



New Development

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Category: LGBT+

Description: It's wedding week, and Brady Griffin is already in a bad mood about it. Watching one of his best friends marry the love of his life should be awesome, but Brady is dealing with layers of confusion and denial when it comes to his feelings for his friend.

His sour mood hasn't gone unnoticed. In fact, it's earned him a babysitter. Cole Fawn, a fellow groomsman, is more than happy to help make sure his friends can relax on their wedding day. And it isn't a hardship. Brady is cute, and right off the bat, Cole likes getting under his skin.

As Brady acknowledges that his feelings for his friend might be attraction, Cole suggests some no-strings-attached exploratory activities to keep his mind off the groom and see if that attraction applies to men in general.

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“Are you going full bridezilla on me?” Cole Fawn asked, watching his friend Matthew pace his living room. Normally he loved hanging out in Matthew’s fancy rich-person apartment—the beverage fridge alone was worth the bike ride over to Matthew’s neighborhood—but the wedding was a week away, and Matthew looked like he was about to melt down. Cole sipped his prebiotic soda and swept his black hair out of his face. He’d never have hair as long as Matthew’s auburn waves, but it was enough to get in his eyes.

“The wedding planner has pretty much every detail locked down. There’s nothing more that I have control over to fuss with. It’s...guest anxiety.”

“No more floral arrangement drama?” Cole remembered an entire shift at Caring Cuisine, the meal-delivery charity they both worked at, where Matthew complained about in-season flowers while chopping fifty pounds of onions. Tears were involved. Cole didn’t know how many were onion induced.

“I have two lingering things that will either be totally fine, or a complete mess.”

“Your dad?” Cole guessed. He had witnessed the month-long decision-making process when Matthew chose to protect his peace and not invite his dad to his big day. His dad who used to be his fiancé’s hockey coach, who’d traded him across the continent when he’d found out that Matthew and Blake were dating. Still, in that kind of situation, the feelings haunt you either way, regardless of the presence of the person who stresses you out.

“I don’t think he’ll randomly show up. But I invited my older brothers, and I don’t doubt they would tell him the details if he asked. Blake hired a security guard, and

he'll have a photo of my dad, but I don't want it to come to that."

"Blake loves you one hell of a lot," Cole said. He loved hearing about Matthew's doting fiancé. Imagine meeting a fucking hot professional hockey player who decides that his universe revolves around you?

Matthew blushed thinking about the man he was about to marry. Cole wasn't a romantic by any stretch of the imagination, but seeing Matthew and Blake together made him realize why someone might want to get married.

"That's not the only thing you're worried about, though."

"I know this makes me a bitch, and Blake is absolutely one hundred percent sure it's not going to be an issue, but I'm worried about Brady."

"Which one is he?"

"The other Whales goalie. The one I always get a vibe from. Like he hates me because he wants Blake. Blake is convinced he's straight. I don't think he's about to steal my man, but...I don't know. I keep thinking he's going to do something a little too attention grabbing when he's drunk."

"He seemed grumpy at the bachelor party."

"He didn't want me to be there," Matthew complained. "He wanted Blake to himself. It's always like that when he's around. I like all of Blake's other teammates, but of course, the one who wants to spend the most time with Blake is the one who always shoots me dirty looks."

"Do you have a security guard for him?" Cole joked. He didn't think Brady would ruin the wedding, but he'd also picked up on the same vibe Matthew told him about

during the joint bachelor party earlier in the summer.

Matthew twisted his fingers in his lap. “Well, I was thinking...since you aren’t bringing a plus-one...”

“Oh my God.”

“Please please please? I will owe you three small favors or one very large favor.” Matthew pulled out the big guns with his puppy dog eyes. Cole understood how Matthew had Blake wrapped around his little finger.

“And Nina can’t?” Wasn’t that the point of a maid of honor?

“Nina listened to me complain about flowers for even longer than you did. And she helped me plan the honeymoon. I literally need you to just keep a general eye on him. If you see him about to do something stupid, or loud, or annoying, distract him. I want to enjoy our wedding day and not feel like I have to fight for my husband’s attention.”

“Blake has no idea anyone else is in the room when you’re there. You’ve never had to fight for his attention in your life.”

Matthew’s smile was sweet and dopey. They were in the kind of love that was so annoying generally, but it was impossible to be annoyed by them—it felt too pure.

“Fine. I will babysit the backup goalie.”

Caring Cuisine was a dream job. Cole had no idea how he’d landed it, and while it paid barely enough for him to survive in Vancouver, the mission of cooking meals for LGBTQ+ elders in their community resonated with him, and the hours were ideal. He loved cooking, but late nights in restaurant kitchens, getting food sent back

constantly, and having no sense of security got old quick. Here, he worked a day shift while he managed volunteers, coordinated donations, and put whatever music on the stereo he wanted.

By now, he was good at getting volunteers up and running. He liked big groups who came in with established camaraderie. They got a lot of corporate groups for service days, and usually everyone was in a great mood because even though they were still having to be at “work,” they weren’t having to answer emails for an entire day.

Having Matthew and Blake’s wedding party here for a prep shift was great. The day before, they had received hundreds of pounds of potatoes, carrots, and onions from a grocery store chain that had overbought, and they had a lot of chopping ahead of them. It was a good task for this group, who were all living on wedding magic—slightly hungover but still in a party mood. Cole put on some dance music and got groups set up at different prep stations with their respective endless amounts of vegetables. Everyone had a knife, and once Cole showed how he wanted them to chop up each veggie, he walked around the small prep kitchen, making sure that everyone felt comfortable doing what they were assigned.

The group had started the morning at brunch, so they were full and happy. Cole had requested they limit the mimosas, but Matthew and Blake were clearly drunk in love. As usual. If those two were cute on a normal day, the level they were at during wedding week was off the charts.

As a contrast, Brady Griffin stood at the end of the potato table, as far away from Blake and Matthew as he could get. Miles Foster, the captain of Blake and Brady’s team, was trying to talk to him about his new golf clubs, but Brady’s face was pouty. He also looked like he was interacting with a chef’s knife for the first time in his life.

“You’re going to cut yourself if you keep holding your knife like that,” Cole said, catching Brady’s attention.

“I’m literally holding the handle.”

“May I?” Cole asked, putting his hand out for Brady’s knife to demonstrate. Reluctantly, Brady handed it over. “Pinch the blade here, so you have control over it. Tuck your fingers on your other hand so you don’t chop them off, then rock your blade as you cut, like this.” He grabbed a potato to show him again. There was something meditative about chopping things up. After years of perfecting his basic knife skills, the knife felt like an extension of himself.

He gave Brady the knife back, and dutifully, with a grimace, he held the knife the way Cole had instructed. Cole watched Miles adjust his grip on his own knife as well.

Cole couldn’t babysit one hockey player all afternoon, but he would admit Brady would be a great regular volunteer. Once he had a task, he was a machine, and his table cranked through more veggies than Matthew and Blake’s table, even though Matthew and Blake were sharing their task with Amy and Winter, other members of the bridal party who regularly volunteered with Matthew and Cole.

With a task to focus on, Cole even noticed Brady smile once or twice. Brady happily lugged around heavy tubs of chopped veg and let Cole wrangle him into mixing up half of the chopped potatoes with some herbs and oil in their large (clean) sink with his hands, then spreading it on sheet pans for roasting. He was keeping Brady’s mind off whatever made Matthew so nervous. Watching the muscles in Brady’s arms move as he worked was a bonus.

They all took a break before the last task of the day, which was apple crumble. The kitchen was hot, and most of the wedding party dipped out the back door to get some fresh air and a breeze.

Brady stayed. And as hot as Cole was, he was used to kitchen heat. If you can’t handle the heat... He had a bandana tied in a band around his forehead to catch his

sweat, so he was fine.

“You don’t want to get some fresh air?” Cole asked. Brady was wiping down counters, even though Cole hadn’t asked him to. He grabbed a rag and joined him.

“I want to get this done,” Brady said. Even when his face was relaxed, he had a crease between his eyebrows from constant furrowing. “Then I’ll go outside for a few minutes, I guess.”

“You don’t have to.”

Brady paused to think about it, worrying the corner of the rag between his fingers. “I think I want to stay here.”

“You don’t want to spend time with the others?”

“You’re not.”

“I’m technically at work.”

“This must be a pretty chaotic workday for you.”

“Honestly, it’s pretty on par for any day. Most of this job is herding cats.”

Brady didn’t quite smile at him, but his shoulders dropped a little. They moved on to wipe down the next table.

“What are you most excited for about this week?”

Brady thought for a long time, struggling to come up with anything. Cole didn’t think he was trying to be in a bad mood. But if Matthew was right, and Brady had feelings

for Blake, this would be a hard week. Matthew didn't need to have sympathy for Brady's feelings, but if being Brady's babysitter was his duty for this week, Cole had no problem putting himself in Brady's shoes.

His answer came after a solid minute of thinking, time that Cole didn't fill with anything else. He could wait for Brady to think about what he wanted to say. "The food, I guess."

"A man after my own heart."

"How about you?"

"Tied between mini golf and getting photographed like an extra in a movie."

That got a little chuckle from Brady. "At least the suits look nice. My little sister tried to scare me into thinking that all wedding parties ended up with ugly clothes. She likes to thrift bridesmaid dresses and they can be questionable."

"Nah, Blake and Matthew have good taste. It's going to be a good week. And if something makes you want to pull your hair out, find me. I'll distract you."

"How?" Brady gave him a curious look, head cocked to the side.

"With all my sick dance moves."

Brady's cheeks pinked and he averted his eyes as Cole's watch buzzed. It was an email, but it reminded him that the rest of the crew had been outside for a while. He'd take pity on Brady.

"I'm going to go get everyone. But I'm serious. Find me if you get bored."

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Brady couldn't put his finger on exactly why he wasn't a big fan of Matthew. Matthew had never been mean to Brady. He was kind and smart and made Blake happier than anything else. Even hockey.

But when Brady had to hear the thousandth story about something cute Matthew had done while Brady was trying to hang out with his friend on a road trip, it had made him see red. It was bad vibes. Which wasn't a reason.

Brady knew that if Blake was marrying someone else, they would get to spend this pre-wedding time hanging out with the boys and going actual golfing. But the only golf Matthew would play is mini golf. The wedding party found themselves at a mini golf course themed like a medieval castle. There were turrets—and a dragon.

Since there was a four-person limit to each group, the ten of them couldn't all putt through one hole at a time together. That would take forever. But it meant that Blake and Matthew got paired up with Marcus and Nina. Brady expected to be in Miles' group, but Miles was having some weird bonding session with Luca from the New Jersey Ruby Reds, Blake's old team, since Miles and Jill recently got a puppy. Apparently, Luca was a dog person before he was anything else. Amy and Winter got in on the dog conversation, and the four of them formed a group.

It left Brady and Cole to be a twosome. It made more sense for Brady to play with Luca and Miles, and Cole to play with Amy and Winter, but he'd feel like an asshole if he tried to rearrange things. He didn't want Cole to think he didn't want to play with him, but Cole would be right to think that. Brady wanted to play with Blake. And if he couldn't, then any other hockey player would be his next choice. Cole had been nice so far, but Brady wanted to hang out with his friends.

Minnesota Nice meant something to him, though, and he smiled at Cole as the first group got started. They had a while to twiddle their thumbs.

“Cooking,” Brady said randomly. He wasn’t used to small talk with folks outside of the hockey world.

“Yup,” Cole said, a little sparkle in his eye. Cole looked like a chef. He had forearm tattoos, and even on the mini golf course, he was wearing a black button-up with the sleeves rolled up to show them off. The side of his head was buzzed, and the hair he did have flopped dramatically away from the short side. There was something commanding about him, like he knew he was in charge of the whole kitchen, and that confidence radiated from him outside of the kitchen too. “Hockey.”

Brady smiled. Okay. So Cole was pretty much the last person in this group he would have chosen to play with (except Matthew), but maybe this wouldn’t be too bad.

“How did you learn to cook?”

“I was raised by a single mom. She worked pretty much around the clock. I hated cleaning, but figured out that I could contribute by having a meal ready for her between her shifts, or baking her something sweet. She worked so hard for us. And I discovered how satisfying it is to make something that tastes amazing.”

“Did you grow up in Vancouver?”

“Nah, I grew up close to Kelowna. My mom’s still out there. I went to culinary school in Vancouver though, and I couldn’t leave.”

They transitioned into talking about what they both loved about Vancouver, and the conversation started to flow. And every time Brady’s eyes strayed to watch Blake and Matthew flirt their way through the first hole, and then the second—as Brady and

Cole were still waiting to hit a ball at all—Cole would touch his arm or tap his putter against his shoe. Clearly, Cole wanted to be the center of his attention, and it was a little nice having someone distract him from the way he was clearly currently sulking.

Brady's little sister, Syd, had given him a lecture before he'd left about how he'd better have a good fucking attitude, and if his sister thought he had a problem, he probably did. He took a deep breath, and he and Cole stepped up to the first hole.

"Gentlemen first," Cole said with a flourish of his arm.

"Are you not a gentleman?"

"Oh, honey. You don't want to know." His smile was sly and sexy, and something about it made Brady blush. The golf ball he'd chosen was green, and he dropped it on the Astroturf and lined his shot up. The flush of embarrassment disappeared when he focused on the first hole. It was L-shaped, and you had to hit a little cement wedge in the right spot to send your ball toward the hole. Competition, feats of strength, physical challenges—they all made his brain quiet. He could drop into his body and let his mind get far away from his thoughts.

He lined up and tapped his ball, sending it toward the exact spot he was aiming for. It ricocheted toward the hole, but the green was faster than he'd expected, and it slipped around the lip of the hole, ending up a foot and a half away instead of in it.

"Fuck." Brady was frustrated, but he kept it in.

"Fuck me," Cole said appreciatively. The thing that upset Brady impressed Cole. It tempered his upset a little. Brady turned back toward him, and Cole's gaze slid down his body and then back up. Brady preened a little. He wasn't interested in men, but he'd gone to gay bars with Syd, Quinn, and Hunter before, and he'd never minded getting hit on by men. It was flattering.

“Okay, Sporty Spice. My talents lie away from the green. You’re going to have to have some patience with me here.”

“No one could possibly be worse at mini golf than my brother,” Brady reassured. “Quinn hit a ball onto the freeway once, and I still love him.”

“Well, I hope you still love me after you watch this disaster.” Cole had his eyes on his black golf ball as he tried to line his shot up, which spared Brady from having to hide whatever his face was doing. Obviously, Cole was joking. Was Brady truly this starved for attention that a man was making him feel a little fluttery and lightheaded?

Cole took a swing at his ball after hardly looking at where he was hitting it to. They were lucky the course had a wooden fence around it because Cole’s ball shot off the green, bounced off the fence, and landed in the rocks.

“Is that a penalty?” Cole asked, sucking air through his teeth in regret.

“Fraid so,” Brady said.

Cole grumbled and went to pick his ball out of the rocks.

“You have to put it on the green here,” Brady said, pointing to the spot closest to where Cole’s ball had landed in the rocks. Cole dropped it. “You know, when I said I still loved Quinn after he hit a ball onto the freeway, it wasn’t a suggestion.”

Cole took another swing, more gently this time, and it bounced off the corner of the L, right back to him.

“Fine,” Brady said when Cole looked at him with big sad eyes. “You don’t have to count that one.”

While Cole worked on getting his ball over to the end of the hole, Brady easily tapped his ball in and pulled the scorecard from his shorts pocket.

“You’re not actually keeping score,” Cole said, watching Brady write with the tiny pencil.

“Of course I am. I got a birdie.”

“Well then, I got...” Cole turned to look at the hole he putted all over, tracing a fingertip in the air to each spot his ball landed. “Um, three.”

“You are a liar, Fawn,” Brady said, falling easily into using someone’s last name instead of their first.

“That’s Chef Fawn,” Cole said, getting a glimpse of the scorecard over Brady’s shoulder as he added a seven to Cole’s column and letting out a huff. Even the seven was generous, and Cole must have known that because he didn’t argue.

“Yes, Chef.”

By the time they were done with the first hole, the group in front of them was finishing up with the third, and they had twice as many people. Miles and Luca had bonded over brewing beer during the bachelor party, and Brady was a little resentful that it felt like he was in a Ruby Reds bubble at the moment, despite the fact that Luca Bischel was the only current New Jersey player.

But as soon as Brady started pitying himself, he felt Cole’s hand on his arm again. “Are you waiting for me to go first?”

“Sorry, no, but you can,” Brady said. It took everything in him to not correct the way Cole held his putter. “Remember: putting is gentle.”

“You’re gentle,” Cole quipped. It wasn’t a comeback that had any thought behind it, but it made him shiver.

Cole’s first swing was only better insofar as the ball remained on the green. They were aiming to hit the ball through a small path under a miniature castle, and Cole’s hit the front of the castle and bounced back.

“Fuck.”

“You got this,” Brady coached. “You want to follow through with your swing. Where your putter goes is where your ball will go.”

Cole tried again. And then again. Brady was beginning to regret letting him go first because he surely would have been done with the hole himself by this time. But on Cole’s fifth stroke, the ball went through the castle and caught a tiny path that skipped him through most of the rest of the hole, down to where the little red flag waited for them.

“Sick,” Cole said, watching his ball roll to a stop only inches from the hole.

Brady lined his shot up and gently sent his ball down the same path. His green ball knocked against the side of Cole’s, sending it straight into the hole, landing with a hollow thunk.

“So that’s, like, a hole in one for me?”

“Do you count differently in a kitchen?” Brady asked. He tapped his ball home for another two strokes and wrote a five for Cole.

The third hole had a bridge over a little moat, and when Cole noticed that Brady’s attention was once again straying to Blake and Matthew, he cleared his throat and

wiggled his ass a little while he lined up his shot. His ball went straight into the water, and he had to use his putter to fish it out of the little cement stream that smelled about as clean as it looked. He made a face, and Brady rolled his eyes.

“Drop it at the end of the bridge,” he said, sparing them both from the pain of watching Cole hit it into the water several times in a row.

“Rethinking who the worst mini golfer is yet?”

“You really haven’t met my brother,” Brady reassured him. Cole was probably on par with Quinn’s abilities, but Brady felt a pull to make Cole feel better. Obviously, he couldn’t lie and tell Cole he was doing a great job, but he could at least cushion the blow a little.

By the fifth hole, Brady couldn’t take it anymore. “I can’t watch you do this in good conscience.”

“What?”

“Your grip. Your swing. Whatever feeling you had yesterday that made you correct the way I was holding that knife is what I’m feeling right now. It’s like this.” He slowly showed Cole what his hands should look like, and Cole copied him.

“It feels weird,” he said, scrunching his nose.

“You have the best control this way.”

“And then whack it.”

“No,” Brady said quickly, and before he knew it, he had dropped his own club in order to wrap himself around Cole in an absolute cliché of a golf-swing lesson. He’d

be embarrassed, but the day was getting a little chilly, actually, and Cole was warm and fit against him like a glove. He smelled spicy, unmistakably male, and Brady tucked himself in a little closer. “Like this,” he whispered, his hands guiding Cole’s as they rocked at the hip, gently tapping the ball toward the mouth of the dragon that covered the fifth hole.

The ball disappeared into the dragon’s mouth easily, and Brady reluctantly let go, taking a step back.

“Oh, I like golf lessons,” Cole said. He had that wicked grin again, and Brady suspected he would flirt with the dragon as easily as he flirted with Brady. Cole wasn’t a stranger at this point in the long list of wedding events, and he’d watched Cole flirt with waitstaff, grandparents, and a selection of the straightest-looking men Canada could present him with. Brady wasn’t special.

Cole hopped over the dragon’s tail and watched his ball come out the other side and roll straight into the hole.

“Holy shit!” he yelled, club over his head. “Hole in one!” He yelled loud enough for the rest of their party to hear and received congratulations shouted back at him. He was content to take full credit, despite the fact that it really had been Brady’s swing. Brady kept his lips zipped, though. He enjoyed seeing Cole smile like that. Plus, now he knew how to get a hole in one himself.

His own ball went into the dragon’s mouth in the exact same way, but it hit a different path inside. It came rolling out a tube five feet away from the hole. Brady groaned.

“If you ever need pointers, I’m kind of an expert now,” Cole told him. Sassy.

“Yeah, what should I work on?”

“You should probably find a big hot hockey player to come swing your club for you.”

Fuck. Cole knew what he was doing, and the clarity that competition had brought Brady at the beginning of their game had vaporized. When Brady took his swing, his hands were a little shaky, and his putt left his ball nearly as far away from the hole as it started.

Embarrassing.

He put some effort into his third shot, and the ball zipped around the lip the same way it had on the first hole. He grumbled as he tapped his ball a short two inches home and recorded their scores again. He hated the unwelcome shame-adjacent grumpy feeling he got when he was athletically bested. Lots of his teammates over the years had the same streak, so they understood. His brother Jonathan never got quite as upset about losing as Brady did, and it was probably why Brady was in the NHL and Jonathan was currently mowing lawns and following Hunter around with a hammer and a paintbrush, looking for the next task he could be assigned.

Those were traits Brady liked about Jonathan. He was nice, solid, reliable, emotionally stable. He didn't have to worry about making a fool out of himself on a mini golf course.

“You'll kill the next hole, sweetheart,” Cole said, taking his hand and leading him to the beginning of the sixth hole. Both of the other groups were far beyond them now, making their way efficiently through the course. Their whoops and cheers and groans were as loud as what was happening in Brady's head, but of course, they were having fun. Brady was at the top of a spiral he was trying desperately to stay out of.

“You can show me how to putt again if it will put a smile back on your face,” Cole said, hand still in Brady's. His expression went from coy to concerned. “You can mark the hole in one for yourself. You were the one who made that putt.”

“No, it’s fine. I’m an idiot. I’m sorry. It’s just mini golf. I know that.”

“Hey, I didn’t come here today to diminish your feelings. But I am having fun with you, even though I know who you’d rather be hanging out with.” Brady’s eyes betrayed him, looking past Cole to where Blake was watching Matthew putt, perpetual heart eyes as present as ever. Cole squeezed his hand. “I bet this week is hard for you.”

That was too close to what Brady was feeling. Cole was implying something, and Brady didn’t want to examine it. He eased his hand away from Cole’s.

“I’m fine. I’m sorry for being stupid about that hole. Come on. You don’t need me to help you, you got this.” He stopped himself from spiraling. Just because Blake was ignoring him didn’t mean that they weren’t still friends. They were still close. Cole had a smile on his face again, a little pursed like the jury was still out.

No, Brady wasn’t hanging out with his goalie partner, the person who was the most significant to him, at least during the season. The person who Brady was man enough to admit he had a little hero worship for. But he was hanging out with someone who was genuinely trying to make sure Brady had a good time, and he wasn’t sure exactly how he deserved that.

“You will never believe what is happening in this godforsaken town,” Syd said when Brady picked up her call that evening. He was puttering around his apartment, trying to settle back in a little after being gone most of the summer. After the wedding, he would go back to Minnesota, but not for long. It was time to shift gears back to hockey.

“Well, I know you’re ready to go back to school if you’re insulting Minneapolis.” In a few months, Minneapolis would be her beloved homeland, and Madison would be on her shitlist. The grass is always greener.

“Yeah, yeah. Guess.”

“Um, Quinn isn’t depressed anymore and everything is normal now.”

“Not even close.”

“Okay. Quinn adopted an ostrich.”

“Sadly, that’s closer. Quinner punched Jon.”

“What? With his fist?” The glow of his refrigerator light made Brady realize how dark out it had gotten. He flipped his kitchen light on and kept taking inventory. He’d picked up a few staples at the gas station, but he had little more than eggs in his refrigerator.

“Yeah. Jon’s gonna have a black eye.”

“What happened?”

“Quinner sucker punched him.”

“I’m asking about motivation.”

“Oh. Well, here is the more surprising part: Jon and Hunter are dating.”

“I understood all of the individual words in that sentence, but I don’t understand them together.”

Syd’s bright laughter made him wish he had forced her to be his wedding date. But bringing your little sister was more pathetic than going alone.

“Yeah, they’re—ugh I hate talking on the phone when you can’t see my obscene hand gestures. I should have FaceTimed you. They’re fucking.”

“Each other.”

“Yes.”

“Since when is Jon gay? Did he come out, and I didn’t notice because there is already so much gay around me?”

“Watch out or you’ll be next,” she teased, and her words rattled around inside of him. “Jon hasn’t ironed out a label but mumbled something about a spectrum. Whatever, labels don’t matter.”

“How did they get together?”

“Well, you know that our middle brother has been living on planet Quinn lately, and Jon can’t help himself from, well, helping people. I guess...proximity? H said that he and Jon had never gotten to know each other very well until now. And apparently, Hunter is delectable. Something that I, as a femme-attracted person, know very little about.”

“Yeah, Hunter is cute,” Brady said absently, chewing on the idea of later-in-life same-gender attraction. A sweet, blond goalie floated through his mind. It was uncomfortably close for Blake to make his way to this part of Brady’s brain. He had been pushing those ideas away for a year and a half, and he still couldn’t look at them head-on. He kept it in his periphery.

“Alright, loverboy, the gay train is coming for you faster than I anticipated. I’m hiding from Quinner in the basement, and I’ve seen Hunter cry multiple times this week. It’s weird here without you.”

“You could have come to the wedding.” Brady could never get a girlfriend to stick around for long, and nothing made him feel more pathetic about it than his sister being his most viable wedding plus-one.

“Gross,” she dismissed. Syd was not the kind of person who grew up dreaming about her nuptials.

“I’m glad I got to see so much of you in the summer this year.”

“Same. The duplex is pretty messy right now—interpersonally—but I’m glad we got to stick together even though Mom and Dad sold the house.”

“Don’t tell Quinn that. It might make him smile.”

Syd laughed. “I’ll let you go, and I’ll keep you updated on the home front. Tomorrow is the rehearsal dinner?”

“Mmhm.”

“Okay. Be good,” she said, and Brady didn’t argue against her warning. He wanted to be purely happy for his friend, but he could feel a storm cloud brewing, and he couldn’t put his finger on exactly why. The whole week felt...uncomfortable.

“Keep in touch.”

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“You clean up nice,” Cole said appreciatively as Brady opened the passenger door of his SUV for Cole. Brady looked slightly uncomfortable in his sport coat, which emphasized his broad shoulders. Cole didn’t know a ton of goalies, but he always expected them to be more linebacker shaped. Instead, Brady was tall enough to look slim, proportionately. The scruff he had been rocking on the mini golf course was gone now, his face more boyish as a result.

“My sister said I had to shave,” he confessed, his hand finding his bare chin self-consciously. Cole smudged a thumb over his cheek, catching the barest amount of raspy stubble.

“I like it,” Cole said to make Brady blush. According to Matthew, Brady always claimed to be straight. However, if Cole coupled Matthew’s read on how Brady acted around Blake with his own interactions with Brady over the past few days, he’d wager a bet that Brady existed somewhere in the wild middle, even if he wouldn’t admit it. Regardless, poking at Brady was fun, and Cole had decided to do it all evening.

“So I was right,” Cole said as he climbed into Brady’s oversized SUV.

Brady hurried around to the driver’s side. “Right about what?”

“I called you a gentleman yesterday.”

Brady shook his head. “I’m Midwestern.”

“I know you were voluntold to come pick me up on the way to the rehearsal dinner,

but I still appreciate it.”

“It’s no problem,” Brady said. “I really don’t understand how you survive with only a bike.”

“Out of absolute necessity. Vancouver is fucking expensive. Not having a car saves me enough to make it possible to live here.”

“Oh.” An awkward silence radiated inside the car as Brady pulled onto the freeway. Cole hated making people feel better about financial inequality. He would coddle Brady through a lot this weekend, because he loved Matthew enough to do it, but it was good for rich boys to think about these things sometimes.

“Have you ever been in a wedding before?” Cole asked after a few minutes of watching Brady drum his fingers on the steering wheel and check his rearview about forty times. Fine. He would diffuse the tension.

“Once. My older brother.”

“Were you the best man?”

“Nah. I have two brothers, so Quinn chose his best friend instead.”

“And how was that?”

“The day was fine. The marriage is not.”

“Sorry about that.”

Brady shrugged. “Not my marriage. Have you ever been in a wedding?”

“I officiated a wedding in my friend’s backyard once. I cannot explain how different that day was from the wedding we’re about to experience, though, so I’ve never done the fancy groomsman-at-an-expensive-wedding thing before. This will be my first rehearsal dinner.”

“It’s casual. We’ll do a rehearsal, so everyone knows where to go on the actual day and what to expect, and then we’ll eat. Usually there are still speeches. Those are pretty unavoidable.”

“Are you giving one?” Cole didn’t have to give a speech, thank god.

“Absolutely not. Not really a words guy. Plus, I don’t think I’d get the go-ahead from Matthew.”

“What’s your beef there?” Cole asked, trying to investigate gently enough to not raise suspicion.

“There’s no beef. I don’t know. You could ask him.”

“Alright,” Cole said. It wasn’t the time to push, even though Brady didn’t sound convincing at all.

While the wedding itself would be at the Stanley Park Teahouse, the rehearsal dinner was at a private residence that Matthew and Blake had rented out for the evening. The wedding planner waved Brady and Cole into the house, and she shuffled them into the kitchen, where a large bar was set up across the kitchen island. There was a person making drinks and pouring beer and wine, and Cole and Brady each got drinks before heading to the backyard, where the rehearsal and catered dinner would happen.

Fuck, Matthew and Blake were a beautiful couple. It was an undeniable fact, and one that Cole was only a little jealous of. He considered himself married to his work. But

sometimes, when he saw the two of them together or Matthew told him something particularly tooth-rottingly sweet about Blake, there was a glimmer of want in his heart.

Not a big glimmer, though.

Blake was in a charcoal-gray suit, the buttons on his white shirt open at the neck, no tie. And sure, he looked nice. But Matthew was wearing a creamy silk blouse that had more open buttons than Blake's and moved like liquid. The rest of his outfit—shoes, socks, pants—was all black. He was radiant, but Cole expected nothing less of his friend. Blake had a hand pressed to Matthew's lower back, and they moved as one entity as they greeted their friends and family.

Brady plucked a bacon-wrapped shrimp from a server's tray and looked longingly at the couple.

"He looks beautiful," Cole said, stepping closer. Unlike mini golf, Brady could try to lose him at any time, but Cole was starting to think that Brady liked him a little. He had a bit of fondness for that huge backup goalie growing in his heart as well. Brady was sweet, like a puppy. Everyone liked puppies.

"Yeah."

"That blouse is divine." Cole knew he was baiting Brady, and it wasn't the nicest thing he had ever done, but *c'est la vie*.

"What? Oh. Uh, yeah. Absolutely." He gave his head a little shake, and Cole knew that he was expelling thoughts of Blake.

Seeing it in action—the reason Matthew asked Cole to keep his eye on Brady to begin with—made him ache with sympathy for this boy who was clearly struggling

with unrequited...something. His longing for Blake radiated off him, and Cole felt it as a physical presence. Blake didn't realize it and Brady wouldn't admit it, but Matthew wasn't crazy.

Cole caught Brady's arm and redirected him, finding the nearest hockey player to start a surface-level conversation with.

By the time Blake and Matthew made it over to them to say hi, Brady had drained his drink. They said hi, and Brady promptly excused himself to get a refill.

Matthew raised an eyebrow at Brady's retreating form. "You're going above and beyond. I don't know what I did to deserve you."

"Consider it part of my wedding gift for you. And I think you were justified in your worry. He does seem...attached."

"Yeah." Matthew's agreement was curt and annoyed.

"Don't worry."

Cole hugged his friend. He hadn't forgotten the reason they were all there together. Why it was so important for Cole to keep Brady in check. These two lovebirds were tying the knot, and Cole was so happy for them.

The backyard had filled with guests, and Brady returned to Cole's side as the officiant called the grooms and wedding party forward for the rehearsal. "Got you a refill too," Brady said, handing Cole the exact cocktail he had almost finished. He drained the last sip of his current drink, and Brady exchanged them out, putting the empty glass on a cocktail table that was already collecting empties.

The officiant split the wedding party to two sides, and Cole found his spot at the end

of the row behind Amy as they lined up to walk down the “aisle” in pairs. Brady was also the last in his line, but Cole already knew they would walk down together. When it was their turn, he took Brady’s offered arm and followed Amy and Luca as the bridal party stacked themselves away from the grooms. Brady and Cole were as far apart from each other as they could be. Then came the flower girl and ring bearer, who were Blake’s niece and nephew. They were at the perfect age for maximum adorableness.

And then came Matthew and Blake. They walked down the pretend aisle together, and when they got to the officiant, they faced each other and clasped hands. Cole could already feel the spark of tears in his eyes. Whew. He was going to blubber at the actual ceremony.

“Obviously, we won’t go through the whole song and dance tonight, but now you all know where you’re standing and how you’re walking. Now, I heard a rumor that the dinner is incredible, so let’s get to the food,” the officiant said.

“Hold on,” Blake said, his calm voice rippling over the audience. “I know this isn’t legally binding, but I’m not giving up any opportunity to kiss this man.” He held Matthew’s face so gently as he pressed a kiss to his lips, and a cheer erupted from the small crowd. When they broke their kiss, they stayed in the moment for a little longer, their foreheads pressed together.

Cole knew he had never felt that way about anyone in his life. He had a hard time conceptualizing it, honestly. But looking at Blake and Matthew confirmed to him that, in the very least, love was real. Across the aisle from him, Brady was watching the kiss like his world was ending.

“Now you can go eat,” Blake said, not taking his eyes off his husband-to-be.

There was a buffet line, and Cole lost Brady as they filled their plates and found seats

at unassigned tables across the back lawn. The entire backyard was beautiful and private, lush with old trees and tall bushes, as well as grass that looked better than a golf course. White flowers littered the tables and draped over the buffet, and the setting exceeded Cole's expectations for what he wanted for his own wedding, if he ever made it there.

However, when you married a hockey player, apparently you spared no expense. Every once in a while, it was nice to go to a rich person's wedding. It was a cultural field trip.

Cole settled at a table with Winter, Amy, and Amy's wife, Margaret—his Caring Cuisine crew. Cole got started volunteering at the location the rest of his table volunteered at, and eventually landed a full-time position in a different kitchen. However, their small network of kitchens shared resources easily, and he still saw them—and Matthew—often. Matthew spent enough hours at Caring Cuisine to justify him receiving a salary, but being a volunteer and not a full-time employee gave him the flexibility he needed alongside Blake's career. It also allowed Matthew to spend time at each location throughout the week, keeping Cole connected to the rest of their friends.

"The two of them really have something special," Winter said, her gaze on the couple of the hour. They were seated with a group of people who were likely related to Blake, if all the blond hair was any sign. "I hate going to weddings where I don't think the couple should be together at all, let alone making it legal. It's much more fun to go to a wedding where you couldn't imagine anything but forever for the people you're celebrating."

"You're a romantic," Amy teased. "How come you never date anyone longer than a few weeks?"

"I don't feel like my standards are unreasonable, but it's hard to meet someone who

can clear them. And I'm not going to settle for someone who is going to become more of a problem than a solution in my life."

"Wise," Margaret agreed, looking at Amy like she was her solution.

God, Cole was around way too many adorable lovebirds right now.

"I'd recommend finding a bridesmaid or groomsman to have a little fling with, but the only single one left is that other goalie. Well, and Coley. But I think maybe our little chef already has an eye on the available hockey player. Coley and a goalie."

It would be easier to dispute that claim if Cole wasn't currently staring a hole in the back of Brady's head. He was with a group of hockey players and their partners, and everyone was...beautiful. Rich people, damn.

He couldn't see Brady's face, but he didn't seem very animated from behind.

"I told Matthew I would keep an eye on him," Cole said, stabbing another pear in his salad. The dressing they had used was so light, like they'd used apple cider vinegar instead of balsamic. He made a note to himself for later.

"You're being a hero, seriously," Amy said. The four of them all heard about it when Matthew had to do Whales stuff, and he came back with stories of the hostile backup goalie. "It also seems like you've been getting along with him. Or you've been hiding acting skills from us."

Cole snorted a laugh. "Yeah, no acting skills to speak of. I kind of like him, I think. He has his moments. He was sweet to me yesterday. He drove me here today. I am not miserable about spending time with him."

"He's cute," Winter encouraged.

“He is cute,” Cole said, letting himself really consider it. Brady turned his head to look at the other side of his table, revealing his profile. He had a strong jaw, and a nose that Cole knew he had broken before, but only because he had looked at Brady’s face a lot in the last few days. The sides of his haircut were tight and clean, but he had some length on top that it looked like he didn’t fully know how to style.

Maybe he would let Cole help him with that.

Dessert was mini cheesecakes, and despite Cole’s mind being a little preoccupied, the food was good enough for him to notice, for his taste buds to linger on, for him to get a little inspiration from. He hadn’t made cheesecake in ages, and while he enjoyed cooking and was very capable in a kitchen, he’d gone to school to become a pastry chef. The cheesecake wasn’t a revelation, but it satisfied his sweet tooth.

When he looked over at the table of hockey players again, Brady’s cheesecake was sitting at his spot, one bite taken, the man himself missing from the table. A quick scan of the backyard was fruitless.

The bar was inside, and so were the bathrooms, so Cole didn’t worry about it. He shifted his attention to the conversation happening at his table, which was either about a dating reality show or a talent reality show, and the fact that he couldn’t tell was a little alarming.

Ten more minutes passed. Cole checked his phone. He always wore a watch at work, but his Apple Watch was too ugly to wear for wedding activities.

“I’m going to hit the restroom,” Cole lied, not that his table bought it.

He headed up the stone stairs to the terrace and into the main level of the house. There were signs posted to identify the bathrooms—one past the kitchen, and an additional one on the other end of the first floor. He headed through the kitchen first.

The bathroom was empty. While he had the opportunity, he relieved himself. Even the soap in this place was expensive. Who was renting out their giant mansion for these kinds of things? People who bought investment properties? Cole would likely never own any kind of house, and here this one was, empty.

Cole headed toward the other side of the house, and that bathroom was empty as well. Where the fuck was Brady? He almost gave up when he noticed the study, right past the bathroom. It was solid wall-to-wall bookshelves, and Cole found Brady sitting at the grand desk in the center of it all, a new drink in one hand, an open book in the other. His sport coat was crumpled on the desk. His eyes were a little red. Cole rested a shoulder on the doorframe.

“There you are,” Cole said.

“Were you looking for me?”

Cole stepped inside the room and shut the door. A little privacy might be nice since it looked like Brady wasn’t ready for an audience quite yet. He walked over to the desk and sat on the edge, right next to Brady’s chair. The desk was bare except for a lamp and a paperweight, and when he looked at the book in Brady’s hand, it was bare too.

“Fake books?”

“Some of them have writing in them. Lots are for decoration, I guess.”

“This is a weird house.” He was trying to lighten the mood, but he didn’t think it was working. He switched tactics. “Are you okay?”

“I think I had the realization that everyone has already had before me.”

“Oh?”

“Blake,” he said simply, chasing his admission with a sip of his drink.

“Do you love him?”

“Honestly, I don’t think I’m the authority on that.”

“But you want to be the one at the altar with him tomorrow?”

Brady blew out a heavy breath. “I don’t... It’s not that I want to marry him. I don’t know that it’s love, even. It’s this combination of—don’t laugh at me—hero worship. I know that. I had his poster up in my dorm in college. You have to understand, Blake was the first out gay player. And he was a goalie. I have two gay siblings... Actually, maybe all four of us are gay. I don’t know. He’s always been important. And then I met him in person, and he was so fucking nice. The goalie I was backing up before him had no time at all for me. Did not respect me. Didn’t like me.

“And then Blake was there, and he was a good guy. I thought we had something special. At the rink, or on the road, we had a connection. But at home, when he was with Matthew, that Blake disappeared a little. Or I disappeared. I know I’m not the love of Blake’s life or whatever. And I don’t want to be. But I’m always watching from the sidelines, you know? Backup goalie. Little brother. Second choice.”

“Yeah, that all makes sense.”

“And everyone has been trying to convince me I’m in love with him, and I’ve been resisting it for so long that now, watching Blake kiss Matthew like that, like he can’t fucking wait for Matthew to be his forever... Yeah. Maybe some crush feelings came to the surface. And now, like, do I have to have a sexuality crisis here, too?”

Cole took the book Brady was holding and set it on the desk, then took one of Brady’s hands. It was warm and massive, his fingernails clipped impossibly short,

fingers curling around Cole's hand instinctively.

"Thanks for telling me that," Cole said. Proximity to queer people didn't automatically mean you were completely okay with your own burgeoning queerness. "I won't tell anyone."

Brady sighed. "I hate that I've been so oblivious to it. And I know Matthew hates me, and I'm sure he hates that I'm in his fucking wedding."

"Matthew doesn't hate you, but he's used to fighting for everything. He had to fight hard for Blake. He's protective. And I can promise you that if Matthew hated you, Blake wouldn't have asked you to be in his wedding."

"Did Matthew ask you to be my keeper?"

Cole froze at the question. Maybe they were both behaving with transparent motivation.

"Because if he did, I guess I needed it."

"He asked me to keep an eye on you. I chose to spend this much time with you because I like you."

Brady hummed. He took another sip of his drink, then laid his head on Cole's thigh. Cole knew he had alcohol to thank for Brady's admission. He combed through Brady's hair and waited for him to speak again. When long minutes passed without Brady saying anything, Cole knew it was time to go.

"Hey, do you have your keys?"

Brady fished them out of his pants pocket, and Cole took them from him. Brady had

too much to drink that night, but Cole was good to drive.

“Let’s get you home. No one will miss us.” Brady didn’t put up a fight. Cole grabbed Brady’s sport coat from its pile and draped it over his arm. Brady followed him outside.

“Do you have a license?”

“I don’t own a car, but I know how to drive,” Cole said. He opened the passenger door for Brady, echoing what Brady had done when he’d picked Cole up that morning. “I’ll get you home safe.”

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Brady wokeup to a nicer morning than he deserved. He wasn't as hungover as he should have been (because Cole had forced so much water into him that he felt like he was one of those huge cups everyone's wives were carrying around), and he could smell something cooking from the comfort of his bed.

He may not be hungover, but he had to relive the memories of the night before, which was worse. He got drunk, spilled every thought in his head to Cole—a man who was practically a stranger and did not have any obligation to be as nice to him as he was being—had to have Cole drive him home, and then begged him to stay. Ostensibly because Brady didn't want him to have to take an Uber home, and because he was going to have to pick him up that morning anyway.

Not that it saved them a trip when they would have to go pick up Cole's suit from his place, but it had made sense to drunk-Brady.

His shoes were gone, but the rest of his clothes were still on, and very wrinkled. The other side of his bed was undisturbed. At least he knew he hadn't thrown himself at his new best friend.

He found Cole in the kitchen in a big Whales shirt he must have found in Brady's drawers, along with a pair of pj pants. "Couldn't find an apron, and I'm not getting grease on anything dry-clean only," Cole told Brady's confused face.

"I don't have an apron."

"I didn't think so. You also have very little food."

“I’ve been in Minnesota for a few months.”

Brady peeked over Cole’s shoulder at the stove where he was frying up some eggs.

“I was the biggest mess on planet Earth and here you are, making us eggs?”

“You assume I’m cooking for you?” Cole teased.

“Touché. We’ll eat fast and then head to yours. I need to shower and pack up quick. We can grab coffee on the way since I haven’t picked any up yet.”

“Yeah, you need a major grocery run.”

Brady took a deep breath. Today was the day, and it would be weird. But he would get through it.

The day was getting weirder, and maybe he wouldn’t get through it. He waited in the car outside Cole’s building for him to grab what he needed for the day and went through his texts. He had a nice one from Blake thanking him for coming the night before and letting him know he was excited to celebrate with him. And then a pile of texts from his assorted siblings, which he wasn’t in the mood for. He could handle one emotional crisis at a time, and that crisis was his own.

“Ooo, what’s happening now?” Cole asked, clocking the look on his face as he got into the car. He’d stashed his garment bag on the same hook as Brady’s, and his hair looked fresh. Even in street clothes, he looked good. Polished. Awake at least.

“My middle brother ran away and flew to Arizona,” Brady said.

“I feel like I’m going to need a little more context,” Cole said, and Brady spent the drive to downtown explaining the Hunter-and-Jon situation and how Quinn fit into it

all. Or didn't.

"I don't know what I would do if I was there, but I kind of feel like I should be there. Maybe Quinn wouldn't have darted. But then again, he's spent most of the summer isolating himself as best he can, even though my sister and I were living in his house. And then there's the Jon thing. Is he gay too? Am I gay? Can we all be gay? I don't know if that makes more or less sense."

"Mmm," Cole said. "That sounds really hard."

"Yeah, it is," Brady said. Cole's hand rested on his forearm for a moment, and sparks shot through Brady's body. He had a rush of embarrassment when he remembered what he'd put Cole through the night before. "I'm sorry again for telling you every thought in my head last night."

"I asked. Nothing to be sorry for. I appreciate you sharing that with me. Sometimes it's easier to tell people you don't know very well, rather than the people who know you best." It sounded like Cole was speaking from experience, but Brady didn't press. "What do you think about your older brother and the friend? Hunter?"

"I feel good about it. Hunter lived with us in high school for a year. Jon was already out of the house. Hunter and Quinn were so platonic for so long that I was a little sad he'd never marry into the family. Now he can."

Brady was grateful when they got to the hotel, and he could stop talking about his feelings. It was nice, but it was awful. At least while driving, he didn't have to look Cole in the eye.

They checked into their rooms and then met in the little conference room that had been transformed into a "getting ready" room. Brady didn't know why they had to get ready at ten a.m. for a four p.m. wedding, but he would do as he was told.

Nina, Amy, and Winter had hair and makeup to do, and Brady waited until after he ate one of the catered sandwiches for lunch before he put his suit on because he knew himself, and he would not be wearing mustard to Blake's wedding. Blake's groomsmen all wore the same suit, but the bridesmaids wore different deep wine-colored dresses, and Cole's suit coordinated with the women he'd be standing next to. He wore all black with a rich maroon button-down, socks, and a coordinating pocket square.

Brady wasn't enough of a bitch to ignore how beautiful Matthew looked. He was glowing, his navy suit popping next to the maroon of his side of the wedding party. His hair looked sleek without looking wet. Blake was in a dark charcoal. If there was any benefit to a traditional hetero wedding, it was not needing to coordinate four different styles of suits, but they did it, and it worked.

"Will you take it as an insult if I ask to put some product in your hair?" Cole asked him, a tub of wax in his hand. Brady put something in his hair, but he was man enough to admit he didn't know what he was doing. Cole's hair always looked good. Brady nodded and Cole looked so pleased to be allowed to fuss with him. It made Brady happy, too. Brady stayed seated in the conference room chair, and Cole stood between his legs as he worked in product, using a little comb to make it behave exactly how he wanted it to.

"There we go." Cole took a step back to admire his work, grabbing a mirror from the table to show Brady.

"Wow," Brady said, looking at a stranger. Cole had swooped his hair back off his forehead in a neat wave. It was a look Brady had never mastered, but Cole made it look perfect in less than five minutes. "You are multitalented."

After everyone got properly beautiful, they hopped into a limo and headed toward Stanley Park. The wedding itself would be in the teahouse, but the grooms wanted

photos all over the grounds. The day was beautiful, bright but not hot, and Brady had little responsibility other than standing where he was designated and smiling.

“Have you ever been here before?” he asked Cole, as Blake and Matthew got a couple of shots on the beach. Matthew’s hair was down and flowing in the wind, like Mother Nature was his stylist, and Brady had the first odd twinge of genuine happiness for his friend. He—like everyone else on planet Earth—knew how much Blake loved Matthew’s hair, and he could already see this photo blown up above their fireplace. The weird, icky feeling he usually had around the two of them, which he was now realizing must be jealousy, was nowhere to be found.

Instead, his focus was on Cole.

Brady figured he would spend all his time with the other hockey players, but with the exception of Miles, who he was still a little afraid of, he didn’t know Blake’s hockey friends. Marcus and Luca had great reputations, but they weren’t Brady’s buddies. Cole had kind of become his buddy.

“A few times, yeah. It’s pretty beautiful. I saw sharks here once.”

“For real? I love sharks.”

“We can come back when we’re not doing wedding shit. It’s worth spending some time here.”

Cole wanted to hang out with him again? Alone? Hanging out in nature. Maybe seeing some sharks. Brady wanted that. He wanted to spend more time with Cole, but he hadn’t thought Cole would want to spend more time with him, too.

The photographer called them over for group shots. Blake and his boys, Matthew and his crew. The entire group. They took photos of every variation possible.

“Don’t trip,” Cole joked in a whisper, taking Brady’s offered arm as they finally walked down the aisle. Blake and Matthew had opted for a small wedding, and the intimacy of it made Brady even more nervous than the giant wedding Quinn had. He found his spot behind Luca. Then the flower girl and ring bearer came down after them, in pure, uncoordinated toddler cuteness. Blake’s nephew Drew gave the rings to Marcus, and then the music shifted into something sweeping, dramatic, and untraditional.

Blake and Matthew appeared on opposite sides of their guests and met at the aisle. They joined hands, and though it was unscripted, Blake couldn’t stop himself from kissing Matthew’s knuckles. He already looked like he was on the verge of tears. The team had a pool going for when Blake would cry, and Brady had put money on the very first slot.

The whole of Stanley Park held their breaths as Blake and Matthew made their way to the officiant. Blake stumbled enough to garner polite laughter, because it was clear his distraction was his beautiful groom.

The ceremony was sweet and not too long, and even Brady got misty when they read their own vows.

“Matthew, I knew from the second I met you that you would change my life. I have never loved more deeply than I love you. I have never been more sure of anything than I am of tying myself to you. And no matter what happens, I want you by my side through it all.”

“Blake, when you gave me your heart, you gave me a home. You showed me what it means to have a soulmate and encouraged me to find my purpose in life. I’ve grown into the person I am because of you, and I only want to see what life has in store for the two of us if you’re by my side.”

They exchanged rings, and when the officiant announced them married, Blake dipped Matthew deep to kiss him, then fit at least four more kisses in when they were both upright. The crowd erupted, and Blake and Matthew were whisked away for more photos and a little alone time during cocktail hour.

Cocktail hour was inside the tearoom, and Brady slipped away as everyone headed inside to take a moment for himself. He tucked himself in a corner, the image of Matthew and Blake's first kiss playing itself over and over in his head. He wasn't sad, but there was something bittersweet that was squeezing his heart.

The tears that had been right on the edge of spilling over during the ceremony came now that he was alone. He tried to breathe through it, but he couldn't do anything but gasp for air and let his tears roll down his cheeks.

The door cracked open, and Brady scrambled to wipe his face dry with the scratchy sleeve of his suit. But it was Cole, and he already knew that Brady might be a mess. He knew to look for him. And when Cole opened his arms for a hug, Brady didn't hesitate to pull him close, to bury his nose in the warmth of Cole's neck.

"It's alright, sweetheart. You can be sad. It's okay," Cole said, his voice the comfort Brady was looking for. With Cole there, he could get his breathing under control. Cole smelled clean, sharp, and citrusy, and Brady breathed him in.

Cole had no obligation to him, but here he was, making sure Brady was okay. Walking Brady through his feelings. Being his literal shoulder to cry on. When the intensity of their hug eased, Brady cupped Cole's cheek, his thumb finding the indent of his single dimple. His eyelashes were so long, his brown eyes warm and clear. The world looked right past Brady, but Cole didn't.

He leaned in to kiss Cole before he had formed an entire thought about doing so. Their lips barely touched, and Cole didn't pull away from him. He nodded his

consent, and Brady kissed him again, deeper this time, but just as slowly.

Their lips fit together, and Cole pulled Brady in by his shoulders. In Brady's arms, Cole was all man. Brady had stubble under his lips and a hand tucked up under Cole's suit jacket, and yeah. The kiss felt nice. The male attraction he had spent his life pushing away, shooing off to the edge of his consciousness to deal with down the line, solidified. He'd known being queer was okay before, but now he knew it was good. It was fantastic.

He pressed Cole gently against the back of the door, their bodies connecting along the entire length of them. And when he pressed a thigh between Cole's legs and felt his growing erection, they both let out groans.

Cole took a deep breath. "I am very on board for this. But not here."

"Are we going somewhere?"

"No, we're staying here. We're going to go have a nice drink, hopefully get some kind of snack, and then do the dinner-and-dancing thing. If you still want this by the time we shuttle back to the hotel, then it's game on."

Brady nodded. Cole had that fond look on his face again. He looked happy. He looked like Brady was making him happy.

"Do you want to be my date?"

"To what?" Brady only had the one brain cell at the moment, and it wasn't producing much power.

"To the wedding. I already know we're sitting together at dinner. But dance with me. Hang out. Have some fun with me."

Somewhere, Blake and Matthew were having photos of their rings taken, or whatever the couple did during cocktail hour, and Brady felt light for the first time when thinking about the two of them together. Blake was a great person, but he would never be Brady's person. It was time to move on.

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If Cole ever got married, he'd probably hire Matthew to plan it. It was a nice day, sure, but the details were what Cole appreciated. Like the fact that the wedding party didn't have to sit at the same long table. Amy got to sit with her wife. Marcus and Nina got to sit together. And Cole was next to Brady.

His lips still held the memory of their kiss. He knew what it was—an exploration for a newly realized queer man. But Cole's focus was currently on his career and making sure Caring Cuisine could grow at a sustainable pace. He wasn't looking for a boyfriend. If a cute boy who was a little hung up on someone else wanted to fool around, that was fine with him.

Dinner was in the conservatory, and the greenhouse windows above them let in the summer sun but also allowed for air-conditioning. Another great planning choice. And though they weren't at the head table, the wedding party got their meals first. There was nothing worse than being at the last table to receive your food, while everyone around you was already eating.

Or maybe Cole was particularly food focused.

"That looks great," Brady said, looking at Cole's plate of salmon. He was right. It did look good. He stuck a tine of his fork into the sauce and wow. He was going to enjoy picking through all those flavors. Brady had chosen the steak.

"Yours looks good, too. Wanna trade bites?" Brady nodded, looking at Cole's plate with as much excitement as he felt himself.

Or maybe they were both starving.

Cole loaded up a good bite with salmon, asparagus, and potato on it and held a cupped hand under it as he guided it to Brady's mouth. Brady accepted the bite, the choreography of it a little clumsy.

"Sorry, wasn't expecting to be fed." Brady laughed, wiping sauce from the corner of his mouth.

"Fuck, sorry, of course not. I'm used to shoving a spoon into people's mouths."

"Kinky."

"Kitchen things. Though I am not against food in the bedroom."

Brady's tie was loose, his top button unbuttoned, a five o'clock shadow on his cheeks and jaw. He was handsome before Cole got him to laugh, and when he did, Brady lit up. Maybe it was the glass of wine in him, but even when Brady was comfortable, he was still reserved. A little quiet. Cole had expected to be ditched immediately for the other hockey players, but Brady seemed shy around them. Maybe that was why he felt so attached to Blake. Blake was the person he didn't have to be shy around.

Cole wanted to be that person for him, too.

To return the favor, Brady fed Cole a bite right back. His steak was medium rare, and the veggies had a nice caramelization to them. His potatoes were roasted instead of mashed.

"That's fucking great," Cole said, knocking his knee against Brady's under the table. They ate and watched the room, continuing to trade bites. Brady pointed out the people in the crowd he knew, and Cole did the same. The wedding was fewer than one hundred people, and it felt intimate. Cole knew the guest list had been kept short on purpose, out of necessity.

They both agreed on how grateful they were that Matthew's dad didn't show up. But his mom was there with her husband and stepkids. Blake's family was there, as well as some cousins. Brady pointed out the Hockey players from across the league, including a lot of the gay ones, apparently. Cole hadn't realized there were multiple gay hockey players. Cole pointed out the Caring Cuisine staff and volunteers. It wasn't the largest group of people, but Cole knew every person there was rooting for Blake and Matthew.

Even Brady, now. Before, Brady's gaze would slip over to Blake every five minutes. Now he was calmer. He looked at the head table when everyone's attention was drawn to it, and when folks clinked silverware against glasses to request a kiss from the newlyweds, he clanked along.

It was good progress. Cole was happy for him.

They trudged through speeches as servers cleared dinner plates. Marcus and Nina made a very cute joint speech that made Cole leak a few tears. Both moms said sweet things. The couple themselves expressed their gratitude.

Then half the space was converted into a dance floor, and after first dances, as well as mom-and-son dances, Cole dragged Brady onto the floor with him.

Dancing at weddings should be absolutely mandatory. There were few opportunities in life to dance like this, late into the night, with people you cared about, in a weirdly wholesome environment. There were grandparents here, and kids. You could dance at a club anytime, but there were few joys like sharing a multigenerational dance to "Shout."

The dancing started out upbeat and silly, and Cole and Brady both ditched their suit jackets pretty quickly and got drink refills at the open bar. When a group of straight men danced with each other, it was mostly a lot of jumping up and down and

shouting song lyrics at each other, and there was plenty of that. But Brady was receptive to how close Cole was dancing to him, and when he got handsy, Brady reciprocated.

The music slowed down like Cole knew it eventually would, and when he went to leave the dance floor, Brady pulled him back. “You’re my date, right?” he asked, his husky voice sending shivers to the tips of Cole’s toes.

Blake and Matthew were busy disappearing into each other’s eyes. Cole was surprised when he looked at Brady to find that he already had Brady’s eyes on him. Brady had a warm hand on his lower back and the other hand clasped around one of Cole’s. It was an easy sway, nothing fancy, and before they even reached the halfway point of the song, Brady had pulled them flush together.

By the time the song finished, Cole’s head was on Brady’s shoulder. When the music resumed an upbeat pace, it felt like waking up from a daze. Brady’s gaze was dark and sneaky, and if the wedding had been in the hotel ballroom instead of several miles away, Cole would have pulled him toward the elevator.

This wasn’t a wedding they could ditch, though. They skipped the electric slide in favor of grabbing waters and cupcakes, then got back out on the dance floor when the mid-2000s pop started coming up.

Every time Cole thought he lost Brady, he was right there, millimeters out of his periphery. They chatted with people at the edge of the dance floor, and there wasn’t a single moment where Brady was shy about his public affection, even as curious gazes slid over the two of them. This wedding was a trial run for something, and Cole was proud of him. His own coming out process, even though he’d known he was gay from fairly young, was a long one. There were a lot of factors to weigh. Even in accepting spaces, it could be nerve-racking.

Maybe Brady hadn't had enough time to develop anxiety over it. However things shook out, Cole didn't want him to look back on their night and regret it.

The darkness pressed in from overhead through the glass ceiling, and they danced until Cole's feet ached in his dress shoes. Until the sheen of sweat on Brady's forehead made his perfectly swooped hair droop. Until they reached a point where folks started tapping out. The early shuttle came and took half of the guests back to the hotel. The late-night pizza was brought out, and the only people left celebrating were drunk enough to never want to leave the dance floor.

The last shuttle would come in an hour, and everyone would get kicked out of the venue. Brady filled that hour with purposeful teasing—Hands that slid down to Cole's ass. Hot breath on his neck. A thigh pressed between Cole's legs.

Cole had enough to drink to keep him tipsy, in that bubbly happy place but not messy, and Brady was at the same level.

The small crowd of people left on the dance floor converged, and Matthew pulled Cole away to dance with him. He'd put his long hair in a bun, and he was glowing, his smile maxed out, eyes soft and happy. "Thank you for helping make this day perfect," Matthew said, having to shout a little in Cole's ear. "And it's looking like you're not having a bad time." His eyes darted to Brady, who was dancing with Blake now, much like he would dance with any other teammate, with no attempt to get handsy. Nothing like the way he had been dancing with Cole.

A weird wave of relief hit him.

"Brady is really sweet."

"And it looks like you fixed him."

“I think he experienced some emotional growth. I’m proud of him.”

“Then I am, too,” Matthew said, uncharacteristically generous. At least as far as Brady came.

When the song ended, Cole had Brady’s hand on his lower back again, pulling them back together. Cole kissed Matthew on the cheek so they could both resume dancing with their dates.

As the night wound down, the limo came to take Matthew and Blake to their honeymoon suite for the evening, and everyone else piled into the hotel shuttle. The lights were low, and the shuttle driver had enough music on to keep people partying. Some of the hockey players were arranging an after-party at a bar, and Cole kept waiting for Brady to join in, but he settled against the back of the bench seat they were sharing and put his hand on Cole’s thigh, fingertips drumming impatiently.

They kept goodbyes short once the shuttle pulled up in front of their downtown hotel. It was nicer than any hotel Cole had ever been to but was likely on par with the hotels Brady stayed at during the season. Without discussion, they ended up in front of Cole’s door. And if Cole had any worries about Brady changing his mind, the way Brady pressed himself tight against his back as he fumbled with his room key dispelled them all. Brady’s hands were firm on his hips, lips pressed to his temple, growing erection against his ass.

“Fuck, you are distracting.” Cole had been on edge since they’d kissed at the venue, and Brady’s current actions weren’t helping anything.

“Let me,” Brady said, taking the keycard from him and smoothly sliding it into the lock. The door clicked open, and in a blink, they were inside, and Brady pressed him up against the nearest wall.

Earlier, Brady's lips were soft, exploratory, a little tender. Now they were hungry. Brady tipped Cole's chin up with his thumb, his hand warm on Cole's neck. It was possessive, and the whimper that escaped from Cole encouraged him.

Brady's stubble was even more prominent now at nearly midnight, and Cole knew he would wake up tomorrow with beard burn. "This feels so good," Cole said, running his thumb against the grain of Brady's cheek. He felt Brady smile, and he nearly purred when Brady nuzzled their cheeks together.

He dragged a prickly cheek down Cole's neck, and Cole wrapped his arms around Brady's neck to keep him in place. Brady's erection throbbed as Cole's teeth grazed his jaw and tugged on his earlobe. Cole was helpless against the hotel wall. Days ago, Cole could barely imagine this man opening up to him, or even taking his eyes off of Blake. Now, he had Brady's full attention.

"What do you want to accomplish tonight?" Cole asked.

For the first time, Brady paused. "Uh. I'm not sure. I wanna make you come." That husky voice again, a whisper in his ear.

Cole shivered. Brady could undress him just with that voice.

"Well, I'm not going to stop you from doing that."

"And I wanna come."

"Yeah, darling, we'll make sure that happens, too."

The smile on Brady's face wasn't sneaky or predatory. It was...sweet. Brady's hands slid down Cole's waist to his ass, encouraging him to grind on his thigh. His hips moved involuntarily. Matthew had told him about how amazing hockey thighs were,

but getting a firsthand demonstration was otherworldly. This man's thighs were tree trunks.

"You're going to make me come too soon. Let's slow down," Cole said, hands reluctantly finding Brady's pecs to put an inch more space between them. "Do you want to move to the bed?"

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“Do you want to move to the bed?” Cole asked. His pink lips were slick from kissing, and Brady couldn’t look away. He imagined them wrapped around his cock. He was imagining a lot of things at the moment, but he didn’t want to get ahead of himself.

“Yes,” Brady said. He wrapped Cole’s loose tie around his hand to pull him in for another quick kiss, then pulled the end of his tie out of the knot and slipped it free from his collar. The only time he had ever taken off another man’s tie was when one of his buddies had gotten too drunk, and he’d had to put them to bed mostly fully clothed, sans ties and shoes. He began working on Cole’s shirt buttons, and he was happy that he wasn’t nervous or scared. Well, maybe a little scared. Self-conscious about something he had never done before. Mostly, though, he was excited.

Cole was bare chested under his shirt, his body defined but not chiseled, smooth and hairless, unlike his own body. He caught the first hint of body hair when he made it to the final buttons and tugged the shirt out of Cole’s pants. Dark hair trailed from his navel down, disappearing into his pants.

Allowing himself to look at a man and feel how aroused it made him was heady. Usually when he was around attractive men, he put a lot of energy into not noticing them. People who aren’t attracted to men probably don’t need to do that.

Brady dropped to his knees. Above him, Cole gasped. “You don’t have to do anything you don’t want to,” he said. Brady didn’t need the comfort.

Slowly, he opened Cole’s pants and was greeted by his erection, straining against his black underwear. Black underwear. Was black underwear inherently sexy, or was Brady on a hair trigger? He pressed his face in close, taking in how good Cole

smelled and nuzzling against his erection. Cole gasped, a hand coming down to cover himself.

“Fuck, stubble,” Cole said. He threaded a hand into Brady’s hair, tugging him slightly away from where he wanted his face to be.

“I’ll be good,” Brady promised, and Cole took his hands back, pressing them against the wall and out of the way. Brady held Cole’s hips in place as he mouthed at him through his underwear, mindful of his stubble. His fingertips slid around the top elastic of Cole’s briefs. There was only thin fabric in the way of having a cock in his mouth for the first time. He had to give himself a squeeze through his dress pants to take the edge off.

“Go on,” Cole said, encouraging Brady along. He raked his fingers through his own hair, and it was messy. Brady felt like the most embarrassingly eager person on earth, but Cole looked just as needy.

He pulled Cole’s underwear down slowly, until his erection sprang free. His underwear was bunched around his thighs, shirt open, thighs trembling already. Brady took a moment to admire Cole, hard and long and angry red at the tip. He didn’t overthink it. He went for it, closing his mouth over the tip of Cole’s erection.

Above him, Cole whined, one of his hands finding Brady’s hair again, this time to keep him in place. Brady ran his tongue along the underside of Cole’s cock, humming at how silky it felt. Cole shook as he exhaled.

“That feels so good. Too good.”

Brady pulled off, and a string of saliva kept him connected to the shiny head of Cole’s dick. Fuck. He was really doing this. “Do you want me to stop?”

Cole shook his head no. “Yes. Let’s actually make it out of the entryway.”

Since Brady was on his knees anyway, he unlaced Cole’s shoes and helped him out of them. Then his socks. As Cole pushed the rest of his clothing all the way off, Brady got to work on his own buttons. He worked much faster when Cole walked over to the bed, his round ass on display. He had those little dimples above his ass, and when he threw a look over his shoulder to see how Brady was coming, Brady nearly tripped over his pants in his haste.

Be cool, he thought. He didn’t want Cole to think he was a loser. He knew Brady hadn’t been with a man before, but he didn’t want Cole to think he was a virgin. He wanted him to think he was cool—to like him.

By the time Brady made it to the bed, he’d stripped bare. Cole pulled the blankets to the side and was waiting for him on his back, propped up on his elbows.

“You are... Wow,” Brady said, his gaze tracking up and down Cole’s body slowly. His cock was still shiny from Brady’s mouth, and his own erection was aching. He didn’t know what Cole had in mind for him, but he would take anything Cole gave him.

“I could say the same.” Brady wasn’t used to being on the receiving end of desire like this. He was used to being desired because he was a pro hockey player and made decent money. Not for his body. There were plenty of guys on his team who were more ripped than he was. He always had a hard time getting definition in his stomach, but that didn’t seem to bother Cole.

Cole reached for his hand and pulled him onto the bed. He carefully settled on top of Cole, not wanting to crush him. They both groaned when Brady lined their erections up together. He was dick-to-dick with another man. The soft, warm body beneath him was turning him on more than anyone he had dated in years. Sex had never been a

chore with women, but nothing had ever been as exhilarating as what he and Cole were doing. And then Cole took his face in both of his hands to kiss him, and he let himself turn his brain off and chase that feeling.

Brady only enjoyed kissing under certain circumstances. He liked an affectionate, chaste kiss, and sometimes he liked to kiss during actual intercourse. But lying here and making out with Cole while they slowly rocked their bodies together was making him float. Cole's hair was dark against the white sheets. He was breathtaking, and Brady told him as much.

"Let me—" Cole looked around, searching for something.

"There's lube in the side table," Brady told him. He'd used it alone the night before, but he was having a lot more fun now.

Cole found the lube and poured some onto his hand. He reached between them, and Brady gasped when Cole's long fingers curled around him. He spread the lube up and down Brady's cock.

"Fuck, baby," Brady said, the term of endearment slipping out so easily. The connection he felt with Cole was already deep—scary deep.

Cole knew what he was doing, and he wasn't timid about it. Sometimes with girls, Brady got the impression that touching his dick was something they got through, not something they enjoyed. Cole was fully enjoying himself.

Cole grabbed the lube again and drizzled some on himself too, shivering at the temperature of the cool gel. Brady assumed it was an invitation for him to jerk Cole off too, but instead, Cole pulled Brady's hips down to meet his again. Their hips automatically shifted to line the two of them up perfectly to slide against each other, and Brady realized what his intent was.

“Yeah, exactly like that,” Cole said when he saw Brady putting the pieces together. Brady slid their hips together and let his eyes drop closed.

“Jesus.” He bit his lip as he continued to move until Cole pulled him back into a kiss.

“Look at us,” he said, and Brady looked between the two of them. He was between Cole’s spread thighs, and they were shiny with lube, their cocks moving against each other in the most delicious friction. He couldn’t take his eyes off of them.

While his attention was glued to the place they were pressed together, Cole dropped his hands from around Brady’s neck in favor of pulling his legs wider. He arched his back.

“You look fucking obscene,” Brady said, reaching between them to get a hand on both of them. “I’m so fucking close.”

“Me too,” Cole panted. “I’m almost there. Make me come, Brady.”

Brady stroked them together as they reached the edge. Cole was rock hard in his hand, and when he started to shoot, Brady could feel him coming on the underside of his own cock. He didn’t need any more than that to reach his own climax.

He stroked the two of them together as they coated Cole’s chest in come until his arms gave out and he let himself collapse into Cole’s embrace.

“You did so good, holy shit,” Cole said, his voice light and giddy after his orgasm. He shifted his hips against Brady’s to chase that feeling a little longer. “Mmm.”

“That might have been the hottest thing that’s ever happened to me,” Brady whispered into Cole’s neck. All he did was rub off on a guy, and he was about to write a poem about it. Brady wasn’t like some of his teammates who were always

trying to get laid, but he wasn't inexperienced. "I'm not sure I've ever come that hard."

Cole kissed his cheek. "So your first time with a man—good?" he teased.

"Very, very good." He rubbed his cheek against Cole's soft skin again, and a shiver ran all the way down Cole's body. They should get up before things got gross, but Brady couldn't yet. He was basking. "Thank you."

"For what?" Cole asked, as though Cole hadn't dedicated his entire week to making Brady not be a big fucking baby and/or a liability at the wedding.

"Well, for that orgasm, first. And then for everything. For being my date tonight. My shoulder to whine on. For putting up with having to play mini golf with an overcompetitive asshole. Showing a grown man how to hold a chef's knife. For holding my hand through all my Blake feelings." He rolled his eyes at himself. For a year and a half, he had been trying to convince everyone he didn't have a crush on Blake. It seemed like the only person he successfully convinced was himself. "I'm so pathetic."

"You are not. You're processing. And I had fun. I wanted to hang out with you, look after you, take you to bed." Cole kissed his forehead.

God, Brady was fucking tired. His eyes were starting to droop, betraying his exhaustion. He wondered if Cole was as tired as he was.

"Shower?" Cole asked.

Brady nodded but didn't move until Cole shoved him off.

They were only under the spray for long enough to wash off the come and lube. Cole

tossed him a towel, and then Brady realized Cole might want him to go back to his own room. Brady didn't want to. He wanted to get under the covers on the bed they fucked on and bundle Cole into his arms.

"Glad we didn't make a mess of the sheets," Cole said. He yawned and turned the lamp off as he got into bed. "Well, c'mon," he prompted, and Brady scrambled in next to him.

"I've never been more tired in my life." It was a lie. Brady was a professional athlete. He was constantly exhausted.

"We have brunch at ten thirty."

"Ugh," Brady complained, but he was glad to have one more mandatory reason to get to hang out with Cole.

Brady had dreaded this weekend for all the wrong reasons, and now he didn't want it to end.

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Cole woke up hot. Brady was octopused around him, flush to his back, and part of that was lovely. But they were also sweaty. Neither of them had bothered to bump down the air-conditioning before falling asleep. It had been so long since Cole had spent the night with a hookup that he forgot he needed climate control in order to enjoy a full night of cuddling.

Hookup. Was Brady his hookup? They obviously weren't dating, but when Cole thought about what they had ending with the weekend, he ached. When Matthew had asked him to keep an eye on Brady throughout the week, he'd thought he would be forcing himself to spend time with a crabby jock. Instead, Brady was exactly the kind of person Cole liked being around. Quietly fun, determined, passionate, kind. Really fucking hot, if Cole was being honest. Cole was never, ever on the hunt for a boyfriend. In general, he enjoyed being single. He liked making his own plans and focusing on his job and his friends. But if that's what this developed into, he would be into it.

Brady groaned as Cole slipped out of bed, the slightly cool air hitting his skin a relief. Brady reached for his hand to tug him back into bed with him, and he would have been able to resist if Brady's morning wood wasn't prominent under the thin white bedsheet. Someday, he hoped he'd get to ride that dick, but it was still early, and Cole was trying to ease Brady into new experiences.

Instead, he crawled back into bed, tossing a knee over Brady's waist as he went. Big hands immediately steadied him. Brady was big all over, and the way his hands eclipsed Cole's hips made his cock throb.

"Mmm," Brady said, pressing his hips up for friction, eyes on Cole's cock. He would

be perfectly happy to do a repeat of last night, but as the future of the two of them was cloudy, he wanted to get one more new thing in before they had to head to brunch.

His lips skipped Brady's mouth and landed straight on his jaw. He'd go without morning breath kisses. There weren't many things he reserved under the mantle of Boyfriend Things, but dealing with someone else's morning breath was relationship shit.

Brady's stubble was still prickly, and Cole hummed against his skin as he dragged his lips down to his neck, giving Brady just enough of a nip to get a reaction but not enough to leave a mark. As Cole trailed south, Brady's hands slid up his sides.

"Oh, fuck," Brady said, realizing what Cole was about to do. They had to rearrange a bit in order for Cole to get between Brady's legs, and then there he was, those huge thighs spread open, cock hard and resting on his stomach. His hips had a hint of a V cut, and his whole torso was covered in a generous sprinkle of dark blond hair. Cole didn't know what he did to deserve this, but he thanked the universe for sending him this queer-curious hunk of man.

The night before, Cole barely had time to get acquainted with Brady's cock, and that was a shame. It was beautiful, nice and thick, not too long. Sure, Cole liked anal, but he wasn't looking to split himself open. Brady was packing plenty to make him feel good.

Cole mouthed at the underside of Brady's length and looked up to check in with him. Brady nodded, one of his hands coming to cradle the side of Cole's head. It was gentle and simple, but it still made Cole melt a bit. There was intimacy in the look Brady was giving him. Not a lot could get Cole's hopes up, but he felt something more than his dick coming to life.

The crown of Brady's cock was beautiful, and Cole lapped at the underside before wrapping his lips around the soft tip. Brady's breath caught. Cole couldn't help but groan. He loved sucking dick, and there was nothing better than the person on the receiving end making sure he knew how much they were enjoying his mouth.

Cole bobbed down a bit before pulling back up, swirling his tongue around the tip, then taking even more in. He knew this was the kind of dick that could make his jaw ache if he got to really take his time, but he knew they had obligations that morning. He had to get the show on the road.

He couldn't fit all of Brady into his mouth, so he used a hand at the base, sometimes stroking in time with his mouth's movements, sometimes drifting lower to play with Brady's balls. He seemed to especially like that, and when he took Brady in as far as his mouth would allow him without relaxing his throat and gave his balls a firm tug, Brady shouted, his orgasm coming unexpectedly. Cole recovered enough to swallow most of it, his hand jerking Brady slowly as the last few drips of come slid down the head of his cock. Cole leaned in to lick him clean.

"I am so sorry," Brady said, the hand that had never left Cole's cheek comforting him. "I didn't have any warning. I know that's bad manners. I'm not normally like that, I was surprised?—"

"No worries. I knew what I was getting myself into. I like dick, and I like your dick. I'm not upset."

"You're not?"

"No, but damn, you're sweet. I know this is a stereotype, but usually when I'm with, you know, big strong men, there is not nearly enough sweetness in bed. Everyone has to be the alpha male." Cole rolled his eyes.

“I’m literally a backup goalie. Not a lot of alpha energy here.”

“Good.”

“You’re still hard, right? Can I—” Brady sat up, wrapped his arms around Cole’s body, and pulled him up the bed, depositing him on his back. “That’s the best I got.”

“Okay, well, I like that. Sweet and strong.”

Brady bit his lip and eased Cole’s knees apart. Cole had already been in Brady’s mouth before, and like the night before, Brady was eager. Sure, he could work on finesse as he gained more dick-sucking experience, but his novel enthusiasm was affecting Cole plenty. He focused on keeping his hips from thrusting, and when Brady reached a hand up, Cole took it, tangling their fingers together as Brady bobbed on his dick. Sweet.

Cole was already fairly worked up from sucking Brady’s dick, and seeing this beautiful man so enthusiastically try to take him deeper and deeper, despite his gag reflex triggering more than once, was something Cole wanted to sear into his memory. Someday Brady would be practiced, talented, deft, masterful. But now he was still figuring it out and working so hard. He was listening not only to Cole’s direct feedback on what did and didn’t feel good, but he was also paying attention to the sounds Cole was making and what made Cole squeeze Brady’s hand from intensity.

“Okay, sweetheart, I’m gonna come,” he said, and Brady pulled off, jerking him the rest of the way. And as good as Brady’s mouth felt, seeing Brady’s big hand around his dick as the tip disappeared and reappeared, red and wet, was what pushed him over the edge.

“Oh my god,” Brady said, like that felt as good for him as it did for Cole. Cole never

wanted Brady to take his hand off of him, but as he was nearing oversensitivity, Brady took both his hands back, sitting up like he was waiting for his next direction.

“That was amazing.”

“My amateur BJ was amazing?”

“Yeah. You went all in. Tried hard. Paid attention.”

“You sound like my coach.”

“So hockey is as gay as I always thought it was,” Cole teased. He swatted Brady out of bed and headed to the bathroom. They had showers to take, clothes to put on, hair to do, suitcases to pack—all before their ten-thirty brunch. They needed to get a move on.

But the urgency didn’t stop Brady from pushing Cole up against the bathroom counter as they waited for the shower to warm up and kissing him deep, morning breath and all.

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“I want you to know how important it is to me that you agreed to be my groomsman and were here this weekend,” Blake said, already a little tipsy. They had the private room of an upscale restaurant to themselves, and every brunch food imaginable was mounded across an impressive buffet. And, of course, a Caesar bar with all the toppings. Blake had pulled him aside, and Brady realized how little he had talked to Blake all week. If he had known how little Blake time he would get before he’d come, would he have reconsidered being here? Now, all he had was happiness for his friend.

And for himself. He got a BJ first thing in the morning, which was uncommon for him.

“You’re one of my favorite people in the entire world. I couldn’t have imagined yesterday without you. And it looked like you and Cole became friends?” He did a little eyebrow wiggle that betrayed how little control he had over those particular muscles.

“Yeah. Cole is awesome,” Brady said. He wasn’t ready to come out to his friend yet, even with what he’d surely seen the night before. Brady and Cole weren’t being subtle. Maybe he would have his shit together by the start of camp, but he wanted to sort out the feelings he had about his sexuality from the feelings he had for Blake. He could admit that Matthew had been right all along, even if Brady didn’t fully understand how he was feeling himself.

Blake pulled him into a big hug, navigating around Brady’s overflowing buffet plate. Blake was an excellent hugger, and Brady let himself enjoy it without jealousy or sour feelings. There was a new lightness to this relationship between the two of them,

and Brady hoped it would help deepen their friendship. And if he was lucky, maybe he could even earn back Matthew's trust. The best gift you could give someone you loved was to get along with their partner. And now Blake and Matthew were married forever.

"I love you, man," Blake said, giving his cheek a friendly pat.

"Love you, too. If we don't get a chance to talk before you and Matthew leave, have a great time in Greece."

Blake checked his watch. "Tee minus twenty-seven hours."

"Alright now, get back to your man," Brady said, bumping his shoulder against Blake's as he turned toward the table Cole was sitting at. For the first time in a long time, Brady didn't feel Matthew's laser gaze on the two of them. He was chatting with Nina. It was past time to graduate from needing a babysitter around Blake.

"You too," Blake said, eyes sliding past Brady to Cole. He was teasing him a bit, and well, maybe he wouldn't need to worry about coming out. Maybe you didn't need to come out to some people because it was obvious.

"Still feeling okay about that?" Cole asked when he claimed his seat next to him.

"I feel great about it," Brady said truthfully. Even if, in an alternate universe, Brady and Blake had been single at the same time, and Brady knew he was queer, they wouldn't have been a good match. Blake was maybe too sweet for him. Blake would lie down in a mud puddle so Matthew wouldn't dirty his boots, and Brady loved that about him. He had a good heart and was kind to those around him. But Brady needed someone with a little more edge. Someone who could keep him in line.

"No drink?" Cole asked. His own Caesar had a pile of toppings on it, in a comical,

nearly American kind of way.

“Gotta drive you home,” Brady said. He wasn’t ready to drop Cole off yet. Plus, as an American, he’d yet to acquire a taste for Caesars.

They hung around for another two hours, lingering as Matthew and Blake basked in the freshly married glow. The brunch was open to everyone who’d come to their small wedding, so the room they were in was busy with people reliving the night before and catching up with each other if they hadn’t had time to in the hustle of the previous day.

By the time they made it to Cole’s apartment building, it was nearly three.

Instead of dropping him off at the front door, Brady parked. He took a breath, trying to get up the courage to at least kiss him goodbye, but Cole beat him to it, his hand on Brady’s arm. Sparks, as always.

“Come up. Hang out a little.” Cole had this confidence in himself, this certainty, that Brady had only ever felt on the ice. Never around someone he wanted to kiss.

“Yeah, okay,” he said, putting his car into Park and pocketing his key. He grabbed Cole’s bag from the back seat and didn’t let him take it from him. Brady wanted to carry it. He was having big feelings, but until he had some time to sort them out, he was going to keep his actions small.

Cole’s apartment was a studio. It made Brady’s messy apartment feel like a waste of space.

“Nothing fancy here, but I can make you something to eat.”

“I am so full of breakfast food.”

“But I bet you could go for a snack.”

Brady was a hockey player. He could always go for a snack. “I’m convinced.”

Cole got him a drink, and Brady sat in his small kitchen nook as he pulled out a blender.

“Oh my god. I have never pulled out an appliance for a snack before.”

“I have all the stuff for salsa. I swear it’s easy.”

Cole made it look easy. When Brady had to cook something, he spent so much time thinking through the things he needed. Space, ingredients, tools, time. Cole had all of his ingredients rough chopped and in the blender before Brady would have even touched knife to veggie.

Time passed like a liquid, gone before he realized, the night sky getting dark. They snacked their way through the evening, sharing Cole’s small but comfortable couch and flipping channels on the TV as they chatted through most of what they watched.

Finally, Cole sighed.

“When do you have to go back to Minnesota?”

“Flight leaves tomorrow around noon.”

“That’s so soon.” He was pressed against Brady, their feet up on the coffee table. Brady was getting used to the way Cole fit against him, and now he had to go home.

“Maybe I should push it out. Shit is weird at home right now.”

“What’s up with your brother?”

“The MIA one is in Arizona with my parents. Their RV is parked down there, at least at the moment. Oldest brother is fine. Feels a little guilty. Unofficial brother feels like garbage. My sister is about to leave for her senior year though, and I want to spend as much time with her as she’ll let me. She’s the closest in age to me. Also a goalie.”

“Are you all goalies?”

“Well, Quinn doesn’t play hockey. But the rest of us are. It’s what happens when two goalies fall in love and have kids. They produce baby goalies.”

“That sounds adorable.”

“It was expensive as fuck. I don’t know how they did it.”

“And then you’re coming back?”

The hope in Cole’s voice echoed Brady’s butterflies.

“In two and a half weeks, yeah.”

“Will I see you in two and a half weeks?”

Cole wanted to see him again? “You witnessed the most emotionally embarrassing moment of my life, except for that one time in Bantam when I cried during a shootout.”

“I like humans with emotions.”

“I figured out I like guys about twenty seconds ago.”

“And I don’t have a problem with that.”

“I’m only a backup goalie.”

“You are a whole person.” Brady didn’t feel like a whole person. He felt like someone who worked so hard every day to achieve a goal that he probably wouldn’t achieve for years. Someday, he would be a starter, but not this season. The focus hockey took didn’t leave him much left over. Cole didn’t treat him like leftovers.

“You really want to see me again after this?”

“Yeah. And until you come back, I also want to send you dumb memes throughout the day. Maybe send you a good morning text or two.”

Brady spent the last year and a half sabotaging every relationship he tried to be in, and he never understood why. He got it now. He wasn’t at the finish line when it came to Knowing Himself, but he was at least running the race now.

“Yeah, I’d really like that.”

“Good,” Cole said. He climbed into Brady’s lap to kiss him, and as the night got later and later, Brady closed his eyes to the clock’s steady progression. Eventually, it was so late it would make no sense to go home.

He got tucked into Cole’s bed in his underwear as Cole turned lights off and drew the curtains. Light from the city still made its way into Cole’s little apartment, little slivers of it lighting up Cole’s angular face. He was so beautiful that Brady wanted to paint him. Or maybe he wanted to buy a painting of him—who was he kidding?

“I gotta get up early,” Brady said through a yawn, welcoming Cole easily into his arms. He was sated after the blowjob Cole gave him and hoped Cole felt the same.

His bed was warm, but the AC was blasting. Brady hoped it meant a night full of cuddles.

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“He comes back tonight, right?” Matthew asked over a table full of chicken Caring Cuisine received from a grocery store that overbought. Matthew always wrinkled his nose when he had to do meat-adjacent tasks, so Cole usually spared him. He didn’t care about raw meat. However, this was the primary task for the day.

“Plane lands in two hours.” Cole had gotten a handful of texts and a selfie from Brady before the plane had taken off. “It’s crazy how much I miss him. I’m trying to play it cool, but then he calls and I practically trip over myself answering. I don’t know if I’ve ever really given a shit about a boy before.”

“That’s how it was with Blake. One day I thought I was going to die alone, and the next, I was moving across the continent for him. Love is a drug, when you know, you know, blah blah.” Matthew was cubing up chicken breasts for a pasta bake, touching each chicken breast like it was going to burn him, even though he was wearing gloves.

The kitchen was busy—with a few interns helping guide some regular volunteers through other prep tasks that needed to get done, with the sound of several knives on cutting boards, the hollow clank of commercial-grade stainless steel bins getting passed around, and a ’90s pop playlist on Spotify. The pace of Cole’s job had helped the time pass between Brady leaving and Brady coming back. He wouldn’t be volunteering this information, but he had a countdown on his phone.

“You know when you go to summer camp, and you make these crazy close friends because of proximity, and fear, and changed schedule, and being around each other every second of the day?”

“Sure.”

“It feels like that. Like we did a speed-run of getting to know each other.”

“It’s scary to go from a person expecting to be single for the foreseeable future to someone who now has to factor a new person into their lives. But it’s good, Coley. It’s worth it.”

“We talked every day, more than once. He said he wants me to meet his family when things settle down—he’s got a little sibling drama right now.”

“That’s a big step.”

“He said he wants to be my boyfriend.”

“What did you say?”

“That we should take it slow.”

Matthew scoffed, trying to blow a loose strand of hair out of his face. “Just fucking do it. Maybe I’m not the best person to give advice here, because I understand Blake and I aren’t the usual situation, but do it. Try.”

“I thought you hated this kid.”

“Yeah, when he was looking at my husband like he was an all-you-can-eat buffet.” Matthew’s entire demeanor changed every time he called Blake his husband, like they were the first two people ever to get married. Jeez. Some couples had the audacity to make you believe in love.

“You want me to date him so he stops bugging you?” Cole raised an eyebrow at him.

“Nah. I want you to date him because you looked so happy when the two of you were hanging out all weekend. You were having actual fun, not ‘I’ll have one drink, but I have to be in bed by nine’ fun.”

Fuck. Matthew was right. Cole could be nose-to-the-grindstone with his job. It’s why he’d had to quit working in restaurants. He didn’t have boundaries and would let a job eat him alive if it wanted. Caring Cuisine asked a reasonable amount from him, but he still wanted to give double effort. Self-sacrificing effort. And when he felt ground to dust, he remembered that every day, he cooked food to serve his community. Folks struggling with illness. The precious remaining queer elders left. His work felt serious to him.

But being with Brady was real fun, where he got to be in the moment and share that with someone he liked. To be silly, to tease and be teased, to give and receive pleasure knowing that your partner actually gave a shit whether you came.

He clocked out when he got the notification that Brady’s flight landed. Another selfie. Fuck, he was cute. Cole was jittery with how much he wanted to get his hands on that man, and having him be in the same city again and not immediately getting to maul him was an affront.

Cole obviously couldn’t pick up Brady on his bike. Brady had left his car in an airport parking lot though, so Cole biked home and straightened up his apartment a little. Brady had spent one night in his bed, and Cole was already fantasizing about that becoming a regular thing. He knew about the hockey schedule. Matthew complained about it enough. But Cole was tenacious. He’d figure out a way to get Brady in his bed as often as possible.

Brady shared his ETA with him when he got to his car, and when he was nearly there, Cole headed downstairs. Brady’s SUV turned into his parking lot, and the second his car was in Park, he was out of it, the two of them closing the distance with fake

casual slowness until they were close enough for Cole to leap into his arms.

“Hey, baby,” Brady said, spinning Cole around once before setting him back on the asphalt. When Brady kissed him, it was with a familiarity that Cole had never felt before. Maybe this was what finding your person was like. “God, you look good. You smell good. Neither of those things applies to me.”

“I literally do not care what you smell like. I want you in my bed immediately.” There had been no phone-sex attempts. Brady lived in a small house with nosy siblings. Cole had respected that.

“Lead the way.”

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Someday, Brady would have a big, gorgeous condo like Blake. Someday, Brady would be a starter, and that meant eventually he and Blake would play on different teams. The curse of being a goalie. But for now, he would enjoy Blake's condo, and in twenty minutes, they would all be enjoying the food Cole and Matthew were cooking in the kitchen of said condo.

Brady and Blake had the good sense to not hover. Brady had learned to be useful in different ways, like driving Cole around to different grocery stores for hard-to-find ingredients he wouldn't bother to go searching for on his bike. He'd also become a world-class dishwasher, because Cole would make some crazy, fiddly shit if he knew he wouldn't have to clean up after it, and the less Cole wanted to clean up after a meal, the more Brady wanted to eat that meal.

"You two seem like you're doing well," Blake said, sipping his beer. The condo's kitchen, dining, and living space were open concept, but it was such a fucking enormous space that they still had a semblance of privacy. Blake hadn't lost the tan he'd gained in Greece, but Brady thought part of the glow was from being a newlywed. Brady hoped whatever power he was drawing from his happiness translated to the ice. Some goalie tandems were bitter and competitive, but Brady always wanted Blake to play well.

"We are. It's... I mean, I'm new to this. But it's really incredible. He's amazing. I'm sure it's a cliché, but I never thought I'd feel this way."

"I'm happy for you. You never seemed overly excited about anyone you dated. I'm glad you realized you're gay."

“I’m not positive it’s that. Cole is just...Cole. If he was a girl, he’d still be Cole, and I’d still be into him.”

“Sexuality is weird. I’m proud of you for letting yourself go for it though. It’s a hurdle. And you can always ask me any newly queer questions you have.”

Brady had only officially come out to Blake a few days prior. Blake knew Brady and Cole had something going on during his wedding—he had eyes, after all. But he had waited to ask Brady about it until he came to Blake. It was nice practicing coming out with people he already knew would accept him. Considering all the gay that was already happening in his family, he came out to them via group text by sending a photo of him and Cole from the wedding. He hadn’t had so many enthusiastic texts blow up his phone in a short period of time since the NHL draft.

Blake was the first non-Cole person he’d come out to face-to-face. He still had echoes of how fast his heart had been beating when he’d stumbled over the words, even though Blake had been beaming at him the whole time. He remembered the wash of relief when Blake had hugged him.

“Come dish up!” Matthew yelled across the space. The smell had been distracting Brady for forty minutes. Garlic and onions and butter and... He couldn’t place all the flavors, but he was sure he’d hear about them all.

He and Blake grabbed plates, and Cole scooped up portions of “deconstructed butternut squash lasagna,” which was made with homemade pasta and a butternut squash ricotta filling. They had ranch green beans on the side, which Cole became obsessed with making in the air fryer ever since he had learned of Brady’s Midwestern love of ranch. Both goalies also got a chicken breast each on the side, since they were back to working out. Camp was only days away. Brady was ready to horrify Cole with how much he could eat.

He hoped Cole didn’t get sick of his terrible hockey schedule. One thing that was nice

about dating a man who wasn't looking for a boyfriend was that Cole had his own life. Brady knew he wasn't going to leave Cole twiddling his thumbs when he went on a road trip. Cole was independent, and it was nice to know he was with Brady because he was choosing to be.

He was, however, thinking of buying Cole a car so he wouldn't have to bike to work in the winter, but Syd told him to wait so he didn't freak him out.

It didn't stop him from having a tab on his phone browser open to the luxury car dealership his teammates loved.

Maybe that was over the top.

"We gotta convince Kenny to make these green beans," Blake said as they got settled at the table and finally tucked into their food. Kenny was the team chef, and bless his heart, he took a lot of requests.

"I'm not sure I'll divulge the recipe," Cole said, a coy look on his face.

"It's a packet of ranch seasoning," Matthew said. Brady already knew this, since he'd requested the packet, even after Cole had offered to mix up his own seasoning. The packet was what ranch tasted like to him.

Dear god, why did Cole still like him?

"The fuck, dude, that's proprietary info." Cole laughed. "What am I going to do when Brady realizes he can get ranch green beans from any old guy?"

"I only want them if they're made with love," Brady said, knocking his knee against Cole's.

They hadn't said the L word yet, but Brady could feel it on the tip of his tongue. He

knew he'd say it soon. This thing they were doing was still so new, so bright and vibrant. And sure, it was a little scary, but turning toward fear was how he got where he was. If he shied away from scary things, he wouldn't have made it to the NHL.

Cole was bold and fearless, and it was easy to be brave around him. For him. For them.