

The Way Hockey Is

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The Way Hockey Is

by [Erisenyo](#)

Summary

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Cliff ignores it, staring past Pike's shoulder. "Fucking Christ, fucking—are they—"

"Shut the fuck up, shut up, shut your fucking *mouth*, Marlow."

"They're—fuck, fuck, I didn't mean to, I didn't—" Cliff finds himself looking at Pike almost pleadingly, a weird helplessness buzzing in his fingertips and toes. "I didn't *kno*—"

"You don't know shit," Pike says savagely, physically putting himself between Cliff and the space Hollander used to be. "Shut your fucking mouth, you don't know anything."]

OR,

Cliff Marlow's POV of The Hit and the aftermath, as he starts to put a few things together.

Notes

Episode 5 was absolutely fantastic in all ways, my brain has been vibrating with the idea of Cliff as Ilya's best friend on the team finally putting some things together with all the ups and downs of the 2017 season. A huge thank you to the always wonderful sooz and meesh for assuring me that there was something here worth figuring out, and to dntat for the beta!

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

April 2017 – Montreal

It happens fast the way hockey always does, almost too fast to process, just instinct and reaction and muscle memory dug deep enough it's in his bones: a hit, a clean one, and Cliff nearly overbalances with it anyway when he doesn't meet the resistance he's expecting. He automatically adjusts his weight as the crowd is still shouting in excitement, is already slowing before he consciously registers the gasp-hush that follows, because that sound only ever means—

Someone crashes into him already screaming. “—*fuck you, fuck you, fuck you, you mother—*”

“Fuck off, go fuck yourself,” Cliff reflexively defends himself, shoving away *Hayden fucking Pike* of all people to catch a glimpse of Hollander still slumped on the ice and a splatter of *red* and—

Pike makes an inarticulate, furious noise and takes another swing that Cliff blocks on instinct, grabbing onto Pike's jersey when the dude nearly overbalances because he forgot that they're on fucking ice, the idiot. Fucking Christ. Couldn't it be Dagenais?

“What the fuck, man, save it for later,” he grunts, giving Pike a little shake and trying to see past his shoulder. “You want to do this *now*? Let your boy get off the ice first before you need a medic too.” More than one medic, at that. More than two. *All* the medics from the look of it. Fuck.

Pike just shouts, “I'm going to *end you*,” like he isn't a full head shorter than Cliff, like that's what's *needed* right now. “You fucking goon, you useless motherfuck—”

“Chill out, man,” Cliff snaps, trying to disentangle himself and get around him. If *Hayden fucking Pike* is going to turn this into a line brawl, Cliff isn't letting Roz get jumped. And with the way Roz is just staring at Hollander—Cliff would call it gawking if not for the urgency of whatever Roz is trying to say to the medics, but whatever it is, Roz clearly isn't paying any attention to—

“*Fuck*,” Cliff grunts as Pike actually lands a hit. “What the *fuck*, dude,” he demands, trying to corral Pike's arm. He doesn't *want* to lay out a second Montreal forward, but he fucking *will* if Pike doesn't fucking *drop* it. “You want to join your boy? It wasn't on *purpose*, man, it was a clean hit!”

Which gets him another furious noise and a surprisingly good swing from someone who isn't a brawler. Cliff doesn't even try to avoid it. He *is* a brawler. And he knows that it doesn't actually matter that the hit was clean, when it goes like this. Hollander is still down and Roz is staring like he's going to be sick and they're bringing out a *back board*, fuck, fuck.

“Dude, just chill out,” Cliff huffs, trying to trap Pike's arms between them, trying to see if Hollander's skates are moving, his legs, anything, trying to tell what Roz is saying. “Defend your boy's honor or whatever later, man, you've got the rest of the game, now isn't the time.”

“*Fuck* you,” Pike spits out, sounding like he’s about to *cry*. “*Fuck* you, fuck you, *fuck* you—”

“Dude, just—calm the fuck down,” Cliff says in alarm, even though he *knows* it’s the wrong thing to say, Tess always hated when he said that. Pike just thrashes against him, face screwed up and arms trapped. “You really want to start something?” Cliff tries instead, which usually ends things, except Pike looks like he really, really does. “Pike just—don’t do this *now*,” he nearly pleads. They’re taking out a *neck brace*, Cliff can’t make himself say as his stomach turns. But Pike must notice anyway because he makes another tight, furious—no, *upset*—noise and abruptly sags in his grip, which...

Pike’s breaths are harsh and loud like they have a full game under their belts and not barely half a shift, his fists twisted in Cliff’s sweater, and Cliff just—automatically keeps Pike locked tight. Like they’re just one of the other pairs on the ice, everyone half-heartedly ready for a fight they all hope isn’t about to happen.

Everyone except Roz, because normally he’d be paired up with—but the ref has Roz, shoving him back like it’s just a normal Montreal game when Roz can’t seem to resist starting something with Hollander. Or no, like it’s one of those games from before the All-Star break when Roz was acting like he *needed* to start something with anyone willing, and Hollander is just laying there exactly the way he fell, and Cliff can’t tell if his skates are moving because Hollander is moving them or because the meds are moving him, so Cliff thinks he gets it.

“I wasn’t trying to do anything,” Cliff says like that matters. The medics lift Hollander off the ice and Cliff suddenly wishes Pike was still trying to square up. The ref is physically forcing Roz back, which is probably smart. He looks like he’s finally about to snap the way Cliff’s still been half-waiting for, not trusting that some Florida sunshine was all Roz needed after two fucking months of prowling around like he was itching for a fight until suddenly he wasn’t anymore, the fucker. “It was a clear hit.”

Pike makes some terrible noise that might be a laugh. “Sure it was. Sure you fucking weren’t.”

“Go fuck yourself, I don’t need to take anyone out to beat your ass,” Cliff says, trying to find the clean feeling of a good fight, the one that sweeps everything else away.

But of course Pike doesn’t do anything *now*, just lets out another of those awful noises, and so Cliff doesn’t have any distraction at all from the way Roz is watching Hollander being carted off the ice.

Fuck. Roz looks worse than when his fucking *dad* died. Like they’re right back to aftermath of that fucking Montreal game in November when Roz had played like shit and gotten on the outs with his Montreal Girl, probably not in that order, and made it all their problem for weeks afterward.

Christ, he’d been so pissy. Not even showing him Hollander headlines could get him scoffing and joking the way it usually did. Every comment and remark and glance just seemed to push him closer to snapping, and Cliff had thought if the dad-thing didn’t do it then they were in the clear. But Roz is suddenly wearing the same face he wore when Cliff thought he might

throw his phone every time it vibrated and clearly wasn't who Roz wanted, like Hollander being carried off the ice is sucking all that Florida sunshine right back out of him, and...

"Oh fuck," Cliff hears himself say out loud as his brain suggests—something. "Roz and Holl...oh, *fuck*."

Pike goes still for a moment before shoving him, rough and unexpected enough that Cliff nearly overbalances. "Fuck off, Marlow," Pike snarls, hauling him in by the sweater.

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"Shut the fuck up, shut up, shut your fucking *mouth*, Marlow."

"They're—fuck, fuck, I didn't mean to, I didn't—" Cliff finds himself looking at Pike almost *pleadingly*, a weird helplessness buzzing in his fingertips and toes. "I didn't *kno*—"

"You don't know *shit*," Pike says savagely, physically putting himself between Cliff and the space Hollander used to be. "Shut your fucking mouth, you don't know *anything*."

Which isn't a denial and is basically a confirmation, though of what...Cliff can't seem to find the words even in his own head. It's just a jumble of inputs, all of it coming together lightning-fast the way hockey does sometimes, more intuition than thought. But this isn't—Cliff can rely on that for *hockey*, not...*this*. Not the kind of stuff Tess was always telling him at the end he was utterly useless at. And she wasn't wrong, obviously, the fact that he's even *thinking* that the look on Roz's face is related to the things Tess would snap at him, *relationship* things, is just...obviously she was right and it's not...it isn't...That intuition works for *hockey*, not for...

Cliff is vaguely aware of Pike shoving him away, hard. Of letting himself be pushed back, even though that just lets him see Roz *and* the red-spattered—Of the refs finally clearing the ice, starting with Roz who doesn't fight it. Of his own legs moving more automatically than on purpose as he finds his way to the huddle at the bench, that buzzing feeling creeping up his legs, his arms.

"It was a clean hit," Victor says with his usual gruff sympathy, and it *was*, but...

"Hollander should have had his head up," Brown says, and he should have, he didn't—he was in the fucking neutral zone and looking *back*, looking at...

"Part of the game." Carmichael gives Cliff a rough pat on the shoulder. "Shit happens."

"We all get our bell rung, he'll be fine," Varkov says, sounding like he's hoping as much as reassuring. And Cliff would normally accept all the words, would normally laugh it off and agree and make sure the guys were hyped up to keep playing because that's what an A *does*, it's just what hockey *is*.

But all he can seem to do is swallow, hard, and dredge up a bare nod, his stomach churning as he stares at Roz not even halfway down the bench, in hearing distance and aching, conspicuously silent.

“Right,” Cliff rasps out and finally sits down, shaky.

The rest of the game happens like it’s in slow motion. It feels like they’re playing on sand instead of ice, every minute of it a grueling slog. His legs are heavy and his thoughts slow and he keeps looking up expecting the game to be nearly over only to find the clock’s barely moved at all. He’s almost relieved to find his minutes cut because he’s not—out there he isn’t —

They’ve all seen guys get hit before. They’ve all *been* hit before. People go down all the time, that’s the game no matter how clean you play it. But something like that—it’s different. It’s *bad* no matter what you say about it, and it clings to them all, sticky and heavy as they grind out the rest of the game.

Cliff would normally be able to shrug off the feeling, to make the right jokes and heckle the right people to make sure they’re going out to the bar after. But this...he knows he’s *supposed* to but he can’t—this is *different*, this is...

“I didn’t know, Rozy,” Cliff finds himself saying when the shuffling of players on and off the bench puts them next to each other. Except he doesn’t *know* anything, he doesn’t, he just— “I didn’t mean to,” he corrects, unsure why he suddenly needs to say that so badly, mid-game and when they might get tapped for another shit at any moment and they’re just words, they’re *useless* so why... “I didn’t—Roz, I...” he trails off when Roz doesn’t react at all, realizing after a moment that he’s just staring at the guy at a total loss.

Cliff jerks his eyes away, trying to flex that buzzing feeling out of his hands. He can still see out of the corner of his eye the way Roz’s jaw is locked tight, a look on his face that would be furious as long as Cliff doesn’t focus on the way Roz’s eyes are glittering overbright, something Cliff could just mistake for the gleam of lights on his visor except...

Roz explodes off the bench for his next shift, the only thing that feels like it’s still moving at normal speed. Cliff sits and watches him streak away and feels...helpless. Or heavy, or—something.

Roz had been playing since the All-Star break like he was having *fun* again, shit talking and joking in the locker room and smiling at his phone again. And somehow that just makes his presence on the ice *now* seem like some kind of...confirmation. Some kind of sign, some kind of...something.

Cliff looks around, floundering. But no one is looking at him in that post-hit way Cliff knows, like they’re all trying to forget what could happen, what *did* happen. No one except Hayden fucking Pike, Christ, who’s glaring and venomous like Cliff has never seen the guy before. Not that Cliff really pays attention to him, but the dude’s basically a golden retriever, AirBud if someone thought to give the dog skates and a stick instead of a basketball. But now...

“Shit happens, dude,” Felly offers after the game as they line up to leave the ice.

“Sometimes it’s a bad fall,” Seb shrugs.

“Tough luck, man.”

“Shit sucks, man.”

“A win’s a win, right?” Aud says, clapping him on the shoulder and not quite meeting his eyes, and Cliff takes his place at the end of the line like he’s skating through sludge.

Pike’s watching Roz for once instead of him and Cliff follows his gaze to where Roz is standing at his usual spot by the gate, hand raised for fist bumps and eyes fixed across the ice, lips pressed tight.

Cliff goes through his post-game motions with that tingling feeling in his whole body now, a lifetime of momentum keeping him moving. Roz blows off the media and not even PR Stacey tries to push it when Roz just stares at her, face looking like that. The room is loud with chatter and jokes and Roz’s entire body is locked down so tight and so obviously brimming with a crackling, horribly kind of energy that Cliff can barely look at him. He wonders if the rest of the guys actually don’t see it, or if they’re just giving Roz the grace of pretending not to, the same way they’d all do on those days when Roz’s phone rang and rang and rang until he finally picked it up to spit out white-hot, clipped Russian.

Cliff stares at Roz’s phone and now feels like he can’t entirely breathe, that tingling tightening around his lungs. He waits for Roz to pick it up, *wills* him to flip open his texts with that little smile on his face, his Montreal Girl Look, the one he’d had pre-game and they’re in Montreal and—

Cliff used to love that Roz thought he wasn’t being obvious about the whole thing. He suddenly doesn’t, anymore.

“Roz,” Cliff says when he can’t take it any longer. Roz turns to him like he might fight, or break apart, and Cliff stalls out. “Brother…”

Roz visibly puts himself back into captain-mode, such a *physical* shift that it feels a little like whiplash. “What.”

“Roz, I didn’t mean to…” Cliff suddenly feels the absence of Roz’s fist bump and the silence in place of his joking *I love you* like a punch. “I promise, I didn’t—”

“Yes,” Roz cuts him off, jaw tight as he concentrates on shoving his feet into his shoes. “Was clean hit,” he says so bitterly Cliff wonders if he’s about to see him cry. “S—Hollander should have kept his head up.”

“Roz, I didn’t *know*—” He suddenly hears Pike hissing at him to shut up and flounders again. “I—I didn’t know that was going to happen,” he finishes lamely, trying to fill the words with—meaning, intent, *something*. He and Roz have a thousand ways to say *fuck you* and *fuck off* to each other and know exactly what the other is getting at, so why does it suddenly feel like they’re a thousand miles away from each other? Like he *needs* Roz to understand but barely knows what he’s trying to say because the idea that Roz and *Hollander*…

Cliff swallows, fighting to breathe. Maybe he and Roz have always been a thousand miles away from each other.

“Is fine, Marlow,” Roz finally says in that way that sounds like it really, really isn’t. “No one could know.” He takes a deep breath before straightening and offering a horrible kind of smile. “It happens. Hockey, right?”

And it—it *does* just happen, sometimes. It *is* just...a thing that happened the way things just do in the game. Catching an edge wrong, hitting a divot in the ice, the puck luck not going your way, that’s what hockey *is*. It doesn’t...it doesn’t have to *mean* something, it doesn’t have to mean that Cliff...that he...

“Roz, man,” he says, feeling like that space between them is growing wider even though Roz isn’t moving at all. “What do you need, man?”

Roz grunts one of those Russian fuck-off-fuck-you-you-make-no-sense kind of noises.

“You want to, like. Grab a drink?” Cliff knows that’s not right even without Roz pointedly ignoring it. “Or—something?” Not going to pick up, obviously, even though part of him wonders if it wouldn’t help, it’s not like Roz *doesn’t*. Fuck, what do you even *say* to someone when you’ve... “Dinner? We can go out?”

Roz doesn’t look at him in a way that feels worse than a glare. “No.”

“What about—that girl you hang out with? Sveta? You want to call her?” Cliff is suddenly very, very sure that Roz should not be alone right now. He has no idea how to say it when Roz just looks at him, flat.

Christ. Cliff feels suddenly wildly inadequate and unprepared in a way he hasn’t since fucking high school. It *should* be that Sveta chick here, probably. Except it’s not, it’s Cliff. And it’s not like he has her number because it’s not like he and Roz *do* things like give each other the numbers of their other friends, not like he even knows for sure that Roz and her *are* friends and not just fuck buddies because it’s not like he and Roz hang out *that* way.

“We can order in?” he tries. Fuck, have he and Roz ever just gotten dinner? He’s suddenly painfully aware of all the things he and Roz don’t do, apparently. “Or—a ride to the—the hospital?”

Roz stares at him at that, like maybe he’s going to punch him, and Cliff wonders if maybe Tess wasn’t entirely right about him being utterly, fucking useless.

“It’s where—I mean, they’ll take Ho—him to the closest hospital probably, right? We can google that shit or whatever.”

Roz’s jaw tightens.

“And you could...”

Roz stands fully dressed and completely still, like just moving might be enough to break his control. “Could what,” he finally bites out, tight, and Cliff stalls out again. He wants to say

you could see him or you could find out if he's okay, but suddenly he can't get the words out, suddenly isn't even sure if he should. Fuck.

"Roz," Cliff finally says again, the only thing he can apparently say and normally it's enough, normally Roz just—*understands*. "Lets—we can grab a burger or something. Or I can bring something to your room, you can come to mine. We don't have to make it a whole thing, we can just..." What, *be* together? Fucking dance around it the whole night? Sit and watch shitty TV movies and pretend everything is fine, pretend that Cliff isn't the person who put Roz's... whatever into the hospital in the first place, probably the last person Roz ever wants to look at?

Fuck. Tess *was* right. And Cliff really, really didn't think anything would ever make him agree with her about that. He wonders if she'd want to hear it, after this many years.

Roz grunts. "Maybe," he says in that way that means no. Cliff feels helpless. "Maybe," he says again, like it's final, visibly taking a breath and resettling his cross and calming himself in a way that feels very, very uncalm. "I am fine, Marlow," Roz says brusquely, not fully looking at him. "Bus leaves soon, don't hold it up," he adds, striding away, and Cliff stares after him, wondering what the fuck he's supposed to do now, or if maybe he hasn't done more than enough already.

Roz hasn't called him Marlow instead of Marley in—a while.

"Hey, man," Caddy says, giving him a slap on the back that has Cliff remembering to suck in a breath. "Bad luck. You know that, right?"

"Yeah, yeah, I'm fine," Cliff says automatically. Then, "Hey, do you have Pike's number?" he blurts before he even realizes he's going to say it. He's not sure why Caddy *would*, but he's suddenly sure that he *does* need to do something, and that Pike will know what it is, will know...something. Clearly Pike *knows* things, so—

Fuck off Marlow, Pike texts back hours later after Caddy's sent him the number from Zadonsky who got it from Ryan fucking Price of all people. *I think you've done enough*.

I didn't mean to, he wants to say back, but he doesn't, because that doesn't matter. He just watches the little dots move and move until Pike finally sends: *you better stop thinking about it at all if you know what's good for you*

Cliff texts Carmichael next—

Carm (10:02): What do you mean, what to do?

Carm (10:02): There's nothing to do

Carm (10:03): They took hollander to the hospital

Carm (10:04): it's hockey man

—and works through every google search he can think of to see if anyone's gotten an injury update yet. Does Canada even have HIPAA?

He checks every one of those annoying-as-fuck Twitter and Reddit accounts too that are always saying shit unsourced and uncorroborated and probably totally made up but sometimes true enough to believe. But even they're silent, or talking about Montreal's *chances* if Hollander's gone, as if it's that simple: Hollander out and Montreal adjusting and Boston playing on line normal, like Cliff didn't—like Roz isn't...

Cliff knocks back the rest of the whisky from the minibar and rubs at his gritty eyes, scrolling back and back and back to his texts with Tess. It used to piss him off so much that she'd just *type* this shit instead of say it to him, and it still does as he reads her fucking lists of accusations and complaints and every single thing he's ever done wrong in his whole fucking life, apparently. But he cracks open another little bottle—vodka, decent enough quality, fine—and tries to shove aside his outrage to actually read her words about *showing up* and *actually listening* and *being present emotionally not just physically* because that's what he's supposed to do now, right? Show up for Roz, even though he has no idea how to do that when all their usual things suddenly feel stupid and useless and impossible.

What did you mean by active listening he almost texts her. Almost. He isn't a total idiot.

Brown (11:07): lol why asking about flowers you fuck up with a girl Marly?

Brown (11:07): is she hot? Give me her number I'll make it up to her

Fuck off, Cliff texts, and none of the other things he wants to say.

Fells (11:40): Dude you should come out ultraviolet is fire tonight

Blonde Chrissy Montreal (12:03): looking to celebrate that win big guy? [image attached]

Max (12:08): Dude you made SportsCenter Top 10 that hit was INSANE!!!!

It was, Cliff doesn't type back, putting his head down against the desk and taking a deep breath. Fuck, why is this so—*hard*. Roz used to be the easy one on this team. Just get him to a party or a girl, distract him from his phone and give him an excuse to ignore it, and problem solved. Worst case, dangle an opportunity to mock Hollander in front of the guy and he'd bounce right back to normal and Christ if Cliff isn't going to have to think about *that* fact.

Later though. Once he figures out what the fuck he's supposed to do, since dangling Hollander in front of Roz isn't exactly an *option* in the current...

Cliff pauses, and thinks about Tess texting that it wasn't worth trying anymore since he *had his head up his ass so far he couldn't find his way out with written instructions*. Maybe he should think about that fact now, actually.

Cliff (12:46): Hey dude, are you going to do that captain injury check in thing?

Roz (12:48): ??

Cliff (12:48): like when captains go check on players who get injured

Roz (12:51): are you injured

Cliff (12:52): no for the other team

Cliff (12:52): like being all classy and gentlemanly and stuff

Cliff (12:54): that's a thing

Cliff (12:55): you've done it before asshole I know you know it's a thing

Cliff closes his eyes and quietly curses and marinated in the feeling of finally understanding years too late what Tess meant by *texting like you're already defensive*.

Roz (12:57): its 1 in the morning

Cliff (12:58): obviously when visiting hours open fuck head

Cliff (12:58): sorry

Roz (1:04): why would I do this

Roz (1:04): I do not visit every player who tweaks ankle playing Boston

Cliff stares at his phone for a long time and wonders if he's wrong, or if he just wants to be. Except Roz *has* done this before, when Alston went down two years ago and that third-line winger from Tampa the year before that. So Cliff thinks probably he's not wrong at all, that Roz wouldn't think anything of it if it were actually nothing.

Cliff (1:08): do whatever you want man

Cliff (1:08): but if you do go you can like offer my apologies or whatever

Cliff (1:09): to Hollander

Cliff (1:09): I don't have his number

Though he's probably seen it, he realizes, with how often he's glanced at Roz's phone and seen him texting his Montreal Girl. *Jane*. It was always more fun to tease Roz without her name, but Christ, maybe he should have given it a shot. He might have figured it out faster, might not be sitting here now trying to figure out *this*.

Cliff (1:12): besides I think it would be weird if it was me

Cliff (1:12): not sure he'd really like to see me right now

Cliff (1:12): or here from me or whatever

Cliff (1:15): but I am

Cliff (1:15): sorry, I mean

Cliff immediately wishes he could unsend those messages. This is worse than texting Tess, having that just—*dangling* awkwardly out there...

Cliff (1:18): I never wanted him to get hurt at all, especially not that way

Cliff (1:19): you don't have to tell him that I guess

Cliff (1:21): I'm not really sure why I'm saying it

Cliff shoves his hands under his arms so he doesn't make it even worse. His stomach twists as he waits for those little bubbles to appear and then flips as they start typing, typing, typing, feeling like maybe he's going to vomit as he waits for the reply. Fuck. He shouldn't drink whiskey, he hates whiskey, he should have just stuck with—

Roz (1:25): Okay

“What the fuck does *okay*—”

Roz (1:25): I will tell him this thing for you if you go to bed

Roz (1:25): You are weird person after 2, Marly. Getting too close. You turn into pumpkin soon.

Cliff sags, blowing out a slow, long breath. Okay. One of *those* ‘okay’s, then, the ones that mean ‘yes’, and Cliff is suddenly so, so relieved as he stares at the word. He thinks of texting Tess again and then still doesn't because he isn't a masochist, either.

He can't bring himself to go to bed yet, though, even though his body is suddenly heavy and dragging. He just stays in that uncomfortable desk chair, turning the TV remote in his hands without turning it on and refreshing his phone for any news, looking up visiting hours at the hospital, pulling up directions to the visitor's entrance is and maps of the layout. He wonders if he should text this stuff to Roz. He wonders if that's too obvious. He thinks about Roz being so obvious about his Montreal Girl who apparently isn't a girl at all and wonders if he even knows what the word ‘obvious’ means.

Cliff does sleep eventually, waking up far too soon feeling gritty and awful. He fumbles for his phone, thankful he typed out this text before he passed out last night so he can just hit send now.

Cliff (7:06): hey man how was being all gentlemanly and stuff

He rolls over, phone in hand and head and body pounding as he waits for—

Roz (7:12): was most interested when nurse warned me not to suffocate Hollander with pillow

Cliff stares, trying to fumble his thoughts together. Is that—good? Or?

Roz (7:14): playoff chances just got much better. Hollander is out for rest of season.

Cliff feels ill.

Roz (7:14): concussion, broken collarbone

Roz (7:15): Lots of pain pills, VERY high

Cliff (7:16): shit that sucks

Cliff (7:16): glad he wasn't feeling it at least

Cliff stares at the words, thumbs hovering over the keypad. They feel awkward and inadequate, clumsy as he reads them back, even worse to imagine saying out loud. Christ. Tess would laugh at him, probably.

Roz (7:20): yes

Roz (7:20): he says he doesn't blame you, also

Roz (7:20): in between other very high things he was saying

Cliff wonders very much what those things are, wonders if it's natural or just second-nature for Roz to be so dismissive of them. Roz has been texting his Montreal Girl for...years. Since his rookie year? As long as he's been on the team, probably.

Roz (7:21): he knows you didn't mean to do it

Cliff squeezes his eyes shut against the sudden sting, exhaling long and slow and then taking a deep breath or two, then another, the way he learned to do from that sports shrink in the minors until he finally stops feeling so shaky.

Great, he finally manages to send back, *I wouldn't blame him if he did*. If you did, he wants to send, but—he thinks it's enough. Maybe. That Roz gets what he means, or close enough to count.

Roz (7:24): Hollander is not like that I think

Roz (7:24): class act

Cliff thinks of all the things he'd say to one of the guys who found themselves with a nice girl that, teasing and mocking and chirping the way hockey always is, even with your own teammates.

Yeah, seems like he really is, Cliff sends instead. He doesn't know how to chirp someone about this. Maybe later, once he has time, maybe when it's not still too...soon.

Cliff (7:26): I'm glad he's doing okay

Cliff (7:27): thanks for going for me, man. Appreciate it.

Roz types and types and types before finally sending a single thumbs-up emoji, and Cliff stares at his screen, wondering for a long time at all the things Roz might not be saying, too. At all the things Roz is *definitely* not saying, and Cliff—he chirps his teammates like breathing because that's the way hockey is, and the idea of suddenly holding onto *this* and not saying anything...

Cliff (7:38): Dude how the fuck do you keep this quiet I've only known for 12 hours and I feel insane

Pike (7:38): wtf its not even 8am

Cliff (7:38): Hollander's fine btw

Pike (7:38): how do you know that

Pike (7:39): also you don't know anything

Pike (7:39): fuck off

Cliff (7:40): Roz just visited him in the hospital

Pike (7:40): and he told you???

Cliff (7:40): I wanted to make sure Hollander was okay

Cliff (7:40): he was doing me a solid

Pike (7:41):

Pike (7:41): you don't know shit Marlow

Cliff (7:41): you'd know what that feels like I guess

Pike (7:42): fuck off

Pike (7:44): thanks for telling me

Cliff starts and stops a few texts and finally just sends a thumbs up emoji. And then sighs and thunks his head against the pillow and thinks of Tess and makes himself add, *No problem dude. Least I could do.*

He keeps thinking of Tess after that, though. Like it's their fucking breakup all over again, Christ, he hasn't thought about her this much in years. She'd always snipe at him that words mattered and had meaning, and Cliff was always irritated that she'd act like she didn't understand what he meant when they both full-well knew what she did, but maybe she had a point about that, too. The least Cliff can do suddenly doesn't seem like all that much anymore.

He turns his phone slowly in his hands, thinking how long he has until they have to report for film and see Roz and pretend...whatever Roz wants to pretend, Cliff supposes. Then he unlocks the screen instead of going back to sleep, searching *how to support bro in closet* and relieved to see a slew of Reddit threads in the results. Figuring out how to help his Captain—that's what being a good A is. And knowing how to be have your teammate's back without needing to be told, on and off the ice—that's what hockey is, too.

End Notes

The likelihood that Cliff and Hayden now get in a highly competitive Support-Off for the next *mumble mumble* years: very high lol

I hope you all enjoyed! Thanks so much for reading. Comments, thoughts, kudos, yelling at me on [tumblr](#) are all welcome and appreciated!

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