missing pieces

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at https://archiveofourown.org/works/76240801.

Rating:	Mature
Archive Warning:	No Archive Warnings Apply
Category:	Gen
Fandoms:	Heated Rivalry (TV), Game Changers Series - Rachel Reid
Relationships:	Cliff Marlow & Ilya Rozanov, Kip Grady/Scott Hunter, Shane Hollander/Ilya Rozanov
Characters:	Cliff Marlow, Ilya Rozanov, Scott Hunter (Game Changers), Shane Hollander, Hayden Pike
Additional Tags:	POV Outsider, Episode: s01e05 I'll Believe in Anything (Heated Rivalry), cliff marlow (or marleau) my beloved, Canon Compliant, at least for the tv show
Language:	English
Series:	Part 5 of if we collect all the pieces, maybe we can make a quilt
Stats:	Published: 2025-12-23 Completed: 2026-01-09 Words: 4,894 Chapters: 3/3

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by rubyjean_jacket

Summary

Winning puts things into perspective. So does losing.

Notes

If you're paying very close attention, the announcers during the Cup final say Marleau's name on the broadcast, which is most definitely a goof but in this universe means that Marleau got traded to the Admirals that year after the game where Shane got injured for the rest of the season and playoffs.

Chapter 1

It's quietly devastating, being traded to the Admirals. Of course, Cliff would never say so; it's not a good look, shit-talking your new team, especially when that new team takes you all the way to the Cup finals and you get the second championship ring of your long but unglorious career. Cliff is happy when he raises the Cup over his head to the tune of 20,000 cheering, he really is. But he's devastated all the same.

It's not because he loves Boston. He doesn't. New York is better: better clubs, better food, better team, all of it.

But Boston has Roz, and somehow, over the course of the last six years (five and a half, really), Roz has become the most important person in Cliff's life.

It's not like there's much competition, really. Cliff's mom is dead and his dad isn't in the picture. He doesn't have any siblings. Cliff and Amy split very unamicably years ago, and they'd never had any kids. That was part of the problem. Not all of the problem, not even most of it, but definitely a contributing factor.

It's just… you play with a guy for six years, you start to care about him. Especially a guy like Roz. An asshole who knows exactly what he is, and isn't ashamed of it, not one bit. A guy who came into the league like a fucking firecracker, who didn't need any adjustment before lighting it up. Roz was born for this: for bright lights and adoration. It's magnetic. He's magnetic.

And maybe Cliff was looking forward to retiring in Boston. Looking forward to shaking his captain's hand and swallowing around the lump in his throat, trying to find the words to tell him how much these past few years have meant to him. Something cliche, like, *It's been an honour.* Or something sappier, like, *You'll always be my brother.*

It doesn't matter what Cliff would've said, though, because he doesn't get a chance to say it. The trade deadline approaches and Cliff gets a call day-of that changes the course of his life very little, in the grand scheme of things, but breaks his heart all the same.

Cliff's new captain is Scott Hunter.

"Welcome to the team," Hunter says, when Cliff arrives at the rink for his first practise. "We're happy to have you."

Boring, is what Roz would say.

"Happy to be here," Cliff says, which is a bald-faced lie.

He is like dinosaur, the Roz in Cliff's head says, even while watching Hunter weave and deke around defensemen. *Like fossil. Ten hundred million years old. I am better. Watch.*

And Roz is. He's the best Cliff's ever seen. Definitely the best Cliff's ever played with.

I know, Cliff says to the Roz in his head. *I'm sorry I wasn't better for you.*

Because Roz has a Cup, won in Boston, but he doesn't have the dynasty that Hollander is building, and Cliff knows it eats away at him. Roz is the best, and he wants everyone to know it. He deserves that much.

But the Admirals play the Raiders in the playoffs. Second round. Roz is playing hurt and everyone knows it, so all the Admirals are finishing their checks on him, wearing him down. Cliff sends Roz into the boards and Roz swears at him, cussing him out in breathless Russian, and all Cliff wants to say is *I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry.*

It reminds him of the Hollander hit. One of the last games Cliff played as a Raider, but of course he didn't know that yet. It was a clean hit, only Hollander wasn't looking, didn't see it coming, didn't adjust his body and brace for impact; hell, the lack of resistance nearly brought Cliff down on top of him.

Jesus, what a fucking shit show.

Pike is on Cliff instantly, shouting obscenities and swinging wildly, but Pike's a smaller skill guy with zero experience fighting, so it's easy enough to keep him at arm's length, out of reach. They all pair off, one Raider to one Metro, everyone but Roz, who is just looking at Hollander's unmoving body with a pure, unfiltered horror.

"Enough, Pike," Cliff says. "We'll settle it later."

They don't. Pike doesn't drop the gloves with Cliff; once he cooled off, he was probably glad Cliff didn't take him up on his offer.

"Roz?" Cliff asks, coming up alongside Roz. "Hey, man, you're okay."

The look Roz gives him would be withering, if it wasn't for the panic in his eyes.

"Look, if you need a minute—" Cliff starts, gesturing to the tunnel, but Roz cuts him off.

"Am not the one in neck brace, Marly," he snarls, but he storms down the tunnel anyway. Cliff watches him go, watches him stop and lean against the wall and take big, deliberate breaths.

"Is Roz good to go?" Reilly asks, coming down the bench. He looks unruffled, but that's a coach's job.

Cliff shakes his head. "Give him a minute."

Reilly sighs and turns back to the team. "Okay. Second line, you're up!"

Cliff sits back down on the bench and tries not to think about how fucked up Roz's face had looked. He'd looked… Like, fuck, he looked worse than when his dad died. Not that Roz had

seemed all that fucked up about that, honestly, and he never talked about the guy unless he was drunk; frankly, Cliff hopes he rots in hell, given some of the things Roz said, all matter-of-fact. Like it wasn't some of the most upsetting shit Cliff had ever heard.

"I'm just gonna—" he says to Dubi, and heads down the tunnel.

Roz is sitting on the ground with his head between his knees.

"You good, Roz?"

"Da," Roz says, clipped. "Am great."

"Hollander's going to be fine," Cliff says. "It was a clean hit. He didn't keep his head up. It happens."

"I know."

"It's shitty that he got hurt," Cliff continues. "I feel bad. You never want to see a guy go down like that."

Roz looks up at Cliff. His eyes are red. "What do you want, Marly?"

"I just…" Cliff stops. Takes a breath. "Are you good, man?" he asks again. He's not sure why, not sure how this answer is going to be different from the one Roz already gave him, but he feels like it's important to ask, anyway.

Roz blows out a slow breath. "No. But I will be." His voice wobbles. "Will go back to game. Work hard. Win for team."

Cliff nods. “Okay. Do that.”

Roz does.

Later that night, Cliff invites Roz over to his hotel room and the two of them clear out the minibar.

“His hand,” Roz says, early in the morning. “It wasn’t moving.”

“Hm?”

Roz turns his glassy eyes on Cliff. “Have you ever seen a dead person?”

“Uh.” Cliff thinks. It’s kind of hard to, amid the alcohol haze. “I’ve been to funerals. Like, open casket kind of thing. My grandparents. My mom.”

“My mother died when I was twelve,” Roz says. “I remember it. She was very still. Her hand —”

Roz stops abruptly, and Cliff realises that he’s crying. “Shit, Roz.”

Roz clears his throat. “Her hand, it—” he demonstrates, moving his hand limply “—like she had no bones.”

Cliff suddenly remembers that Roz is much, much younger than him. “Roz, that’s awful, man.”

Roz sniffles, wiping his nose with the back of his hand. “Tomorrow, I will visit Hollander in hospital. I will tell him good recovery. I will say you are sorry.” He clears his throat again. “Is

the captainly thing to do, yes?"

That's another thing about Roz. He's a natural-born leader. He always knows what the captainly thing to do is. Cliff misses that on the Admirals. That's not to say that Hunter isn't a good captain, because he is. He's just not Roz.

He makes eye contact with Hunter when the families come out to celebrate. He and Cliff are the only two players without people there to support them, without parents and wives and children to hug them and say how proud they are.

Cliff wishes Roz were here.

The first time Cliff won the Cup, Roz was the one who passed it to him. Cliff hadn't been expecting it—he thought maybe Vorkov, who scored the game-winning goal, or maybe Zads, who'd backstopped them to a low-scoring win. But no. Roz had taken his lap, screaming in Russian the whole time, and then he'd stopped in front of Cliff with the biggest shit-eating grin on his face and said, "Your turn," like it was just that simple.

"You did it, man," Cliff tells Hunter, over the noise of the crowd. That's different from his first Cup win, too: the Raiders had won it on the road.

Hunter beams at him. "We did it, man!"

And yeah, that's true. No man is an island, or whatever the fuck. It's not the name on the back that matters, it's the name on the front.

Well, it's the wrong fucking name, and Cliff would give up this Cup to be back in Boston, because what is the point of winning the Cup if you don't have people to celebrate with?

Hunter skates off, looking out towards the fans. Cliff watches him go simply because it hurts less than watching Breezy and his girlfriend, or Huff and his brother, or Cameron and his kids. It hurts less until it doesn't, because Hunter is gesturing to someone in the stands,

motioning them to come down and join him on the ice. And then Hunter drags him out to center ice and kisses him, and suddenly Cliff is the only one who doesn't have anyone to share this moment with. Irrationally, he hates Hunter for it.

Cliff's not, like, homophobic or anything. He just wishes there was someone out there as miserable as him, and for a moment, he'd thought he'd found it in Hunter.

But no. Hunter is in gay love with his gay boyfriend and they're going to live a beautiful gay life together, and Cliff is going to watch with gritted teeth as everyone around him gets exactly what they want. It's not fucking fair.

They say, if you work hard in this league, it'll all pay off. Well, it hasn't. Cliff's almost forty and he's staring retirement in its ugly face and he doesn't know what the fuck he's going to do in two seasons when his contract is up, because God knows he doesn't make enough money to just disappear into the Canadian wilderness or a two-million dollar house on Lake Ontario.

He should call Roz, Cliff thinks idly, as Hunter makes out with his boyfriend and the fans explode into revelry. Ask him how things are going with that Montreal girl. See if he's found anyone he'd invite to celebrate winning the Cup with him.

Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Cliff has taken over my brain.

Cliff's, like, eighty percent sure that Roz is mad at him. It's in little things, like the way Roz won't quite meet his eyes, the way he hesitates before saying his name. When Roz says "Marly," it's supposed to be familiar. Safe. Like a centering pass, practised over and over until Cliff could do it in his sleep, muscle memory built on repetition and trust. That's not how it feels right now. Cliff doesn't know how to articulate all the ways that it's worse, only that it is. And it's so much worse. So much worse that Cliff feels like crying in a way he hasn't since his mother died.

A car accident in December, right before the holidays. Amy was pissed; Cliff had promised that year would be different. It was, it was just also worse.

My mother died when I was twelve, Roz had said, and what the fuck was Cliff supposed to do with that?

So it was back to business as usual, once Roz visited Hollander in the hospital and told him how fucking sorry Cliff was. Practises and games. Bars, clubs. And Roz, scowling through it all.

Cliff tells himself he'll talk to Roz, figure out what got his panties in a twist. That's what he tells himself, but then he doesn't, and then he's standing in his living room, ears ringing with the Raiders' GM saying, *We wish you all the best in New York, Cliff.*

Cliff's world slides like a car on black ice. He manages some sort of thank you and hangs up. For a long moment, he doesn't do anything. Then he cries. He doesn't know how long for, except when he looks up, it's dark.

His agent calls. Arranges flights. The whole time, Cliff wonders if anyone's told Roz. He stays up all night agonizing over a text message. He types and retypes variations of the same few sentences.

Hey Roz, traded to NY. I'll miss you, brother.

A perfectly inoffensive text. Cliff doesn't send it. It's not good enough. Roz deserves better.

Hunter is friendly and welcoming. He does his best to make Cliff feel at home. Cliff doesn't feel at home. Hunter is a good captain, but he's not Roz. Cliff tries not to hold it against him, but Cliff does. Amy was right; he's a weak man. He doesn't know how to have hard conversations. He's always running away. Holding grudges. Letting things fester: amiability into resentment, familiarity into contempt. He's unwilling to grow, to step outside of his comfort zone and just *try*.

"Fuck, Cliff, I just need you to try!" Amy screams. She wants to go to her parents for Christmas dinner. Cliff wants to go to bed. It's Boxing Day, so it's not like it's really Christmas dinner, anyway. She's angry. He's… God, he's just so tired.

"You know, you can have friends here, if you want," Hunter says one day after practise. They're the last two on the ice because Cliff is always the last to leave—he knows what he is—and Hunter stayed, too, waiting for Cliff to call it.

Cliff frowns. "Is there a problem, Hunter?"

The boys call Hunter Scotty. Cliff isn't there yet. He might never be. He doesn't think he cares to try enough to get there, either, which is a bad sign.

Hunter sighs. "Just—" he stops. Takes off his helmet and runs a hand through his sweat-soaked hair. "I know it's hard, getting traded. I mean, I don't know personally, but I know from the other guys. It's normal to feel off. Lots of people do. It's a big change." And then Hunter is clapping Cliff on the shoulder. The gesture is probably supposed to be fortifying. It isn't. "I know we're not Boston, but we're here for you, man."

He was mad at me, when I left, Cliff wants to say. *There are so many things I need to tell him.*

"I know," Cliff says instead.

"Do you?" Hunter asks.

Cliff doesn't answer, just skates past Hunter and heads into the locker room. He showers and tries not to think about all the things he needs to say to Roz.

I'm sorry. I wish I was there. I wish I was better for you. I'm sorry your mom died. I'm sorry your dad was awful to you. I'm here if you need me. Please, I need you to need me.

Pathetic, really.

Cliff jerks off when he gets home from practise. He puts some porn on of a girl getting fucked from behind. She makes soft little punched out noises as a huge cock plows into her. Cliff gets off in quick, efficient strokes. The euphoria fades, and he's left sticky and unsettled.

Maybe he should go out. Find a bar or a club. Test his luck in NYC without Roz there to wingman. Not that Roz is any good at being a wingman. He gets too distracted: he'll make eye contact with an absolute rocket, and then it's over for everyone else, the whole world narrowing to Roz and the woman he's pursuing. But shit wingman or not, Roz is Cliff's.

Was.

Whatever.

He doesn't go out, but he does get drunk. He stares at his last text thread with Roz. The last thing he'd sent was a link to an interview Roz had done with ESPN where Roz said he slept with three pillows. *Getting soft, Roz?* Cliff had sent. He didn't mean anything by it. It was just a chirp, and a pretty lazy one at that. Hell, Cliff slept with three pillows himself; he's not a young man anymore.

Fuck off, Roz had replied.

And that's it.

It's weird that Roz didn't say anything after Cliff got traded. That's what captains do, typically. But then again, Roz is mad at Cliff, so maybe he's glad Cliff's gone.

Cliff's stomach clenches. That can't be right. Six years don't just vanish overnight, right?

Doesn't matter. Cliff puts his head down and works, and in June, he's holding the Cup over his head for the second time in his career and hating it for the first.

Two-time Cup champion. Roz only has one.

Cliff gets floods of text messages from guys he used to play with. Congratulations, mostly. A few invitations to hang out some time, but those are mostly empty, probably. No one really wants to hang out with Cliff. He doesn't blame them; he's not good company these days. If he ever was.

Cliff is running in Central Park when he feels something in his knee give. It sends him sprawling, cursing God and everyone. It's a fucking embarrassing way for a professional athlete to hurt themselves. Cliff hates it. Hates how everybody in the sports world seems to know about it before he even picks himself up off the pavement. It makes headlines. Just proves how slow things get in the off-season.

The doctors ask Cliff a lot of questions. It's a repetitive stress fracture, common among athletes, and even more common among hypermobile people, which apparently, Cliff is. The doctors say it's not normal for joints to move the way his do. They ask if he has a history of dislocations. Cliff does. He puts his own shoulder back into place semi-frequently.

The doctors don't like hearing that. When they think Cliff can't hear, they mutter under their breath about how shitty his athletic trainers must be for missing this. Cliff doesn't blame the trainers, though. He thought every hockey player's body hurt like this.

Cliff spends the summer rehabbing his knee and trying to make sense of it all. He buys some sort of new-agey full body brace that he wraps around his joints to support them. It helps.

Did you know that skating could feel like this? Cliff asks the Roz in his head. He probably does. This is probably what skating feels like for Roz all the time: like flying, or some shit.

One of the beat reporters asks Cliff what he's wearing one day before a game. He's just pulling on his chest protector.

"Oh," Cliff says. He wasn't expecting to be answering questions—no one cares what Cliff has to say. "It's for my joints. It's like taping, kind of."

Getting old, Marly?

Yeah, he is.

The reporter asks Cliff more questions than he's ever been asked in New York. Asks him about his injury, the rehab, the discovery of his hypermobility. Asks him how the game has changed for him since he's learned about it. Cliff does his best to give genuine answers.

That night, the Admirals win 3-1 and Cliff gets an assist.

Two weeks later, the Raiders are in town for the first time since the Admirals knocked them out of the playoffs last spring. Cliff watches Roz warm up on the visitor's side of center ice and screams at himself internally. It shouldn't be as difficult to close the distance as it is; Cliff berates his cowardice with each push of his skates.

"Hey, Roz," Cliff says, stopping on his side of the center line.

Roz looks up from where he's stretching on the ice. "*Privet*, Marly."

Cliff shifts his weight from foot to foot. "How was Russia?"

"I didn't go," Roz says breezily.

Oh. "How are your ribs?"

Roz narrows his eyes. The look he gives Cliff is sharp enough to bore right through him. "Do not apologize to me, Marly."

Cliff didn't realise the words were on the tip of his tongue until he's not allowed to say them. "But, Roz—"

Roz gets to his feet. He closes the distance until he and Cliff are beside each other, straddling the line. "You have nothing to apologize for," he says, poking Cliff for emphasis. Square on the Admirals crest.

"I don't mean…" Cliff stops. Steels himself. Amy's words are echoing in his head. He doesn't know how to have hard conversations. "I don't mean playoffs, Roz. I mean whatever happened before."

Roz shakes his head. "You did nothing wrong," he says firmly.

A weight eases off Cliff's chest. "Drinks after?"

Roz smiles. "Sure. You can congratulate me on my win."

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Reviving a friendship takes time. Cliff knows that. He wishes it wasn't true, wishes that reconnecting with Roz was as easy as getting drinks after Boston ekes out an overtime win over the Admirals, but that's not how the world works. Relationships are hard, and they take time, and sure, friendship doesn't vanish overnight, but it does atrophy.

"Come to the Kingfisher," Hunter says in the locker room. "We can celebrate our loser point."

Cliff shakes his head. "I'm going out with Roz."

"Bring him," Hunter says easily.

Cliff wants to say no, but he doesn't know how to without sounding homophobic, so he texts Roz *Kingfisher with Hunter.*

The gay bar? Roz asks.

Cliff frowns at the text. He's never known Roz to give a fuck about things like sexuality, but maybe he's missed something over the years. It would be easy enough to. And Cliff knows that some of the Russians in the league are quiet over things like Pride initiatives because Russia is a dangerous place for that sort of thing. Cliff had overheard Zads tell Reilly that he wasn't going to wear the Pride jersey, back when the league was still doing those. *My family is still in Russia,* Zads had said. *Is not safe for them, if I do this.*

Which was too bad, really, because Zads was one of the nicest guys Cliff had ever met, and half of the Internet tore him to shreds for being homophobic—which he isn't—and the other half applauded him for standing up for "Christian values", which was ironic, because Cliff's pretty sure that Zads is Jewish. Zads had been upset about it for weeks, which led to one of

the worst stretches of play in his career. One game, he let in a muffin from the blue line that will haunt him for the rest of existence.

That was what pushed Cliff into putting the gay tape on his stick. He usually doesn't; he's here to play hockey, and so he hates theme nights as a rule. Too many distractions. It feels like every other game is some more nonsense: kids night, women's night, Chinese fucking New Year, regular New Year, cancer night, and then a celebration for every kind of ethnicity there is, and some that Cliff suspects might be made up. It's pandering. It's corrupting the game, all this political correctness. He's not a role model, he's a hockey player. No one should be looking to him for guidance about anything except the game. But Cliff knows that Zads would give anything to wear the Pride jersey, and it's bullshit that he can't. No one should ever have to be afraid like that.

Looking back, Roz had given Cliff a look when he saw him in the rainbow warm-up gear. He hadn't said anything, though, so Cliff forgot about it.

Had Roz been wearing any? Cliff can't remember.

Yeah, Cliff texts back. *Is that okay?*

Is fine.

Is ominous, actually, but whatever. Cliff has decided he has to resuscitate his relationship with Roz through any means necessary. Cliff liked the person he was when he was with Roz. He liked that version of himself, that Marly. He was younger, and not just because it was years ago. Less burdened, in some ways. More often than not, he felt like he belonged.

God, he misses Boston.

The Kingfisher is pretty understated for a gay bar. There aren't any strobing rainbow lights or men in silver speedos. It's like any other sports bar, really, only there's one of those god-ugly flags with seventeen different colours pinned up over the bar.

Roz shows up last, because he always did love to make an entrance. “Hello, losers!” he calls, cheery. “Did you miss me?”

Hunter groans. “Lay off, Rozanov. Don’t you get bored of making the same joke?”

“Is great joke,” Roz counters. “I am funniest person I know.”

Cliff laughs, because Roz is definitely the funniest person Cliff knows, too.

They drink and talk about the same shit hockey players always do, which is nothing of importance. Gossip around the league, teammates, family. They talk about winning the Cup and what it feels like, talk about how they spent their respective days with the Cup. Hunter took the Cup with him in the New York Pride parade.

Roz raises his eyebrows. “Was not too much excitement for you?”

“I’m not that much older than you!” Hunter protests.

Roz shakes his head solemnly. “Senile, too.” He sighs. “Sad.”

“Man, fuck you,” Hunter says, but he’s smiling.

Hunter and the rest of the Admirals turn in pretty early. They hadn’t been planning on going out at all, it was a last-minute thing, and there are wives to get back to and sleeping children to kiss on the head or whatever. Soon, it’s just Cliff and Roz.

“How is New York?” Roz asks.

Cliff shrugs. “Not bad.” He takes a long drink of his beer to avoid elaborating.

But Roz doesn't play like that. He gives Cliff a look.

"It's—" Cliff cuts himself off and sighs. "It's fine, Roz, it really is, and we won the Cup and that's awesome, and the city loves us, and for the first time, it doesn't hurt to play hockey, and that's awesome, too, but—" he stops again. Takes a breath. Makes eye contact with Roz and then looks away, because it's all becoming too much. "It's not Boston."

"Boston is good, yes," Roz says contemplatively. "But is not the only place you can be happy."

It's not about Boston at all, it's about Roz. But Cliff can't say that, so he just nods dumbly. "I know that."

Roz leans in. "I will tell you secret, Marly."

"Oh?"

"I am free agent at the end of season. I am not signing with Boston."

Cliff is stunned. "What?"

Roz leans back in his seat. He spreads his hands in a "what did I tell you?" kind of gesture.

"Roz, that's insane. They fucking love you there."

Roz nods a few times. "And they will love me somewhere else, too."

“I can’t believe this.” Cliff scrubs a hand over his face and scoffs out a laugh. Roz has just dropped the biggest bomb he’s acting like it’s nothing. It’s not nothing. Everything is going to explode if Roz goes through with it. “Roz, Boston *is* you.”

“But I am not Boston,” Roz says. “I think I like Boston because I like being the best. I like being in competitive hockey market. But maybe there are other things I like more.”

“Like money?”

Roz shrugs. “Among other things.” He takes a drink of his beer. “Are you still retiring soon?”

Cliff doesn’t know. He thought he’d be forced to retire by his deteriorating body. Now that he knows why his body is the way that it is, he knows how to support it. And he’s not actually that old, he just skated like it because all his joints hurt. “I don’t know.”

“You are good player. We miss you. The defensemen we got back from New York didn’t work in our system. You can play as long as you want.”

Cliff doubts that the last part is true, but he’s not going to argue with Roz right now, not when he said he misses Cliff. He doesn’t know if he can trust himself to speak.

“I miss you, too,” Cliff says, after clearing his throat. “Hunter is… he’s a good captain, but he’s not my captain, you know?”

Roz smiles. “Ah, Marly, you always had high opinion of me.” He shakes his head, still smiling. “Some days, I think I even deserve it.”

“You’re the best hockey player in the league.”

“Best hockey player in the world,” Roz corrects, grinning wide, his sudden burst of humility gone as quickly as it appeared.

Classic Roz, that Boston charm. Not Boston charm for much longer, though. That'll be weird, playing Boston and not seeing Roz on the ice. Seeing him in another team's colours. Hearing a different stadium cheering for him. But maybe it hurts less that Cliff isn't in Boston if Roz isn't there, either: if they've both moved on, it feels less like Cliff has been forced to leave something behind.

"Damn right, Roz," Cliff says, and laughs.

Chapter End Notes

This is the actual, real end of this work. No more surprise chapters! I'm happy leaving it here.

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