Summary

Cam takes a couple of breaths and turns around to face Ryan.

He’s just as tall as he was the last time Cam saw him, just as rail-skinny in an oversized, plain hoody, but Cam knows he’s covered in lean, corded muscle underneath it all. His hair still falls into his eyes, making him look younger, making Cam feel old.

‘Hey, stranger,’ Cam says, trying to sound neutral. Trying to sound friendly.

‘Hey, Cammy,’ he says, like it’s easy. ‘Long time, no see.’

Notes

this has been almost four months in the making. i started writing it in january, literally a full year after joey was traded, because that’s how long it took me to get over it. i’m a parody of myself.

big thanks to my amazing beta, lil, and robin and jenna for holding my hand through the tricky parts, and telling me when to get over myself and write.

2025

Cam likes coaching. It’s peaceful, in a weird way. It’s easy to tune out the sound of the kids bickering and focus on the plays, on the slow progress of the puck from one end to the other. His bad hip aches a little in the cold. He shifts his weight to his other leg, and blows his whistle to bring the kids in.
He’s explaining the next drill when he catches movement out of the corner of his eye. He thinks at first it’s his assistant coach, a high school kid who’s always running late, but when he glances up, it’s—

He doesn’t realize he’s stopped talking until one of the kids asks what’s wrong.

Cam clears his throat, and looks back down at his board. ‘Sorry,’ he says. ‘So, we’re just gonna do a full-ice horseshoe to cool down, you guys all know that, right?’

They all clamor in agreement, and scatter to collect the pucks for the drill.

Cam takes a couple of breaths and turns around to face Ryan.

He’s just as tall as he was the last time Cam saw him, just as rail-skinny in an oversized, plain hoody, but Cam knows he’s covered in lean, corded muscle underneath it all. His hair still falls into his eyes, making him look younger, making Cam feel old.

‘Hey, stranger,’ Cam says, trying to sound neutral. Trying to sound friendly.

‘Hey, Cammy,’ he says, like it’s easy. ‘Long time, no see.’

‘What are you doing here?’ he asks, blunt.

‘Meeting with Jarmo,’ he says. ‘I— He had some paperwork for me to sign.’ Ryan isn’t quite looking him in the eye.

‘What kind of paperwork?’ Cam asks, like he doesn’t know the answer. Like he hasn’t heard the rumors. Like he hasn’t fielded questions from Adam for a week about the return of Big Name Free Agent Ryan Johansen.

‘He won the Conn Smythe, dad,’ Adam had said, in a hushed tone.

‘I won a Conn Smythe!’ Cam had protested, and Adam had pulled a face.

‘Yeah, like a million years ago, dad. Joey won it this year.’

Cam had given up, waited for Adam to fall asleep, and then googled the rumors like an adult.

‘The coming home kind of paperwork,’ Ryan says, grinning.

‘Congratulations,’ Cam says, carefully blank. ‘How did we manage to afford you?’

‘Call it a hometown discount,’ Ryan says. ‘Anaheim had to blow up after the win, and I’m too pale for the West Coast anyway. I missed Ohio.’

Cam chews his lip. ‘Welcome home,’ he says, but he knows he doesn’t sound genuine.

‘Know anyone who’s looking for a roomie?’ Ryan asks. ‘I knew I should have kept my apartment here just in case.’

‘I think Jack’s looking for a babysitter,’ Cam says, after a pause, and Ryan laughs. Cam doesn’t get why he’s so calm, so at ease. Cam feels like he’s standing on top of a tower and the wind is making the foundation shake. He feels like he’s just barely clinging onto the ropes of the conversation.

‘Dad! Dad!’
‘Adam, I told you, it’s Coach Cam at practice, buddy,’ Cam says, turning around to find not only his son but the entire Columbus Justice mites team staring at him and Ryan.

Rawan punches her brother in the arm and whispers, pointing at Ryan. Kids are great, Cam knows, but kids are not subtle.

‘Uh,’ Ryan says, sounding awkward for the first time since he turned up out of the blue. ‘Hi, guys. I’m Ryan.’

‘We know,’ Jason says. ‘You’re famous.’

‘Uh,’ Ryan says again, looking to Cam for help. ‘How are y’all doing?’

‘Y’all?’ Cam asks, unable to help himself. ‘You spent too much time in Texas, dude.’ He turns back to the kids. ‘Ryan’s got a very important meeting, so he has to go now. Say goodbye, guys.’

‘Actually, I’m kind of early,’ Ryan admits. ‘I was gonna kill some time in the cafe, but I heard the sound of hockey, so— here I am. Is it just you with all these kids?’

‘Coach Tim is always late,’ Adam says. ‘Da— Coach Cam pretends it doesn’t bother him, but it does. Do you have skates?’

‘—In my car,’ Ryan says. ‘Is— I can grab them,’ he says to Cam. ‘You look like you could use a hand.’

Cam considers saying no. He thinks about telling Ryan that he hasn’t needed him in ten years and he doesn’t need him now, but. It would be a lie. So he half-smiles, and nods, and watches Ryan jog to the parking garage elevator. He’s back in no time, skates slung over one shoulder and a stick with orange tape wrapped around the butt.

‘We normally finish with a scrimmage,’ Cam says. ‘Everyone throws their sticks in the middle.’

Ryan lights up. ‘It’s war,’ he says.

‘They’re seven,’ Cam reminds him.

Ryan just grins, and as soon as the kids are split into teams he’s down on one knee in a huddle with them. Cam rolls his eyes, but his eyes keep getting dragged over to the group.

‘Dad,’ Adam says, tugging on the sleeve of his jacket. ‘Ryan’s coaching, why aren’t you? I don’t wanna lose.’

‘Coach Cam,’ Cam reminds him, but he crouches and runs through a couple of simple plays with them, checks on his goalies, and then it’s time for a faceoff.

Ryan’s taking the faceoff for his team.

‘This seems unfair,’ Cam says, skating up with the puck. Adam, taking the faceoff for his team, scoffs.

‘It’s fine, Coach,’ he says.

‘I’ll be nice,’ Ryan says. ‘They’re seven.’

Cam rolls his eyes again. ‘I guess I’m tagging in for my team,’ he says. ‘To make it fair.’
Adam’s eyes light up; Cam knows he loves watching his dad play. ‘Yeah!’ he chirps. ‘Take this faceoff against Ryan, I bet he wins!’

‘You’re supposed to be rooting for me,’ Cam protests. ‘And I’m not a center, anyway.’

‘Scared of losing?’ Ryan asks, something competitive dancing in his eyes.

This is all— it’s too close, it’s too casual. The last time Cam had a conversation with Ryan, it— wasn’t this. Wasn’t light, or easy. It hurt.

Cam takes his place across from Ryan at center ice.

‘Don’t worry,’ Ryan says. ‘I’ll be nice.’

Cam raises an eyebrow above the puck he jammed in his mouth for the drop, and grips his stick a little tighter, lowers his stance a little. Ryan doesn’t even look like he’s trying when he wins it cleanly and taps it back to his D. He has time to smirk at Cam before wheeling away, tapping his stick on the ice for the pass.

Cam isn’t any more than a heartbeat behind him. Just like old times.

- 2011 -

‘Hey, fuck you!’

Cam looks up from where he’s stick handling his stolen puck, kicking it from foot to skate to foot. ‘Sorry, were you using this?’ he asks. From behind him, he can hear assorted snickers.

‘You know I was,’ the rookie says, reaching out to try and take it back. Cam turns a tight circle and keeps it away from him, bouncing it off the boards and dancing around him, laughing.

Joey, Cam thinks his name is, makes a frustrated sound and tears after him, but Cam’s fast and small, so his center of gravity is low, making him almost impossible to knock off the puck. He turns tight around the net, crosses over to gain some speed, and— is sprawled on the ice, belly down.

‘I feel like that was cheating,’ he says, rolling onto his back. ‘Ow.’

‘You took my puck,’ Joey says. ‘I took it back. We’re even.’

Cam thinks about it, and then jams the blade of his stick between Joey’s skates and twists, putting him on his ass. ‘Now we’re even,’ he says. ‘You can keep the puck though. For now.’

He gets up and skates to the bench, knocking the snow off of his knees.

‘Making friends?’ Wiz asks, raising an eyebrow at him.

‘Making the rookie feel at home,’ Cam says, before he knocks the puck off of Carts’ stick and tears off with it down the other end of the ice, laughing at he goes.

‘Fuck you, Atkinson!’ Carts yells, but doesn’t chase him. Boring.

-

Joey makes the team, and stealing his puck becomes Cam’s routine.
Joey pretends to hate it, but Cam can see right through him. He can hear the laughter in Joey’s voice as he shouts across the ice at him, and by now Joey should know him well enough that he knows Cam’s coming for his puck as soon as his skates hit the ice, but.

‘You let me take the puck from you, don’t you?’ Cam asks him in the locker room after a practice. Joey turns red and makes a big show of unpicking the double knot in his right skate.

‘Maybe,’ he mumbles.

‘Why?’ Cam asks, honestly curious. ‘Everyone else just knocks me on my ass, or trips me, or whatever. Not you, though.’

Joey shrugs, starts in on his left skate. ‘I dunno. It’s fun chasing you.’

‘Huh,’ Cam says.

‘What?’

‘Nothing, nothing. That’s just a new one on me.’

Joey grins at him. Something flares in Cam’s chest. The kid smiles like Cam hung the stars in the sky. ‘So you’re gonna keep doing it?’

‘I— guess so?’ Cam says. ‘It’s less fun when you’re letting me do it, though. Maybe I’ll have to think of something else to bug you with.’

Joey’s cheeks go a little pink. Cam— doesn’t know what to do with that.

2025

‘Dad! Dad!’

Cam looks up from his laptop to see Adam tearing into the room. He skids to a halt in front of the couch.

‘Is the house on fire?’ Cam asks, dry.

‘No,’ Adam says, with all the contempt a seven year old can muster. ‘Is it true about Joey, Dad? The TV says that Ryan Johansen’s signing with the Blue Jackets, was that why he was at practice?’

Cam considers feigning ignorance, but he’s never been a good liar, and especially not in front of his kid. ‘Yeah, kiddo,’ he says. ‘It’s true.’

Adam’s eyes light up. ‘Will he sign my jersey?’

‘—Probably.’

‘Will you ask him? You guys are friends, right?’

‘Yeah,’ Cam says, slowly. ‘Good friends.’

‘So he’ll sign my jersey and come back to practice,’ Adam says, satisfied. ‘He was way better than Coach Tim.’
'Uh, I don’t know about that,’ Cam says. ‘If he’s gonna play for the Jackets, he’s gonna be really busy. Lots of his own practices, you know?’

Adam pulls a face.

‘But I’m sure he’ll sign your jersey,’ Cam reassures. ‘Maybe a stick, too?’

Adam lights up, and runs off to choose a stick for Ryan to sign, leaving Cam alone on the couch. He told Adam that he and Ryan were good friends. He knows that used to be true. He isn’t sure if it still is.

—

2012

‘Can I talk to you?’

‘—Sure?’ Cam tucks his phone back into his pocket and looks up at where Joey is shifting from foot to foot. ‘What’s up?’

‘I wanna— words. Talk. To you. About something.’

‘Go for it.’ Joey slides into the seat next to him. They’re at the back of the plane, away from everyone else. Cam hates flying, so he likes to sit where he’s gonna get as little chirping as possible about the look on his face every time they hit a small patch of turbulence.

He chews his lip. Cam sits patiently. They still have twenty minutes before take-off, they have time. Half the team is still dicking around in the lounge, getting drinks from the vending machine or flirting with the girl at the desk.

‘I’m—I used to know this guy in juniors,’ Joey starts, and that’s when Cam knows it’s confession time. Everyone, including Cam ‘knows a guy in juniors’ who got caught jerking off by the coach, or missed their curfew and got locked out and slept in the lobby, or got drunk and made out with a teammate— anyway. He realizes that Joey’s looking at him for confirmation, and he nods for Joey to continue. ‘He— got caught doing something when he was on a roadtrip. By some of his teammates. And they told him that it was okay to do it in juniors, but if he got caught doing it in the NHL, he’d be in real shit for it.’

Cam hums. Narrows it down to two things, in his experience. ‘And your friend,’ he says, slowly. ‘He— wants to do it in the NHL, too?’

Joey nods, bright red. ‘Yeah. I told him it was a stupid idea, but. It is a stupid idea, right? Doing something you know could be really bad, especially when you’re— he’s a rookie?’

Cam— has no idea how to explain this. ‘I think your friend has to think about whether what he wants to do is worth it,’ he says. ‘And whether it really is that bad. Is it illegal, or is it just— frowned upon, you know? If he’s not breaking any laws, and he wants to, and he understands the consequences, then— I think he should do it. As long as he’s being careful, you know?’

Joey looks like he’s thinking hard, eyebrows furrowed. There’s a clatter at the front of the plane and he jumps, glancing up at Matty, who’s making a beeline for them.

‘Okay,’ he says, slowly. ‘Thanks, Cam.’

‘Any time,’ Cam says, patting him on the shoulder.
Joey has time to give him a grateful smile before Matty’s there, throwing himself into the seat in front of them and twisting to look over the seat back. ‘You know Cam likes to be alone when he flies, rookie?’

‘Uh,’ Joey says, looking at Cam and fumbling to gather his stuff. ‘Sorry.’

‘It’s fine,’ Cam says, glaring at Matty. ‘You can stay if you want.’

‘Congrats, Joey,’ Matty says, giving Cam a Look. ‘You’re the first person that gets to sit next to Cam on a flight ever.’

‘Well, I feel special,’ Joey deadpans, and Matty gives them both a shit-eating grin before sauntering back to the front of the plane.

‘It’s really not that big a deal,’ Cam says.

‘Nervous flyer?’ Joey asks.

Cam nods. ‘It’s fine, like I just put my headphones in and tune out as best I can by watching a movie or whatever. I was on a plane that got hit by lightning as a kid, it scared the hell out of me. Now every little bump I can’t help thinking what if we die.’ He laughs, self deprecating. ‘I’m fine, honestly. You can stay if you want, or go hang out with someone more fun. They’re probably playing Euchre at the front of the plane.’

‘I’m okay here,’ Joey says, shifting in his seat. ‘Do you want— I could be a distraction?’ He pauses. ‘I mean. We could watch a movie together? I have the new X-Men movie on my iPad.’

‘That’s— okay,’ Cam says. ‘Sounds great.’

Joey beams at him, and cuddles into Cam’s side immediately.

The movie is great. Cam pays barely any attention to it. Joey falls asleep twenty minutes in, and makes snuffly sounds in Cam’s shoulder, and he can’t help but listen as the arm underneath Joey’s head goes numb and falls asleep. Fuck.

- 2025

The boys are going drinking! Ryan texts him before the first day of training camp. You’re coming.

Cam sighs, and calls him. ‘Who’s gonna watch Adam if I go out drinking?’ he asks, when Joey picks up. ‘Also, I’m not one of the boys any more. I’m almost forty.’

‘You’re thirty five,’ Ryan says. ‘Don’t be so dramatic. Don’t you have a nanny?’

‘What world do you live in? Why would I need a nanny?’

Ryan is silent on the other end of the phone. ‘Nights like tonight?’ he suggests.

Cam sighs. ‘I’ll call my babysitter.’

(Janelle Foligno is a saint. Cam turns up armed with Adam, a bottle of wine and a pint of Jeni’s pear and Riesling sorbet.

‘You’re ridiculous,’ she tells him. ‘You don’t need to bribe me to look after Adam, he’s an angel.’
'He’s a monster who’s good at acting,’ Cam deadpans, and she laughs, kisses him on the cheek, and shoos him out.)

‘You’re an enabler,’ Cam says, when he gets to the bar. Ryan is already a beer and a half deep, pink cheeked and giggly like he always was.

‘I’m a winner,’ Ryan says, and the guys cheer.

‘Are you now?’ Cam asks, accepting a beer from Z and taking a long drink.

‘How long before your curfew?’ Ryan asks, nonsensically.

‘Adults don’t have curfews, Jo,’ he says. ‘But Adam’s staying with Janelle and the kids tonight, if that’s what you mean.’

Ryan beams. ‘Janelle is so great,’ he says.

‘You’re damn right,’ Fligs says from behind him. ‘Why else do you think I’m drinking with you losers on a school night?’

‘Man, you got old,’ Ryan says, turning to pull him into a hug, slapping him on the back.

‘I’d still kick your ass,’ Fligs says, grinning. ‘And here I was gonna buy the prodigal son returning home a drink.’

‘I’ll have a Molson,’ Ryan says, immediately.

It’s kind of nice hanging out with the guys again. Cam doesn’t really know the younger guys, but some of the older guys stuck around after retirement like he did, and he winds up in a booth with Fligs, Hartsy, and Hartsy’s partner, Matthew, as they watch Ryan make his way around the group, introducing himself to the guys.

‘Damn,’ Cam says, watching Ryan talking to their first round draft pick that year, just barely eighteen. He’s holding a soda and looking vaguely shellshocked. ‘We got old, guys.’

‘Speak for yourself,’ Hartsy says. ‘Matty keeps me young, right babe?’

‘I threaten to trade him in for a younger model when he complains about his knees,’ Matthew says, patting the back of Hartsy’s hand fondly.

‘Janelle threatens that too,’ Fligs says. ‘She’s a terrible liar, though, cracks up halfway through.’

‘Or maybe she’s a great liar,’ Cam points out. ‘Lulling you into a false sense of security so she can run away with Matty.’

‘We do have plans to run away to the big city together,’ Matthew says. ‘We’re gonna be professional salsa dancers.’

‘I knew those classes were a bad idea,’ Fligs says, finishing his drink. ‘Your round, Atkinson. Don’t think I don’t see you nursing the same beer you got when you walked in.’

‘Not all of us make NHL salaries anymore,’ Cam grumbles, but he swallows the last of his drink.

‘Assistant coach doesn’t pay much either,’ Fligs says. ‘Get going, kiddo.’

‘You’re a year older than me,’ Cam says, climbing out of the booth.
‘And don’t you forget it.’

Cam flips him off without looking at him and heads for the bar. Ryan’s there with Saader, gesturing wildly with his hands. It’s so painfully familiar all of a sudden that Cam stops just short of the bar, and just— watches. Saader notices him first, tips his beer at him in greeting. Cam nods back, and then Ryan turns around and spots him.

‘Cam! Why are you sitting with the old men?’

‘I am an old man now,’ Cam says. ‘I have a bad back and everything.’

Saader snorts into his beer.

‘Lies,’ Ryan says. ‘You can’t fool me, I saw you skating last week.’

‘You didn’t see me struggle to get up the stairs at home that night though,’ Cam counters. Ryan flaps at him, and pulls him into the conversation, waving at the bartender for fresh beers. ‘It’s actually my round, I was getting drinks for the guys,’ Cam says, but Ryan ignores him and launches into telling Saader about crashing Cam’s practice.

Ryan’s bright eyed with beer and excitement. He looks younger when he laughs, always has. Cam remembers the way the years would fall off, even when he was a kid, making him look even more like a teenager. He has laughter lines now, but he looks painfully like the Ryan Cam used to— anyway.

Saader laughs along at all the right bits, and Cam steadily ignores the way Fligs is making obscene gestures at him, and drinks his beer, then another, and another.

2013

Joey is twenty one and drunk and Cam loves him more than anyone else in the world right now.

‘Dance with me, Cam!’ he shouts, wriggling out of the booth past Dubi, who Cam suspects is texting his wife in despair. Cam knows the feeling. He doesn’t have a wife to text, but sometimes he’ll text Matty about the dumb shit the younger guys get up to.

‘Yeah, Cam,’ Boone goads. ‘Dance with the birthday boy!’

Cam flips him off, slams the rest of his drink back, and shoves at Prouter to let him out. Wolf whistles follow him to the dancefloor, where Joey’s already swaying.

‘I don’t get how you can be so coordinated on the ice and so— this— off it!’ he yells in Joey’s ear, gesturing at Joeys— well, everything.

‘The ladies love it!’ Joey says, pushing his stupid too-long hair out of his face and winking at a nearby woman, who laughs at him and gives him a little wave, a little shimmy.

‘You don’t like ladies,’ Cam says, patiently, and grabs Joey’s hips. ‘Here, like this, you big orangutan. Slowly.’

Joey moves with him, robotic at first, but he loosens up, settles his hips against Cam’s and enjoys the music. Cam daren’t look at the booth. He knows he’s being watched.

The song ends, and he steps away. Joey turns, heartbroken the way you can only be when you’re
reaching fall down drunk, wide eyed and hurt. ‘You don’t wanna keep dancing?’

‘I figured I’d give you a chance to dance with— someone else,’ Cam says, standing on tip-toe to talk into his ear. ‘I’ll run interference on the guys.’ He pauses. ‘Happy birthday, Ry.’

He leaves Joey in the middle of the dancefloor, looking helplessly around him. When Cam reaches the booth again, he looks back, sees some guy sidling up to Joey, sliding easily against him like Cam did, one hand on his hip, the other on his belly. Cam ignores the curl of resentment in his gut, and demands that Dubi buy the next round. Predictably, it elicits a squawk of protest and an attempt at deflection, and no one asks him about his dancing. Or about the fact that Joey’s disappeared into the crowds, unseen.

Cam’s so busy not thinking about that that when Dubi announces that it’s Cam’s round, he doesn’t even protest, just goes to the bar for more pitchers.

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Cam is— drunk. So drunk. Cam’s hitting ‘I’m so drunk I don’t even remember how I got this drunk’, and it sucks. He Ubers home, manages not to embarrass himself by puking in the dude’s car, and manages to get his door code right on the third attempt. Score.

His phone is ringing. He squints at the screen. ‘Joey!’ he says, answering it. ‘My guy!’

‘Are you home?’ Joey asks. ‘I— I know it’s late, but. Can I come over?’

‘Yeah!’ Cam crows. ‘Bring beer!’

‘I— you sound like you’ve had enough,’ Joey says. ‘I’ll be there in ten.’

—Coffee. Cam needs coffee. Also sleep, but right now, coffee. With many shots.

‘I lost my keys,’ Joey says, when he’s standing in Cam’s open door. ‘Or I locked myself out. One of the two. Adrian said I could go back to his with him, but—’

Cam’s on his third, maybe fourth cup of coffee. He feels sober enough that he’s not bumping into things. Not sober enough that he’s capable of dealing with the giant hickey on the side of Joey’s neck. ‘Why didn’t you?’ he asks, blunt.

‘Uh,’ Joey says, and he reaches up to thumb at the bruise, like he can feel Cam staring at it. ‘I— wanted to come here, instead?’

‘—Right.’ Cam fills a tumbler with water for him, eyes his Keurig but figures it might be better to stick to the water himself, and fills a second one before herding Joey into the living room.

Joey has that look on his face like he wants to talk about what’s bothering him. Cam knows that look well. He also knows that Joey responds best when you let him get there in his own time.

‘He wanted to have sex,’ Joey says, staring into his water glass like it’s telling him the secrets of the universe.

Cam doesn’t choke on his own water. He doesn’t. ‘And you— didn’t?’

‘Not— with him,’ Joey admits.

‘—Okay,’ Cam says, and goes back to waiting.
‘He’s a stranger,’ Joey says.

Cam nods.

‘And I wanted him to— not be a stranger.’

‘You mean, you wanted to date him first, or…?’

‘I want to have sex with someone who’s not a stranger,’ Joey says. His face is still doing something weird, like he has a secret. Joey doesn’t keep secrets from Cam. ‘Because it’s— you know.’

Cam pauses.

‘You know,’ Joey repeats.

…Yeah. Cam knows. ‘Because you’ve never had sex with a man,’ he says, wanting out-loud confirmation. Fuck, he’s really, really not sober enough for this conversation.

Joey nods, and draws his feet up underneath himself. ‘I know it’s dumb,’ he says, sounding young.

‘It’s not,’ Cam says. ‘It’s— I get it.’

‘Yeah,’ Joey says, nodding, which doesn’t— really make sense, but. Cam rolls with it.

‘I’m sorry, bud,’ he says. ‘Spare room’s all made up for you. From the last time you locked yourself out.’

‘You’re the best,’ Joey says, listing into his side. ‘Can we stay here a little while? Miss you.’

‘You see me every day, numbnuts,’ Cam says fondly. ‘You’re gonna fall asleep and fuck up your back and Coach is going to murder you dead.’

‘Not gonna fall asleep,’ Joey murmurs, but Cam can feel him getting heavier.

‘You’re the worst,’ Cam says. ‘I’m not carrying you to bed.’

‘Okay,’ Joey agrees, then makes a snuffly sort of sound and his head slides gracelessly into Cam’s lap.

‘Fuck,’ Cam says, with feeling. Joey snores at him.

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2025

Cam takes Adam to every Jackets home game, unless they have their own game. They sit by the glass for the home opener, Adam wearing his brand new Johansen jersey.

‘You don’t wanna wear your Atkinson?’ Cam had asked, but Adam had been Very Sure.

‘I promised Ryan!’ he’d said. ‘At practice last week!’

(Ryan shows up to practice again last week with signed pucks and brand new sticks for the whole team. Even Cam gets one, a brand new Easton stick.

‘What the— heck?’ he asks, catching himself in time. ‘These got discontinued years ago.’
'They were always your favourite,' Ryan say, shrugging. 'I know a guy.'

Cam flexes it, looks at the blade. 'How did you remember my curve?'

'I remember a lot of things about you,' Ryan says, which— Cam can’t deal with right now. So he doesn’t. Tapes the stick, tapes Adam’s, tapes half a dozen of the other kids’ sticks before they can even get onto the ice.

'Good job you brought stick tape,' Cam says. 'It’s even the right colour.'

'Union blue,' Ryan says, winking. All the orange butt ends of his sticks have been replaced, Cam notices.)

'Fine,' Cam says, pulls his own (blank) jersey over his head stuff a cap onto Adam, and hoists him into the car.

They’re playing Anaheim, because of course they are. Ryan spends his warmup stretches talking to one of the Ducks, someone Cam doesn’t recognise. He spots Adam immediately though, taps on the glass at him and twirls his glove so Adam turns to show him his jersey. Ryan gives him a thumbs up when he sees the name on the back and flips him a puck. Adam doesn’t put it down all game, even when Cam offers to put it in his pocket to keep it safe.

The Jackets win, which is always nice, and Adam loses his shit when Ryan scores the game winner. Cam’s carrying Adam out to the car after the game when his phone goes off in his pocket. ‘Sorry, bud,’ he says, and sets him down to answer it.

It’s Ryan. Of course it’s Ryan. Adam’s my new good luck charm, he says.

He’s pretty great, Cam texts. Falling asleep on the concourse now though. Too much excitement.

I know the feeling, Ryan says. Are you guys busy tomorrow? We got an off day before we fly out to Philly.

No plans that I can think of. I gotta get Adam in the car though. I’ll call you when I get home?

:)

-

2013

Are you awake yet?

:)

Cam looks at his phone.

‘What the fuck does that even mean?’ he asks his kitchen. The coffee machine declines to answer him, so he picks his phone up and texts back?

idk, Joey texts him. just wanted to bug you

‘You’re two rooms over from me!’ Cam shouts in the direction of the guest room. ‘Stop hiding from your hangover!’

Silence. Then his phone buzzes. I’m dying. Make me breakfast?
‘You’re not dying,’ Cam says loudly.

His phone buzzes with a barf emoji. Cam rolls his eyes and goes to the fridge for bacon.

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Eventually, Joey surfaces, makes a beeline for the coffee machine, then the bacon pan.

‘You’re embarrassing,’ Cam says. ‘How much did you drink last night?’

‘Shut up. Why aren’t you hungover? I hate you.’

‘I know my limits,’ Cam says. ‘You want eggs?’

‘Of course I want eggs,’ Joey says.

‘Are you gonna puke them straight back up?’ Cam asks, because he *knows* Joey and he knows hangover Joey even better.

‘No comment,’ Joey says, nose in his coffee mug.

‘So… maybe,’ Cam says, and scrapes half the eggs in the pan onto the plate.

Joey gets halfway through his eggs before he puts his fork down. ‘Did I— say anything last night?’

‘You said a lot of things,’ Cam says, carefully. He stirs half and half into his coffee and turns to put the spoon in the sink, giving Joey a second.

‘What did I say?’

‘That you could have gone home with a guy but didn’t.’

Joey looks at his mug, swirling it gently. ‘Did— I say why?’

‘You wanted your first time with a guy to be with someone who cares about you. That you care about.’

Joey laughs, bitter. ‘That sounds dumb even to me.’

‘It’s not dumb,’ Cam says. ‘Wanting to wait until it’s with someone you know and trust isn’t a bad thing.’ He pauses. Takes a long swallow of coffee. ‘Mine was with a teammate I’d known for years.’

Joey drops his fork. ‘Oh,’ he says, mouth still full of food. He coughs a little, and swallows it. ‘I— didn’t know.’

Cam shrugs. ‘I didn’t tell anyone.’

Joey looks down at his breakfast. Pushes a chunk of egg through the ketchup mess on the edge of the plate. ‘So— when you were talking to me about my friend.’

‘I was drawing from personal experience, yeah.’

Joey looks like he’s thinking about that. ‘Do you date?’ he asks.

‘Sometimes. Mostly I just— you know how Clitty has a girl in every city?’

‘You have a— boy in every city?’

‘Huh,’ Joey says.

‘It gets less scary after a few years. It helps that no one cares about the Jackets. Or some sixth round draft pick from five years ago.’

Joey hums, and then looks worried. ‘What about last year’s first round draft pick?’

‘Don’t worry about it,’ Cam says. ‘In my experience, no one cares.’ He laughs, faint. ‘Sometimes I get comments like “hey, you know who you look like?” I just laugh it off. No one cares, I promise.’

Joey takes another forkful of eggs, pokes at the corner of his toast thoughtfully. ‘Will you take me to — where you find guys? Next season, I mean.’

‘I mean, there are a couple of places in Columbus,’ Cam starts, but Joey shakes his head, frantic. ‘Too close?’ Joey nods. ‘Yeah, Jo. Next season we’ll go hit up Chemical Reaction together. It’s a gay bar in LA. Very loud. Very neon. Very—’ he pauses. ‘Anonymous. I—’ Another pause. ‘I actually ran into a guy from the Kings in there last time. That was awkward.’

Joey huffs out a laugh. ‘What happened?’

‘I went back to his place,’ Cam says, and laughs. ‘It was fun. My point is, especially in LA, unless you’re Brad Pitt, no one cares.’

Joey finishes his breakfast in silence. Cam showers, and when he gets out, Joey’s gone, left a note that just says “Thanks for [scribble] + Breakfast. RJ :)”

—

2025

‘Pick the green,’ Fligs says, from the doorway. ‘Blue makes you look short.’

‘Go fuck yourself,’ Cam says, scowling at his reflection. ‘I’m plenty tall, just not when I’m surrounded by monster ex hockey players.’

‘Quarter in the jar!’ Fligs singsongs. ‘But seriously. Green. It looks good on you.’

Cam rolls his eyes, but starts unbuttoning his shirt. ‘Are you trying to tell me that I looked shorter than I am my entire career as a Blue Jacket?’

‘Only at home games,’ Fligs says. ‘You’re gonna be late, by the way.’

Cam twists to look at the clock on his nightstand and curses again.

‘Fifty cents,’ Fligs says.

‘I don’t know why you’re even here,’ Cam says. ‘I’m an adult. I can dress myself and wait for the babysitter.’

‘Who is also late,’ Fligs says. ‘You know, Joey doesn’t have a game tonight.’

‘What’s your point?’
‘Adam just asked me if Ryan Johansen was coming to babysit. His inflection, not mine.’

‘Adam thinks he’s the second coming of like, God and Wayne Gretzky and Barney the Dinosaur all at once,’ Cam says, shrugging into the green shirt. Annoyingly, it does look much better. ‘Why would he think Ryan’s coming to babysit?’

‘Dunno. Maybe you should ask him.’

Cam’s phone chimes from the dresser. Fligs picks it up and makes a sound. ‘Babysitter’s cancelling,’ he says. ‘I’m telling ya, Joey’s free tonight.’

Cam sighs. ‘Hey, Ryan, come and babysit my seven year old son while I go on a date? I don’t think so. Hey, what are you typing? Why do you know my passcode?’

‘It’s Adam’s birthday,’ Fligs says, rolling his eyes. ‘I’m typing what you’re saying.’ He thumbs at the bottom of the screen and then hits the home button, satisfied. ‘You missed a button.’

‘Did you just text Ryan?’

Fligs rolls his eyes again. Cam figures he learnt that move from Milana, who’s twelve going on seventeen.

‘You need a babysitter,’ Fligs says. ‘Joey’s free, and he loves Adam, and he’s bored as shit in his stupidly big apartment. He’ll enjoy the excuse to watch cartoons and play knee hockey.’

‘Quarter in the jar,’ Cam mimics, and Fligs flaps a hand at him.

‘You’re trying to distract from the situation,’ he says, and Cam’s phone buzzes. Cam is an adult, so he doesn’t lunge for it and wrestle with Fligs for it, but it’s close.

‘I hate you,’ he says, picking out a dark grey jacket. ‘We’re not friends.’

‘Joey’s gonna be here in ten,’ Fligs says. ‘I’ll text Tony for you.’

‘You will not,’ Cam says, and grabs for his phone. Fligs holds it above his head, because he’s a fucking child. ‘You are thirty eight years old and you have four children, why are you like this?’

‘Kids are wonderful teachers,’ Fligs says, tipping his head up so he can text. ‘Aw, he sent a heart emoji.’

Cam is going to murder him dead. Eventually, Fligs gives him his phone back, and then tells him to fix his hair before swanning out, telling Cam not to do anything he wouldn’t. Cam checks to see if he needs to run damage control, but the most recent texts are just... sure! B there in 10! from Ryan and no worries gorgeous see you when I see you from Tony. There is indeed a heart emoji. Cam smiles despite himself.

-

Ryan arrives with burgers and a new pair of hockey gloves for Adam.

‘You’re going to spoil him,’ Cam says, stepping into his shoes.

‘Who’s the lucky guy?’ Ryan asks, looking Cam up and down. Cam pretends to not notice his gaze lingering.

‘His name is Tony,’ Cam says, after a pause. ‘He’s a vet.’
'Did you meet him when you accidentally hit a dog with your car?' Ryan teases, but there’s a weird vibe to it. Cam can’t put his finger on it, but it’s unsettling.

‘Adam’s turtle got sick,’ Cam says, wry. ‘Tony saved his life. Adam— he’s a big fan. Of Tony.’

‘Glad to hear it,’ he says. ‘Where is the monster, anyway?’

‘Basement. Practicing his ‘wicked wrister’,’ Cam says, pausing from smoothing out a wrinkle on his shirt to make air quotes. ‘I have to run, I’m already late. You know where everything is, right? If you don’t, Adam does.’

‘We’ll be fine. Enjoy your date.’

That weird tone is back, like Ryan’s— Cam doesn’t know. He’s too late to worry about it though, rushes down to the basement, kisses the top of Adam’s head and extracts a promise of if not good behavior, then at least acceptable behavior.

He’s twenty minutes late to the restaurant. Tony’s already there, a few sips into a glass of wine and wearing a dark purple shirt that looks amazing on him.

‘Sorry,’ Cam says, sitting down and accepting a menu and a glass of water from the waitress. ‘Babysitter drama.’

Tony just smiles at him and they fall into easy conversation. The date is— it’s fine. It’s nice. They always are, Tony’s nice. But he’s not— Cam likes him. He doesn’t know if he wants to be with him. He thinks about Ryan looking him up and down and shakes his head a little. Ryan’s the past. He’s not an option. Tony is.

—

2014

Cam’s never seen one person covered in so much glitter. Go figure they’d be in LA on body paint night at Chemical Reaction. Joey’s doing his awful dancing with a couple of spiky haired girls who are painting him with bright blue glow in the dark paint and sprinkling him with glitter.

Cam, meanwhile, is at the bar and keeping his shirt on, thank you. Joey keeps looking over to make sure he’s still there. Cam sips his beer and gives him an encouraging smile. Turns out Joey’s kind of impressionable when he gets a couple of glittery shots down him.

‘That your boy?’ a voice says, and Cam turns to look at the guy sliding onto the barstool next to him.

‘Colleague,’ Cam says. ‘He’s— new.’

‘He’s cute,’ the guy says. He’s wearing a tight mesh tank top and has tattoos swirled up and down his arms.

‘Yeah,’ Cam says, glancing over at Joey.

‘Ah,’ the guy says, knowingly.

‘…What?’ Cam asks.

‘He’s taken. I get it.’

Cam blinks. ‘He is?’
‘You can’t fool a queer, darling,’ the guy says, winking outrageously. ‘You should tell him how you feel.’

‘How I feel,’ Cam says, blank.

‘I’m surprised he doesn’t already know,’ the guy says, and leans over the bar to whisper in the bartenders ear with a smile. The bartender puts three of what Cam’s drinking on the bar. The guy takes one, and leaves the other two in front of Cam. ‘For you and your boy,’ he says. ‘My treat.’

‘He’s not— my boy,’ Cam says, but the guy’s already disappeared into the crowd.

‘Is this for me?’ Joey asks, appearing next to him and pointing at the bottle. ‘Or do you have an admirer?’

‘For you,’ Cam says, and pushes it over. Joey’s shiny with sweat and glitter, and when he glances down he can see the cut of his hips.

‘Some guy grabbed my ass,’ he says, after swallowing half of it in one go. ‘I grabbed his back, and he laughed at me and called me a twink. Am I a twink, Cam?’

Cam— does not want to answer that. Joey’s eyes are wide, pupils blown. He looks like a fucking cartoon, especially with how he keeps chewing on his lip. Cam squashes the urge to thumb at the red mark, and shrugs. ‘Kind of?’

‘Huh,’ Joey says. ‘Aren’t you gonna dance?’

‘I don’t dance, Jo.’

‘You danced with me on my birthday,’ he says, pouting.

‘That was your birthday,’ Cam says. ‘Special occasion. Also, I was drunk.’

‘Why aren’t you drunk now?’ Joey whines.

Cam sighs. ‘Because if I end up going home with a guy I want to be able to get it up, okay?’

Joey’s jaw drops a little, his eyebrows go up. ‘Oh,’ he says, and then his face does something weird. ‘What if I don’t want you to go home with a guy?’

‘Don’t worry,’ Cam says. ‘I’m not gonna abandon you.’

‘No, I mean—’ Joey stops. ‘Dance with me, Cam. Come on.’

Cam sighs again, finishes his drink, and allows Joey to pull him off his stool.

Joey still dances like the person pulling his strings is drunk. Cam rolls his eyes and grabs his hips, pulling him in like he did on his birthday, grinds up on him, a little dirtier than he dared to surrounded by his team. He turns, wraps Joey’s arm around his waist and keeps his hips moving. He can feel Joey against his back, slick with sweat. He’s probably getting glitter all over Cam’s shirt. Cam can’t bring himself to care.

Joey’s hand is low on his belly, fingers sliding between two of the buttons on his shirt. Cam can feel the heat of his hand through the fabric, and feels something in his gut stir.

‘Don’t go home with anyone,’ Joey says again, leaning so his lips are by Cam’s ear. ‘Please.’
Cam licks his lower lip. ‘Why not?’ he asks.

Joey goes quiet, and Cam turns in his grip. ‘Why not, Ryan?’

Joey kisses him. Cam’s entire body goes warm. He can feel the hairs on his arms standing up as his eyes slide shut, and he kisses back, hooking a couple of fingers into Joey’s belt loops. ‘Oh,’ he says, when they part.

‘That’s why,’ Joey says, looking like the only thing keeping him there is Cam’s grip on his belt loops. Cam tightens it. The glitter on Joey’s cheekbones shimmers as a spotlight passes over him. He’s beautiful, Cam realises, thumbing at the bare skin of his waist.

‘Come home with me,’ Cam says, on impulse, just to watch Joey’s expression flicker into shock.

‘I—’ he starts.

‘Please,’ Cam says, pulling him in a little closer. The height different means he can feel Joey’s half-chub pressing into the hollow of his hip. ‘You want it to be with someone you trust, right? Someone you know?’

Joey nods, a little helpless.

‘You know me,’ Cam says, moving his hips in sync with Joey’s. ‘You trust me, Ry. Let me do this.’

   -

Joey—Ryan—is twitchy in the Uber to the hotel. They’re not past curfew, but they’re late enough that everyone else will be in bed and hopefully asleep. Cam has his hand on Ryan’s knee the whole way back. The Uber driver keeps up a steady stream of chatter about the Dodgers and keeps his eyes on the road. Cam’s grateful.

The hotel is thankfully quiet when they get to their floor. Cam can hear the buzz of TVs or quiet conversations from behind a couple of doors, and he’s thankful that he got the long straw of no road roommate this trip. He hurries Ryan into his room anyway, clicks the door shut and takes a couple of breaths. Ryan looks lost in the middle of the room, and his shirt is buttoned up wrong.

‘You okay?’ Cam asks him, taking a small step towards him. Ryan looks at him, a little wide eyed, but he exhales slowly and nods.

‘Yeah,’ he says. ‘I just— I think I’ve built it all up in my head to be a big thing, you know?’

‘It doesn’t have to be,’ Cam says, taking another step. ‘I mean, it can be. If you want it to be. But I’m not going to put myself on a pedestal. We don’t even have to do anything if you don’t want. I just— wasn’t ready to be done kissing you, is all.’

‘Oh,’ Ryan says, throat working like he’s not done talking. He opens his mouth and closes it again. ‘I want to,’ he says eventually. ‘With you. If you do.’

‘I’ve wanted you for— a while,’ Cam admits, dropping his gaze and looking up in time to see the top of Ryan’s ears flush.

‘A while?’

‘At least since that time you showed up drunk at my apartment and told me you wanted your first time to be with someone you trust. I— wanted to be that person.’
‘I want that too,’ Ryan says, barely above a whisper. Cam is still edging close to him, close enough to reach up and thumb at Ryan’s lip, gently.

‘Then let me,’ he says. ‘I’ll be real good for you, Ry.’

Ryan’s tongue darts out and he licks Cam’s thumb, sucks it into his mouth easily when Cam pushes. ‘You wanna take your shirt off again?’ Cam asks, pulling his hand away so he can unbutton his own shirt. Ryan has about three buttons on his shirt that are fastened, so it takes him no time to shrug it off for Cam to survey the smears of paint and glitter on his chest. There’s a bright pink handprint splayed across one pec. Cam fits his hand over it, swiping at the nipple on the way past. Ryan shivers.

‘I’m gonna get glitter on you,’ he says, fitting his hands to Cam’s waist.

‘You already got glitter on me,’ Cam says. He can feel it itching on his skin. He slides the hand up to the back of Ryan’s neck and pulls him down for another kiss, this one slow and a little dirty. Ryan just melts into the kiss, pulling Cam in close. They land with a soft thump, and Cam sprawls between Ryan’s thighs. Even with all the drinks, he’s fully hard, and he pushes his hips up into Cam easily.

Cam pushes up to his knees, away from where Ryan tries to follow his mouth, and shifts back to perch on his thighs, peeling his pants open carefully, frees his dick from his underwear. Ryan’s dick is just like him, slender and pretty. There’s a small circumcision scar on the underside of it. Cam really, really wants to suck it.

‘Can I blow you?’ he asks. When he glances up the long line of Ryan’s body, he’s propped up on his elbows and watching him, quiet.

‘I—’ he starts. ‘Aren’t you going to fuck me?’

‘I can blow you and then fuck you,’ Cam says. ‘Just— tell me if you feel like you’re going to come?’

Ryan nods, and sucks his lower lip into his mouth. Cam turns his attention back to Ryan’s dick, runs a knuckle down the underside of it to watch him twitch.

Cam likes sucking dick. Always has, he likes feeling the muscles of his partner’s thighs tense and strain underneath him, likes the weight on his tongue. When he takes the tip of Ryan’s dick into his mouth, Ryan gasps, and he hears his head hit the pillow with a soft thump. He sucks gently, pokes at the slit with the point of his tongue, and Ryan makes a strangled sound. Cam hears his hand scrabble at the sheets, and pulls off with a wet sound to look at him. ‘If you want to touch me, you can,’ he says. ‘Put your hands in my hair, or on my shoulders, or whatever. I don’t mind. Do what you’d do with a woman.’

‘Women have more hair than you,’ Ryan says, and Cam laughs.

‘There’s enough of it to grab,’ Cam says, running a hand through it to push it off his forehead. Ryan reaches out and pushes an escaped curl behind his ear. He cradles the back of Cam’s head with the hand that’s not propping him up, scraping blunt fingernails over his scalp. Cam hums, and drops his head again to swallow a little more of Ryan down. When he glances up, Ryan’s still watching him, propped up on an elbow.

‘You’re gonna get a cramp in your shoulder if you do that,’ he says. ‘I’m kind of planning on taking my time.’

‘But I wanna watch,’ Ryan says, and a flash of heat bursts in Cam’s gut.
'Here,' he says, sitting back. ‘Why don’t we—’

He nudges Ryan up the bed until he’s propped against the headboard, and Cam is sprawled between his splayed legs. ‘Better?’ he asks, resting his cheek on Ryan’s thigh. He can feel the muscle shaking, faintly.

Ryan swallows and nods. He settles his hand back in Cam’s hair, combing through the strands.

‘Good,’ Cam says, and wraps a hand around the base of Ryan’s dick, thumbing at the underside while he mouths wetly at the shaft. It’s not the best blowjob Cam’s ever given, he’s had too much beer for that, but it’s dirty and messy and frankly, Cam suspects Ryan likes it that way.

‘Tell me if you’re going to come,’ he repeats, and then swallows as much of Ryan down as he can, until he’s bumping the back of Cam’s throat. He stops, working his throat, fighting the gag reflex, swallowing again and again, while Ryan makes the neediest sound, head hitting the wall with a soft thud. Eventually, Cam’s relaxed enough to bob up and down, humming randomly to make Ryan jump, until he shoves at Cam’s shoulder wordlessly, reaching down to grab the base of his dick and squeeze.

‘You can come,’ Cam says, voice wrecked when he pulls off. ‘I don’t mind.’

‘No— I— I thought you were going to fuck me.’

‘If you come now, it’ll take the edge off,’ Cam says. ‘We can go for longer, you’ll be a little more—relaxed, when I finger you.’

Ryan’s cheeks are blotchy, pink and red and so fucking close, Cam can tell by the way his jaw is set. ‘Come on, Ry,’ he says, making sure his lips brush the head of his cock when he speaks. ‘You gonna come for me?’

Ryan’s come splashes onto his tongue, over his lips and chin, dripping to the sheets as his tongue darts out to lick it up. Cam grins. ‘Baby’s first blowjob,’ he says. ‘How was it?’

Ryan makes a wordless sound, but he grips Cam’s hair a little tighter, and Cam thinks that means it was okay. He kisses Ryan’s softening dick, and the hollow of his hip, and sits up. ‘I’m gonna wash my face and give you a minute. You okay?’

Ryan nods, makes a grabby motion for Cam as he climbs off the bed. ‘I’m just gonna be in the bathroom,’ he says. ‘I won’t even be a minute.’

‘Mkay,’ Ryan mumbles.

Cam washes his face and hands, grabs the little bottle of lotion from beside the sink, and steps out of his pants, making a half-hearted attempt to hang them over the towel rail, lopsided.

When he gets back into the main area though, Ryan’s asleep, head lolling on his chest. He barely wakes up when Cam coaxes him into lying down, just darts a hand out to grab Cam’s wrist and pull him into the bed, making whiny sounds until Cam curls up behind him, arm slung over his waist, nose stuck into the curls at the nape of his neck. He sleeps surprisingly well, and when his alarm goes off the next morning, Ryan’s still there, soft and sleepy and he lets Cam kiss him good morning, giving him a shy smile after.

‘I need a shower,’ Ryan says into the kiss. ‘I smell like a bar floor.’

‘I’ve smelled worse,’ Cam says. ‘Can I come?’
Ryan’s smile is all the answer he needs.

2025

Tony is a great kisser. Like, a great kisser. He pushes the drivers seat of his car as far back as it’ll go and Cam is straddling his lap, hands on his throat, tipping his head up.

‘We are definitely too old for this,’ Tony says, between kisses, but he has his hands on Cam’s ass, holding him in place.

‘Speak for yourself,’ Cam says, biting at his neck to make him gasp.

‘I’m sorry, which of us will be forty first?’

‘Just for that, I’m not gonna give you a handie in the car,’ Cam says, but he reaches down to palm at Tony’s dick through his pants anyway.

‘You’re such a liar,’ Tony says, arching into it.

‘Sue me,’ Cam says, and pops the button on Tony’s pants.

The house is quiet when Tony drops him off. All the lights are off, and he can’t find Ryan anywhere, until he ventures upstairs and finds him fast asleep in Adam’s bed, book half open on his lap, and Adam passed out next to him, wearing a single hockey glove.

He shakes Ryan awake as gently as he can, holding a finger to his lips while he rearranges Adam, removes the glove and pulls the covers up over him, turning out the light on his way out of the room.

They’re halfway down the stairs when Ryan speaks.

‘Got lucky tonight, huh?’

Cam coughs to hide his surprise. ‘Sorry?’

‘Your hair looks like it does when someone’s had their hands in it. I remember—’ Ryan stops. Clears his throat. ‘Never mind.’

Cam— doesn’t have anything to say to that. ‘Thanks for doing this,’ he says, eventually. ‘I really appreciate it.’

‘Any time,’ Ryan says. ‘Adam’s a really great kid. I was sorry to hear about—’

‘The divorce?’ Cam asks, lightly.

‘—Yeah,’ Ryan says. ‘I’m sorry.’

‘I got Adam out of it,’ he says. ‘It wasn’t all bad.’

They reach the kitchen, and Cam pours himself a glass of water, offers one to Ryan. ‘You’re off tomorrow, right?’

‘Optional before we fly out to California,’ Ryan says. ‘Somehow, I became one of the old guys who
“Isn’t required to show up for those.”

‘Enjoy it,’ Cam says. ‘I remember those days.’

They lapse into a comfortable silence, while Cam drinks his water.

‘I’m glad—’ Ryan starts, and stops. ‘Never mind,’ he says again.

Cam looks at him. The lights are set to half-brightness, but even in the dim he can see Ryan’s swallowing back his words. ‘What?’

‘I’m glad we’re talking again,’ Ryan says, eventually, ducking his head. ‘I missed you.’

‘Ryan—’ Cam starts, because they’ve been here before. They’ve had this conversation before, when Ryan got traded to Dallas. And when Cam was about to get married. It ended badly. It always does.

‘I know,’ Ryan says. ‘I know. I just— wanted to tell you. That’s all. Do you want me to go?’

‘—No,’ Cam says, because he doesn’t. ‘I—’ he pauses. ‘I missed you too,’ he admits. ‘I’m glad you’re back in Columbus.’

‘Me too,’ Ryan says, and finishes his water, turns the glass around in his hands. ‘Are you hungry? Adam and I made cookies. I figured you’d still be full from the date, but—’ he trails off. ‘I don’t know what I thought.’

‘Cookies sound great,’ Cam says, and helps himself. ‘I didn’t know you baked.’

‘I learned. In Dallas. I can cook, too.’

‘Huh,’ Cam says, and takes a mouthful. ‘These are really good, Jo.’

Ryan beams at him. ‘Adam maybe had—a couple more than he should. He crashed really hard about an hour before you got home.’

Cam laughs. ‘You’re a terrible babysitter,’ he says. ‘Never again.’

Ryan pouts at him. ‘He’s not dead, and the house is clean, and you have cookies, what more do you want?’

‘You cleaned my house?’

‘Adam’s idea. Also— there was a small spillage.’

Cam’s not fazed. He has dealt with every spill imaginable, up to and including the time Adam had a funeral for his stuffed goldfish and blew a pipe when he tried to flush him down the toilet.

‘Spillage of what?’

‘—Grape juice,’ Ryan admits. ‘In the basement.’

‘Adam isn’t allowed juice in the basement,’ Cam says, slowly.

‘—Adam didn’t have grape juice in the basement,’ Ryan says, flushing. ‘I was cleaning the hockey stuff up while he was in the bath, and my phone rang and made me jump. I maybe kicked my glass over. I got the stain out!’
Cam sighs. ‘You’re supposed to be the adult, Jo.’

‘I got the stain out!’ he repeats, and Cam just laughs at him.

‘Thanks again,’ he says. ‘Adam thinks the world of you. He refused to wear anything but your jersey to school today. He asked me for a new away jersey yesterday because he only has a home Johansen jersey. He’s gonna bankrupt me, I swear.’

‘Sorry about that,’ Ryan says, looking not at all sorry.

‘He could have worse heroes, I guess.’

Ryan preens at that, and they fall into easy conversation, sitting at Cam’s kitchen table, until Ryan starts yawning into his drink, and Cam realises how late it’s gotten.

‘I have a spare room—I actually have several. You wanna crash here?’

‘If you’re sure,’ Ryan says. ‘I can dri—’ he gets interrupted by another yawn.

‘I can only imagine what the coach will say if you die because you fell asleep at the wheel driving home from my place three weeks into the season. Stay here. The rooms are all made up already.’

Cam shows him to his room, and then goes to bed. He lies awake for longer than he should, thinking about— just thinking.

- 2014

‘How long have you and Joey been hooking up?’ Matty asks one day, casual, while they’re waiting for Mark to sharpen their skates.

‘I—’ Cam starts.

‘Don’t deny it,’ Matty says. ‘You two move around each other like newlyweds, it’s kind of sickening.’

‘Couple of months,’ Cam admits. ‘No one knows. Well. Fligs knows.’

‘Aww,’ Matty says. ‘It’s cute that you think that no one knows.’

‘…Everyone knows?’ Cam asks.

‘Everyone.’

‘Oh,’ Cam says. ‘Good.’ He pauses. ‘Don’t tell Ryan you know. Or that anyone knows. He’s— worried about it.’

Matty winks, taps the side of his nose. ‘He won’t hear it from me. You should probably tell him, though.’

Cam sighs, glances behind him into the locker room, where Ryan’s wrestling with Dubi. ‘Yeah,’ he says. ‘I will.’

‘You’re good for him,’ Matty says.
‘I hope so,’ Cam says, and takes his skates off of Mark, who gives him a knowing nod.

2025

Cam sleeps later than he usually does, wakes up with a jolt at about ten wondering why Adam hasn’t come to wake him up. He pulls sweats on and strains his ears to listen for him in the basement; sometimes instead of deliberately waking Cam up, Adam likes to go down to the basement and beat the hell out of the wall with a hockey puck.

He can hear voices from the kitchen, so he heads for them, and finds Ryan making pancakes in various shapes.

‘They better be kid-friendly pancakes,’ he says from the doorway. Ryan looks up and gives him a smile, tipping the pan to show him Mickey Mouse.

‘How irresponsible do you think I am?’ Ryan asks, glancing over at Adam, who’s watching them silently, chewing his mouthful of pancake. ‘Chew with your mouth closed, bud.’

‘How’d you sleep?’ Cam asks, heading for the coffee pot, half full and steaming gently.

‘Like a corpse,’ Ryan says, flipping his pancake. ‘You know me. Any requests for shapes?’

Cam hums. ‘Bet you can’t do the Blue Jackets logo.’

‘Sucker,’ Ryan says. ‘Adam already asked for that one.’

‘Fine,’ Cam says. ‘Cannon.’

Ryan winks at him, and wields the squeeze bottle of pancake batter.

Cam eats a cannon, a star and, when Adam goes to the bathroom, a hastily drawn dick shaped pancake that has them both laughing.

They do the dishes together after, while Adam’s practicing his wrist shot in the basement. ‘Are you gonna come too?’ he asks Ryan.

‘When the dishes are done,’ he promises, stacking the plates and putting the syrup back in the cupboard.

Adam sighs, but leaves them to it, and Cam starts filling the sink.

‘I can’t believe you do your own dishes instead of putting them in the dishwasher,’ Ryan says. ‘What kind of millionaire are you?’

‘One that’s trying to teach his son the importance of chores,’ Cam says. ‘I like doing the dishes.’

Ryan laughs at him, and nudges him with his hip. ‘I made the mess,’ he says. ‘I’ll clean it up.’

‘Don’t worry about it,’ Cam says, nudging him back. ‘Thank you for making breakfast. Normally Adam wakes me up at seven wanting pop tarts.’

‘Yeah, I busted him on his way out of his room this morning. Figured I’d distract him with cartoons, but we just watched last night’s NHL highlights instead. Kid is kind of crazy about hockey.’
‘He grew up around hockey. He wanted to be a soccer player for about three weeks last year, when he went to a Columbus Crew game, but apart from that, he’s kind of a one track mind. Wants to be the next Auston Matthews.’

Ryan laughs. ‘Not the next Cam Atkinson?’

‘He wants to be taller,’ Cam says. ‘Sophia was— pretty tall, so. He might hit six foot.’

‘Here’s hoping,’ Ryan says. ‘NHL players are monsters nowadays, I feel small on the ice sometimes.’

The dishes are done quickly with two people. Cam’s starting to get used to having Ryan around again, working as a team again. He feels weirdly less like a single dad with Ryan around, something he doesn’t really want to unpack his thoughts about. Ryan disappears into the basement for an hour or so while Cam does a load of laundry and folds the stuff out of the dryer.

He’s humming to himself, back to the basement door, when Ryan speaks, making him jump.

‘I, uh, have a flight in a couple of hours. Road trip. I should go back to my place and pack.’

‘Do you need a ride? Or I can call you an Uber or something, or—’

‘It’s fine, I drove here last night,’ Ryan says. ‘I just didn’t want to take off without saying goodbye. I’ll— be gone for a few days.

‘West coast road trips are a killer.’ Cam remembers what they’re like, and stands up. ‘Thanks again, for last night. And this morning. You’re kind of a Godsend.’

‘Any time,’ Ryan says. ‘Seriously. Any time. Adam’s really great, and— I missed hanging out with you.’

Cam takes a step closer and they hug, awkward. Cam pats him on the back and walks to the front door with him, gives him a half-wave as he pulls out of the drive.

Adam’s standing in the hallway when Cam closes the front door, making him jump.

‘You need a bell or something,’ he tells him, ruffling his curls on his way past.

‘Are you guys dating?’ Adam asks, and Cam almost swallows his tongue.

‘Why would you think that?’ he asks, aiming for casual and hitting slightly panicked.

Adam shrugs, looking older than seven for a second. ‘Dunno.’

Cam— has no idea what to do what that.

‘What do you mean?’ he asks.

Adam shrugs again. ‘He laughs at your jokes.’

‘I’m funny.’

Adam snorts, telling Cam exactly what he thinks of that. ‘You kept bumping each other doing the dishes.’

‘Huh,’ Cam says, thinking about it. ‘You saw that?’
‘I came to get juice,’ he says. ‘You didn’t see me. I was being sneaky.’

‘Very sneaky,’ Cam agrees. He can’t believe he didn’t notice Adam coming in the room. Was he really so wrapped up in Ryan? He shakes the thought off, and goes into the kitchen to start putting the clean dishes away. When his phone buzzes with a text from Ryan, he deliberately waits until he knows Ryan will be on a plane to read it.

- 2014

After the game, they go back to Ryan’s apartment for dinner. Cam was as surprised as anyone to learn that Ryan can actually cook pretty well, and he makes a decent pasta dish for them to eat while Cam flips through Netflix.

‘So,’ Cam says, halfway through the meal. ‘You— know that Matty knows about us, right?’

Ryan goes still, and Cam instantly feels guilty. ‘No,’ he says, quiet.

‘I didn’t tell him,’ Cam says. ‘He guessed. Apparently we’re— kind of obvious.’

‘Oh,’ Ryan says, letting his forkful of pasta drop back into the bowl.

‘Is that— we can dial it back a little, if you want?’

He shrugs, looking a little lost.

‘He doesn’t care, you know,’ Cam says, softly. ‘He’s happy. For you.’

‘He doesn’t care that I’m— we’re—’

Cam shakes his head. ‘He thinks we’re good for each other. Also that we’re gross.’

Ryan laughs weakly at that. He’s a little less pale now. Cam leans into him a little, kissing his shoulder.

‘It’s not the end of the world,’ he says, quietly. ‘They’re good guys. They love you. You’re team.’

He moves up over the cap of his delt, kissing up his neck. Ryan shivers.

‘We don’t have to tell anyone,’ Cam says, kissing the hinge of his jaw. ‘It’s up to you. Let them assume, if they want, but you don’t owe them anything if you aren’t ready to tell them.’

Ryan twirls his fork in his spaghetti, like he’s thinking.

‘Soon,’ he says, quietly. ‘I think— maybe Fligs. He’s been watching us anyway, when he thinks I’m not looking. And Jack.’

‘Okay,’ Cam says, easily.

‘Does the team know about your— you?’

‘That I date men?’

Ryan nods, ducking his head.

‘Most do,’ Cam says. ‘I don’t really hide it. If they have a problem with me, let them. I—’ He
pauses, not sure how to say this without sounding like he’s judging Ryan. ‘I did my time in the closet when I was a kid,’ he says. ‘It’s not where I want to be any more.’

Ryan takes a thoughtful bite of food. ‘I’m gay,’ he says. ‘That’s— the first time I’ve ever said it out loud.’

Cam takes hold of his free hand and squeezes, reassuring.

‘It’s not so scary,’ Ryan says, laughing a little. ‘Not to you, anyway.’

‘It’s easy to come out to the guy who keeps sucking your dick,’ Cam agrees. ‘Baby steps, Ry. It’s a big word for some people.’

Ryan pokes at a chunk of bell pepper with his fork. ‘Will you ever come out— properly?’ At Cam’s raised eyebrow, he hurries to clarify. ‘To everyone, I mean. Not just team.’

‘Like— my mom?’ Cam teases, knowing what he’s asking.

‘To the media,’ Ryan says.

‘Maybe,’ Cam says. ‘When I retire, and if— if I have someone in my life, then yeah, maybe.’

‘You just don’t want to be the first,’ Ryan says, hearing what Cam’s not saying.

‘I’m five eight,’ Cam says. ‘I look like a teenager even when I stop shaving, I was drafted in the sixth round of my second draft. I already have to fight to get people to take me seriously. I can’t— I don’t want to be the first out player, not on top of all that.’

‘Are there other gay players in the league?’

‘A handful. Some of them are like me, out to their team. We don’t have like, a group text, if that’s what you’re thinking.’

‘But you talk to some of them, right?’

‘Yeah. Mostly because we’re friends, though. We don’t just stick together because we all like dick, Jo.’

Ryan blushed. ‘I wasn’t—‘

‘I know, that’s not what you were saying,’ Cam squeezes his hand again. ‘Next time we’re in Montreal, we’ll hang out with the guy I know up there.’

‘Who?’

Cam shakes his head. ‘Can’t tell you. Not without asking him if I can, first.’

‘I won’t tell anyone—‘

‘I know you wouldn’t. It’s still not my place to tell. I’ll text him tonight.’

Ryan leans into him, appeased. ‘I’m done,’ he says. ‘Wanna load the dishwasher for me? Then we can fool around on the couch.’

‘I am way too old to fool around on any couch,’ Cam says, but he gets up and takes Ryan’s bowl off of him anyway. ‘You have a perfectly serviceable bed. Two perfectly serviceable beds, even. Go
pick your favorite, I’ll be there soon.’

Ryan pulls him in for a kiss that tastes like basil and the soda he was drinking, and then heads for the spare room. They tend to alternate nights between the rooms, so they always have clean sheets.

- 2025

Cam’s not avoiding Ryan. He’s not. Ryan is just— on a super long roadtrip, and furniture shopping, and Cam’s super busy with coaching, and Adam, and— okay, maybe he’s avoiding him a little bit.

Chucky’s in Columbus tonight for the game tomorrow. They had vague plans to get dinner and catch up after the game, but Adam is on a playdate and Cam’s studiously avoiding the mess in the basement and also bored.

He’s about to pick his phone up when it buzzes on the kitchen counter.

Wanna get dinner tonight instead of tomorrow? Chucky wants to know.

Cam laughs, and calls him.
‘Got a hot date or something tomorrow?’ he asks, when Chucky picks up.

‘Something like that,’ he says. ‘He’s definitely hot.’

‘Tell me it’s not another weird sex bet with Troubs,’ Cam says. ‘No, actually, don’t tell me. I don’t need that mental image.’

Chucky stays deliberately silent, and then starts laughing. Cam liked playing with Troubs a lot; when he signed with Columbus the year before Cam retired, he filled that hole on their second pairing from losing Savvy and Jack in back to back seasons. He’s having a good season so far, from what Cam’s seen.

‘So, dinner?’ Chucky asks. ‘I want red meat.’

‘Sure,’ Cam says. ‘Want me to pick you up from the hotel?’

They end up in a burger place a couple of blocks down from Nationwide. Cam’s a regular, enough that no one really bothers him any more, and Chucky is almost unrecognizable under the beard.

‘What the fuck is on your face, anyway?’ Cam asks, tugging at it. ‘Did you lose a bet?’

‘It’s cold in Montreal,’ Chucky says, swatting at him. ‘You’re just jealous you’re almost forty and can’t grow a beard this good.’

‘I’m thirty five,’ Cam says, kicking him under the table. ‘And you’re an asshole. You’re paying for dinner.’

Chucky grins. ‘Sure,’ he says. ‘If you tell me why Ryan Johansen slept at your place last week.

‘Troubs has a big fucking mouth,’ Cam says, darkly.

‘So it’s true,’ Chucky says. ‘He finally forgave you for dumping him, huh?’

‘I didn’t dump him,’ Cam says. ‘It was a joint decision to not pretend we were mature enough to deal
with a long distance relationship. He was twenty three. It was a bad idea for everyone involved.’

Chucky hums. ‘Sure,’ he says. ‘That’s why you guys had a big blow up fight the first time he came back to Columbus after the trade.’

‘I regret telling you anything,’ Cam says, and sighs. ‘He was babysitting Adam for me while I had a date.’

Chucky’s jaw drops, delighted. ’How did you convince your ex to babysit your kid while you were out getting laid? You have to teach me that trick.’

‘It’s not a trick!’ Cam protests. ‘It was Fligs, anyway. My usual babysitter cancelled and he texted Ryan from my phone asking if he was free.’

‘Which he was.’

‘Which he was,’ Cam agrees.

‘Doesn’t explain him staying the night, though.’

‘I got home later than I meant. He was too tired to drive, I told him to take the spare room. It’s not a big deal.’

Chucky takes a thoughtful bite of his burger. ’But you want it to be.’

Cam sighs. ‘I don’t know what I want,’ he admits. ‘I— having Ryan back is— weird. Not— bad, though. I missed him. We missed each other.’

‘You’re still in love with him,’ Chucky says, knowledgeably.

‘Love’s a strong word,’ Cam says. ‘And it doesn’t matter. I’m dating someone else.’

Chucky shrugs. ‘The heart wants what it wants, dude.’

Cam sighs again. ‘Yeah,’ he says. ‘That’s what worries me.’

His phone buzzes. It’s a text from Ryan, accompanied by a screenshot of a tweet wanting to know who Cam Atkinson’s dinner date was, complete with blurry picture of them in a booth together.

Is that Tony, Ryan asks. U can do better.

Cam laughs, and shows Chucky the text, before sending Ryan a selfie of the two of them. Just Chucky, he texts.

Tell him he looks homeless, Ryan says, so Cam does. Not a real date then?

No, Cam says. Just buddies.

Ryan doesn’t respond to that, and Cam shoves his phone back in his pocket and looks back up at Chucky.

‘What?’ he asks.

‘What’s your face doing?’ Chucky asks. There’s a piece of french fry in his beard. Cam thinks he has zero room to discuss what Cam’s face is or isn’t doing.
‘Nothing,’ he says, reaching for his water glass.

‘Hmm,’ Chucky says.

‘Nothing,’ Cam repeats. ‘You have food in your beard.’

‘Occupational hazard,’ Chucky says, wiping at it with a napkin. The french fry remains.

‘Being bearded is not your job,’ Cam says, trying to distract him, and it works, devolving into Chucky chirping Cam for not being able to grow a beard, and Cam chirping him back for looking like a homeless person.

Ryan doesn’t text back all evening, so Cam gets to focus on catching up with Chucky, has maybe a couple more beers than he should, and texts Janelle to remind her that she’s an angel for taking Adam overnight.

He falls asleep without checking his phone, and feels weird when he wakes up in the morning and there’s no response from Ryan.

- 2014 -

They make the playoffs.

They make the playoffs.

Ryan assists on the third goal against Dallas, the 3-0 nail in the coffin, and they take the game 3-1 in the end. They make the playoffs for the second time in franchise history and Cam doesn’t think he’s ever felt like this.

He blows Ryan in their hotel room after the game until he’s scrabbling at the headboard, tossing his head with the effort not to come.

‘I’m proud of you,’ Cam says after, when they’re lying in bed together, Ryan’s head on Cam’s chest. Ryan’s tracing patterns on Cam’s belly with the tip of his finger.

‘I can’t believe we’re going to the playoffs,’ Ryan says.

‘Hell of a season we’re having,’ Cam says, combing through Ryan’s hair. He means hockey, but Ryan turns onto his belly and leans up to kiss him.

‘Yeah,’ he agrees. ‘First you, then the Cup.’

‘We haven’t won anything yet,’ Cam reminds him, knocking on the headboard with a closed fist.

Ryan pulls a face at him. ‘You’re too superstitious,’ he says. ‘Jinxes aren’t real.’

‘That’s what you think,’ Cam says, pulling a face back and jabbing into his ribs with his fingers. It devolves into a wrestling match.

- Playoffs are insane. Cam’s never experienced anything like this before, even at BC, even in Championship games. Ryan scores his first playoff goal to cut the lead to 2-1 and Cam feels like he could jump all the way into the rafters. He flies down the bench smiling like anything, and when he
looks at Cam, his eyes are steely and determined. Cam would put money on Ryan scoring again before the game’s over.

When Matty scores the OT winner, Cam tackles him to the ground and kisses him, on pure instinct.

Matty’s laughing and yelling in his ear, and when Cam pulls back he just says ‘I won’t tell Joey if you don’t,’ and Cam laughs back.

Because Matty’s an asshole, it’s the first thing he says when he gets in the locker room.

‘Hey Joey! You’re a lucky guy if Cam kisses you like he just kissed me on the ice!’

Ryan looks up from his skates, frowning. Matty wolf-whistles, and smacks Cam’s ass with the blade of his stick.

‘You kissed him?’ he asks, looking hurt.

‘Uh,’ Cam says. ‘It was a knee jerk reaction?’

Ryan’s eyes get really wide and pained. ‘Why would you do that?’ he asks, and Cam’s gut clenches.

‘I just got carried away,’ he says. ‘I’m sorry.’

There’s an uncomfortable murmur in the locker room. Cam glances at Matty, who looks like he regrets saying anything.

Cam’s just about to open his mouth and apologize again when Ryan bursts out laughing, doubling up in his stall.

‘You’re an asshole,’ Cam says over the laughter that bubbles around the room as they realise he was joking. Ryan laughs until he looks like he’s struggling to breathe. ‘You scared me.’

‘Totally worth it,’ Ryan manages, wheezing a little.

- 2025

‘I have to break up with Tony,’ Cam says, over brunch at the Folignos’.

Janelle looks at him, concerned. ‘I thought it was going really well.’

Fligs doesn’t say anything, but he’s eying Cam over his mug.

‘It was. Is. It— ‘ He pauses. ‘There’s someone else,’ he says.

Janelle doesn’t look any less concerned. Fligs still hasn’t said anything.

‘It’s— ‘ Another pause. ‘It’s Ryan,’ he admits, and Janelle’s eyebrows fly up into her hairline.

Fligs hums.

‘Nothing happened,’ Ryan rushes. ‘We haven’t even— talked about it.’

‘But you want to,’ Fligs says, eerily mimicking Chucky’s comment the week before.

‘I don’t know,’ he says. ‘But I’ve been— thinking about it. About him. And it’s not fair to Tony if
I’m not in the relationship one hundred percent.’

‘And you’re planning on breaking up with him before talking to Joey and seeing where he’s at?’ Janelle asks. ‘What if he doesn’t feel the same way?’

Cam shrugs. ‘It would feel dishonest to Tony staying in the relationship if I have feelings for someone else.’

‘What about Adam?’ Janelle asks.

‘That’s what’s stopping me,’ Cam admits. ‘He loves Tony. He loves Ryan, too. What if things don’t work again and we break up and don’t talk for eight years? What—’

‘Talk to Joey,’ Fligs says, interrupting him. ‘You’ll drive yourself crazy thinking of the what-ifs until you do that.’

‘When did you turn into an adult?’ Cam grumbles.

‘Right around kid number three,’ Fligs says, smug. Cam flicks a strawberry at him.

2014

Playoffs are great. Being eliminated fucking sucks.

The room is just going through the motions. Ryan looks haunted by the shot he missed in the dying seconds of the third, just fanning on the puck. Bob has made a cave out of his jersey and doesn’t look like he’s coming out any time soon.

Fligs is trying to lift the room a little, going from player to player and saying a handful of words, but. It fucking sucks. Cam feels empty, like he left part of himself on the ice. Fligs puts a hand on his shoulder, squeezes, looks at him wordlessly. Cam gives him a half-hearted smile, and Fligs smiles back. He’s going to get the C one of these days, Cam thinks.

Ryan is silent the whole drive home. He makes dinner, and they sit on the couch, curled together quietly.

‘I should have been better,’ Ryan says, the first words he’s spoken since getting in the car.

Cam kisses him quiet. He doesn’t want to talk. He doesn’t want to think. He just wants to feel Ryan underneath him, warm and willing and solid in the way that their season isn’t. He fucks Ryan on their couch and swallows the sounds of his orgasm with his mouth.

He feels better, after, and he thinks Ryan does, too. They shower together and it feels a little like they’re showering the whole season away.

‘Next year,’ Ryan says, while Cam’s washing the come off of his belly.

‘Yeah,’ Cam says, looking up at him. ‘Next year.’

Next year is not their year either.
Can we talk

Cam stares at his phone waiting for a response for five minutes and then leaves it face down on the counter while he unloads the dishwasher.

Half an hour later, it buzzes.

What’s up?

Come over?

Another ten minute pause.

Be there in fifteen, Ryan says, and Cam’s gut twists, unsettled.

Ryan’s there in ten, rings the doorbell instead of just letting himself in, and stands on the porch shuffling his feet when Cam opens the door.

‘—Come in,’ Cam says, and steps aside.

Ryan takes a seat in the armchair. He’s fidgeting, tugging the sleeves of his hoody down over his hands and pushing them back up to his elbows, over and over. It makes him look young.

‘Is this about why you’ve been avoiding me?’ he asks, suddenly, while Cam’s trying to get up the courage to speak. ‘It’s about what I said when you were getting dinner with Chucky, right?’

‘—Kind of,’ Cam says. ‘I didn’t mean to avoid you for so long, you just— I had some stuff to think about.’

Ryan frowns, tilts his head. ‘Like what?’

There are a million ways Cam can say this, probably. Dozens, at least. He can find a diplomatic and sensitive way to talk about this without scaring him off.

‘I have feelings for you,’ he says, and wishes briefly for death.

He risks a glance at Ryan, who looks— blank.

‘Oh,’ he says. ‘I— that’s not what I was expecting you to say.’

‘Me neither,’ Cam admits.

‘I have to go,’ Ryan says, and stands up. Cam’s heart sinks.

‘No, you don’t—’

‘Yeah, Cam, I do.’ There’s more bite in his words than Cam expected, and he flinches back a little. ‘This is— this isn’t okay, you get that, right?’

Cam opens his mouth, but Ryan’s apparently not done yet.

‘I babysat your son while you were out fucking some other guy. You broke up with me nine years ago and stopped talking to me eight years ago. I begged you not to get married, and you did anyway. I moved on, Cam. I thought you had, too.’ He pauses. ‘So yeah. I have to go. I can’t do this.’
He doesn’t slam the front door on the way out. That’s somehow worse, Cam thinks.

‘Fuck,’ he says, and slumps back into the couch.

- 2015 -

Ryan is snarling on the bench. Cam’s a few guys down, but he can sense it. He’s not used to sitting on the bench, has been on the top line basically his whole time with the Jackets, but— Tortorella has other ideas, Cam guesses.

He’d ripped into Ryan outside the locker room during intermission, told him to fucking skate already or his ass was gonna get real familiar with the bench.

Cam’s still smarting a little from his healthy scratch the game before, has something to prove. He’s never going to be as fast as some of the guys on the team, but. He’s skating.

Ryan— isn’t. Cam can’t figure it out. He’s never been the most defensively responsible, but he used to at least try. Cam can’t figure out if he’s trying to piss off Tortorella or if it’s something else.

‘Are you hurt?’ he asks, when they’re getting undressed in the hotel room.

‘I’m fine,’ Ryan says, short.

‘Then what gives?’

‘Dunno what you mean,’ Ryan says. He turns away from Cam to get something out of his suitcase.

‘Sure you don’t,’ Cam says, frustrated. ‘You’re just skating around like you have all day to back check. Are you trying to prove a point, or?’

‘Fuck you,’ Ryan snaps.

Cam drops it, climbs into bed.

‘I’m gonna sleep in my own room,’ Ryan says suddenly, pulls his sweatpants on and he’s gone before Cam can say anything.

- They finally win a game, squeezing past Colorado. Cam hasn’t slept in the same bed at Ryan since the— he guesses it was a fight. Ryan’s been sullen, silent, hasn’t talked to anyone but Saader, who’s impossible to shut out.

It’s only been a couple of days, but Cam misses him.

‘I’m sorry,’ he says, cornering him in the airport bathroom, while he’s washing his hands. Ryan jumps, splashing water onto his pants.

‘Good,’ he says. ‘You should be.’

‘It was shitty of me to act like you were the problem when everyone’s playing like crap.’

‘Yeah,’ Ryan says. ‘It was.’
‘So I’m sorry.’

Ryan shuts off the tap and leaves.

The team sends Ryan home before the next game, and Cam can’t get a straight answer out of anyone.

‘It’s not his heart, they’re saying,’ Fligs says.

‘What if it is, though?’ Cam asks.

Ryan had called him in the summer a week before he was due to fly out to Connecticut to tell Cam he was in the hospital because his heart was beating too fast. It happened again a couple of weeks later, but hadn’t bothered him since. He’d passed the physical in training camp just fine, and he was supposed to be better.

Cam can’t stop thinking about that conversation in the hotel room. He calls Ryan, but there’s no answer.

He comes back after a couple of games, picks up a couple of points in San Jose, and that’s the first time Cam’s seen him smile in a long time.

He catches him on the way to the bus after the game.

‘You played well tonight,’ he says.

‘—Thanks,’ Ryan says. ‘Good to get a win.’

Cam nods in agreement.

‘I’m sorry,’ he says, again.

Ryan’s quiet in the gloom of the parking lot.

‘I’m glad you’re feeling better,’ he adds. ‘I— missed you. Miss you.’

‘I missed you too,’ Ryan admits. ‘It wasn’t my heart. I’m— Fligs said you were worried it was.’

‘Good,’ Cam says, awkward, and then pauses. ‘Are we—’ He stops.

‘Are we what?’

‘We’ve slept in separate beds since Minnesota,’ Cam says. ‘I’m pretty sure the team thinks we’ve broken up.’

‘Have we?’ Ryan asks, a little tight.

‘I don’t want to,’ Cam says, determined. ‘I know you’re mad at me because I was an asshole, but. I love you. I don’t want to break up. God knows we need something good in this shitty season.’

They’re at the bus. Ryan has started sitting next to Saader, but he bypasses him to sit a couple rows behind him, where there’s two empty seats together.
Saader tilts his head at Cam, but gives him an encouraging smile, jerks his head at Ryan and nods.

Cam nods back, and slides into the seat next to Ryan.

‘You should— come to my room tonight,’ Ryan says, halting. ‘If you want to.’

‘I do,’ Cam says, immediately. Maybe a little too fast, but he’s never been dignified when it comes to Ryan.

They fall asleep curled up together, and though things are still— stilted, they’re better.

Ryan and Tortorella keep butting heads, and the team keeps losing, but they’re gonna be okay, Cam thinks.

2025

Cam breaks up with Tony. It’s awful.

He keeps asking if it’s something he did, and Cam has to keep saying no, no it’s not, he’s sorry.

He doesn’t tell Adam. Janelle takes him for the night and he and Fligs get drunk in Cam’s living room. He falls asleep on the couch and wakes up feeling like death.

‘Fuck,’ he says, sitting up and looking at Fligs, who’s annoyingly chipper and making coffee.

‘Feel better?’ he asks.

‘No,’ Cam says, and then goes to throw up.

2016

Cam hears about the trade on fucking Twitter. He’s at his apartment, waiting for his laundry to finish and noodling around online when it pops up.

He drives to Ryan’s on autopilot. Ryan looks drained when he opens the door, guilty and tired and heartbroken.

‘Why didn’t you tell me?’ Cam asks, quietly. ‘Why did I have to find out from Portzline, Ryan?’

‘I didn’t know how to tell you,’ Ryan says. ‘It was like, if I don’t tell you, then it’s not happening, you know? I’m still a Blue Jacket.’

Cam— can’t say anything.

‘We all knew it was happening,’ Ryan says. ‘You heard as many rumors as I did, I was— I’ve been done in this town all season, it was just a case of where, and what you got for me.’ He pauses, and sighs. ‘Fuckin’ Nashville, Cam.’

‘When’s— when’s your flight?’ Cam asks.

‘I have a couple of hours,’ Ryan says. ‘I was trying to pack, but— I’ve never been traded before. I
didn’t know what to take.’

‘Come to bed,’ Cam says, quietly. Ryan goes.

- 

The sex is slow, and careful, and when Cam’s pushing into him, Ryan reaches out to tangle his hand with Cam’s, and he holds on tight, all the way through their orgasms.

After, Cam is lying on Ryan’s chest, feeling the steady rise and fall of his breaths.

‘We have to talk,’ he says, quietly. ‘About— what we do now.’

Ryan tenses a little. ‘What do you mean?’

‘Nashville is really far away, Ry. It’s—’ He trails off, losing his nerve.

‘It’s not that far,’ Ryan says.

Cam takes a breath. ‘It’s far enough,’ he says, and Ryan stops breathing.

‘What are you—‘

‘I can’t do it,’ Cam says. ‘I— don’t want to do long distance. It sucks. It’s hard, and it makes people resent each other for not being there, and I— I don’t want to resent you.’

Ryan is so still underneath him. He shoves Cam off of him suddenly, gets to his feet.

‘Fuck you,’ he says. ‘What do you mean, you don’t want to resent me? You’re breaking up with me?’

‘I’m sorry,’ Cam says, sitting up.

‘Get out of my apartment,’ Ryan says. ‘Fuck you.’

Cam goes. He stands on the sidewalk outside for long enough that he struggles to turn the key in the car ignition, his hands are so cold.

When he gets home, he calls Ryan. No answer. He doesn’t leave a voicemail.

The picture of Ryan at Port Columbus that he puts on Instagram that night hurts more than Cam would like to admit.

- 

Matty shows up at his apartment with beer. Lots of beer.

‘He didn’t say goodbye,’ Cam says, halfway through his third beer. He’s lying on the floor, with his feet under Easton and his head under the coffee table.

Matty kicks him in the ribs from his seat on the couch. ‘That’s because you had sex with him and then dumped him, idiot.’

Cam looks at the underside of his coffee table. It’s probably cleaner than the top, he realizes. Maybe he could— flip it, somehow. Hide the stains from before he owned coasters, and that time he and Ryan got high and accidentally burnt a mark in it with the roach.
‘I miss him,’ Cam says, mournfully.

‘He’s been gone eight hours,’ Matty says, and then softens. ‘He won’t be angry forever. Give him a minute. He’s hurting.’

‘I hurt him,’ Cam says, and sits up, narrowly missing the edge of the coffee table.

‘Yeah,’ Matty says. Cam squints at him. He’s still only on his first beer.

‘Get more drunk,’ he says. ‘Drinking is a social activity, it doesn’t count if it’s you nursing one Bud Light and watching me embarrass myself.’

‘You don’t need to get drunk to be an embarrassment,’ Matty says, but he gets another beer.

2025

‘I thought I was done getting hangovers when I retired,’ Cam says, putting his forehead on the kitchen counter.

Fligs jabs at him with a spatula and slides a coffee mug within reach. ‘You want a bendy straw, or are you gonna pick your head up?’ he asks.

Cam gets involved in a brief staring match with the steam curling out of the mug before admitting surrender and sitting up.

‘You look awful,’ Fligs says.

‘Gee, thanks,’ Cam says, taking a mouthful of coffee. ‘Did you make me breakfast just to excuse shitting on me?’

Fligs shrugs. ‘We may never know. Fried or scrambled?’

‘Fried,’ Cam says, even though the thought of eggs is making his stomach turn.

‘Seems like last night’s been brewing for a while, huh?’ Nick asks, sliding a plate in front of him.

‘Seems like,’ Cam says.

‘Wanna talk about it sober now you’ve poured your heart out over half a bottle of rum?’

‘Christ, when did you let me have rum?’ Cam asks. ‘Aren’t you supposed to be the responsible adult?’

‘You’re very persistent,’ Fligs says, grinning. ‘Also chatty.’

‘God,’ Cam says. The only thing stopping him from putting his face on the counter again is the plate of food. He takes a sulky bite of his eggs.

‘So, you talked to Joey,’ Fligs says, sitting across from him with his own mug. ‘Sounds like it went well.’

‘He basically told me to get fucked,’ Cam says. ‘Which is— probably fair.’

Fligs hums.
‘I hate it when you do that,’ Cam says, through his toast.

‘S’why I do it,’ Fligs says, giving him a grin.

Cam takes another bite of eggs. He feels a little better with food in his stomach. ‘I told him how I felt about him,’ he says, after swallowing. ‘He told me I had no right after— after I’m the one that ended it.’

Fligs frowns. ‘You told me it was mutual. He told me—’

‘I— No one likes to be the one that gets dumped. I didn’t realize he was telling people it was mutual until you guys took me out to get sadness wasted a couple of weeks later.’

‘What happened?’

‘He got traded,’ Cam says, and flinches. ‘I— I know how that sounds. But— you and Janelle have always been together, you know? You got traded, she came with you. You never had to do long distance.’

‘Neither did you,’ Fligs says. ‘You ended it before you had the chance to try.’

‘I didn’t want our entire relationship to be on the phone. On laptop screens. Seeing him twice a year over the season and for two months in the summer. Maybe that makes me the asshole, but. I didn’t want half of him.’

‘So you settled for nothing.’

‘I’m not proud,’ Cam says. The toast in his mouth turns to cardboard, and he pushes the plate away.

‘We were kids.’

‘You were twenty six.’

‘It was my first real relationship that lasted longer than twelve hours,’ Cam snaps. ‘It— Do I wish I’d done it differently, looking back? Of course I do. But it didn’t. That’s how it happened, and I— it was a long time ago.’ He pauses. ‘We’re different people now.’

‘But you still love him,’ Fligs says. ‘It’s not just— feelings.’

Cam pauses. ‘No. It’s not.’ He shrugs. ‘Not that it makes a difference. He got over me. I missed my chance. I’m an adult, I’ll get over it.’

Fligs doesn’t look convinced. Cam’s coffee has gone cold, but he drinks it anyway.

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2016

Cam feels bad for bullying Seth into giving him his old address; he knows Ryan is staying there until he finds his own place. They get into Nashville a day early, and he doesn’t mean to show up at Ryan’s door, but.

‘Why are you here?’ Ryan asks, when he opens the door.

‘Please don’t slam the door in my face,’ Cam says. Ryan looks like he’s considering it anyway. ‘I know I’d deserve it,’ he rushes, ‘But. Please.’
Ryan raises his eyebrows, cool. He doesn’t say anything.

‘I’m sorry,’ Cam says. ‘I— I was an idiot, the way I handled— us.’

‘You think?’ Ryan asks. ‘Are you just here to apologize, or?’

‘You told the guys it was our decision to break up. Why didn’t you— ‘

‘Why didn’t I tell them you were a raging asshole and a coward?’

‘—Yeah.’

Ryan sighs. ‘I didn’t want anyone to know I got dumped. I figured it was less embarrassing if we just— decided to split up.’

Cam— doesn’t know what to say to that.

‘I’m s—’

‘Don’t apologize again,’ Ryan says. ‘I don’t want to hear it.’

Cam stops. He shifts from one foot to the other on Ryan’s doormat.

‘You should go back to the hotel,’ Ryan says.

‘Ryan—’ Cam starts, but the door’s already shutting.

-

The game is a shitshow. Ryan gets an assist on the opening goal. Cam doesn’t even get a shot away.

Some of the guys go out for drinks with Ryan after; they miss him almost as much as Cam does.

Cam lies in his hotel room and pretends he’s sleeping when Fligs texts him to check on him.

-

2025

Cam still kind of misses playing. He’s been retired for a couple of years, and he’ll jump onto a local mixed-level scrimmage sometimes (they make him play D, to keep it fair), but it’s not the same.

He’s watching the guys practice at the Ice Haus. Strictly speaking, it’s closed to the public, but he sneaks in. Who’s going to stop him?

They’re practicing the shootout. Cam will probably never get bored of Ryan’s go-to move. He watches him basically glide to a halt in front of their backup, Niko, and waits for him to make the first move before slotting it low blocker.

‘Every time!’ someone yells from the blue line. ‘Every fuckin’ time, Joe!’

Cam can see Ryan’s grin from the bleachers.

He catches him on the way out of practice.

‘Hey, uh, Ryan?’ He jumps, looks over his shoulder, and then waves the guys he’s walking with on.
‘I’m still mad at you,’ Ryan says, but he dumps his bag on the floor and leans against the wall, waiting for Cam to talk.

‘I handled the other night badly,’ Cam starts.

‘Yeah,’ Ryan says. ‘You did.’

‘I’m sorry,’ Cam says, again, because he’s not sure what else to say.

‘You have a boyfriend, Jesus, Cam.’

‘Uh,’ Cam says, and stops, dropping his gaze guiltily.

When he looks up, Ryan is staring at him, incredulous. ‘You didn’t,’ he says. ‘What the fuck?’

‘Not for you,’ Cam says. ‘—Kind of for you. I realised that it wasn’t fair for me to— string him along. When there’s someone else.’

‘There isn’t someone else,’ Ryan says, harsh. ‘That ship fuckin’ sailed, Cam, when Tennessee was too far for you to want to bother with me. Now I’m back in town, suddenly you’re interested? That’s bullshit and you know it.’

Cam— doesn’t have anything to say to that. How can he? ‘It’s— not like that,’ he says, weakly.

‘Then what is it like, Cam?’

‘It’s like— it’s like hanging out with you feels like coming home. Feels like I’m twenty five again and we have all the time in the world. Feels like— ’ he stops, unsure how to say what he wants— needs— to. ‘Feels like maybe I’ve always been in love with you.’

‘You married someone else,’ Ryan says, and his voice sounds tight all of a sudden.

‘She was carrying my baby,’ Cam says. ‘What was I supposed to do?’

Ryan just looks at him. Cam is focused intensely on the cut on his chin from the last game, because he can’t look him in the eye right now.

‘She knew I was gay when I married her,’ Cam says, finally. ‘It was never… I loved her. Still do. But it was never like that.’

‘Never like what?’

‘Never like it was when I was with you. Fuck, Ry, you’re— I loved you more than the mother of my child, and maybe that’s fucked up and unfair, but it’s true.’ He holds his hands out, palms up, fingers splayed, half shrugging. ‘I know it’s been a long time. I know. But— I had to tell you. I was a coward when I broke up with you. When I didn’t tell anyone about you. I’m not going to be a coward any more.’

Ryan sags against the wall a little. When Cam risks looking him in the eye, he can’t read the expression on his face. He looks— struck. Speechless. But not mad.

‘I’m mad at you,’ he says, again.

‘I know,’ Cam says. ‘I’m hoping you won’t be mad forever. But I get it if you are.’

‘I don’t know what the fuck I am any more.’ He clears his throat, straightens up. ‘I have to go. Team
lunch. You remember.’

Cam nods.

‘I need— a minute,’ Ryan says. ‘Just— You have to give me time.’

Cam would give him the world if he asked, but he doesn’t think telling him that would help. ‘As much as you need,’ he says, instead, and Ryan nods.

‘Thank you,’ he says. ‘This isn’t— We’re not getting back together. This was really shitty of you, Cam.’

‘I know,’ he admits. ‘I’m—’

‘You’re sorry, I know,’ Ryan interrupts. He reaches down to pick his bag up, and turns to leave. He gets three steps down the hall and turns to look over his shoulder. ‘I miss you,’ he says. ‘I don’t want this to ruin our chance at being friends.’

Cam isn’t sure how long he stands in that corridor, but it’s long enough that one of the training staff catches him and talks him into a pick-up game on Sunday with the rest of the staff and retired guys. He barely hears what Tom’s telling him.

-

2016

Sophia is a grad student at OSU. She’s studying Political Science and she wants to change the world. She has a cat called Butter, and a tattoo of an angel fish on her shoulder blade. Cam doesn’t know what she sees in him.

Their first meeting, she upends an iced coffee on him and is horrified. He ends up at her apartment wearing one of her roommate’s shirts while she scrubs the stain in her kitchen sink.

‘I’m so sorry,’ she says, lightly accented.

‘It’s honestly fine,’ Cam says. ‘I have a million shirts, perks of the job.’

‘What do you do?’ she asks, wringing the shirt out and squinting at it.

‘Uh—’ he says, thrown a little. ‘I play hockey.’

‘Like, for a living?’

He laughs. ‘I mean, it’s summer right now, so no, but most of the year.’

‘Are you like, a pro?’

Cam doesn’t know how to say that his face is on the side of Nationwide Arena without sounding like an egotistical jerk. ‘Uh,’ he says. ‘Yeah.’

‘Wait, do you play for the—Blue Jackets?’ she asks, uncertain.

‘Yeah,’ Cam admits.

‘Huh,’ she says. ‘You guys were not good this year.’
‘—No,’ Cam agrees. ‘No, we were not.’

‘You should work on that,’ she says, airily, and tosses his shirt in the dryer. ‘Would you like to get lunch with me? I’m buying, since I think I ruined your shirt.’

‘You don’t need to—’ he starts, but she insists, and they end up at a tiny Greek place in the Short North, splitting Dolmades and feta fries while he attempts to explain hockey with the salt shakers. He gets about three sentences in and she covers his hand with hers.

‘It’s sweet that you’re so passionate,’ she says. ‘But I’m from France. We like football—proper football, not American—and rugby.’

Cam doesn’t really know what to say to that, and she laughs. ‘Tell me about you,’ she says. ‘Not your job.’

So Cam tells her about growing up in New England, and playing college hockey, and about Easton. She tells him about growing up in the suburbs of Paris, and about moving here with her father when she was fifteen. ‘Ohio is— very different to Paris,’ she says, laughing. ‘I like it, though. It’s home, now.’ When she graduates, she wants to teach English overseas, or work for a non-profit. He leaves the restaurant with her number and a vaguely guilty feeling.

Sophia is beautiful. She’s exactly the kind of girl his mom used to want him to bring home. She’s smart, and kind, and hilarious, and she loves Easton, and— Cam knows he shouldn’t have slept with her. He fucking knows he’s leading her on.

‘I have to tell you something,’ he says, one night. They’re lying in bed, and she’s playing with his hair, pulling a curl straight gently and letting it spring back while he dozes.

‘Hmm?’ she asks, scratching at his scalp lightly.

‘I—’ he starts, and stops. Sits up. The sheets pool around his waist. ‘I had a speech planned. I wrote down what I wanted to say, and—’ He pauses again. ‘It all sounds kind of dumb, now, so I’m just gonna come out and say it.’ She’s looking at him, wary, but curious.

He takes a deep breath and lets it out. ‘I’m gay,’ he says. He looks her in the eye while he says it; he owes her that much at least. She doesn’t laugh, at least. That’s what he was worried about.

‘Oh,’ she says, eventually. ‘I— oh.’

‘I’m sorry,’ he says. ‘I should have told you before— before.’

‘Yeah,’ she says. ‘You should have. Why didn’t you?’

He shrugs a little, scratches at an itch on his hip. ‘I guess— I was pretending.’

‘To be straight,’ she says, gentler than he was expecting.

He nods. ‘I had— my last boyfriend was— it was a nasty breakup. I didn’t want to do that again. I thought maybe— if I dated a woman it would be—’ He trails off.

‘Easier,’ she says.

‘—Yeah,’ he says. ‘Do you— want me to go?’
She’s still just sitting next to him, naked from the waist up, hair falling over her shoulder. She looks — Cam doesn’t even know what her expression is. Surprise, he thinks. Regret, maybe, and that makes him feel like the biggest asshole in the world.

‘I think so,’ she says, quietly.

He nods, gets his stuff together, leaves quietly. ‘I’m sorry,’ he says again, at the door, turning back. She just nods.

—

‘We need to talk,’ Sophia says, when Cam picks up the phone. It’s been a couple of weeks since he’d seen her, has been spending more time in the gym to avoid thinking about— any of it.

They decide to go to the Short North, walking Easton through Goodale Park. Sophia greets him but then falls silent. He gives her time.

Some guy runs past, shirtless. He’s tall and kind of rangy, and he looks just enough like Ryan that Cam’s stomach clenches. He doesn’t mean to watch him go, but.

‘So that’s your type, huh?’ she asks. She— doesn’t sound mad.

‘—Yeah,’ he admits. ‘I’m sorry.’

She shrugs, and says nothing. They keep walking. Easton runs off to chase another dog, and Cam turns his head to look at Sophia. He can’t see her expression behind the sunglasses.

‘I’m pregnant,’ she says, and Cam stops breathing.

‘What?’ he asks. ‘I— how?’

She looks at him. ‘How do you think?’ she says, a little snappish. ‘The condom broke, I guess.’

‘Shit,’ Cam says. ‘Are you—’ he stops. ‘Are we keeping it?’

“This is where you want to have this conversation?’ she asks. ‘The park?”

Cam bites his tongue so he doesn’t remind her that she was the one who brought it up. ‘Probably not,’ he says. ‘You wanna go to my place?’

—

She curls up in his armchair with a mug of mint tea and doesn’t say much.

‘Do you want to keep it?’ Cam asks her, and she just blows on the steam spiraling over her chin, not looking at him.

‘Do you?’ she asks, eventually. Cam opens his mouth to say that whatever she wants to do is what he wants to do, but— he can’t. He thinks about— aborting it, or giving it up for adoption, and— he can’t. Can’t even imagine it. He wants the baby as much as he’s ever wanted anything.

‘Yes,’ he says, and she takes a sip of her tea. ‘I— I don’t want to force you into anything, so if you don’t want it, then— that’s that, but. I want the baby.’

She takes another sip of tea, puts her hand on her stomach. ‘I don’t— not want it,’ she says.
'What happens—' Cam starts, and stops. ‘What happens if we keep it?’

She frowns and looks at him.

‘I mean like— with us,’ he clarifies. ‘What happens with us?’

‘Well,’ she says. ‘I’m having your baby. And you’re— gay.’

He doesn’t have a response to that.

‘This is the worst sitcom ever,’ she says suddenly, laughing weakly.

Cam half-smiles, cautious, and she laughs more, a little hysterical, but when she’s calmed, the atmosphere in the room is better. Less tense.

‘Are we doing this?’ she asks. ‘Are we having this baby?’

‘I want to,’ Cam says, quietly.

She takes a breath, sets her tea aside, and comes to sit next to him, takes his hand. ‘Then I guess we’re doing it.’

They decide to get married for— a lot of reasons. Sophia’s dad. Cam’s mom. He tells the Blue Jackets’ PR lady and his agent that he got a girl pregnant and all everyone wants to know is if they’re getting married, so. They get married. Well, engaged. Cam buys her a hugely expensive ring. She moves in with him.

‘Are you sure about this?’ he asks her, probably for the millionth time.

‘No,’ she says. ‘But it’s what’s happening.’

‘I do love you,’ he says, quietly, dropping his gaze. He does. It’s not enough, he knows, but.

‘I know,’ she says, kisses his cheek. He rests a hand on the baby bump, just for a few seconds.

2025

‘What’s up, bud?’ Cam asks, leaning on the kitchen counter.

Adam’s staring at his dinner like it just told him hockey was cancelled forever.

‘I miss Joey,’ he says, sighing heavily in that dramatic way that only kids get.

‘Ah,’ Cam says, getting a spike of guilt.

‘He hasn’t come to see us in forever,’ Adam says. It’s been— about a week. (Nine days, Cam’s traitor brain reminds him helpfully.)

‘I guess he’s just busy,’ Cam lies. Ryan’s out with an ankle sprain at the minute so it’s not even that hockey is keeping him busy.

‘Doing what?’ Adam asks. ‘He’s on IR right now, he could come here and you’d cook for him, right?’
‘Yeah,’ Cam says, truthfully. ‘I would. I don’t know what he’s doing. I’m sure he’ll come see you soon.’

‘Don’t you miss him?’ Adam asks. He’s pushing his spaghetti around the bowl with his spoon.

‘Yeah,’ Cam admits. ‘I do.’

‘Maybe you should call him,’ he suggests, looking hopeful for a second. ‘You haven’t called him in a long time.’

‘He’s busy, Adam,’ Cam says. ‘I don’t want to bug him.’

The look on Adam’s face says that he does want to bug Ryan, but. Ryan asked for time, so that’s what Cam is giving him. When he wants to, he’ll be in touch.

---

2017

He assumed the knock on his door was room service.

Ryan is wearing a ratty hoody with a hole chewed in the sleeve, and his hair is sticking up every which way. There are dark circles under his eyes, like he hasn’t slept in days, and he’s— swaying. He’s drunk, Cam realizes.

‘Wha— Why are you here?’ he asks, eventually. Ryan is clinging to the doorframe like he’ll fall over without it.

‘I still love you,’ Ryan says, raw and honest and desperate.

Cam closes his eyes. ‘Come in,’ he says.

Ryan kisses him as the door is closing, sloppy and with that awful clack of teeth, and he tastes like shitty airplane beer and bad decisions.

Cam pushes him away. ‘Ryan, what the fuck? I’m getting married tomorrow.’

You can’t get married,’ he says. ‘I don’t want you to get married.’

‘It’s too late for that,’ he says. ‘I— we’re having a baby.’

‘You’re gay,’ Ryan says. ‘You don’t love her.’

Cam balls his hands into fists instinctively. ‘I do love her.’

Ryan just shakes his head, close to tears all of a sudden. ‘Please,’ he says. ‘Please don’t.’

‘I have to,’ Cam says.

‘Do you still love me?’ Ryan says. ‘You came to my apartment, in Nashville. You still loved me then, right?’

Cam doesn’t know how to answer him.

‘Yes,’ he says, eventually, after a long enough pause that it’s awkward, makes him sound fake.

‘I would give anything to have you back,’ Ryan says, and his voice hitches the tiniest bit. For both of
their sakes, Cam pretends to ignore it.

‘I’m sorry,’ Cam says.

‘No, you’re not,’ Ryan says. ‘If you were really sorry, you wouldn’t be marrying someone else. You wouldn’t have broken my heart. We’d still be together.’

Cam’s throat is tightening. He tries to clear it and can’t. ‘Ryan—’ he starts.

‘Don’t apologize again,’ Ryan says. ‘Don’t say anything unless it’s that you won’t marry her.’

Cam swallows. ‘You’re drunk,’ he says.

‘That doesn’t matter,’ he says. ‘I could be stone cold sober and I’d be saying the same thing.’

‘You should go,’ Cam says. ‘Do you have somewhere to stay?’

‘...I’ll call Saader.’

‘Okay,’ Cam says. ‘I— okay.’

When he stands, Ryan stands too, wraps him up in a tight hug. Cam just hugs him back, buries his face in Ryan’s hoody. Underneath the beer and the airplane, he smells familiar, comforting. Like home. His eyes start to sting.

‘I love you,’ Ryan says, voice rough.

Both of them have red rimmed eyes when they separate. Cam sniffs.

‘I’m sorry,’ Ryan says. ‘I know— this was dumb. But I had to tell you.’

‘We’re having a baby,’ Cam says, anguished. ‘Maybe if it were something else, but— it’s my kid.’

‘I get it,’ Ryan says. ‘I’ll go. I shouldn’t have come.’

Cam sinks onto the bed as soon as the door clicks shut and puts his head in his hands. His shoulders shake.

‘Fuck,’ he says, into his palms. ‘Fuck.’

- 

2025

He’s just putting Adam to bed when the doorbell goes.

‘Is it Joey?’ Adam asks, lighting up.

‘No, bud,’ Cam says. ‘It’s probably Uncle Nick, he said he was gonna stop by.’

‘Can I come downstairs?’

‘You know it’s a school night,’ Cam says, and Adam’s face falls. ‘Stay in bed, okay? I’ll be back up to read you a story in a bit, why don’t you choose one?’

Appeased, Adam picks up the thick storybook they keep by the bed and starts rifling through at random.
‘—Hi,’ Ryan says, standing on his porch, a little shy.

‘—Hey,’ Cam says, stands aside to let him in. ‘Are— why are you here?’ Ryan looks at him, frowning, and Cam curses. ‘Fuck, sorry, that didn’t— I didn’t mean it to sound like that. You just caught me by surprise. I thought you were Fligs.’

Ryan accepts a beer, settles onto a kitchen stool, plays with the bottle cap. Cam gets the feeling he’s gearing himself up to say something, so he stays quiet, pops the cap on his own beer and takes a slow drink.

‘I told you I’d gotten over you,’ Ryan says, eventually.

Cam puts his beer down with a quiet thunk. ‘But—?’ he asks, tentative.

‘I lied,’ Ryan says, and Cam’s heart twists.

‘You— lied.’

‘I’m not over you. I— I fucking tried, I really did, but I couldn’t do it. I don’t know if it’s because you were the first guy I ever really loved, or what, but. I’m still in love with you.’ He laughs, a little bitter. ‘Have been for, fuck, for almost ten years now.’ Cam opens his mouth to speak and Ryan puts his hand up. ‘I’m not done.’

He takes a pull from his beer bottle. ‘You broke my heart. You married someone else. And then when I came back into town you tried to act like the last eight years hadn’t happened. That was kind of fucked up of you, man. I’m not that kid any more, you know?’

‘I kn--’

‘I’m not done. I’m not that kid. But.’ He pauses. ‘I’m still in love with you. I spent a lot of time convincing myself we could just be friends. But I don’t think I know how to be friends with you. So.’ He pauses again. ‘I guess— I guess I’m here to say that you’re an asshole, and you treated me like shit for a long time, but— If you still want me. I’m yours.’

Cam is silent.

‘Now I’m done,’ Ryan says, flushing a little and taking another swallow of beer to try and hide it.

‘I—’ Cam starts and stops. ‘I have to finish putting Adam to bed. Will you— I’m sorry, I know you’ve waited this long.’

‘I can wait twenty minutes for you to put your son to bed,’ Ryan says, smiling, that same old Joey smile that somehow hasn’t aged with the rest of him.

Cam makes it all the way to the kitchen door before stopping, turning back and wrapping his arms around Ryan’s neck to kiss him deeply. He tastes like Molson and pizza and Cam couldn’t care less. He feels Ryan smile into the kiss, feels his hands settle on his hips, and he lets himself sink into it. Pulling away is harder than it should be.

‘Go put your son to bed,’ Ryan whispers, drawing back. ‘I’ll be here.’
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