff read Ilya type into their chat.

That's cute. Yeah, maybe. Jane shot back. *When things are different.*

Something about reading that short, quick interaction made a lump form in Cliff's throat that the whiskey isn't able to burn through. He decided to just mind his business while Ilya continued texting Jane. Shane. Fuck. That's kind of hard for Cliff to get used to, even still.

Now, Ilya's phone is nestled safely in his pocket and he waits for Cliff to respond to his comment about Sebbin getting hit on. Cliff finally glances over to where Sebbin and St-Simon are crowded around a pool table with a few strangers. Sebbin, who is famously absolute *garbage* at playing pool, is receiving instructions from one of the helpful strangers while St-Simon chats it up easily with the other guys. The helpful stranger has Sebbin leaning chest-down against the table and has sidled up behind in, leaning downwards so he can cover Sebbin's body, arms and all, and readjust them as needed. With the man's very intense physical assistance, Sebbin manages to draw the cue back and hit one of the balls. Both he and the stranger leap up as Sebbin lets out a *whoop* so loud that it makes a few heads turn.

"Hell yeah, brother! Thanks!" Cliff hears Sebbin say to the stranger as he envelops him into a crushing side-hug.

"I can't tell," Cliff says honestly. Ilya snorts.

"Hey, you know where Johansson is?" Cliff asks, starting to look around for their young Swedish rookie.

"He's fine," Ilya says quickly.

"How do you know that?" Cliff asks. Ilya waves his hand towards the opposite corner of the room, where Johansson is at a two-seater hightop and is locked in an extremely intense discussion with an older man. They're both leaning in to each other as they talk, and Cliff's eyebrows raise on their own when he notices the way Johansson's hands are creeping a bit closer towards the older man's own hands.

"This bar was good choice, Marly," Ilya says casually, still watching Johansson and the other man chat eagerly. The older man barks out a sharp laugh at something Johansson says, which is kind of crazy to witness because Cliff has never heard Johansson tell a joke that actually lands.
"Unexpected, but good. We will get more of the team here soon."

The Bears are always on the hunt for a good bar. They've ripped their way through the majority of the night clubs and Irish pubs that litter the streets of Boston and have been kicked out of a fair share of them. They have a blanket ban from three separate pubs, which includes all past, current, and future Boston Bears recruits until the year 2019, 2023, and 2030 respectively. Technically, the pub that has banned them until 2030 didn't say anything about future Bears, but the team tells all newly drafted and traded players anyways just in case. Thankfully, there are a few crowd favourites that have not banned them and probably never will, and the team naturally gravitates towards those haunts frequently.

Cliff supposes he's done well enough if Ilya, sitting here smiling and relaxed, thinks the whole team (and not just the weird little ragtag group who has come tonight), will be willing to abandon their usual spots in favour of a relaxed gay bar.

Somehow, the realization that Ilya is probably, no– *definitely* dating and in love with Shane fucking Hollander made Cliff forget that the entire fucking team, himself included, are still *technically* on a collective mission to learn everything they can about their captain's mysterious Jane. He's reminded of this with crushing clarity in the guest locker room of the Carolina Hurricanes, when Kohn picks something off of a coat Ilya discarded into his temporary cubby and holds it aloft for the entire room to see, including Ilya himself.

"Black hair," Kohn announces, waving a singular strand of hair around. "I got Jane's DNA, fuckers!"

"Let's fucking go!" Carmichael announces, pumping his fist in the air. A few of the other guys cheer and laugh as Kohn walks around the room, proudly showing off his catch like it's a prize fish.

Cliff's blood runs cold. "Dude, what the fuck," he says weakly. Ilya watches the entire scene with his arms crossed in front of him and stays silent, which makes Cliff's blood feel like it might be congealing into slush. There are also sirens going off in Cliff's head, which isn't great because he'll definitely get a headache if they continue. Cliff takes a moment to glance at Hammersmith, who looks strangely calm about the whole Kohn-holding-Shane-Hollander's-hair-thing.

Feller bounds over to Kohn, climbing over Connors like he isn't even there as Connors squawks in weak protest. "We gotta send it off to analyze it at like, a DNA lab or something," Feller says.

"Do we know any scientists? What's the word…forensic specialists? Whatever the fuck they got on CSI?" Zadonsky calls out to the room, only to be greeted by silence.

"No," Kovalev says. "But my girlfriend is a hairdresser?"

"Close enough," Zadonsky nods sagely, plucking the strand of black hair from Kohn's grip and placing it on the floor. He grabs his phone from his bag and snaps a quick photo of it, sharing it in the main Bears group chat. It's not a good photo; the lighting in the room casts a shadow over half of the photo, and the floor is visibly dirty, but at the very least the strand of black hair stands out okay enough against the light grey flooring.

Kovalev dutifully messes around on his own phone, likely sending it off to his girlfriend, who is the closest the Boston Bears will ever get to a real DNA analysis lab technician outside of sending a swab of their spit to a sketchy ancestry-analysis company or taking a paternity test.

“Wow,” Ilya says sarcastically, startling everyone who definitely forgot that he’s literally standing right there. “You are all extremely bored.”

Connors glances up at his captain, the only person on the team who seems to have both known Ilya was there the whole time, but not known that the guys are handling a strand of hair that definitely grew out of Shane Hollander’s scalp. “Just curious, Rozzy,” Connors says conversationally, like this isn’t an insane situation to be in or, at the very least, a stupid distraction before a very serious game that is important for their real, actual careers. “We wouldn’t act like this if you just showed us a picture of her or something.”

“I will make sure next practice is not boring at all,” Ilya says casually, ignoring Connors.

“What does that mean?” Oregan says, a twinge of fear apparent in his voice.

Ilya just smiles.

“Rozzy, no,” St-Simon begs. Ilya continues to smile. “Please.”

Kovalev’s phone dings a few times.

“What’d she say?” Carmichael asks, leaning over to look at the phone for himself. “Ah, she thinks we are insane weirdos. Fuck, anyone else know another hairdresser?”

“She’s still typing, hold on,” Kovalev says. The room remains silent for a few beats. Kovalev and Carmichael squint at the screen as more messages presumably pour in.

“She says it’s kind of short,” Carmichael says. “I mean, duh, obviously we can see that?”

“She’s suggesting Jane maybe has a quote unquote ‘short bob’ or ‘grown-out pixie,’” Kovalev reads.

“What does that mean?” Connors asks. “Does anyone know women’s hairstyles?”

A chorus of “no”s rings out throughout the room.

“Roz, come on,” St-Simon asks. “Give us something.”

Ilya shrugs. “You are greedy,” he says. “You have your hair, you freaks. Now put your fucking shit on so we can start this game before we become as old as Scott Hunter.”

Cliff feels kind of stupid knocking on Hammersmith’s hotel room door holding a bag of Bojangles takeout at 1:30AM. Mercifully, Hammersmith opens the door fairly fast, ensuring Cliff does not have enough time to reflect on the state of his life in the hotel hallway while the bag of oily fried food goes cold in his hand.

“Ubereats delivery,” Cliff says in an attempt at a joke. Hammersmith grabs the bag and wordlessly gestures for Cliff to come in.

“Fuck yeah,” Hammersmith says, opening the paper bag. ”Steak biscuit? You shouldn’t have,” he continues, grabbing the biscuit, unwrapping it, and attempting to cram as much of it into his mouth as he physically can.

“I was thinking,” Cliff begins. Hammersmith makes a noise of acknowledgement through his full mouth of biscuit and fried meat. “After what happened earlier with the hair thing…should we throw some stuff in the Jane doc to distract the other guys?”

Hammersmith swallows. “Like, stuff that points away from Hollander?”

“Yeah.”

Hammersmith considers for a moment. “I don’t think they'll figure it out based on what we have in the doc right now. I don’t think the vast majority of the team would even believe us if we told them Roz likes guys.”

Cliff shakes his head. “I mean…two of us figured it out?” Cliff steals a fry. “...if it is actually true and we are right,” he adds after shoving it into his mouth. “It just feels like this might be a secret we need to protect, you know?”

“I’m fairly certain we are right,” Hammersmith says dryly. “It’s kind of hard to miss Shane Hollander moaning ‘I love you’s while Roz tries to eat his entire face.”

Cliff feels his face twist into something weird. “You didn’t tell me all of that.”

“You want details, pervert? Hollander’s moan-y. It was traumatizing.”

Cliff smacks Hammersmith’s shoulder. “No, I mean, you just told me you saw them making out, not the L-bombs.”

Hammersmith shrugs. “We already know that they say the L-word, dude, it’s been in the doc for months.” He shakes his head a little. “Okay, fine, just in case, we can add some random shit to the document. What should we say?”

“I dunno,” Cliff says truthfully. “I was kind of hoping you’d have an idea.”

“What do women have that Shane Hollander doesn’t?” Hammersmith thinks aloud. “Boobs? Big boobs?”

“I guess?” Cliff says. “What do we say if someone asks how we know that Jane has huge boobs?”

“Say you were hanging out in Roz’s apartment and you found one of Jane’s bras on the floor or something,” Hammersmith shrugs.

“Ugh,” Cliff says. “Fine. What else?”

After some debate (and a lot of fries), Cliff and Hammersmith add the following bullet points to the *What We Know About Jane* masterdoc:

Huge boobs

Younger than Roz

Deathly allergic to cats

Went to McGill

Has a younger sister

Controlling Ilya during warmups before another game against the Montreal Voyageurs is like having to hold back an excited pitbull puppy whose eyes are locked in on a rotisserie chicken display. It's only getting worse over time, Cliff thinks. Ilya has always been…deeply enthusiastic or downright murderous when they play against Montreal, but this is starting to become untenable. Cliff is practically scruffing the guy to stop him from crossing the line and biting into Hollander like he's a massive chew toy.

Ilya skates a ridiculous circle around Cliff, goofy and with some dramatic arm flourishes that are probably meant to look like a figure skater's choreography and end up looking more like an elephant whipping its trunk around. Cliff can't help but roll his eyes at his captain's antics. Behind them, Cliff can hear a few of the guys laughing along, which seems to capture the attention of some of the Voyageurs..for example: Shane Hollander and Hayden Pike.

Cliff makes eye contact with Pike, who for some reason looks completely murderous, like Ilya's little spin has personally insulted the last four generations of his family. Next to Pike, Hollander laughs, openly and loudly. Cliff's never heard Hollander laugh like that on the ice. Cliff makes the mistake of looking back at Ilya, who now looks like a pitbull puppy about to get a treat for being a good boy. Eugh.

Across the line, the murderous-looking Hayden Pike shakes his head and mutters something Cliff can only partially hear about a "...Boston Lily, fuckin' nightmare…hope it's…" before kicking off to skate some slow laps.

The comment, whatever it is, makes Shane Hollander's skin flush with such an immediacy that if someone were to watch this happen without being able to hear the conversation, they would probably assume Hollander has come down with a sudden high fever. They'd probably want to call the medics onto the ice. Thankfully, the medics don't really give a fuck when the game isn't actually in play.

"Shut up, Hayd," Hollander calls out before kicking off into a leisurely skate of his own closer to Cliff and Ilya.

Ilya's face breaks out into a massive grin that is practically wide enough to split his face in two. He watches Hollander approach like he plans to sink his fangs into him and thrash him around. Hollander, for what it's worth, looks equally insane and predatory. If Cliff didn't know better, he'd

probably assume that this whole interaction is the strange byproduct of a decade's long rivalry that the two both take far, far too seriously. In the past, Cliff wondered about the type of crazy shit those two must say to each other when no one is around to tell them to chill the fuck out and stop competing for five seconds. Cliff knows better now, or at least, suspects (with an entire mountain's-worth of proof to back him up) that he knows better.

This isn't a rivalry. This is flirting.

He still wonders about the type of crazy shit they must say to each other when no one is around.

That night, Cliff wakes up around 4am with a terrible start, skin sticky with a thin layer of sweat and blankets thrown around into a useless lump at his feet. *Boston Lily*, he remembers Hayden Pike spitting out with vitriol. *Lilies for my Lily,* said the card attached to the massive bouquet of flowers that Ilya claimed were part of a personal joke between himself and Jane.

These motherfuckers think we are all stupid, Cliff thinks. And they're right, obviously, considering they've hidden so well for so long. He just can't help but wonder what might happen if, someday, someone with looser lips or more antagonistic intentions figures them out.

He'll just have to do what he can to keep their secret safe for them.

Hayden Pike's ugly mug flashes into Cliff's mind, lips snarling around around the words "Boston Lily" like the words taste bad in his mouth. Now that's an example of someone who seems to have some antagonistic intentions *and* has also (he thinks) figured them out. It's too early for Cliff's brain to formulate a plan, but knows that he has to do something about Hayden Pike. The Montreal Voyageur is a fucking liability.

Chapter End Notes

This one is a little on the short side,,,sowwy

That press release was born when I smashed several official NHL and Boston Bruins articles together. Connor Connors' two statements are based heavily on Brad Marchand's (Hockey is for Everyone Boston Bruins 2018 ambassador) statements I found in a NHL webpage...like based so heavily that I think they would NOT pass an anti-plagiarism test. Thanks, Brad! Loved your nothingburger statements.

I feel very strongly about the idea that Shane would eat natto and would try to convince Ilya to eat it too because it's a superfood (Ilya does NOT like it)

Chapter 5: Bisexual twink dark web assassins near me

Chapter Notes

> Hey guys so canon divergence here is that hayden pike knows about hollanov too early in this universe and im sorry hdjfkdsjhs straight up I forgot about the timeline rachel reid had going on so I need you to imagine that in the crow's nest-verse that hayden putting together the pieces / my dinner with hayden happened a full year earlier
>
> I thought about retconning my own timeline but ykw it's not that serious
>
> Thanks for your patience with my upload schedule! I have the opposite of the AO3 curse rn where things are going very well for me, but that means less time for me to type weird shit in my google docs. you win some you lose some

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The riptide of the season sweeps most things aside. It's like this every year for Cliff; the grind of game-practice-game-travel-game-travel-etc melds together into a gelatinous soup he finds himself treading water inside of. In times like this, there are little things that keep him tethered to the world outside of hockey: a television serious he watches in chunks in hotels rooms, airplanes, and on his phone, a series of increasingly stupid bets made with team members and debated on with increasingly ridiculous fervour, and a lengthy text-message chain with his grandmother who has taken up sending him Minions memes every single morning. This year, he has Natalia as well (his *girlfriend!* He thinks giddily), who keeps his brain active and occupied with stories from Boston College. The amount of drama between colleagues in her academia bubble is nothing like the drama between hockey players, he has recently discovered. While he can settle scores quickly and easily with his fists, Natalia and her colleagues resort to insane things like *words* and other passive aggressive tactics, layered over each other with time. Listening to Natalia recount the drama is like listening to his own personal podcast. Natalia's favourite coworker recently reported Brandon, an administrative assistant from the Political Science department, to HR for having a suspected inappropriate relationship with an undergrad, and Cliff's just absolutely dying for an update on that. Just last week, Natalia told him that two of the night-shift janitors are having an affair, one of them might be pregnant, and they're both pro-lifers. It's fucking juicy stuff, okay? Sue him.

This season, there's also Hayden Pike, unfortunately. Well…Hayden Pike's been around for a few years, so it's not like he's new by any means, but this is the first time he's held any particular relevance to Cliff's life.

The calendar posted in the Bears' locker room tells him that he won't be seeing Hayden Pike (and by extension, Ilya won't be seeing Shane Hollander) until early March when the two teams meet in Montreal. On one hand, this gives him plenty of time to figure out what to do about Pike. On the other hand, that means there are a few weeks in which Pike could fuck everything up for everyone. Cliff doesn't know the man, after all. He isn't sure if Pike is a loose cannon ready to explode and ruin the protective layer of privacy Ilya and Shane have carefully wrapped around themselves over the years, or if the man can legitimately be trusted to maintain a secret.

Cliff barely knows Hollander, for Christ's sake. He knows, through osmosis, that Hollander and Pike are close friends. They're usually next to each other in team photos. Pike has posted photos of Hollander hanging out with his kids. They even hang out near each other during pre-game warmups. Hollander doesn't exactly have a strong social media presence, or any presence *at all* outside of the media persona he has cultivated over the years and the infinitely more terrifying on-ice persona he lets loose the second his skate blades touch the ice. In a way, Cliff knows three Shane Hollanders: the first is the the guy who gives canned responses to the media and posts carefully-worded tweets once every three months, the second is the guy who will whip past you on the ice, call you an asshole, and chip away at your entire team's mental health with each touch of his stick to the puck, and the third is the guy that makes Ilya Rozanov melt into a pile of goop. Ilya's Jane: the sexy, boring, shy, beautiful model who sends him flowers and puts little "I love you" sticky notes on his bathroom mirror.

He supposes that mixing together these three iterations of Shane Hollander would result in an approximation of the real deal, but he just can't imagine it. He's spent years seeing the guy looking like he is two seconds away from committing murder in cold blood, and now he's trying to force his brain to imagine that same face…pinching Ilya's cheeks and cooing? It's just not computing.

What version of Shane Hollander does Hayden Pike know? Is Hollander sweet with his team, or is he as terrifying as a captain as he is as an opponent on the ice? Does Hollander keep his friends at an arm's length, like he does with the media? Does he write little complimentary sticky notes and leave them in lunch boxes? Does he call them assholes and threaten to murder them if they lose too many games? Boiled down: does Hayden Pike fear his friend Shane Hollander at all? Probably not, Cliff thinks, given his very visible reaction to seeing Hollander giggle at his own boyfriend's antics. That's not a reaction you give someone you're a little afraid of. That's not even a reaction you give to your friend you care about.

The more Cliff thinks about it, the worse his opinion on Hayden Pike becomes. Who the fuck does this guy think he is, shitting on Roz like that? Looking absolutely disgusted seeing his good buddy interact with his boyfriend?

A thought slams into Cliff like a freighter: Hayden Pike is probably homophobic. Holy fuck. He *definitely* cannot be trusted. Hayden Pike has to go, and Cliff's gotta be the guy to handle this.

The most obvious option, when it comes to the question of how to deal with Hayden Pike, is to just kill him. This is also the first option Cliff explores in-depth. At first, Cliff considers the efficacy of murdering him on the ice during their next game against each other. He knows he can make it happen and, more importantly, make it look accidental.

There are a few problems with this plan. Firstly, murdering someone mid-game, no matter how accidentally it appears, would probably have a deeply negative impact on Cliff's career. He thought he hated being branded a bulldozer…imagine being branded a killer! Cliff imagines even the Bears would have a hard time scrimmaging with him knowing his body has and could kill again. For the rest of his life, a Google search that starts with "Cliff Marlow" would more often than not be followed by "Hayden Pike." His Wikipedia page would be littered with mentions of the Pike family. Fuck, he'd probably have to commit a good portion of his salary for the rest of his life towards the Pike children's college funds out of pure guilt (and probably some pressure from everyone in his life).

Secondly, killing Hayden Pike on the ice would traumatize many, many people. He'd probably be scarred by it forever. His teammates and the Voyageurs would probably leave the game

permanently altered. Many might not ever step back on the ice. There is the live audience which includes literal children. There would be staff watching. The game would be live streamed. The videos would end up on the internet, reposted and taken down in a never ending cycle. It would be cemented in “Top 10 worst hockey accidents” and “(NOT CLICKBAIT) worst LIVE sports accidents ever recorded!” compilations on YouTube and Vimeo forever, broadcasted and traumatizing untold numbers of new watchers.

Cliff's mission to make sure that Ilya and Shane feel safe and comfortable would be fucked up forever. He can't really imagine either of them handling this scenario well.

Thirdly, well, there is simply too much time between now and Boston’s next game against Montreal. It's early February now. Their next Montreal game isn't until March. Hayden Pike could really fuck things up in a short few weeks if Cliff waits to take action.

In conclusion: bulldozing Hayden Pike so hard that his brain shuts off forever just isn't a reasonable option.

Cliff then considers flying to Montreal to murder Pike outside of a hockey game, but that would come with a whole other set of issues. Even if he successfully murders the guy, he’s not certain he’d get away with it. He doesn't want to get arrested and thrown into a Canadian prison. He's pretty sure prisoners are fed poutine with canned gravy and shit, the real nasty stuff you find in dollar stores. There would also be the career-ending implications of it all.

Then, Cliff looks into hiring an assassin. It looks complicated and expensive, and he’s like 95% sure that it’s also highly illegal and still might end up with Cliff thrown into a weird Canadian jail cell and with a permanent Hayden Pike-shaped stain on his career. He still peruses a few websites anyways after googling DARK WEB ASSASSINS NEAR ME, just to cover his bases and do his research. Somewhere around the 30-minute mark of exploring assassination hiring how-to guides on the internet, Cliff realizes that maybe trying to murder a guy he barely knows because said guy *might* be homophobic is probably…not a good method of allyship.

He closes his tabs and clears his history, hoping that is enough to ensure the FBI won't hop on his trail. He takes a brief moment to stare dead into his web camera and says “Sorry! It was just a joke” to it, just in case an FBI agent is actively watching him on the other side.

He asks Natalia what he should do, and she kindly suggests just…talking to Hayden Pike. She is so smart. Cliff doesn't really *want* to talk to the guy, but it sounds a hell of a lot better than going to sad Canadian jail and permanently altering the course of lives of thousands of people.

The only issue with this new plan is that Hayden Pike is ignoring Cliff’s Facebook messenger requests. Fucking dickhead. Cliff decides he will give it a couple of days, just in case the guy needs some time to think it over, or perhaps doesn’t check his Facebook account frequently. Cliff’s pretty sure Pike checks his Facebook regularly, though; from what he knows about Hayden Pike, the guy’s originally from a rural-ish town somewhere in Atlantic Canada and has a small army of children with his young wife. Cliff may not know Hayden Pike, but he knows the type of dude he is, and dudes like that tend to be crawling all over Facebook. There’s no way Hayden Pike can resist the siren call of posting photo compilations of his children rolling around in snowbanks on Facebook for his former highschool classmates to ooh and aah at. Facebook’s like year-round Coachella for young millennial fathers.

If all else fails, Cliff will try two other options he has prepared in his back pocket: he’ll just simply ask Ilya for Hayden Pike’s phone number, and if he doesn’t have it, Cliff will just have to reach out

to Pike's agent. It's not like his agent has much to do anyways outside of reviewing pictures of his snot-nosed kids before they hit Instagram feeds around North America.

In the meantime, Cliff simply must balance being Extremely Normal in front of his good friend whilst planning his great Hayden Pike shakedown, while also ensuring he is still doing small little things that subtly let him know that he, Cliff Marlow, is a very safe ally.

After careful deliberation, he decides that his best course of action will be to diversify the porn he sends to Ilya.

This is already built-into their friendship much like other friendships Cliff has with his guy friends. If Cliff sees some fare he thinks Ilya might like, he sends it over. There's no point in hoarding your porn especially if it's something your friends might enjoy. It's always nice to get a little PornHub link from your good buddy alongside a little "thought you might like this one!" message. It warms his heart knowing that his bros are yanking their shit and still using a tiny bit of brain space to think about how much their good bud Cliff might also enjoy the experience they're having. The culture of hockey bros sharing their porn around like greeting cards has a special place in his heart.

What's new about this, and what makes this an act of allyship, is that Cliff doesn't usually send guys-on-guys to Ilya. Cliff's not into it, which means there's no way he'd pull up a video to then send it along in the hockey bro porn chainmail line. Maybe, he thinks, it's time to change that. Threesomes seem perfectly fine for this; it simultaneously balances Cliff's urge to send Ilya something that says "hey bro! I was thinking about you, like, you know, in the regular bro way, like we always do, and this time there's two guys in this video, because I'm a cool ally like that and I, again, saw this and thought of you in a cool normal bro way!" while also being subtle enough. It's not like it'd be too far out of Cliff's character to watch a threesome video– there's a girl there! Hell yeah! It's really the perfect plan. Cliff mentally pats himself on the back for coming up with such good personalized bisexual ally stuff just for his best bro while he types "threesome" into the PornHub search bar. Cliff clicks open a few videos of threesomes in new tabs and closes the ones that have two women. Those are objectively way more interesting to Cliff, but this isn't about him right now. This is about Ilya and creating a welcoming environment, and that means holding space for *SLUTTY BISEXUAL TWINKS POUND COLLEGE VIRGIN AND EACH OTHER #4*.

And, okay, maybe Cliff can admit that some of the videos he opens up featuring two dudes and a girl are, well, hot. Some of these guys really go at it, and porn is porn, after all. The two guys in the video Cliff is actively watching right now don't ignore each other like sometimes happens in these videos. A pretty sizable chunk of the video is the two dudes making out and touching on each other's dicks, so Cliff's pretty sure this one is also one of the better options to send to his good bisexual pal cushioned in between the standard stuff Cliff sends. Cliff figures that if these can get him, a comfortable and proud heterosexual, going…they must be good options to send over to Ilya. He sends this particular one, the one he is currently watching, over to Ilya.

After a tense five hours, in which Cliff totally does not check his phone repeatedly just to see if Ilya has responded, Ilya thumbs up reacts to the video link. Success! Cliff's so fucking good at this ally thing.

It's been four days and Hayden fucking Pike still isn't responding to Cliff's Facebook messenger requests. Cliff enacts his first backup plan: asking Ilya directly for Hayden's phone number.

“Do you know Hayden Pike?” he asks as he tugs on a battered old sweatshirt with *BIG PAPI* emblazoned on it, purposefully forcing his voice into a level, casual tone. There’s a small thread of rage that runs through him every time he says the words “Hayden Pike,” so the effort to maintain a casual air is necessary.

As for the Big Papi sweatshirt, well, Connors had a brief breakdown a few years back during which he got high, raided a Life is Good store, and dropped over a thousand dollars on weird novelty shirts. A few guys on the team ended up with some of the stranger choices: Cliff got his big papi sweatshirt, Ilya has a *BOY MOM* t-shirt somewhere in his closet that Cliff distinctly remembers Ilya chopping the sleeves off of, and Carmichael has a few golfing-themed shirts. Merrick, who retired three years ago, had a shirt that said *MY FAVORITE PEOPLE CALL ME GRANDPA*. Connors has a photograph of Merrick wearing the shirt and flashing two thumbs up printed out and taped to the back of his cubby.

Ilya makes a disgusted face upon hearing Hayden Pike’s name. "Somewhat. Unfortunately."

Cliff nods. “Do you have his phone number?” he asks. “I, uh, need to ask him a question.”

Ilya gives him the most baffled look he has ever seen the man make. Ilya’s made a lot of baffled expressions in his time, especially back when he was a fresh-faced rookie still struggling to parse out some of the phrases the team flung around the room. *No textbook prepared me for shit like “wicked pissa,” Marly. What the fuck is that? And why does no one in this city know how to use the letter R?* Cliff remembers Ilya drunkenly lamenting to him one night back in early 2011.

“What on earth would you need to ask Hayden Pike about? How to forget to pull out? How to skate like baby deer?” Ilya asks. His face takes on a weird expression. “Cliff, you cannot baby trap Natalia. Do not ask Hayden Pike about baby trapping. This is terrible thing to do.”

Cliff chokes on his own saliva. He can feel his face become flaming hot and probably bright red. “I’m not trying to, fuckin’...baby trap my girlfriend, Jesus Christ, Roz. Who do you think I am?”

Ilya shakes his head. “There is little else Hayden Pike knows how to do,” he explains with something like pity laced through his voice. “It is reasonable assumption to make.”

Cliff rolls his eyes. “Fuckin’ A, dude. Uh, one of Natalia’s coworkers likes Pike, and I wanted to ask the dude to, uh, autograph a jersey so Natalia could give it to her for her birthday.”

Ilya somehow looks even more baffled by this. Cliff really thought the autograph method would be reasonable-sounding. Clearly he messed something up along the way. Is it the way he said it? Can Ilya tell that Cliff’s lying through his teeth?

“You are telling me that someone in Boston likes Hayden Pike,” Ilya says flatly. “So much so that they would be okay with owning his jersey.”

“Yes?” Cliff confirms.

Ilya shakes his head, still visibly flabbergasted. “This coworker…has terrible taste. The worst taste. Tell Natalia to get this person fired, please.” Then, dramatically rolling his eyes and scoffing like the concept of doing something nice for a person with taste so terrible that they are a fan of Hayden Pike is the most ridiculous thing he’s ever heard in his life but he is doing it anyways because Ilya Rozanov is a damn kind person, Ilya takes out his phone and shares Hayden Pike’s contact information with Cliff.

Cliff, frankly, wasn't sure he'd get this far, so now he doesn't know what to do beyond texting Hayden Pike.

Maybe: Hayden Pike

Thu, Mar 8 2:12 PM

Cliff: Hello Hayden Pike

Cliff: Hayden Pike?

Cliff: Hello?

Cliff: Wow did Roz give me the wrong fucking number. Dickhead

Cliff: Do you happen to know Hayden Pike at least

Hayden: Who is this?

Cliff: Cliff Marlow

Cliff: Who are you?

Hayden: Why are you texting me, Marlow?

Cliff: Dude who are you

Hayden: Hayden Pike

Cliff: Oh! Hell yeah

Cliff: I mean

Cliff: I need to have a serious talk with you

Hayden:I don't know about this. Are you trying to murder me or something?

Cliff: It's about our friends.

Cliff: You know who.

Seen

+ Message

Hayden Pike is calling.

"What the fuck do you want," Hayden Pike's annoying, nasal voice seethes as soon as Cliff hits "accept call." Cliff barely even gets the opening H-sound of his aborted "hello" out before Hayden Pike is cutting him off.

"I just want to chat," Cliff says after a moment of being stunned by the other man's rudeness. Jesus. What does Shane Hollander see in this guy? He sucks. Cliff puts on the most condescending tone of voice he is capable of. "About uhm, our friends. And their *very important secret that is our responsibility to keep secret.* Should we use codenames or something?"

Hayden Pike splutters on the other side of the line. "What do you know," he asks, demanding and insistent, making it sound more like a statement than a question.

Cliff scoffs. "I know enough. I'm more concerned about what *you* know, and what you intend to do with it."

“Intend to do with it? Concerned?” Hayden Pike asks, voice filled with anger and frustration. “I should be asking YOU!” There’s another weird spluttering sound on the other side of the line. “Marlow. Tell me. How many people on your fucking team know. I need names. Did Rozanov tell everyone? Fuck, Shane’s gonna to freak. I can’t fucking belie–”

Cliff barely restrains himself from slapping his forehead with the meat of his palm. “What does that mean? Pike, the team doesn’t know. Just me,” he says. Pike quiets down, at least. “Well, okay, not just me. Someone else on the team figured it out, but we’re trying to make sure no one else figures it– wait.” Cliff pauses a moment. “I’m supposed to be shaking YOU down, not the other way around, what the fuck?”

Hayden makes a weird growling grunting sound. “So Rozanov hasn’t blabbed to the team,” he says quietly.

“No,” Cliff says immediately. “Roz, fuck, he’s being so fucking careful and cagey about it. He hasn’t told any of us. I and Hammers, I mean, uh, Brad? Brad Hammersmith? We figured it out, from fuckin’-- context clues and shit, but no one else on the team knows,” he continues. “Hammers and I are throwing the guys off the trail.”

“How?” Pike demands.

“Making shit up about Jane,” he explains. There is an audible whoosh of air on the other side of the phone line, then silence.

“Jane,” Hayden wheezes, after several awkward moments of silence. “Those dumbasses. Terrible fucking names. I bet Rozanov thought of them.”

“Hey,” Cliff protests weakly. “Come on man. Wait, actually, fuckin’-- how the fuck do you know about them?”

“How do you know I know?” Hayden Pike shoots back.

Cliff tries not to roll his eyes. It’s not worth the energy since Pike can’t even see him. “Last game we played against each other. You said something about Boston Lily,” he explains. “I didn’t like your fucking tone, by the way, you piece of shit. I should have punched you for that shit.”

Hayden scoffs. “Well excuse me for being a little disappointed that my best friend is dating…*him*, out of all of the men on Earth,” he says.

“Fuck you, man,” Cliff spits out. “You don’t know Roz. He’s a good dude and he’s, fuck, he’s *dedicated* to Shane.”

Hayden just sighs. “Shane’s really into him,” he says quietly after a moment. “Kind of crazy about him. I don’t get it, but…it’s nice, you know, seeing Shane like someone, even if it’s fucking Rozanov of all people.”

Cliff clicks the tip of his tongue against the roof of his mouth. “Still not crazy about the way you’re talking about my best friend,” he says. “How’d you feel if I was sitting here telling you about how I think Shane’s not good enough for Roz?”

“Fuck you,” Hayden says. “Shane is way too good for Rozanov.”

“Wait,” Cliff says, ignoring the very obvious attempt at starting up an argument again. “We’re off topic. Fuck. Listen: I don’t care if you dislike Roz.” This is a lie. Cliff kind of *really* cares that Hayden Pike doesn’t like his best friend’s boyfriend, but he’ll figure out what to do about that later. He’s got more important fish to fry right now. “I just need to know that you’re planning to keep their secret…secret. Yeah?”

“Huh?” Hayden says stupidly. “I mean. Yeah,” Hayden sighs. “Obviously. I wouldn’t do that to Shane.”

“Does anyone else on the Voyageurs know?”

Hayden makes a weird noise. “They don’t,” he says after a moment. “Shane told them that uh, that he’s gay. He made an announcement a few weeks ago. He didn’t tell anyone he’s seeing anyone, much less that he’s fucking *Rozanov*.” Then, after a moment, Pike adds in a lower, more grumbling voice: “The guys are being weird enough about it as is.”

Alarm bells sound off in Cliff’s head. *Weird* sounds an awful lot like *homophobic* from the way Hayden says it.

“He’s not safe over there?” Cliff asks. Fucking hell. He knows the Voyageurs are a shit team, obviously. They’re not exactly known for having a kind, understanding workplace culture. He’s heard enough horror stories from guys who used to be on the team…but this is different. This is not a safe space. Cliff’s been learning a lot about safe spaces recently and ways to ensure the Boston Bears are one. He’s pretty sure they’re doing an alright job. Ilya still hasn’t come out, but he’s also read that you shouldn’t rush anyone into doing something like that. Maybe he just needs more time, or the space needs to become safer.

Hollander, apparently, thought the Voyageurs were a safe enough space to come out to and was wrong.

“He’s fine,” Hayden says. “A few of us are watching over him. The last thing I want to do is make shit worse for him.”

“Good, dude. Make that locker room a safe space for him,” he says, finally feeling something like kinship with Hayden fucking Pike of all people. “I can send you some resources, if you want. Stuff I've been reading and using. I've also been coming up with some supportive shit. Have you tried taking your team to a gay bar?”

“Uhm,” Hayden stutters. “What the fuck? No.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t think anyone would come,” Hayden says. “I don’t even think Shane would come, if I’m being honest.”

Cliff hums. “What if we, like…the Bears and the Voyageurs, go to a gay bar in Montreal together? After our next game?”

Hayden is silent for a moment. “What?”

“It’s simple. We organize a joint-team outing to a gay bar. Maybe find one with a pool table or some shit so we can say we’re doing a post-game competition or something.”

“Dude,” Hayden says. “You can’t seriously believe this will work.”

“Are you committed to ensuring your best friend feels safe at work, Pike?” Cliff demands.

“Yeah, I mean, obviously. But, like, I don’t think Sha–”

“We’ll make this happen. It’ll be great,” Cliff says, and then hangs up.

The plan to get the Voyageurs and Bears to go to a Montreal gay bar specifically to foster a loving, inclusive environment for their captains who are secretly in love with each other, with the additional intention of getting the Voyageurs (including Hayden Pike) to be a little less homophobic, fails before it can even start. Both Cliff and Hayden fail to account for the fact that both Ilya and Shane would practically vanish off of the face of the planet as soon as their work obligations are fulfilled. Ilya, before Cliff can properly ask the team to go out with him, whooshes out of the room in a blur. He leaves so fast Cliff’s kind of surprised that he doesn’t kickstart a tornado in his wake.

After Ilya vacated the premises, Cliff didn’t see much of a point in inviting the rest of the team out, and everyone else filed out to go back to the hotel and sleep or make plans with random women they’ve been chatting up on Tinder. Zadonsky found a facebook event page for a pay-what-you-can clown performance set to music being played by a touring indie band from Iceland, which he seems pretty fucking dead set on attending. Zadonsky fucking loves attending weird events in Montreal. Cliff half-expects him to request a trade someday just so he can attend these types of weird events with more frequency.

Hayden Pike has similar luck. Shane Hollander, according to Hayden Pike, left the home team locker room with the same enthusiasm and speed as Ilya. The main difference was that Hayden *was* able to ask the team to go out with him before Shane took off at lightning speed, uttering a short “sorry, not tonight,” in Hayden’s direction as he hauled ass out of the locker room.

It didn’t matter, in the end. No one on the team wanted to go out with him besides JJ Boiziau and Artur Stedlund. Now, Cliff’s stuck in a Montreal gay bar with Pike, Boiziau, and Stedlund, and he can’t even use this as an opportunity to debrief about the whole Rozanov-Hollander imminent PR fiasco that will shake the hockey world because Boiziau and Stedlund don’t know what’s happening under their noses, and Cliff refuses to out his best friend and his boyfriend to these two guys.

“Didn’t think this type of place was your vibe,” Artur Stedlund says to Cliff while sipping his drink. Cliff can’t really get a read on this guy’s vibe– he fully and seriously decided to wear crocs and ripped jeans to a bar in early March in *Montreal*, you know, where everything is extraordinarily cold and wet this time of year, and he ordered an extra dirty martini. He seems shockingly comfortable here, but also seemed absolutely flabbergasted when a guy tried to buy him a drink. For what it’s worth, Pike and Boiziau seem just as surprised to see the guy here with them.

“It is important to support LGBT+-owned businesses,” Cliff says. “as an act of allyship.”

Artur nods seriously. “I hear that, brother,” he says, offering Cliff a fist bump. JJ Boiziau is looking at them like they’re both fucking insane.

“We should bring Shane here,” Hayden says lightly. “He might…like it. Maybe he’d find someone here that he likes.”

Cliff bristles immediately. How fucking dare Hayden Pike suggest bringing Shane here to find a hookup knowing he’s in a loving, serious relationship?

Meanwhile, JJ shakes his head. “I don’t know,” he mourns. “I keep trying to set him up with guys I know, and he’s rejected every one of them.” JJ frowns. “Are they not hot enough? I’m straight and I still think they’re hot, but maybe it’s different for gay guys. I don’t know.”

Artur nods very seriously. “You can ask some of the guys here,” he says, gesturing to the room at large. So he *does* know that this is a gay bar. “Maybe they can help you find a boy for Cap.”

Cliff resists the urge to give the three Voyageurs a verbal dressing-down for outing their own captain to a rival hockey player. “Maybe your captain is already seeing someone,” he instead says pointedly, glaring daggers at Hayden. Hayden just casually takes another sip of beer. Fucking asshole. “Maybe it’s *private*,” he seethes.

Artur and JJ don’t seem to notice Cliff glaring at Hayden, nor the tone of his voice. “I dunno,” Artur says. “Hollzy doesn’t seem like the type of guy to have a secret relationship.”

“I agree,” JJ says.

Hayden just quirks and eyebrow up in Cliff’s direction. *Your move*, he seems to be communicating telepathically. On one hand, Cliff fucking hates not being able to defend his best friend’s honour right now. On the other hand, well, he’s got to hand it to Pike: the team is so far off of Shane and Ilya’s trail that they can’t even conceptualize their captain being in a relationship. Fuck, it’s genius.

“Wait,” JJ says suddenly. “What about Lily?”

“Who’s Lily?” Artur asks.

Fuck. Even Hayden looks a little nervous now.

“A girl Capitaine hooks up with in Boston,” JJ explains. “He’s always refused to tell us anything about her.”

“Cap’s gay,” Artur says seriously, furrowing his eyebrows. “He literally told us himself.”

JJ considers this for a moment. “Maybe Lily is a guy?” he says, shrugging. “It would explain some things.”

Hayden appears to be blinking at Cliff in morse code, which sucks because Cliff does not know morse fucking code. Maybe they teach it in Canadian schools, who knows. Cliff tries to flash him a subtle look that communicates *dude I don’t fucking know what to do what the fuck have you done FIX THIS,* and apparently the message is received, because Hayden Pike “accidentally” spills his entire beer on Artur and JJ.

“Dude,” Artur whines as the beer seeps into his clothes. “My crocs!”

It’s a very effective way to stop a conversation in its tracks.

The rest of March and April blur together.

The Bears play hard as hell. The snow piled up high in parking lots scattered throughout Boston melt, slow and steady as the weather gets warmer, covering the sidewalks in a thin grey slush. The Bears are luckily in Boston in time for St. Patrick's Day, which they intend to take full advantage of. St. Patrick's Day is a sacred thing in Boston, and obviously the Boston Bears must pay the Apostle of Ireland his due respects in the most Bostonian way they can: getting aggressively, belligerently drunk and doing something stupid during the annual parade.

The Bears, unfortunately for their PR team, are known for having some kind of scandal relating to the Boston St. Patrick's Day Parade each year that the team is physically in Boston. There's an ongoing rumour in the locker room that management tries very, very hard to ensure the team is as far from Boston as humanly possible on the day of the parade, but sometimes things don't shake out the way they want it to. MLH schedules are complicated beasts and difficult to manage perfectly, hence why this year the Boston Bears are, against better judgement, in Boston.

The PR team tries their best. Cliff's pretty sure they have sent out like six emails begging the team to behave and remember that they need to play several games in the coming days, so being too hungover to move, stuck in a holding cell, or coming down with mono are all ill-advised. These are all things that have happened in the recent past, although the PR team is kind enough to not cite their sources within the emails. They could, though. Cliff's pretty sure Kane's indecent-exposure arrest two years ago made the news, although the charges were dropped immediately.

Cliff's phone dings with another email notification. It's the seventh email he has gotten from the PR team in the past few days. This one desperately urges the team to not make a slip-and-slide using McDonald's shamrock shakes. Mark from PR urges the team that, in the case that they *do* decide to make a slip-and-slide using McDonald's shamrock shakes, that they should avoid recording videos of it and keep it far away from the public eye. Cliff can't remember anything like this happening before, and it sounds too specific to be a completely random example, so PR must have caught wind that *someone* on the team was planning a shamrock shake slip-and-slide video. You know, to celebrate Irish heritage.

St Patrick's Day arrives, and there is no slip-and-slide covered in shamrock shake. There is, however, an actual slide, and yes, it's covered in shamrock shake. Dubek has procured a children's outdoor playset from Walmart, complete with a small plastic slide and swings, and set it up in the backyard of his small house in the suburbs. Cadyn, Zadonsky, and Johansson have purchased way too many shamrock shakes, obtained from five separate McDonalds, and pour them onto the slide as a few members of the team watch the thick, minty liquid slide down the yellow plastic slide slowly.

Technically, PR told them not to make a slip and slide. This is different, and therefore perfectly acceptable for Dubek to record on his phone and post on Instagram. It's also very far away from the parade. It's perfect.

According to the box, the weight limit on the slide is apparently 150 lbs, so they aren't sure how much use they'll be able to get out of it. They all are easily over 190 each (most of them clear 200,

but Cliff's pretty sure Johansson maxes out at 191). Just in case the slide buckles under the weight, they decide that one person will be selected to test the inaugural shamrock slidestravaganza, and the rest of them will simply have to wait and see if there is some plastic and shake left over for them to slide down afterwards. Dubek, for some reason, doesn't have any games in his home besides Mario Kart for the Wii, so that's how they end up deciding who will be the minty victim. Ilya, playing as Princess Peach, absolutely fucking sucks at Mario Kart and is tapped to go down the shamrock shake slide of shame as his punishment. Ilya could barely keep the princess on the track; every time Cliff glanced at Ilya's small slice of the TV screen, he was sending poor Princess Peach careening down the edge of Rainbow Road.

Ilya refuses to admit it, but he's absolutely fucking hammered right now. He's also absolutely fucking ecstatic to get his clothes covered in nasty, sticky, cold McDonald's milk slop. He's so excited, in fact, that he's decided that Jane *has* to see a video of this. Luckily, Ilya only tells the wider group that Jane must watch video of this, not that he's actively calling Jane on Facetime, nor that Shane fucking Hollander actually answers the call. Cliff thrusts a hand into the hood of Ilya's hoodie and subtly drags him backwards so the J/Shane ticking timebomb in his hands isn't seen by anyone else.

Shane doesn't seem to realize that he is extremely visible on the phone, and that his stupid boyfriend is too tipsy to realize the imminent danger he is in. Cliff watches out of the corner of his eye and sees that, unfortunately, Ilya's phone camera does not give Shane Hollander a good view of reality, showing only Ilya's stupidly excited face and not the fact that Cliff is standing just a few steps to the side. Mercifully quiet, Ilya whispers something in Russian to the phone, and Cliff watches in a mix of vague horror and interest at the way Shane 'the Canadian terror' Hollander blushes and crinkles his eyes in response. Jesus fucking Christ. Cliff looks around and is more relieved than he has ever felt in his entire life to see that no one else is bothering to pay attention to them, instead preferring to dare each other to lick shamrock shake directly off of the slide and swing set.

Cadyn drags his tongue along the slide to collect some of that nasty liquid.

"You must watch," Ilya says very seriously to Shane. Ilya then turns to Cliff, smiling so inhumanly wide that Cliff briefly wonders if the dentists accidentally put in extra teeth at some point in the process of giving Ilya his implants. "Marly, take my phone and make sure Jane watches me go down the slide," he orders, tapping the camera icon to flip the view to his back camera.

"Sure, bud," Cliff says, watching Shane Hollander quickly position the phone camera so the only bit of him you can see on the screen is a tiny bit of black hair. Ilya throws the phone into Cliff's hands and makes his way towards the slide, cramming his massive body onto a ladder and platform absolutely not built for a man of his size.

"Sorry about this, Janey," Cliff says seriously to the phone. Shane, of course, does not respond. Cliff wasn't expecting him to. "You don't need to say anything. I know you're, uh, shy. Roz told us," Cliff continues. He really hopes Shane isn't freaking the fuck out right now. At this point, Ilya has made his way to the entrance of the slide and is deciding if he wants to slide down feet-first or head-first on his stomach. "Thanks for taking care of him," Cliff adds. A very, very small noise of acknowledgement leaks out from Shane. "You know, I think that, if you, you know, ever decide to tell the team, everyone would be very open and accepti–"

"Let's go Roz!" Dubek screams, holding his phone up to record.

Ilya pushes himself feet-first. The shamrock shake does nothing to lubricate the slide, like they all so clearly hoped it would. Oregan was really hyping up the milkshake slide idea, yapping incessantly about how it would definitely make them go down at “super speed” and it’d be “sick as hell.” Ilya slides down slowly and safely. He doesn’t even break the cheap children's slide. Disappointing.

Shane Hollander mutes himself, and Cliff watches as the camera shakes lightly like Shane’s laughing his ass off slightly out of view of the camera.

(After this, Cliff hangs up the call with “Jane” and encourages Ilya to take a shower to wash off the sickeningly artificial mint smell coating him. Cadyn and Johansson decide to salvage the afternoon by seeing if they can do a complete 360 on the little child swings. They break the swing set in the process. The chains attaching Cadyn’s swing to the cheap set snap off cleanly and send him hurtling towards a sad, half-melted snowbank. This is what ends up on Dubek’s instagram page. Ilya’s shamrock slide attempt featuring Cliff awkwardly attempting to communicate with Shane Hollander is nowhere to be found, thank god).

(Several members of the Boston Bears who decided to attend the actual parade instead of spending the afternoon at Dubek’s place are photographed vomiting down the sides of a duck boat. The only person who makes it out completely unscathed is Sebbin, who is instead photographed at the parade with his young son on his shoulders, smiling with four leaf clovers painted on their cheeks. It’s the most wholesome photograph anyone has ever taken of Sebbin. It’s also the only photograph from St. Patrick’s day that the PR team decides to retweet on the official Boston Bears Twitter page).

(The Bears temporarily change their group chat photo to Sebbin’s old mugshot just to humble him).

Something’s wrong.

Ilya is fidgeting like he’s never been in his own body before. There’s a small twitch in his right eye that Cliff knows he gets when Ilya hasn’t slept enough. Feller asks Ilya if he wants to grab sliders after practice and Ilya says no, which is crazy because Ilya *never* says no to sliders after practice.

Most notably, Ilya quietly invites Cliff on a quick ride in his car (he’s brought one of his slick, low-to-the-ground ones today, now that the snow has mostly melted and there’s no more salt on the streets to corrode the undercarriage. It’s not that Ilya uses practical cars in the winter by any means, but he tends to not drive his nicest, most vulnerable ones between the months of November to mid-April) to go “to a Dunkin drive through, or something, I don’t know, whatever you want.”

As a result, Cliff finds himself seated in Ilya’s shockingly uncomfortable passenger seat as Ilya drives to a specific Dunkins *somewhere* in Boston. They’ve passed by three separate Dunkins in the five minutes they’ve been driving, which is par for the course in Boston. Cliff’s pretty sure that the Dunkins is just an excuse to get Cliff in the car, which isn’t even necessary. Ilya knows he could just ask Cliff to talk if he wants to. There’s no reason to invent some kind of ridiculous excuse just to get Cliff alone in a car with him. This is why Cliff knows for a fact that something is wrong. Nervousness is really unbecoming on Ilya Rozanov.

The first five minutes of the drive are awkwardly silent. When Ilya started the car, the sound system automatically connected to his Spotify account and began to play a Bad Bunny playlist at an almost ludicrously high volume that shook the entire frame of the car, which Ilya then frantically lowered to an equally ludicrous low volume. Cliff can barely hear Benito sing over the sound of Ilya's engine now. The two of them sit in somewhat awkward silence as they listen to the quietest trap beat of all time. The only other distraction in the car is the only hanging mirror ornament Cliff has ever seen Ilya have in a car: a tiny stuffed bird with red eyes and white spots, swinging wildly as Ilya runs over a pothole.

"You okay, Roz?" Cliff asks quietly. Ilya's fingers flex on the steering wheel as he stares straight ahead.

"I will be a free agent when the season ends," Ilya says eventually.

"I know," Cliff says. "Pretty sure management is freaking the fuck out, dude. When are you going to put them out of their misery and sign the contract?"

Ilya huffs out a small laugh. "You'll make a good captain when I'm gone," he says instead.

Ah. So that's what this is about.

"You're leaving," Cliff says matter-of-factly. "That's why you're freaking out right now."

"I am not freaking out," Ilya says, defensive.

"Why are you leaving?" Cliff asks instead of pointing out all of the ways that he can tell that his friend is definitely freaking out a tiny bit right now. "You aren't retiring, yeah?"

Ilya is quiet for a moment, face very slowly melting into a small, private smile as he blows a thin stream of air out from his nose. Between them, the stuffed bird continues to swing around.

"I am not retiring," he says. "I am…exploring some other options…changes of scenery, you know."

"Like?" Cliff knows what Ilya is about to say. He has seen the writing on the wall, or rather, the locations on Ilya's plane tickets. There's no way Ilya is going to Montreal; they fucking hate his guts there, and they definitely don't have the cap space to afford him alongside their other expensive players…like Shane Hollander. No, Ilya can't go there. He's probably looking at nearby options, like…

"Ottawa," Ilya says.

The air leaves Cliff in a fast whoosh, despite fully expecting the response. There's something different about suspecting versus hearing confirmation straight from the source. "The team's shit," he says, quickly trying to cover his initial reaction.

"Boston was shit when we started," Ilya says casually. "I see their potential."

"Not as shit as Ottawa is right now," Cliff says.

Cliff's not sure how vulnerable Ilya plans to get right here, trapped in his car along with a weird bird keychain thing and Bad Bunny at whispering-volume. He doesn't want to press too hard and force Ilya out of the closet before he's ready, but fuck, Cliff thinks he deserves a little bit of the

truth. He'll claw out what he can. Before Ilya can continue to try to defend the Ottawa Centaurs, Cliff says: "Ottawa's closer to Jane, isn't it?"

Ilya just nods silently.

"But it's not Montreal," Cliff continues, playing dumb.

"Montreal is not a good fit for me," Ilya says quickly. "Ottawa would be better, and it's only two hours away from Montreal."

Cliff hums. "You've done your research," he comments casually.

"Yes," Ilya says. "I don't need to defend my decision," Ilya says suddenly, with force, like he prepared for Cliff to talk him out of it. "I am asking you to accept it."

"I didn't ask you to defend it," Cliff says, wincing. Ilya grunts and keeps his eyes carefully trained on the road ahead. The car jostles over a frost heave and Cliff watches as the stuffed bird continues to sway between them. "I know Jane means a lot to you, man," Cliff continues, trying very hard to soften his voice, but not so much that he's drowned out by Bad Bunny's quiet sounds. "I just wish you felt like you could talk about her more," he finishes truthfully.

"Maybe someday," Ilya says. Cliff watches in the rearview mirror as Ilya's eyes briefly flick towards the bird, then to Cliff, before returning to the road.

Cliff decides to press just a teeny, tiny bit harder. Fuck it. "During your research, did you see anything about how Ottawa is Shane Hollander's hometown? I heard he's like a local hero there."

Cliff can feel Ilya's eyes leave the road and drill into the side of his skull instead. He doesn't even need to glance at the rearview mirror for confirmation. "Maybe he can give you some, uh, restaurant recommendations," Cliff continues anyways.

"Interesting," Ilya says flatly. The car quickly turns right, startling Cliff a little. The little black-and-white bird swings violently as the car pulls into a Dunkin Donuts drive-through at last. They've only passed by eleven different Dunkins locations in the time it took for them to reach this specific one.

Instead of picking up their conversation, Ilya just says "Vanilla bean coolatta, I know, don't worry. I'll buy you your gross vanilla ice juice. You want a donut too?"

Maybe: Hayden Pike

Sat, Apr 8 7:13 PM

Cliff: Heard you didn’t make playoffs this year

Cliff: Ha

Cliff: Deserved

Hayden: Dude come on

Cliff: Hope all the voyageurs got their bears jerseys ready for the cup finals watch party 😎🐻

Cliff: I know SOMEONE'S gonna have that Rozanov jersey locked and loaded

Cliff: And his name rhymes with Jane Jollander

Hayden:I hope you get kicked out first round, dick

Cliff: You aren't rooting for your best friend's boyfriend?

Cliff: Biphobe👏

Cliff: Death penalty👏

Hayden: Biphobe?

Cliff: Because you're biphobic

Hayden:I don't know what that means

Cliff: You didn't read the study guide I sent you?

Hayden: You mean that 200 page pdf you sent me? That was fucking crazy.

Cliff: 200 pages of information YOU NEED

Cliff: You better read it

Cliff: I had to ask my girlfriend to teach me how to use adobe to make it

Cliff: I poured my heart and soul into it

Cliff: Step up your ally game Pike 💪🏳️‍🌈

Cliff: Did you know that 1 in 10 people are LGBT+?

Cliff: Maybe one of your kids is LGBT+

Cliff: I hear you have around 10 of them, so you better step it up

Hayden:I am going to block you

Cliff: WAIT NO

Seen

+ Message

ROZ💯🔥🥵

ROZ💯🔥🥵 is typing…

Today

Marlow

Tell hayden pike to unblock me

7:25

Roz💯🔥🥵

why the fuck are you talking to hayden pike

7:27

Roz💯🔥🥵

Cliff i am asking natalia right now if you've been having safe sex

7:27

Roz💯🔥🥵

this is not a joke

7:27

Roz💯🔥🥵

what was pike talking to you about? poking holes in condoms? raising child army? hiding birth control pills?

7:28

Marlow

Stop texting my girlfriend?

7:28

Roz💯🔥🥵

no. she is very lovely person to talk to. she gives me good gossip.

7:29

Marlow

Dude

7:29

Marlow

STOP

7:29

Roz💯🔥🥵

ah she says she has implant and that it is “not a concern at all”

7:30

Roz💯🔥🥵

and many laughing emojis

7:30

Roz💯🔥🥵

she is very smart

7:31

Roz💯🔥🥵

i do not know how you managed to catch her attention

7:32

Marlow

Just get Pike to unblock me, man

7:32

Marlow

Dude I'm still blocked. Did you even ask Pike or are you still texting Natalia?

7:38

Roz💯🔥🥵

i did not know you liked to be pegged. is this new?

7:43

Marlow

STOP TEXTING MY GIRLFRIEND ROZ WHAT THE FUCK

7:43

Marlow

ROZ!!!

Boston is playing Tampa Bay in the second round of the playoffs, and to be frank, it's not going well at all. Boston won game one with a narrow lead, but immediately lost games two, three, and four. If they lose tonight, they're completely fucked.

Despite the small losing streak, the locker room is loud and chaotic as usual. They always try their best to keep their energy up even when things are looking down. Amidst the usual chaos, Cliff thinks he might be the only person who has noticed that Ilya is being uncharacteristically quiet. He's also, he's pretty certain, the only person in the room besides Ilya himself who knows that this could be Ilya's final time on the ice wearing the Bears logo on his chest.

This changes near the end of Ilya's pre-game hype-up speech. "Depending on what happens tonight, this might be my last game as a Bear. I want it to be worthwhile," Ilya says to the team. "Don't fuck it up."

An unusual silence envelops the room.

"What do you mean, Cap?" Connors asks, breaking the silence.

"It means that my contract is done soon," Ilya says. It's an echo of the phrases Bears staff have been uttering for months now as panic grows over the status of Ilya's contract. All the way back in the beginning of January, whispers of *He says his contract hasn't been renewed yet* ricocheted throughout the walls, quickly morphing into *He said his contract expires in a few months* by the end of January. The phrasing, apparently, has remained the same since then, now with *a few months* replaced by *soon.*

Soon has arrived.

“And…you aren’t re-signing with us?” Carmichael asks. There’s a small, barely-there voice crack when Carmichael says “us.”

Ilya grimaces. “You are right,” he says. “I will not re-sign with the Bears. It is not because of you all. It is because of…other reasons.”

“Where are you going?” Varkov asks.

"It is not yet set in stone," Ilya says. "But, I am trying to move to Ottawa."

Silence falls over the room again, then, Kovalev barks out a few sharp, disbelieving laughs. “Jesus, Roz, don’t fuck with us like that,” he wheezes between laughs. The tension in the room breaks as almost everyone catches up and laughs along with Kovalev, reveling in the impossibility of what Ilya just said to them. There’s no way that Ilya Rozanov, top skater in the league (depending on who you ask) and longtime beloved captain of the Boston Bears, would jump ship and sign with the *Ottawa Centaurs*, of all teams. The only explanation is that he must be joking. It’s in-characters; Ilya’s been known to be a jokester for years now.

The only person besides Ilya and Cliff who isn’t currently laughing at Ilya’s amazing, super hilarious joke is Hammersmith, who is staring down at his skate blades like he’s trying very, very hard to resist reacting.

“You scared the shit out of us, dude, don’t do that again,” Connors chuckles, slapping Ilya on the back as he walks by, heading towards Kane’s bag to steal some extra tape.

“Fuckin’ dickhead over here trying to scare us into playing harder,” Feller says, shaking his head slowly and huffing out a few laughs.

Ilya’s responding smile doesn’t reach his eyes.

Cliff makes his way over to Ilya and slaps a hand on his shoulder, leaning in slightly. “For what it’s worth, I hope this isn’t your last game as a Bear. We’re gonna win this whole thing,” he says. “Your final game as a Bear will end with you lifting the fuckin’ cup.”

The loss against Tampa Bay is physically and mentally crushing. The final buzzer sounds, and Cliff, too exhausted to even think, barely registers the fact that Ilya is slowly skating to the exact middle of the rink. Ilya shucks off his gloves and leaves them in his wake before he comes to a full stop, and only then does he take off his helmet. Cliff watches in slowly-dawning horror, his mind slowly catching up with what’s happening in front of him, as Ilya slowly gazes all around him at the crowd, the rafters, his team…everything.

Shit.

It's over.

Ilya is wearing a completely unreadable expression on his face as he rakes his eyes around the room, letting the cheering and jeering wash over him. A single hand raises up to his own chest, clutching against his sternum. Cliff thinks it might be that necklace he’s always wearing, but from

here it kind of looks like he is trying to squeeze his own heart. Cliff kind of feels like throwing up, and he isn't sure if it's from the long-ass game he just played or if it's from seeing Ilya like this. Feller skates over to Cliff before his pre-game meal of a chicken and rice bowl crawls up his throat and splatters on the ice.

"Holy shit," St-Simon wheezes, still audibly winded from exertion. "He wasn't fucking with us earlier. He's serious? Did you know that?"

Cliff swallows back bile and whatever emotions are swirling in his throat. "He's serious about Jane," he responds. The words feel thick in his mouth.

Chapter End Notes

womp womp

Zadonsky's hyperspecific event is a real thing I witnessed when I lived in Montreal. I left early because someone called the police and I didn't want to be at the fuckin clown icelandic band combination show when cops came

Chapter 6: I have your back, a gun, and one chair

Chapter Notes

> Wow this one took me way longer to post than I had hoped, so sorry about that! I've had a busy month. The good news is that what was once a planned super short epilogue has instead ballooned into whatever this final chapter is! Y'all can thank Yaga for indirectly inspiring me to finish this fic this week. Reading Yaga made me think about Hudson's acting, which made me think about how he's gonna act the FUCK out of HR season 2, and then I was like oh my god my fucking fanfiction...hollanov wedding.....let's fucking go
>
> Edit: omfg I forgot to mention that I read Yaga on my way to visit the mansion in Hamilton, Ontario heated rivalry used for filming some of the outdoor scenes in "Moscow" which I only remembered when I was standing directly outside of it and went "hey...wait a minute..."

See the end of the chapter for more notes

2021

“Cliffy,” Natalia says, lifting her phone towards Cliff. “Have you seen this?”

“What’s this?” Cliff asks as he grabs hold of the offered phone and is greeted by a video of his friend’s carefully-curated life getting blown to smithereens, already in the process of going viral. It was posted on Twitter 10 minutes ago and already has amassed over 100,000 likes. Fucking hell.

Over the past few years, Cliff and everyone around him have seen innumerable changes. After a year of silently and oh-so-casually encroaching on each other's spaces, Cliff and Natalia finally and officially moved in together in early 2020. As predicted by Ilya back in 2018, Cliff was named the new captain of the Boston Bears after Ilya’s unceremonious departure. Late 2018 and the entirety of 2019 and 2020 saw a large amount of restructuring for the Bears roster. The old roster was, unfortunately, built around the Russian powerhouse at its core and sort of fell to pieces without the force of his gravitational pull. Kovalev, long thinking about hanging up his skates, retired in 2020 to spend more time with his kids. Carmichael entered free agency and signed to San Jose (citing an interest in “uncovering the secrets of the Winchester Mystery House” as his modus operandi). Oregan and Johansson both somehow ended up traded to Edmonton (separately: Oregan was first to go, and Johansson followed a year later). Varkov was traded to Washington, who then traded him to Colorado. Connors spent the entirety of 2020 on injury reserve and has just made his valiant return in February of this year, while St-Simon just went out with an injury in January. Amidst the chaos, both Cliff and Hammersmith have luckily been able to remain solid. Together, they're dragging their hodgepodge team of new acquisitions and shuffled-around veterans towards their first playoffs since Ilya hightailed it out of the United States.

Hammersmith is still chronically single. This is a sore spot for him.

The Ottawa Centaurs, from what Cliff has seen, have followed a fairly similar path. They weren't so hot in 2019 or 2020, but things are definitely looking up for them nowadays. Cliff thinks that they might even make it to the playoffs. Ilya seems pretty fucking serious about dragging that team up from the depths of hell and into the spotlight come hell over high water, just like he did back in the day with Boston. Granted, Boston didn't need a literal plane crash scenario to kick them into high gear…but to each their own, he guesses. Maybe a collective near death experience could help the Bears as well. Cliff will have to look into something like that if the Bears fall out of the playoffs too early.

Of course, Ilya and Cliff have kept in touch over the years. Ilya drifts farther and farther away nonetheless, placing a wall between them that feels more obvious now that he is physically distant. Cliff's been starting to think that maybe the wall was *always* there albeit a bit easier to ignore when he had the luxury of looking at Ilya through the windows. Now the walls are too distant for him to delude himself; the curtains are drawn or perhaps just too far away for him to properly see into. In the meantime, Cliff has tried to keep his own door open, but Ilya never dares cross the threshold. He tries to delude himself into thinking that it doesn't sting. Maybe no one is able to get through the impenetrable fortress that is Ilya Rozanov.

Well, maybe Shane Hollander is penetrating that, but you know…that's something else entirely.

Cliff and Ilya still text, get beers after games, send each other stupid memes on Instagram and comment on each other's shit, and they still honour the bro code of sharing bits of porn that remind each other that they're on the mind, you know, in a completely platonic bro way. They follow the rituals of a long distance friendship, clapping each other heartily on the backs when they see each other in person and giving each other lengthy life updates that carefully tiptoe over details too complicated to debrief on in a single evening. Cliff tries very, very hard to ignore the way Ilya and Shane Hollander look at each other during All Stars, opting to play the part of the fool. He was coached by Natalia on ways he could avoid blowing his cover and by extension avoid blowing *their* cover.

Cliff did a really good fucking job, if he does say so himself. Cliff accidentally led an entire fucking entourage of elite hockey players directly to Ilya's hotel room door while Shane fucking Hollander was moaning up a storm– and Cliff saved the day by loudly proclaiming that the noises *must* be from a hot, sexy orgy featuring multiple women because It's Ilya Rozanov and *of course* he's got multiple women sobbing with pleasure in the depths of his hotel room, obviously, and there's absolutely zero chance that the screams everyone can kind of hear through the walls belong to *the captain of the fucking Montreal Voyageurs*, what are you even talking about? Are you insane?

(What the fuck was Roz even *doing* to him in there? Cliff kind of wants a video of it for research purposes. Ilya sends him porn, sure, but no one is ever doing anything that necessitates that type of reaction. He's been holding out on Cliff. Is it because Cliff is straight? He's a big boy and can handle some gay porn– he's even sent some Ilya's way [although there is always some form of plausible deniability there…to this day, Cliff still sticks to threesomes rather than take the deep dive and send his good bro honest to god, unfiltered gay porn]. He's familiar with getting his booty played with. Listen, he just wants some fucking tips and tricks to bring back to his bedroom that he finally shares with his hot girlfriend.)

Everyone believed Cliff because Cliff is damn good at his job. Maybe he should go into acting. Hollander knows Rose Landry, after all…so maybe Cliff's not too far removed from the world of cinema that he can't ever dream of having his own star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame. He'll just

have to convince Ilya to let him convince Hollander into forking over Rose Landry's contact info, and then convince Rose Landry to fork over her own connections. Also, Cliff needs to learn how to act for people who aren't hockey players who have suffered multiple hits to the head in recent memory.

Speaking of hockey players who have suffered multiple hits to the head: Hayden Pike.

Ilya Rozanov and Shane Hollander have spent multiple years carefully concealing their secrets, wrapping their love in layers and layers of things labeled "friendship" and "cofounders" just to outwardly change the shape of it enough to be safe for the public eye, and then Hayden Pike aimed a bazooka at it and blew it all up.

Jesus, they're really going to fucking town on each other's mouths in this Fanmail video. You can't even see them all that well since it's just a reflection directly next to Hayden Pike's massive head, but there's enough. There's more than enough, actually. On the phone screen, Ilya shoves his entire tongue down Hollander's esophagus for the fourth time because the video is automatically looping and Cliff can't tear his eyes away from it. Hayden Pike begins his greeting for someone named Brad yet again. The view count is climbing. He refreshes the post out of curiosity, restarting the video again in process, and balks at the way the number of retweets has quintupled.

Fucking hell.

"I didn't see this," Cliff says finally. His voice is way scratchier than he anticipated. It kind of sounds (and feels) like he's just run a marathon and screamed the whole way. "That's…something."

Natalia grimaces and takes her phone back, quietly tapping her screen until the video disappears and is replaced by her lockscreen. It's a cute photo of the two of them from their third anniversary just a few weeks ago. They went bowling and Cliff's only marginally better at it than he was back in late 2017. "You should probably reach out," Natalia says quietly, setting her phone down on the coffee table.

"He's probably turned his phone off," Cliff responds. Knowing Ilya, he's got a flood of about five million messages pouring in as they speak, and he turned his phone off after reading the first three of them, *if* he has even seen the news at all. "But, yeah, I will."

Cliff's phone is waiting for him like a ticking time bomb on the counter, plugged in and ready to go. As expected, it's absolutely flooded with messages.

The first thing Cliff does is send a quick text to Ilya stating *hey man, I just saw. Just want to tell you I'm here for you brother. Call me, text me, whatever. I'll be here for you.* Cliff waits with the chat open for a solid, tense few minutes, for some reason expecting the *delivered* to turn into *read* any moment now. It doesn't.

There is a small pit settling at the bottom of his stomach, which has no business being there. He *knows* Ilya. Cliff will probably get a response from him in the next 3 business days.

Wrenching himself from his text thread with Ilya, Cliff finally taps around to address the notifications pouring in from a particular group chat he hasn't seen active since 2018.

roz hate club

Several people are typing…

Today

Connors

HOLY SHIT

11:03

Sebbin

Did you mean to revive this chat? Lol

11:05

Connors

YEAH I DID

11:05

Connors

DID YOU FUCKING SEE

11:05

Sebbin

See what?

11:05

Carmichael

Oh dude

11:05

Feller

Are we sure this isn’t a deepfake?

11:06

Varkov

What the fuck are we talking about

11:06

St. Simon

is this about the video of roz making out with shane hollander?

11:07

Varkov

Shane Hollander

11:07

St. Simon

yes

11:07

Varkov

Shane Hollander from the Montreal Voyageurs

11:07

Connors

YES

11:07

Varkov

Making out with Rozzy?

11:08

Carmichael

YEAH DUDE GO ON ANY FUCKING APP

11:08

Hammersmith

Would you guys believe me if I told you I saw it on linkedin

11:08

Connors

Why do you have a linkedin

11:08

Hammersmith

For connections?

11:08

Feller

I saw it on tiktok

11:08

Carmichael

FOCUS!!!

11:09

Sebbin

Wow they’re really going at it in this video

11:09

Sebbin

It’s kind of hypnotic lowkey

11:09

Feller

What happened to Jane?

11:09

Varkov

I’m a little distracted because I can’t believe someone paid money for a greeting from Pike

11:10

Connors

Should I make a Fanmail for the $$$?

11:10

Carmichael

No

11:10

Sebbin

Guys Roz’s tongue game goes crazy

11:11

Sebbin

How fucking long is that thing?

11:11

St. Simon

this chat is a fucking mess

11:11

Hammersmith

Soooooooooo

11:11

Hammersmith

Marly and I knew

11:12

Hammersmith

Not the whole time obviously

11:12

Connors

WHAT

11:12

Hammersmith

We figured it out a while ago

11:12

Hammersmith

And we threw some random stuff in the jane notes to throw everyone else off the trail

11:13

Hammersmith

Sorry!!

11:13

Hammersmith

We realized it was more serious than we expected so we wanted to protect the secret

11:13

Marlow

Yeah, obviously Roz wanted it to stay secret so we thought it was for the best

11:13

Connors

Wait

11:13

Sebbin

Are you telling me Montreal Jane is SHANE MOTHERFUCKING HOLLANDER

11:14

St. Simon

captainfucker in this case I think

11:14

Sebbin

SHUT UPPP

11:15

Sebbin

THEE SHANE HOLLANDER

11:15

Carmichael

YOU KNEW AND DIDNT SAY ANYTHING?

11:15

Carmichael

BETRAYAL

11:15

Carmichael

OF THE HIGHEST ORDER

11:15

Carmichael

TREASON

11:16

Feller

Ah I get it

11:16

St. Simon

yeah on one hand im pissed roz didnt tell us but on the other hand I understand

11:16

Carmichael

Okay yeah fine you are all right

11:16

Marlow

Anyways GAME PLAN

11:16

Marlow

Because people ARE going to ask us about this

11:17

Marlow

BE SUPPORTIVE OR I WILL END YOU

11:17

Hammersmith

I have a gun

11:17

Connors

Jesus dude chill out? No need for the guns

11:18

Feller

Yeah of course we're gonna be supportive

11:18

Varkov

Idk about his taste in men but Roz is Roz and i'll defend that man to the death

11:18

Carmichael

Wdym you don't know about his taste in men when his taste in men is SHANE HOLLANDER?????

11:19

St. Simon

I would probably go to war if hollander asked idk

11:19

St. Simon

there’s just something about his eyes ya know?

11:19

Sebbin

That’s Roz’s man! Relax!

11:20

St. Simon

im just sayin 🤷‍♂️

11:20

Carmichael

Okay okay maybe we can workshop a statement or hashtag or something for social media to show our support

11:21

Hammersmith

I like it. And we can try to get everyone we know on other teams to post too

11:21

Connors

You know what I'm wondering

11:22

Connors

What the fuck is wrong with Hayden Pike

11:22

Connors

Aren't he and Hollander friends? That's a shit thing to do to a friend

11:22

Marlow

Should I kill him?

Right. Hayden Pike.

Cliff switches apps at a speed so intense that his phone screen freezes briefly on the journey from WhatsApp to his dusty, cobweb-covered text thread with the Voyageur.

DEATH PENALTY Cliff texts Hayden. Delivered. Not read.

After that, Cliff hops in his car and begins to drive to Montreal.

Natalia offers to join, but she has to be at work at 8:30AM sharp tomorrow and driving to Canada is not conducive to managing a good work and sleep schedule. She's angling for a promotion and wants to stay on her Department Head's good side, so rolling in extremely late and exhausted from an emergency overnight trip to Canada specifically to bring physical harm to someone is just not a good idea. Instead, she stays in Boston with a promise to monitor "the situation" and send Cliff voice note updates as he drives.

Oh, it's spreading fast, Cliffy, she says in one voice note. *Melissa just asked me about it. She saw it on Facebook.* Melissa is one of Natalia's least favourite coworkers. She keeps asking Natalia when Cliff is going to get a "real job."

By the time Cliff reaches Champlain, New York, Natalia sends him a message saying that she has activated the WAG network and located Hayden Pike's home address. It was easy, apparently. She simply asked in the Boston WAGs group chat. Apparently Cadyn's newest girlfriend used to date a guy on the Voyageurs team, and she doesn't give a flying fuck about Hayden Pike's safety (although she does ask that no harm comes to his wife and children). The girlfriend had the Pike family's home address written in an old notes app note. Natalia sounded only a little judgemental about the whole thing– apparently Cadyn's girlfriend is annoying as fuck in the WAG group chat, but she's willing to put her animosity aside for now since the woman so readily forked over the requested info.

Natalia also reminds Cliff in a voice note to avoid committing murder and to remember to drink some fluids. He gets a Vanilla Bean Coollatta from a Dunkin Donuts drive through along the way, along with an order of the world's oiliest hash browns.

In retrospect, Cliff is so, so lucky that Natalia managed to scrounge up the Pike address before Cliff hit the border. Canadian border officers are very interested in having an exact address tourists such as Cliff intend to spend the night at, and Cliff did not think ahead enough to book himself a hotel room. He only planned to attempt murder and maybe head straight back home afterwards. His

backup plan, in case he was too tired to drive all the way back to Boston in one go, was to spend a few hours in an A&W. It's one of the few consistent 24-hour places littered throughout Canada (and not one of the ones that like to *lie* about being 24 hours like some Canadian Denny's do). The Bears have spent many an evening evading curfew and ending up, seemingly inevitably, at a sticky table in an A&W daring each other to scarf down culinary atrocities named something stupid like the Grandpa Burger along with their root beer floats.

As for the border officer problem, he had a mushy, amorphous, kind-of-but-not-really-there plan to tell them he was staying at one of the Marriotts and just hope that they didn't intend to call to confirm the reservation of the highly suspicious, heavily-breathing, white-knuckled man attempting to barrel through the longest undefended international border on Earth. Instead, he got to tell the bored and tired-looking border staff that he was going to visit his great pal Hayden over by Charlevoix.

Cliff knocks on the front door of the Pike residence two hours later. The door opens slightly, revealing a woman Cliff does not recognize.

"Cliff Marlow," she says in a careful, even tone. In a way, it's good that she recognizes him because that means introductions aren't in order. It's bad because he didn't set up a fucking alibi before driving across an international border to commit murder in broad daylight and now he has been recognized.

Oh well.

"Where the fuck is Hayden Pike?" Cliff demands.

The woman in the doorway fixes him with an expression that makes it clear that she wants nothing more than for Cliff to leave her property and leave her alone. That sucks for her, because Cliff's gonna stay here until Hayden Pike shows his sorry face. The woman in front of Cliff is welcome to watch him pummel Pike through the Earth's crust if she wishes to.

"Driving," she says. "Why are you here?"

"I need to see him," Cliff says. "He knows why."

"Hayden spoke to Ilya and Shane earlier," she says. "If this is about…that."

Cliff nods.

Behind her, the distinct sound of toddler footsteps slapping against hardwood grows louder. "Is that Uncle Shane and Uncle Ilya?" a squeaky voice asks. Well, shit. Maybe Cliff should be nicer to these people. The kid thinks Ilya is his uncle, for god's sake. What does that make Cliff? A distant uncle? Friend-of-an-uncle? Is he, in a way, in "family friend" territory?

He's getting too far ahead of himself. He doesn't even know this kid's name.

"No," the woman says. "This is one of Uncle Ilya's friends."

"Hi," Cliff hears himself say, surprising himself.

The woman sighs. It's a deep, weary sound, like she was balled up tight for hours and has finally released the tension out of her muscles. “Come in, Cliff. I'm Jackie, by the way.” Right, right. Cliff vaguely recalls that Hayden Pike is married to a woman named Jackie, which means the kid calling Ilya uncle is probably one of the Pikelings. Cliff probably could have gotten this from context clues, such as the fact that they're all inside of Hayden Pike’s home, but his brain is kind of fried right now. A little while back after an Ottawa-Boston game, Ilya complained about Hayden and Jackie, tipsily ranting that Pike’s wife is too interesting and pretty for him. Cliff assumed Ilya wanted to hit on Jackie but was rejected, but Ilya looked flabbergasted beyond belief when Cliff began to rib him about it.

When you meet my Jane, you will know how wrong you are. There is no one as pretty as my Jane. Jackie is a lovely woman, do not get me wrong, but she lacks a lot in decision-making department. She has procreated with Hayden Pike several times.

If only you knew how much I know about your Jane, Cliff had thought. Back then, Cliff just rolled his eyes and tried to change the subject to Ilya’s Jane (in a cheap attempt to get his friend to finally open up even just a little bit more about his definitely serious long term partner), which Ilya shut down real fucking fast.

“Hi, Jackie. I'm going to kill your husband,” Cliff says, and immediately regrets it when he remembers that there is a small child right in front of him right now. Do they remember shit at this age? Is this a traumatic experience? Cliff’s earliest memory is from sometime in the middle of Kindergarten when he learned how to write “dog” in cursive. He was shocked by how short the word is when it contains so much importance. This kid looks too young to be in Kindergarten, so maybe he's safe.

Natalia once told him her earliest memory is from when she was freshly 3 years old. She woke up in the middle of the night and climbed out of her new “big girl” bed, just to find her father mixing a bowl of jello in the kitchen. He told her that jello has to be made at night, which is something she believed until she was 22 years old.

This kid might be like 4 years old. Cliff is maybe fucked.

Jackie shrugs. “Not sure if I blame you right now,” she says, gesturing for Cliff to enter.

Surrounded by hundreds of carefully framed and hung photographs of the Pike family in all of their lower upper class, quasi-nuclear glory, Cliff's fighting spirit kind of dies. It might also be exhaustion from driving five hours straight (closer to six if you count the time spent at the border) from Boston to Montreal, stopping only for a drink and to talk to Canadian border officers along the way. It might also be because one of the Pike kids, a young and extremely talkative girl, keeps asking Cliff for details on how he might murder her father, which feels really fucked up now that he is thinking about it. He probably shouldn’t have told Jackie that he was there to kill her husband, but really, how could he have known that her army of children were all extremely nosey and within earshot? The young girl’s twin sister is comparatively quiet but keeps nodding seriously like she is fiercely invested in the conversation but is choosing not to contribute.

“Jade’s in a morbid phase,” Jackie says with a shrug. “She's really into ancient Egyptian mummification and zombies.”

It doesn't make Cliff feel better. “I am not going to take your dad’s brain out with a spoon,” he says weakly.

“Not with a spoon. They didn't have those back then,” the little girl huffs. “And it needs to be removed or else his skull will collapse or a zombie will eat it.”

Jackie’s phone rings. She puts it on speaker phone.

“Hi, hun,” Hayden Pike’s voice crackles through the speakers. Cliff almost immediately sees red, blood boiling back to the temperature it was when he was still white-knuckle gripping his steering wheel in Concord, New Hampshire and imagining running Hayden Pike over with his car repeatedly.

“Daddy, Uncle Ilya’s friend says he won't take your brain out when he mummifies you,” the kid says.

“What?” Hayden Pike asks.

“Cliff Marlow is here,” Jackie helpfully provides context.

There is a small pause. “Why the fuck is Cliff Marlow in our house?” Hayden asks after a moment.

“Swear jar,” the entire Pike family sans Hayden says in scary, creepy unison. This might be the scariest place he has been in his entire fucking life. Are other households like this? Cliff grew up with divorced parents and a significantly older brother he was never close with, so the Pike family dynamics are far out of his wheelhouse.

“I came because I want to talk,” Cliff says.

“Man,” Hayden drawls in angered disbelief. “You drove from Boston to corner me in my own home?”

“Yes,” Cliff says.

“And you're sitting in my fucking living room talking about mummies with my children?”

There is another chorus of *swear jar!*s. Cliff shudders involuntarily.

“Y-yeah,” Cliff says. He cringes as he says it, like, when you put it that way, shit’s weird.

There is a weird thumping noise over the phone. “What a day,” Hayden eventually groans. Jackie barks out a laugh.

“Shane texted me,” Jackie says casually, seemingly unconcerned about her husband’s suffering.

“Yeah,” Hayden says. “I still feel like shit though.”

“Good,” Cliff says without thinking. “Wait, what?” he then asks, realizing he doesn't know what happened at all.

“They say they're fine and don't blame me for what happened, but, yeah,” Hayden says, trailing off. “I dunno, still feeling pretty guilty over here.”

Got it, this is about Fanmailgate. Apparently all of this is *fine* and Pike is *forgiven*, for some fucking reason. “This *is* your fault,” Cliff says sharply. “*Some* of us were more careful and have been for *years*.”

“You don't need to remind me,” Hayden grumbles. “I've got a hundred people on the internet threatening to explode me with hammers.”

“I don't think that's the phrasing they're using,” Jackie says conversationally. “And it's way more than one hundred.”

“Whatever,” Hayden grumbles. “I'll be home in like 45 minutes.” There is a quick pause. “Marlow, are you sticking around?”

Cliff shrugs, then realizes Hayden can't see him over the fucking phone. “Yeah, I guess,” he says. “I'm learning a lot about Egyptian burial practices.” Behind him, Jade and Ruby let out simultaneous cheers.

“Great, we’ll have dinner,” Jackie says.

Hayden audibly groans. “Fine,” he says. As Hayden addresses his family, Cliff’s phone pings. Instead of fighting Hayden Pike any further, Cliff decides to check it.

ROZ💯🔥🥵

ROZ💯🔥🥵 is typing…

Today

Marlow

hey man, I just saw. Just want to tell you I’m here for you brother. Call me, text me, whatever. I’ll be here for you.

11:09

Roz💯🔥🥵

thanks cliff

5:42

Roz💯🔥🥵

this means a lot

5:42

Marlow

Of course man!! I'm always here for you

5:43

Marlow

I had your back on the ice now I got it on land and whatever

5:43

Roz💯🔥🥵

im sorry i never told you

5:45

Marlow

It’s okay, I get it

5:45

Marlow

Also, I figured it out years ago

5:45

Roz💯🔥🥵

what

5:45

Roz💯🔥🥵

really???

5:46

Marlow

Yeah dude

5:46

Marlow

Hammers and I figured it out

5:46

Marlow

The whole team was trying but I think only the two of us made the connection, idk. We threw everyone else off your trail

5:47

Roz💯🔥🥵

how

5:47

Marlow

I might have told the team that Jane has massive boobs, for example

5:48

Roz💯🔥🥵

HA

5:48

Roz💯🔥🥵

I will tell Shane this

5:49

Marlow

Please don’t

5:49

Roz💯🔥🥵

too late

5:49

Marlow

Bro

5:49

Roz💯🔥🥵

5:51

Marlow

ANYWAYS

5:51

Marlow

Remember I’ve always got your back

5:51

Marlow

Pretty sure you've got most of the old team in your corner…in case you need to kill anyone

5:51

Marlow

Such as Pike

5:51

Roz💯🔥🥵

thanks marly. Pike is fine for now

5:51

Roz💯🔥🥵

Shane will be sad if he is murdered so please do not do that

5:51

Marlow

Aight man

5:52

Marlow

In case you want me to whack him a little…I'm in his house right now

5:52

Roz💯🔥🥵

you are in pike’s house??? Right now??

5:52

Marlow

Yeah

5:52

Marlow

Jade keeps asking me if I'm going to mummify her dad

5:52

Roz💯🔥🥵

Say hi to Jackie and the kids for me

5:52

Roz💯🔥🥵

do not mummify Pike he does not deserve such luxurious burial rites

5:53

Marlow

Noted

5:53

Marlow

I'll deliver the news to his young impressionable children

5:53

Roz💯🔥🥵

😂

5:53

Roz💯🔥🥵

anyways I should go. phone keeps blowing up so I'm going to turn it off and blow my shane instead

5:53

Marlow

Come on man I didn't want that visual

5:54

Roz💯🔥🥵

you are LUCKY you get to imagine that visual

5:54

Roz💯🔥🥵

we are sexy people, Marly. develop some taste

5:54

Marlow

Nah I’m good on that front

5:54

Roz💯🔥🥵

hmmm you are right. You do have taste

5:54

Roz💯🔥🥵

Natalia is 🤤

5:55

Marlow

Don't talk about my girlfriend you big whore

5:55

Roz💯🔥🥵

do not worry. I am happily taken man with ring on his finger and everything

5:55

Roz💯🔥🥵

speaking of, when are you putting a ring on Natalia's finger?

5:55

Marlow

Wait

5:55

Marlow

Roz

5:56

Marlow

Ring?

5:56

Marlow

Roz

5:56

Marlow

Are you fucking married

5:56

Roz💯🔥🥵

engaged :)))

5:56

Roz💯🔥🥵

wait for wedding invite

5:56

Marlow

Dude

5:56

Marlow

Since WHEN

5:56

Marlow

ROZ

5:59

Marlow

ROZ GET BACK HERE AND ANSWER ME

6:04

Marlow

Fine, I’ll ask Pike

The wedding invite came in the form of a text message two weeks before the wedding alongside a simple *cum if you can* 🔥💦🍾👰💍, which led Cliff to immediately call Ilya and ask him what the fuck is wrong with him.

When he asked Ilya about a bachelor party, the best man, rehearsal stuff, and all of that wedding jazz, Ilya simply made a noncommittal hum and alerted Cliff that “we just want to be married. The details don't really matter to us. We’d probably just elope if Shane’s parents would let us, but I think Yuna would burn City Hall down if we tried.”

So that's that. It's a ragtag affair in Ilya and Shane’s backyard with decorations that were probably very fucking expensive to obtain on short notice, an extremely odd catered menu, and entirely too few chairs.

Cliff and Natalia have to share a chair, which is more than fine because that means Cliff gets the incredible honour of having Natalia sit on his lap at a formal event. Natalia pulled out all of the stops for this wedding: she’s whipped out a red, floor-length dress with a plunging neckline that made Cliff’s eye pop out of his head when she pulled it out of the back of her closet, as well as a pair of strappy, low-heeled sandals that match her jewelry (initially, she wanted to go for something taller, which would have made her closer to 6’3”, but opted for the short ones after remembering that this is a wedding happening on a grass lawn. What a shame; Cliff loves it when she looms over him a little). She even rescheduled a hair appointment so she could have fresh butterfly locs in time for the ceremony.

She looks amazing, made even more so obvious by the fact that the bar is concerningly low here. Johansson just rolled in wearing khaki pants and a pair of converse. Cliff’s pretty sure one of the Centaurs is wearing black jeans with a suit jacket. At least Natalia has some good company; Rose Landry is milling around wearing a beautiful, glittering dress that probably costs more than the Pike family minivan. She’s probably looking for some poor sucker who will give up their hard-earned chair for her. This should not be too difficult.

(Speaking of the Pikes, for some reason Hayden Pike appears scandalized based the way his eyes keep snapping to the way Cliff’s hand is resting on Natalia’s hip to hold her steady on his lap, which is crazy because Pike has multiple children. He can handle seeing a tiny bit of PDA. How on Earth is he Shane Hollander’s close friend? Shane and Ilya are like, ludicrously guilty of PDA. Ilya spends more time slung across Shane’s chest or back than he does standing up by himself.)

Maybe this– the chair-sharing situation– wouldn't have happened if Ilya and Shane simply had chairs at their wedding.

Granted, it doesn't seem like this is a particularly thought-out affair (which Cliff knew, in theory, but seeing it in practice is kind of wild); their lackluster invitations (apparently Ilya was in charge of text messages, while Shane preferred emails) didn't even provide anything like a dress code or plus one info or *anything* else relevant to a normal wedding ceremony. Cliff texted Ilya to ask if he should plan the bachelor party and Ilya simply responded that it isn't necessary because he's been a taken man since he was a teenager. This is factually incorrect, but Cliff isn't about to correct the guy on his own fucked up relationship timeline in the same text thread as his wedding invitation.

About 40% of the 2018 Boston Bears roster made their way to the wedding despite the short notice, accompanied by a few guys who retired or were traded in the years prior. A few of them (Cliff, Hammersmith, Carmichael, Connors, Varkov, and St-Simon) even managed to swing early arrivals to Ottawa in hopes of throwing something akin to a bachelor party despite Ilya's insistence that it's unnecessary. Luckily, they are in good company; The Centaurs have the same idea.

The real issue is deciding what the hell to do for a last-minute bachelor party for a former partyguy now living in the snoozefest that is Ottawa. There's a limit to the antics that can possibly happen in Ottawa, Ontario, although the younger guys on the Centaurs team keep swearing up and down that there is plenty to do if you know where to look. Cliff's getting the vibe that a lot of said things to do involve crashing college parties, which isn't really cool to do once you hit like 25. There are bars, sure, and a good chunk of the Centaurs and Bears suggest something along the lines of an all-night bar crawl or at least a few tables at a local favourite called Monk's as an homage to Ilya's infamous past. There's also the matter of Shane Hollander technically being a Centaur now, so the team has decided that the bachelor party would be for both Ilya and Shane simultaneously.

Cliff's pretty sure both sides of the to-be-wed couple are meant to be separated for their respective bachelor parties, but the Centaurs seem to have no intentions on doing that.

One of the Centaurs, Zane Boodram, told Cliff in a fond-yet-exhausted way that apparently the Centaurs and the Voyageurs initially had intentions to hold two separate bachelor parties for the husbands-to-be (while Shane is officially a Centaur now, he barely knows those guys, whereas he's been a Voyageur since he was a teenager), but that the idea died in the water once it became clear that "the Voyageurs" in this context meant Hayden Pike and JJ Boiziau *only*. Hayden, always a disappointment, told Zane that he and JJ planned to just have a casual hangout ("he said it would probably involving a run or something equally insane, I don't know, man, who the fuck organizes a jog as part of a bachelor's party?" Zane told Cliff) with Shane in lieu of a real party.

Cliff feels bad for Shane; while he's feeling a sense of perverse victory at the way the Boston Bears once again have beaten the Montreal Voyageurs at something and again proven that they're an inherently better team, he hates what said victory represents. He has heard through the grapevine that shit was bad in the Voyageurs locker room this past season. Cliff knows about all of the rumours flying around the MLH of the type of shit the Voyageurs got up to behind closed doors once their longtime captain's love life hit TMZ and Twitter feeds around North America. Seeing the natural result of that is harrowing nonetheless. Shane Hollander led that thankless team for years and only two guys seem to still give him the time of day, and one of those guys is Hayden fucking Pike. That shit sucks.

Also, apparently, a few Centaurs were concerned that holding separate bachelor's parties would lead Ilya to mope and weep the entire time he is separated from Shane.

Cliff's beginning to get the sense that Ilya has only become more down bad for Shane Hollander as the years have worn on. Cliff always knew that Ilya's Montreal girl really worked him up, but the

clingy, co-dependent guy in front of him is far more intense than he could have ever imagined. Ilya's phone lockscreen and wallpaper are both set to cycle through a series of photographs of Shane Hollander and their dog that Cliff has caught him staring at his phone wistfully on multiple occasions during the short 48 hours he's been in Ottawa. Since the beginning of June, Ilya hasn't shut up about Shane on Twitter, Instagram, and everywhere else he's managed to make an account before the Centaurs' definitely overworked social media team can wrangle and gag him. Even messages traded between Ilya and anyone else (Cliff has confirmed via looking at several text threads between Ilya and various current and former Boston Bears) contain probably too much information about Shane Hollander. What was once "I" and "me" has morphed into "we" and "us," like Ilya and Shane have fused together like two plants that have been grafted. This isn't just worked up; this is down *horrendous.* Cliff tries to imagine what 2015 Cliff would think if he were to see his rambunctious and whorish friend at his home in suburban Ottawa, staring lovingly and mushily at a photo of Shane Hollander cuddling a dog. He'd probably assume Ilya had a psychotic break, or perhaps a concussion so bad that it altered his brain chemistry. Alas, this is the reality of 2021.

In the end, the "bachelor party" ended up being a simple barbecue hosted at Zane Boodram's house, flooded with Centaurs and a selection of Boston Bears and Montreal Voyageurs (again, just two of them, one of them being *Hayden Pike*, the guy who Cliff is like 80% sure is still a massive biphobe and fumbled his best friend's trust so hard that it resulted in two people being outed against their will and the destruction of 95% of the relationships Shane formed in Montreal, but *whatever*). The Boodrams apparently run a tight ship and accepted little help from anyone else, although they did seem to appreciate the ragtag Boston Bears cohort's insistence on paying for dessert catering. They got the good shit, obviously. Cliff watched Hammersmith's eyes water at the price of those fancy little custom hockey puck-and-stick-shaped sugar cookies (which made Cliff roll his eyes, because Hammersmith somehow makes way more money than anyone else on the team), and then Cliff watched in vague fascination as JJ and Hayden balked as Shane took an unceremonious bite out of a puck.

It kind of looked like they were watching Shane undergo mitosis or sprout a pair of wings, which is a pretty extreme reaction to watching a guy eat a cookie, but whatever.

The cookies didn't last long; the Centaurs got a hold of them and decided to try to actually play hockey with the cookies, which left the granite kitchen countertops-turned-impromptu-rink into a mess of crumbs. Dykstra claims to have scored a hat trick in the cookie game, which is absolutely a lie because Cliff knows Evan Dykstra hasn't scored a hat trick in his entire fucking life. One of the Centaurs, a guy named LaPointe, lost rock-paper-scissors and was tasked with cleaning up the mountain of crumbs.

Pike and Boiziau organized a last-minute attempt at a drinking game for the party, because the idea of a bachelor's party without games was just too much to bear. They landed on creating a trivia game about the husbands-to-be…which is difficult to do for a couple that most people didn't know existed until a few months ago and have been historically cagey about their shared history. Unsurprisingly, the trivia questions tend to lean more towards hockey stats and facts.

Anyone who answered incorrectly had to drink. It got ugly.

One of the younger Centaurs, a guy named Luca Haas, absolutely trashed everyone at trivia. Haas parroted back their stats and the various years with an ease that made the hair on the back of Cliff's neck stand up. Who has more assists during the 2015-2016 season? Which award did the couple present together in 2014? How many All Stars games have both of them attended? Who is older?

Who began playing hockey first? When did they announce the Irina Foundation together? In a March 2012 post-game interview, what word did Ilya use to describe Shane's performance?

As the chaos rained around and everyone tried desperately to fight back against the absolute thrashing being given to them by Haas, Ilya insisted on holding Zane's tiny baby, and Cliff tried very, very hard to ignore the very visible and very intense case of baby fever that was oozing from Shane's pores.

Some more personal questions stumped the entire room (including Luca Haas), namely the final question: "Which year did their relationship start?"

The room devolved into fierce debate, made even worse by Shane Hollander calmly announcing that there are multiple possible answers to the question. The responding noise from the group was so loud that it felt like someone was trying to pound Cliff's eardrums with a mallet Ilya covered little Milo Boodram's ears with his palms, engulfing the poor child's head in his hands, and quickly ushered him out of the room, leaving Shane to deal with the consequences.

Shane barely handled it, by the way-- the dickhead just shrugged and said "maybe you'll never know," before announcing Luca Haas as the default winner of trivia. Connors loudly protested this as the 2nd place winner although he was trailing behind Haas by a solid 11 points. Cliff ended up in 5th place, which is fine. Trivia isn't really a big deal. He thinks that maybe if the questions were a bit more personalized, like maybe about the type of shit the couple stock in their shared refrigerator or the number of times Ilya left Montreal with an absolutely gnarly constellation of bruises under his navel, he'd score higher. Alas, they left game planning to the fucking Montreal Voyageurs. As per usual, they disappoint.

Prior to the ceremony, Cliff briefly vacates the single seat he and Natalia are fiercely claiming as their own. It sucks, having to detach himself from her, but he has business to attend to.

From what Cliff has gleaned about the planning of this wedding over the past 56 hours, he knows that Ilya and Shane don't have groomsmen. Cliff half thinks that this is because they couldn't be bothered to plan even that much, but partially suspects that it also has to do with the fact that Shane would have probably named Hayden Pike his best man, and there is no way in hell that Ilya Rozanov would allow Hayden Pike to stand *that* close to him during his wedding ceremony. Regardless, Cliff would like to imagine that if the opportunity existed, he would have filled that role for Ilya…

…Maybe.

He's gotten the vibe that Svetlana Vetrova would have fist fought any potential competition for the honour, and Cliff's pretty sure he wouldn't stand a chance against her. She may be wiry, but she has an energy about her, like maybe there's a knife strapped to her thigh under her skirt or perhaps she has a canister of bear spray tucked into her bra cup.

Oh well. Cliff still has business to attend to.

Cliff makes his way through Ilya and Shane's massive home and takes in the differences between it and Ilya's Boston apartment. The most obvious difference is the sheer size of it, which Cliff

suspects is Shane's fault. He's been forced to watch that weird documentary about Shane's "cottage" (by Ilya, of course, which in hindsight should have raised some major alarm bells because why on earth was Ilya so interested in watching his alleged rival do yoga on a dock, *much less some of his teammates to watch it with him over some beers*, but back then Cliff was still under the impression that Jane was a mysterious woman and that Ilya was just weirdly intense about his rivalry) and knows that Shane's concept of living space size is kind of skewed. Then, of course, is the more homey atmosphere of the place: while Ilya's Boston apartment featured a few pieces of weird abstract art, the Ottawa home features a mix of weird art and clusters of framed photos of the couple (and Shane's parents). There aren't many photos, length of their relationship considered, but the ones hung on the wall are carefully curated: a photo from a commercial Cliff vaguely remembers from many years ago, a photo from their draft day, a few scattered photos of major wins like their cup wins and Shane's Olympic silver medal, a photo of them wearing matching Christmas sweaters, a photo of the two of them in front of a lake, a few photos from the Irina Foundation camps and press conferences, and a whole lot of photos of the couple with their dog. There is a faint outline around one of the photo clusters, like there used to be a large art piece in place of the frames. Cliff suspects that these photos he is seeing right now are new additions to the wall.

While the house seems freshly cleaned and tidied in preparation of the last-minute wedding, there are still some signs of regular, everyday life: matching slippers arranged on a shoe rack, a stray cup left on a counter, a dog chew toy on the floor in the living room, and one of Ilya's cracked-spine, dog-eared, ratty books left unceremoniously on a side table next to a pristine-looking copy of Style at Home.

When Cliff finds Ilya, Ilya is methodically tucking his shirt into his pants.

"Can I come in real quick?" Cliff asks after knocking on the side of the doorframe.

"Marly!" Ilya greets with a huge smile on his face. He continues to cram his shirt into his pants.

"You nervous?" Cliff asks as he enters.

Ilya shakes his head, still smiling. "No, not at all," he says. "I've been waiting for this day for a long time." Ilya finally manages to situate his shirt to his liking before buttoning up the fly of his pants. Briefly, Cliff is reminded of sharing a locker room with him and putting on their suits post-game. "I have imagined it many times," Ilya continues. "But I never imagined that so many people would be in my corner, I think."

And fuck, if that isn't a sad thought. "We've always had your back, man," Cliff says, trying to squish all of the emotions swirling in his chest into a neat and tidy little package complete with a nonchalant bow on top. They really have always had his back, and they would have had it earlier if Ilya needed them to.

"I know this," Ilya says. His smile fades into something slightly smaller and just a teensy bit wobbly. "I think that maybe knowing and seeing it in reality are different things."

Cliff nods. The two of them are silent for a few moments.

"Need help with anything?" Cliff asks.

"No, I am okay," Ilya says. "You should go back out. Maybe make sure Carmy isn't setting my lawn on fire."

He’s managed to do it before. They were both there to witness it.

Cliff huffs out a small laugh. Before exiting the room, he claps a hand on Ilya’s shoulder. “Don't be a stranger, brother,” he says.

“I won't,” Ilya nods. "You better propose to Natalia soon so I can make trivia game for you," he continues. "I have many interesting Marly fun facts. Maybe instead of trivia I will just make a presentation about your worst flirting fumbles before Natalia took pity on you. I could rank them. Or maybe I will do a very long speech about what happened on June 14, 2014."

"A presentation, fuckin' hell, who are you?" Cliff jeers.

"A man about to get married," Ilya announces, puffing out his chest. "You should try it sometime."

Chapter End Notes

If you wanna talk about bullshit or ask questions or anything you can reach me on discord at taylor.gif !!

End Notes

(me pointing at cliff marlow) YOU WILL BE MY PERFECT LITTLE WET AND PATHETIC LOSERMAN (me pointing at ilya rozanov) AND YOU WILL BE NEUROTIC ABOUT PERSONAL CARE

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